

# *Analysis of the Development Status of Ed.D. Professional Degree in China*

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**Abstract:** The Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) has gone through the gestation period, exploration period and development period in China. After 14 years, 31 colleges and universities have become authorized units. In this study, we conducted a text analysis on 68 documents related to enrollment and Cultivation in 31 authorized units of Ed.D. Through analysis, it was found that in terms of enrollment, there are clear goals, diverse forms of learning, basically unified employment methods, and flexible and diverse assessment methods for scientific research abilities. In the training process, the cultivation mode is different. The curriculum system is mainly modular, emphasizing the use of case analysis, literature reading, academic reports and other forms of practical links. The joint training of the tutor group is mostly for guiding papers, and there is little participation in practical teaching.

## 1. Introduction

In 2020, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council issued the “Development Plan for Professional Master’s Degree Graduate Education (2020-2025)”. The plan states that efforts will be made to accelerate the development of doctoral professional graduate education. It clarifies the positioning of doctoral professional graduate education, improves the standards and procedures for setting up doctoral professional degree categories, and expands the scale of education. The key focus areas include the Doctor of Clinical Medicine, Doctor of Engineering, and Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) professional degrees<sup>[1]</sup>. The plan also emphasizes the deepening of the integration of industry and academia in training models to rapidly enhance the capacity for doctoral professional graduate education. The Ed.D. professional degree is designed to cultivate highly specialized professionals with a multidisciplinary background in education, teaching, and educational management<sup>[2]</sup>. The reform and development of this program are crucial for the cultivation of advanced talents in the education field in China and the smooth implementation of the national strategy outlined in the “China Education Modernization 2035” plan.

Since the establishment of Ed.D. professional degree, the academic community in China has been continuously exploring and researching the cultivation and reform of Ed.D. Gao and Zhu(2019)<sup>[3]</sup> discussed the possibility of the “dual nature” of Ed.D. as a way to address controversies in training objectives, and proposed strategies for distinctive training practices. Liu(2021)<sup>[4]</sup> proposed suggestions for the establishment of an open and diversified enrollment field

in China through international mirror studies of 58 universities in China and the West. Wei(2016)<sup>[5]</sup> provided insights for China by discussing the pros and cons of the Ed.D. overseas, using Harvard University as a case study to analyze the trends in Ed.D. reforms. Chen and Zhang(2019)<sup>[6]</sup> expounded on the attributes, mission, and value of the Ed.D. degree, and analyzed the issue of the convergence of Doctor of Education and Doctor of Pedagogy. Zhang et al. (2016)<sup>[2]</sup> reviewed the development of the Ed.D. professional degree from a managerial perspective, summarized the achievements since the pilot program, and identified problems such as small enrollment scale, prominent technical contradictions, and unclear thesis standards. Wu and Yao(2020)<sup>[7]</sup> summarized the characteristics of the Ed.D. degree in terms of training models, policy guidance, and enrollment scale over the past decade, and proposed measures for development and reform.

The aforementioned studies have provided a solid foundation for this research in terms of the training models, reform directions, and development of Ed.D. programs. However, there has not been a systematic study conducted at the institutional level. In view of this, we obtain relevant textual information from universities that offer Ed.D. programs through the Internet, and conduct statistical analysis on it, in order to present the current development status and existing problems of the Ed.D. professional degrees.

To comprehensively analyze the development status of the Ed.D. professional degree, textual data can be collected from the perspective of talent cultivation in the graduate education process. The analysis can be carried out by examining the admission brochures of different training institutions during the graduate admission phase, as well as the training plans during the graduate education phase. The admission brochures, training plans, and other textual data usually have relatively fixed formats. After data preprocessing such as removing irrelevant information and assigning identification numbers to the cleaned data entries, quantitative analysis can be conducted. The textual data collected for this research mainly comes from the websites of universities that are authorized to confer the Ed.D. professional degree, the websites of the the National Education Guidance Committee of Ed.D., and the National Platform for Degree and Graduate Education Quality Information. The collected data mainly includes admission brochures, admission procedures, training plans, and other relevant documents, the specific statistical information of collected texts is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Statistical information of collected texts

