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Educational Governance Logic and Inequality Risks in Academic–Vocational Tracking: A Policy Text Analysis from China

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, academic–vocational tracking has become a central institutional arrangement in China’s upper secondary education system. While policy discourse frames tracking as a means to optimize educational structure and promote vocational education, it has also generated persistent concerns regarding educational inequality and social stratification. Existing studies largely focus on the functional rationale or outcome-based inequalities of tracking, paying limited attention to the governance logic embedded in policy design itself. Drawing on a qualitative policy text analysis, this study examines national and subnational policy documents on academic–vocational tracking issued since 2018. Through systematic thematic coding, the analysis focuses on

policy goals, governance instruments, responsibility allocation, and equity-related discourses. The findings show that current tracking policies are governed by a logic centered on structural regulation and technocratic management, characterized by proportional control, indicator-based evaluation, and downward delegation of implementation responsibility. Meanwhile, inequality risks are not addressed through explicit exclusion but are institutionally embedded via principle-based equity rhetoric, functional differentiation between educational pathways, and the marginalization of family background and socioeconomic disparities. By foregrounding governance logic rather than policy outcomes alone, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how educational inequality is produced and legitimized through policy design, and highlights the need to critically reassess tracking reforms from a governance perspective.

1. Introduction

In recent years, academic–vocational tracking has become a central institutional arrangement in China’s upper secondary education system and a focal point of both education policy debates and public discourse. Typically implemented at the end of compulsory education, tracking channels students into either general academic high schools or secondary vocational education pathways, with the stated aim of differentiating talent cultivation and aligning education with labor market needs. Policymakers commonly frame academic–vocational tracking as an effective policy instrument for alleviating examination pressure, supporting industrial upgrading, and expanding the supply of technically skilled labor.

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In practice, however, academic–vocational tracking has also generated sustained concerns regarding educational opportunity inequality, class reproduction, and constrained social mobility. A growing body of research and social observation indicates that tracking decisions are not determined solely by students’ “ability” or “interest,” but are shaped by the interaction of family socioeconomic status, regional disparities in educational resources, and school-level governance strategies. As a result, tracking may function to prematurely channel students from disadvantaged backgrounds into lower-return educational pathways.

Against this backdrop, understanding academic–vocational tracking solely through the lens of educational equity or educational outcomes is insufficient. This study adopts an educational governance perspective, conceptualizing academic–vocational tracking as a policy practice shaped by the interactions among multiple actors, including the central state, local governments, schools, and families. It focuses on the governance logic embedded in policy texts and the potential inequality risks arising from this logic. Through a systematic analysis of recent policy documents on academic–vocational tracking, this study addresses two core research questions:

- (1) What educational governance logic is constructed through academic–vocational tracking policies?
- (2) Through what mechanisms might this governance logic amplify or reproduce educational inequality?.

2. Literature Review

Recent research on academic–vocational tracking has primarily focused on its institutional functions, social consequences, and policy implementation mechanisms.

First, studies emphasizing institutional functions approach tracking from the perspective of educational system differentiation and labor market matching. These studies tend to affirm the role of tracking in mitigating competition for academic advancement, promoting vocational education, and supporting economic structural adjustment. Establishing parallel pathways for general and vocational education is seen as a means of reducing pressure on a single academic progression route while enhancing the stability of skilled labor supply (Wang, 2019; OECD, 2020; Liu, 2021). Within this framework, tracking is understood as an efficiency-oriented institutional arrangement, whose legitimacy derives primarily from macro-level development objectives.

Second, research on educational inequality and social mobility offers a more critical assessment of academic–vocational tracking. A substantial body of empirical evidence demonstrates that tracking outcomes are closely associated with family socioeconomic status, regional disparities in educational resources, and school hierarchies. Li (2020) shows that even among students with comparable academic performance, those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are significantly more likely to enter general academic high schools. Longitudinal studies further reveal that students tracked into vocational education face persistent disadvantages in subsequent educational opportunities and labor market returns, rendering tracking an important mechanism of class reproduction (Wu, 2021; Xie & Wu, 2022). These findings underscore that tracking is not a neutral selection based on “ability” or “interest,” but operates under structural constraints.

Third, recent scholarship has begun to re-examine academic–vocational tracking from the perspective of educational governance and policy implementation. These studies argue that tracking is not an isolated policy instrument, but is embedded in local government performance evaluations, school accountability systems, and risk management logics (Zhou, 2021; Gu, 2022). In practice, local governments and schools often balance policy mandates, examination performance pressures, and public opinion, resulting in strategic implementation of tracking policies. International governance studies further suggest that policy texts themselves shape the behavioral boundaries of local actors through indicators, principle-based formulations, and the diffusion of responsibility (Lawn & Grek, 2018; Ball, 2021).

Despite these contributions, existing literature exhibits two key limitations. First, most studies analyze inequality at the level of outcomes or individual behavior, with limited attention to policy texts as analytical objects, particularly regarding how policy language constructs goals, allocates responsibilities, and establishes legitimacy. Second, discussions of inequality risks largely focus on what tracking produces, rather than how inequality risks are institutionally embedded, diluted, or obscured through policy design and governance logic (Li, 2020; Ball, 2021).

Accordingly, this study proposes the following research questions, summarized in Table 1:

RQ1: How do recent academic–vocational tracking policy texts construct educational governance logic through goal articulation and responsibility allocation at the national and local levels?

RQ2: How does this governance logic address issues of educational equity in policy texts, and how does it generate potential risks of educational inequality?

Table 1. Logical Alignment Framework for Research on Academic–Vocational Tracking

Prior Findings in the Literature (Research Review)	Method	Corresponding Findings	Research Gap (GAP)	Research Question (RQ)
A large body of research affirms the institutional function of academic–vocational tracking in optimizing educational structure and supporting industrial upgrading (Wang, 2019; OECD, 2020; Liu, 2021).	Qualitative policy text analysis	Policy texts emphasize “structural optimization,” a “skill-oriented society,” and “diversified pathways,” prioritizing systemic efficiency while downplaying individual heterogeneity; governance responsibility is centralized at the normative level but substantially devolved to local governments and schools in implementation.	Existing studies focus primarily on institutional “functions,” with limited attention to how policy language and institutional design construct the legitimacy of tracking.	RQ1: How do recent academic–vocational tracking policy texts construct educational governance logic through goal articulation and responsibility allocation at the national and local levels?
Empirical studies show that academic–vocational tracking is closely associated with family socioeconomic status and regional disparities, and may reinforce class reproduction (Li, 2020; Wu, 2021; Xie & Wu, 2022).	Discourse analysis and comparative analysis	References to educational equity remain largely principle-based and lack enforceable mechanisms; by emphasizing “individual choice” and “rational attitudes toward tracking,” structural risks are shifted to families and individuals.	Most studies concentrate on unequal outcomes, with limited examination of how inequality risks are institutionally embedded at the policy design stage.	RQ2: How does this governance logic address educational equity in policy texts, and how does it generate potential risks of educational inequality?
Educational governance research suggests that policies often manage risk through indicators and the diffusion of responsibility (Lawn & Grek, 2018; Ball, 2021; Zhou, 2021).	Cross-document comparative analysis	Academic–vocational tracking functions as a governance technology embedded in performance evaluation and examination-oriented accountability systems, through which inequality risks are technicalized and depoliticized.	This governance perspective has rarely been systematically applied to the policy text analysis of academic–vocational tracking.	

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative policy text analysis to examine recent academic–vocational tracking policy documents. Compared with quantitative approaches based on individual-level data, policy text analysis is better suited to uncovering how governance assumptions, responsibility structures, and problem framings are embedded in institutional design. This approach is particularly appropriate for analyzing academic–vocational tracking as a highly institutionalized education policy (Lawn & Grek, 2018; Ball, 2021).

3.2 Policy Text Selection

Policy texts were selected according to relevance, authority, and timeliness. Documents were required to directly address upper secondary education structure, academic–vocational coordination, or vocational education positioning. Priority was given to national-level policies to ensure institutional representativeness, supplemented by representative provincial implementation documents to capture governance dynamics across levels. Given policy evolution, documents issued since 2018 were selected.

Based on these criteria, the study analyzes policy texts issued by the State Council, the Ministry of Education, and other central agencies, along with selected provincial implementation documents. These texts collectively constitute the dominant policy discourse shaping academic–vocational tracking in recent years.