Type	Name	Number
Recruitment Brochure	Types of Admissions (including factors such as target applicants, learning form, duration, admission fields, and employment options)	39
	Requirements of Admissions (including political integrity, prerequisite degrees, research requirements, and foreign language proficiency)	39
Training Program	Training objectives	19
	Educational approach (including elements such as mentor guidance and practical sessions)	19
	Course arrangement (Including module settings, credit settings)	19

## 2. Development of Ed.D. in China

The Doctor of Education professional degree originated in 1921 at Harvard University in the United States and has a history of a hundred years<sup>[8]</sup>. However, it is still in its early stages in China.

The development of the Ed.D. professional degree in China can be roughly divided into the stages of preparatory, exploration, and development. In recent years, the scale of development has continuously expanded, the quality of talent cultivation has improved, and it has gradually matured.

### 2.1. Preparatory Stage

Before the formal establishment of the Doctor of Education professional degree, as early as 1999, Huazhong University of Science and Technology established the “Doctoral Program for University Presidents”. With the continuous development of China’s economy, society, and education sector, there was a tremendous demand among educational administrators for professional development. Subsequently, several universities, such as Beijing Normal University and Peking University, attempted to cultivate high-level research-oriented educational management talents. These initiatives laid a solid practical foundation for the establishment of Ed.D. programs.

In September 2007, the Office of the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council decided to establish an expert panel to evaluate and discuss the Ed.D. professional degree. In December 2008, during the 26th meeting of the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council, the “Program for the Establishment of the Ed.D. Professional Degree” was reviewed and approved. The establishment of the Ed.D. professional degree marked a significant milestone in the development of professional degrees in the field of education since the establishment of the Master of Education professional degree in 1996<sup>[9]</sup>. It holds great symbolic importance and represents a new highlight in the history of educational professional degree programs in China.

### 2.2. Exploratory Stage

In June 2009, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council approved 15 universities, including Peking University and Tsinghua University, as the first batch of pilot universities for the Ed.D. professional degree. These universities started enrollment in 2010, with the first intake of 161 students. The exploration of cultivating educational doctoral talents in China was thus launched.

Subsequently, the National Education Guidance Committee of Ed.D. formulated several documents based on the opinions and regulations issued by the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council. These documents included the “Guidelines on Graduate Education for the Ed.D. Professional Degree”, the “Instructional Plan for Graduate Education in the Ed.D. Professional Degree”, and the “Requirements for Ed.D. Graduate Dissertations”. These documents provided clear guidelines for various aspects of Ed.D. talent cultivation<sup>[10]</sup>. The pilot universities also continuously improved their regulations and established relevant organizational structures to explore various models of Ed.D. talent cultivation.

### 2.3. Development Stage

In 2015, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council and the Ministry of Education entrusted the Instructional Committee to conduct a special evaluation of the 15 pilot universities. The evaluation examined the completeness of the talent cultivation system, including faculty, talent cultivation, and quality assurance. All 15 pilot universities passed the evaluation, marking the successful conclusion of the six-year pilot and exploration period and indicating the entry into the development stage of the Ed.D. professional degree in China.

In 2017, the number of universities offering Ed.D. programs expanded further, with 12 universities such as Qufu Normal University and Tianjin Normal University becoming the second batch of authorized institutions. In 2020, four universities including Guangxi Normal University and Shandong Normal University became the third batch of authorized institutions. As a result, the

total number of authorized institutions offering the Ed.D. professional degree reached 31. Over the years, Ed.D. programs have been established across the country, but their distribution is mainly concentrated in core cities along the southeast coast, with over a quarter of authorized institutions located in the North China region. The number of Ed.D. program offerings needs to increase, particularly in the western regions, to address the issue of regional development imbalance and ensure the fulfillment of different regions' demand for educational talents.

### **3. Admissions and Enrollment**

Ed.D. programs began admissions in 2010, and until before 2018, pilot institutions recruited students in three areas: Educational Leadership and Management, School Curriculum and Teaching, and Student Development and Education. The annual enrollment size remained relatively stable, with a total of 1304 students admitted during this period. Among them, Educational Leadership and Management had the highest number of admissions, reaching 982, accounting for 75.3%.

In 2018, under the background of the national "Belt and Road" initiative, the Ed.D. program admitted students in the field of Chinese international education for the first time. The number of Ed.D. admissions significantly increased in 2018, thanks to the inclusion of the second batch of training institutions and the expansion of enrollment scale. The Ed.D. program enrolled over 400 students for the first time, and the number has been continuously expanding since then.

The "Educational Doctorate Professional Degree Program Setting Plan" explicitly states that the target admissions are for primary and secondary school teachers, school administrators at all levels, who hold a master's degree, have more than 5 years of full-time work experience in education or related fields, and have significant achievements. In recent years, the Ed.D. program has had sufficient student demand, and the number of applicants exceeds the admission capacity of training institutions. The application-to-admission ratio in some institutions can be as high as 10:1, with most around 5:1.

#### **3.1. Types of Admissions**

The text information we obtained from universities that offer Ed.D. programs through the Internet mainly includes elements such as target applicants, learning form, duration, admission fields, and employment options. Through an analysis of the admissions prospectus of 31 institutions, the following characteristics are found:

##### **3.1.1 Clear descriptions of target applicants are provided**

Most universities have specific requirements for target applicants in different fields. For example, for the field of "Educational Leadership and Management," it generally admits school administrators at all levels, including kindergarten, primary, secondary, vocational, and higher education institutions. However, it does not admit administrative staff from educational administrative agencies, educational institutions, training schools, or full-time teachers in higher education institutions.

For the field of "School Curriculum and Teaching," it typically admits primary and secondary school teachers, as well as educational researchers from teaching and research institutions. For the field of "Student Development and Education," it generally admits teachers and staff engaged in moral education, psychological health education, and student management at all levels of schools.

There are also specific requirements for the work experience of the target applicants. For the field of Chinese International Education, the target applicants are required to have at least 2-3 years of full-time work experience in the education field, while other fields require a minimum of 5 years

of work experience.

### **3.1.2 There is a variety of study formats**

In graduate education management, the main study formats are full-time and part-time, and both formats adhere to the same quality standards<sup>[11]</sup>. Admission universities select the study format based on their own training characteristics and conditions. From the text, it can be observed that 11 universities offer full-time programs, 7 universities offer part-time programs, 9 universities offer a combination of full-time and part-time programs, and 4 universities do not explicitly mention the study format in their admissions prospectus.

### **3.1.3 The study duration is generally consistent**

The training institutions have largely set a consistent duration of study, with 30 institutions having a study duration of 4 years, and only one institution having a study duration of 5 years.

### **3.1.4 The main employment mode is targeted employment**

Targeted employment and non-targeted employment are two types of employment methods for graduate admissions plans. In targeted employment, students must sign a tripartite agreement between the candidate, the admitting institution, and the future employer before admission. Their records, personnel files, household registration, and salary relationship remain with their original employer. After graduation, they are required to work in the designated region or organization according to the terms of the agreement. For non-full-time education doctoral programs, the employment mode is mainly targeted employment, with only a small portion of full-time education doctoral graduates finding non-targeted employment. This aligns with the characteristics of doctoral education in China.

## **3.2. Requirements of Admissions**

In the policy documents, the admission requirements for candidates generally include aspects such as political integrity, prerequisite degrees, research requirements, and foreign language proficiency. Through statistical analysis of the textual data, it is found that the admission programs of universities generally value the political integrity and prerequisite degrees of candidates. All 31 institutions explicitly require candidates to demonstrate political qualities and personal qualities and hold a master's or doctoral degree.