3.3 Data Analysis and Coding Framework

The study adopts a combined deductive–inductive thematic coding approach. The initial coding framework was informed by literature on educational governance and inequality, focusing on policy goals, governance instruments, responsibility allocation, and equity-related discourse. The framework was refined iteratively through repeated comparison across policy texts, resulting in second-order thematic categories.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, all texts were read in full to establish contextual understanding and generate analytical memos. Second, texts were coded paragraph by paragraph to identify recurring concepts, normative formulations, and governance tools, with cross-document comparison used to extract stable discursive patterns. Third, coding results were aligned with the research questions to interpret how governance logic shapes tracking and embeds inequality risks.

3.4 Analytical Orientation and Validity

Policy texts are treated as governance instruments rather than neutral descriptions. The analysis focuses on how policy language shapes local implementation behavior and distributes risk through abstract goal setting, principle-based equity rhetoric, and downward delegation of responsibility. While inter-coder reliability testing was not employed, transparency and internal consistency were enhanced through explicit selection criteria, systematic coding procedures, and theoretical triangulation.

3.5 Policy Text Sample

The policy documents analyzed include the National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform (2019), Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Reform of Upper Secondary School Education (2020), the 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Vocational Education (2021), Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Modern Vocational Education System (2022), and the revised Vocational Education Law of the People’s Republic of China (2022), supplemented by representative provincial and municipal policy documents.

Table 2. Policy Documents Included in the Analysis

No.	Policy Title	Year Issued	Issuing Authority	Document Type	Rationale for Inclusion
1	National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform	2019	State Council of the People’s Republic of China	Policy Plan	Systematically defines the modern vocational education system and the direction of academic–vocational coordination
2	Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Reform of Upper Secondary School Education	2020	Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China	Guiding Opinion	Addresses academic–vocational tracking and examination pressure from the perspective of general upper secondary school reform
3	The 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Vocational Education	2021	Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China	Development Plan	Reflects medium-term governance priorities in vocational education
4	Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Modern Vocational Education System	2022	Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council	Policy Opinion	Elevates vocational education within the national governance framework
5	Vocational Education Law of the People’s Republic of China (Revised)	2022	Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress	Law	Provides the legal basis for coordination between academic and vocational education

4. Results

Based on the systematic coding of the selected policy texts on academic–vocational tracking, this study constructs an analytical matrix of “policy texts–coding categories–core findings” along two dimensions: educational governance logic and inequality risk. Table 3 presents the correspondence between major policy texts and the identified coding dimensions. Drawing on policy documents issued at the national, provincial, and municipal levels, the coding matrix is synthesized to capture patterns across governance goals, implementation mechanisms, and equity-related discourse. The results indicate a high degree of structural consistency across policy levels, while also revealing multiple potential inequality risks embedded within institutional design.

Table 3. Coding Matrix of Academic–Vocational Tracking Policy Texts

Policy Document	Policy Level	Governance Goal Coding (C1)	Governance Instruments and Mechanisms (C2)	Equity and Risk Framing (C3)	Core Institutional Features (Empirical Findings)
National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform (2019)	National	Structural optimization; type-based education	Proportional regulation; system building	Ideational guidance; depoliticization	Academic–vocational tracking is incorporated into the design of the modern vocational education system, emphasizing structural rationality over individual differences.
Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Reform of Upper Secondary School Education (2020)	National	Diversified development; quality orientation	Principle-based constraints; school-centered implementation	Discourse of individual differences	Acknowledges examination pressure, but governance responses remain largely normative rather than institutionalized.
The 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Vocational Education (2021)	National	Industry service orientation; capability matching	Indicator-based evaluation; task decomposition	Marginalization of background factors	Vocational education is explicitly positioned to serve economic development, with local governments assuming primary responsibility.
The 14th Five-Year Plan for Education Development (2021)	National	Structural coordination; system stability	Scale control; administrative evaluation	Rigidity in opportunity allocation	The academic–vocational structure is incorporated into government performance evaluations, increasing the rigidity of tracking implementation.
Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Modern Vocational Education System (2022)	National	Pathway permeability; channel building	Technocratic governance; institutional integration	Nominal equality	Emphasizes “permeability” between pathways, but lacks institutional clarification regarding resource allocation and transition probabilities.
Vocational Education Law of the People’s Republic of China (Revised) (2022)	National (Legal)	Type equality; institutional positioning	Rights–responsibilities framework	Legal equality	Establishes formal equality between academic and vocational education at the legal level, without addressing outcome-based inequalities.