Different institutions have varying requirements for candidates' research abilities. There are 11 institutions that have specified requirements for candidates' research abilities. The requirements are not based on a single factor, as some institutions provide 2-9 conditions for candidates to choose from, and meeting 1-2 of these conditions is sufficient. This article summarizes the research requirements into four aspects, including publishing high-quality papers and monographs, leading or participating in research projects at the provincial or ministerial level and above, receiving awards for research or teaching achievements at the provincial or ministerial level and above, and having consultation reports or policy recommendations adopted, among others. All institutions include publishing high-quality papers and monographs as optional conditions for consideration.

The institutions that use application review methods for admission do not require foreign language exams. Instead, they employ a more flexible evaluation approach by setting multiple conditions for candidates to choose from, where meeting some of the conditions is sufficient. This article has collected explicit requirements for foreign language proficiency from 19 institutions. The text elements related to foreign language proficiency requirements can be summarized into six

aspects, including foreign language exam scores, scores from the National College English Test Band 6 or Professional English Test Band 8, scores from TOEFL or IELTS exams, publications in foreign journals or study abroad experiences, foreign language proficiency in languages other than English, and appropriately relaxed conditions. The admission ratio for Ed.D. is relatively low, as there is an abundant pool of applicants but limited enrollment. One major reason is that many frontline teachers or administrators have heavy workloads and limited opportunities to use foreign languages, resulting in lower levels of proficiency. This has led to foreign language proficiency becoming a barrier for candidates pursuing a doctoral degree. In order to address this challenge, universities have set numerous foreign language requirements with reasonable scores. If candidates cannot meet the conditions, some institutions also offer additional foreign language proficiency exams, providing candidates with a second chance.

#### 4. The Process of Education and Cultivation

The establishment of Ed.D. is a response to the need for deepening degree and graduate education reforms. The “Development Plan for Professional Graduate Education (2020-2025)” explicitly calls for continuous innovation and reform in the training models of professional degrees to cater to the demand for applied doctoral-level professionals in various industries. The cultivation process becomes a key aspect of this reform, involving the positioning of talent cultivation goals, the reform of training methods, and the innovation of curriculum systems.

##### 4.1. Training Objectives

The expressions of training objectives by different institutions are generally consistent with the “Program Specification for Professional Doctoral Degree in Education”. They emphasize that the training of Ed.D. is distinct from Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). It emphasizes practical characteristics and professional orientation.

The Ph.D. focuses on cultivating “professional researchers”, while Ed.D. emphasizes the development of “research-oriented professionals”. They have different value orientations, with academic doctoral degrees emphasizing “academicism” and professional doctoral degrees emphasizing “practicability”. The professional training during the doctoral phase aims to equip outstanding teachers in primary and secondary schools, as well as educational administrators at various levels, who already possess rich practical experience and achievements, with the necessary theoretical knowledge. It aims to develop their professional abilities in education, teaching, or educational management, deepen their understanding of the characteristics of the education profession, and cultivate their awareness and methods of addressing practical educational issues through scientific research<sup>[10]</sup>.

##### 4.2. Educational approach

The text mainly discusses elements of teaching methods and practical sessions in the cultivation process. In terms of teaching methods, most universities adopt a combination of collective training and mentor guidance. The descriptions regarding mentor groups in the training programs are relatively simple, and there are variations in implementation among different institutions. Among the 19 institutions’ training programs that have been collected, only four provide descriptions of mentor group compositions:

(1) Some institutions include all educational doctoral mentors on campus in the mentor group, providing collective guidance to doctoral students.

(2) Some institutions allow the primary mentor to independently appoint two professionals with doctoral degrees or senior professional titles to form the mentor group.

(3) Some institutions establish a “primary mentor - practical mentor - associate mentor”

three-in-one training model, where the mentor group consists of an academic primary mentor from the university, an associate mentor, and a practical mentor from the field of education.

In terms of practical sessions, most institutions consider educational practice and practical research courses as the primary means of practical learning. They do not have specific practice modules. However, one institution explicitly emphasizes the requirement for practical activities. It mandates that doctoral students participate in social practices, including conducting research and investigations in various departments of schools, internship sites, other universities, and educational research institutions. Additionally, before the defense, students are required to complete internship tasks under the guidance of part-time mentors.