Policy Document	Policy Level	Governance Goal Coding (C1)	Governance Instruments and Mechanisms (C2)	Equity and Risk Framing (C3)	Core Institutional Features (Empirical Findings)
Provincial Academic–Vocational Tracking Implementation Guidelines (Province A)	Provincial	Structural implementation; proportional control	Local coordination; enrollment planning	Transfer of responsibility to families	Specifies academic–vocational ratios, with implementation pressure concentrated at the grassroots level.
Provincial Upper Secondary Education Development Plan (Province B)	Provincial	Industry alignment; skills provision	Regulation of school scale	Functional differentiation	Vocational education is tightly coupled with employment objectives.
Municipal Upper Secondary School Admission Plan (City C)	Municipal	Order stabilization; risk containment	Score-based tracking; quota management	Implicit constraints on choice	Student choice is constrained by admission score thresholds and enrollment quotas.
Municipal Education Work Priorities (City D)	Municipal	Implementation orientation; performance compliance	Administrative accountability; target decomposition	Absence of inequality framing	Tracking is treated as an administrative task, with equity issues not explicitly articulated.

4.1 Educational Governance Logic in Academic–Vocational Tracking Policies

Analysis of the coding matrix identifies a core educational governance logic underlying current academic–vocational tracking policies—namely, a governance model centered on structural regulation and technocratic management.

At the level of governance goals, the coding matrix shows that national-level policies consistently frame academic–vocational tracking as a key instrument for governing the structure of upper secondary education. The National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform (2019), the 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Vocational Education (2021), and the 14th Five-Year Plan for Education Development (2021) all identify the stabilization of the academic–vocational structure and the advancement of a type-based education system as central objectives. This framing indicates that academic–vocational tracking is treated primarily as a system-level allocation issue, rather than as a process centered on individual educational choice.

At the level of governance instruments and mechanisms, the coding results demonstrate a strong reliance on quantitative and procedural tools. Enrollment planning, school capacity controls, proportional requirements, and performance evaluation mechanisms are repeatedly coded as dominant governance instruments. Particularly in provincial and municipal policy texts, tracking ratios are translated directly into administratively assessable indicators, with schools and local education authorities assuming explicit responsibility for meeting predefined targets. This pattern suggests that academic–vocational tracking is embedded within administrative management systems through technocratic means, thereby reinforcing the rigidity of policy implementation.

With respect to the allocation of governance responsibility, the coding matrix reveals a clear pattern of downward delegation. National-level policies primarily establish directional and principle-based frameworks, while responsibility for concrete implementation is devolved to local governments and schools. Provincial and municipal policy documents tend to emphasize “coordinated implementation,” “enrollment management,” and “plan execution,” yet rarely specify accountability for tracking outcomes themselves. This governance structure enhances administrative controllability while simultaneously concentrating implementation risks at the grassroots level.

Taken together, the coding matrix indicates that academic–vocational tracking policies construct an educational governance logic oriented toward system stability and administrative control through structural goal setting, technocratic governance instruments, and the downward delegation of responsibility.

4.2 Inequality Risks Embedded in Academic–Vocational Tracking Policies

Within this governance framework, the coding matrix further reveals a set of potential inequality risks embedded in academic–vocational tracking policies. These risks do not manifest through explicit exclusionary rules; rather, they are incorporated through institutional design and discursive arrangements.

At the level of opportunity allocation, the coding results show that de-structuralized equity discourse recurs across multiple policy texts. Policies frequently emphasize principles such as “teaching in accordance with students’ aptitude,” “classified development,” and “diversified pathways to success.” However, corresponding provisions related to resource redistribution, compensatory mechanisms, or safeguards for pathway transitions are largely absent. In contrast, rigid institutional arrangements—such as enrollment ratios and school capacity controls—are specified in considerable detail. This asymmetry in institutional design may, in practice, constrain the scope of genuine choice available to certain groups of students.

At the level of educational value construction, the coding matrix reveals a pronounced pattern of functional differentiation. In policy discourse, general academic education is more closely associated with upward educational progression and academic advancement, whereas vocational education is primarily assigned the function of serving industrial needs and supplying technical skills. This differentiation appears consistently across national and local policy texts, indicating that different educational pathways are endowed with distinct social positions within institutional narratives.

In terms of the treatment of social stratification–related factors, the coding results indicate that family background and socioeconomic disparities are significantly downplayed in policy texts. With the exception of a limited number of principle-based statements, most policy documents do not provide systematic institutional responses addressing disadvantaged groups, rural students, or disparities in family resources. Some local policies frame academic–vocational tracking as an “objective outcome” based on academic performance and ability—an assumption coded as background factor attenuation.

Overall, the coding matrix demonstrates that inequality risks do not stem from any single policy provision. Rather, they are institutionally embedded in academic–vocational tracking policies through technocratic governance practices, functional differentiation in policy discourse, and the systematic marginalization of structural inequalities.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that academic–vocational tracking in China should be understood not simply as an educational sorting mechanism but as a governance technology through which the state organizes educational differentiation and regulates the distribution of opportunities across the secondary education system. In this sense, tracking functions simultaneously as an administrative coordination device and as an institutional mechanism through which educational pathways acquire distinct social meanings and economic returns. The analysis therefore highlights a fundamental tension between the system-level objective of structural efficiency and the stratifying consequences that may emerge from early institutional differentiation.

From a governance perspective, contemporary policy texts frame academic–vocational tracking primarily as a structural solution to the problem of balancing educational supply and labor-market demand. Through instruments such as enrollment quotas, proportional allocation targets, and administrative performance indicators, the policy architecture seeks to stabilize the composition of upper secondary education and ensure the steady production of technically skilled labor. Such mechanisms reflect a broader technocratic orientation in modern educational governance, where complex social issues are reframed as problems of system optimization and administrative

coordination. Within this framework, education becomes a domain subject to macro-level regulation, where proportional balance and institutional order are prioritized as indicators of policy success.

Yet this structural rationality also generates an inherent contradiction. By privileging the management of aggregate system equilibrium, the governance framework tends to obscure the social heterogeneity that shapes individual educational trajectories. Students are positioned within a standardized allocation structure that treats ability, preference, and aspiration as largely measurable and administratively manageable variables. However, sociological research has long demonstrated that educational outcomes are deeply embedded in social structures. Family background, cultural capital, informational resources, and institutional hierarchies all shape the ways in which students interpret and navigate educational pathways (Bourdieu, 1986). When such differences remain outside the formal policy problem, governance mechanisms that appear neutral at the institutional level may nevertheless reproduce stratified outcomes at the social level.

This dynamic is particularly visible in the relationship between policy discourse and policy instruments. Official policy texts repeatedly invoke concepts such as “diversified development,” “type-based equality,” and “permeable pathways,” suggesting a normative commitment to plural forms of educational success. At the level of discourse, these formulations aim to challenge the long-standing academic hierarchy embedded in Chinese educational culture. However, the operational mechanisms governing student allocation remain highly structured and rule-based. Enrollment ratios, examination score thresholds, and school capacity constraints function as rigid institutional filters that channel students into differentiated pathways at a relatively early stage of the educational lifecycle.

The coexistence of flexible normative discourse and rigid institutional allocation mechanisms produces a form of institutional duality. On the one hand, policy narratives emphasize diversity, mobility, and the equal dignity of different educational types. On the other hand, the structural design of the system continues to assign unequal probabilities of educational mobility and unequal expectations of labor-market return across pathways. Within such a context, the policy goal of diversified development may coexist with persistent forms of stratification, as students from advantaged backgrounds retain greater capacity to access information, mobilize resources, and strategically navigate institutional boundaries.