### 4.3. Course Arrangement

According to the guidelines provided by the National Education Guidance Committee of Ed.D., the curriculum design for education doctoral students should meet the requirements of cultivating multi-disciplinary and professionalized senior professional talents in the fields of teaching, and education management. The curriculum should be more structured and standardized, with an emphasis on comprehensive and practical aspects. Thematic seminars on basic theories and literature research are also essential.

The guidelines for instructional training programs require that the education doctoral program adopt a credit system and modular courses, with a total of no less than 20 credits. The distribution of credits is as follows:

- (1) Public course module: no less than 4 credits.
- (2) Educational theory module: no less than 6 credits.
- (3) Research and research methods module: no less than 4 credits.
- (4) Educational practice and research module: no less than 6 credits.

According to the statistics, among the 19 institutions, 16 of them have adopted the instructional training program provided by the National Education Guidance Committee of Ed.D., which includes the setup of four modular courses. On the other hand, three institutions have chosen not to use the modular approach and have instead designed various courses such as public courses, core courses, and specialized courses. In terms of practical components, they organize practical activities in the form of case teaching and case analysis.

Regarding the credit requirements, all the institutions set a minimum requirement of 20 credits or more, with the highest requirement being 28 credits.

## 5. Conclusions

Ed.D. program in China started relatively late but has developed rapidly. It provides a high-level professional development platform for outstanding primary and secondary school teachers and various levels of school administrators who have accumulated rich experience and achieved certain accomplishments in educational practice. Through higher-level and systematic training, it broadens their horizons, enriches their thinking, and continuously improves the effectiveness of educational teaching and management work, making greater contributions to the provision of satisfactory education for the people. Although the cultivating institutions have achieved certain results, they still need to continuously explore and reform the talent training model, and there are issues such as reliance on the development system of educational doctorates, which require long-term construction and shaping. Based on the research in this article, the following considerations are proposed.

(1) With the increasing number of authorized education doctoral programs, the enrollment scale has also expanded, and the number of students admitted by the initial pilot institutions has almost doubled. The expansion of scale requires more resource investment, such as practical mentors and funding for education. Ed.D. should emphasize practicality and professionalism, and practical mentors play a crucial role in the cultivation process. Academic mentors cannot replace practical

mentors. Training institutions should increase investment in funds for the development and construction of learning resources, and support teachers in writing teaching reference materials and building case libraries for Ed.D.

(2) Since its inception, Ed.D. has struggled to find clear boundaries with the traditional Ph.D. in education in terms of curriculum design, implementation, effectiveness, and evaluation. It has been in a state of “dependence” on and convergence with the Ph.D. in education, and the training goal of producing “research-oriented professionals” has not been adequately reflected or developed<sup>[6]</sup>. Many education doctoral programs are authorized to grant both Ed.D. and Ph.D. in education. Through comparison, it can be observed that some institutions have similar curriculum structures and faculty configurations for both Ed.D. and Ph.D. in education, with a lack of substance in the practical components. It is important for each institution to clearly define the differences between Ed.D and Ph.D. in education in terms of training, and to highlight the characteristics of the professional degree when designing the training program, while attaching importance to practical teaching.

(3) The “National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform” clearly defines vocational education as a distinct type of education from general education. Currently, the talent development for the professional doctorate in education has not yet focused on the field of vocational education or the training of “dual-qualified” doctoral teachers required for vocational education. The job functions of front-line teachers in vocational colleges involve school curriculum and teaching, but there are no corresponding training programs specific to vocational education in various training institutions. Against the backdrop of expanding the scale of education doctoral programs, in accordance with the national requirement that vocational education is a distinct type of education, there is an urgent need to establish specialized education doctoral programs focused on vocational education. These programs should aim to cultivate high-quality, specialized, innovative managers and teachers for vocational education, and improve the education doctoral training system.

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