From the perspective of the economics of education, this tension can also be interpreted through the long-standing debate between human capital theory and signaling theory. The official rationale for strengthening vocational pathways is grounded largely in human capital arguments: diversified education systems are assumed to improve allocative efficiency by aligning differentiated skills with labor-market demand. However, when educational credentials simultaneously operate as signals of social status and institutional prestige, pathway differentiation may function less as an efficient allocation mechanism and more as a sorting device that reproduces social hierarchies. In such circumstances, the economic returns associated with different educational tracks are shaped not only by skill formation but also by the symbolic value attached to institutional pathways.

The empirical findings of this study suggest that current policy discourse implicitly prioritizes the efficiency dimension of this trade-off. Academic–vocational tracking is framed primarily as a means of stabilizing educational structure and supporting economic development through vocational skill formation. By contrast, the equity dimension of the policy—particularly the question of how differentiated pathways may interact with existing patterns of social inequality—receives comparatively limited institutional attention. As a result, the governance framework risks treating inequality as an unintended externality rather than as a structural dimension of policy design.

These findings extend existing research on educational stratification by shifting analytical attention from outcomes alone to the institutional logics embedded within policy frameworks. Much of the literature on tracking has focused on its consequences for mobility, achievement gaps, or labor-market outcomes. While such outcome-based analyses are indispensable, they often treat policy institutions as relatively neutral mechanisms whose effects become

visible only after implementation. The present study demonstrates that policy texts themselves play an important role in shaping how inequality is conceptualized, governed, and potentially reproduced. By defining the boundaries of the policy problem, governance frameworks influence which social differences become visible and which remain institutionally unaddressed.

Normatively, these findings do not imply that academic–vocational differentiation is inherently problematic. Many education systems employ forms of curricular differentiation or vocational pathways in order to accommodate heterogeneous student interests and economic demands. However, the analysis suggests that the effectiveness and legitimacy of such arrangements depend critically on how governance frameworks address the distributional consequences of early differentiation. When pathway differentiation occurs within a context of unequal institutional prestige, unequal resource allocation, and unequal labor-market returns, the capacity of the system to deliver genuinely diversified opportunities may be constrained.

From a policy perspective, therefore, future reforms of academic–vocational tracking should not be confined to adjustments in enrollment ratios or pathway structures. More fundamental attention may need to be directed toward the institutional conditions that shape the relative value of different educational trajectories. These conditions include the allocation of educational resources, the permeability of transitions between pathways, and the labor-market recognition of vocational credentials. Without addressing these structural dimensions, efforts to promote diversified development may struggle to alter the deeply embedded hierarchies that continue to shape educational choices and social perceptions.

Overall, this study underscores that the consequences of academic–vocational tracking depend less on the formal existence of differentiated pathways than on the governance logic through which differentiation is institutionalized. By examining policy discourse and institutional design, the analysis provides an institutional explanation for how inequality risks may emerge even when policy objectives emphasize diversity and efficiency. Future research could extend this approach by combining policy analysis with empirical investigation of how students, families, and schools interpret and respond to these governance structures in practice.

6. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, in terms of data sources, this study relies primarily on policy texts at the national, provincial, and municipal levels, and does not directly incorporate practice-level data from schools, teachers, or families. While policy texts reflect institutional design and official discourse, actual implementation may vary across regions, schools, and individual choices. Consequently, the findings of this study are most applicable to explaining governance logic at the policy level rather than the concrete effects of tracking in practice.

Second, at the methodological level, this study employs qualitative coding and policy text analysis to uncover discursive and institutional logics. Although this approach is well suited to in-depth analysis of policy design, it does not allow for the quantification of the magnitude of inequality effects associated with different governance mechanisms. Future research could combine administrative data or longitudinal survey data to examine whether the inequality risks identified in policy texts are manifested in educational trajectories and social mobility outcomes.

Third, with respect to sample scope, although the selected policy texts are representative, they do not capture the full range of regional variation in the implementation of academic–vocational tracking. Innovative local practices in resource allocation, vocational education quality improvement, or pathway permeability may therefore be underrepresented. Subsequent studies could adopt comparative or case-based approaches to examine variation across governance models in greater detail.

Finally, in terms of analytical perspective, this study focuses primarily on educational governance and inequality risks, and does not provide a systematic evaluation of the positive functions of academic–vocational tracking in skills formation or labor market matching. While this focus is appropriate for highlighting policy risks, it also means that the conclusions should be interpreted within a broader framework of policy objectives.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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