



Curriculum Issues and Reconstruction of Local Universities in the Context of Universalization—A Comparative Perspective of China and the United States

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Abstract

With China's higher education moving into the stage of popularization, the undergraduate curriculum of the massification stage is beginning to face challenges and undergo transformation. Through the analysis of talent training programs for education majors in three local universities in China and interviews with students majoring in education at a university, several issues have been identified. These include a lack of interdisciplinary courses and a low ratio of elective courses in China's undergraduate curriculum. Additionally, there is a large number of specialized courses with a rigid structure, a small proportion of research courses, and weak practical links with theories being dispersed. Therefore, the reconstruction of the curriculum in local colleges and universities should prioritize general courses, carefully allocate the proportion of elective courses, enhance the flexibility of the training program and course structure, provide students with more autonomy in their choices, deepen the study of professional courses, and emphasize the importance of practical education.

Keywords

Universalization of higher education, Local colleges and universities, curriculum, China-US comparison

According to Martin Trow, when a country's education level reaches less than fifteen percent of the national gross enrollment rate of school-age youth, education enters the period of massification. Once the gross enrollment rate exceeds fifty percent, education enters the period of popularization. According to the Ministry of Education, the gross enrollment rate of higher education in China reached 51.6 percent in 2019, indicating that higher education in China has entered the stage of popularization. However, the expansion of higher education will inevitably lead to changes in the internal structure and functions of higher education (Huang Fang, 2018). Along with the transition of higher education from the massification stage to the popularization stage, China's original undergraduate curriculum is also facing challenges and undergoing transformations. There are several problems associated with professional courses, including high credit requirements, an excessive number of courses, students' tendency to learn hastily and superficially, and limited freedom of choice for students. Therefore, the curriculum of local colleges and universities must be adjusted accordingly to accommodate the increasing accessibility of higher education.

1. The current situation of the curriculum of local colleges and universities

This study collects and analyzes the talent cultivation programs of three local colleges and universities in Shandong

Province and interviews 11 students majoring in education in one of these colleges and universities, which finds that the following problems exist in the current undergraduate curriculum of local colleges and universities.

1.1 Liberal studies courses: low percentage of electives and few interdisciplinary courses offered

General education courses play a vital role in the growth and development of students, and they are the basic courses that help students accumulate broad scientific and cultural knowledge, cultivate a deep cultural heritage, and improve their comprehensive quality. The study found that the proportion of general education courses in local colleges and universities is low, and the contents of the courses are not planned as a whole, are disorganized, and the effect of opening them is unsatisfactory.

Although all three schools have set up compulsory and elective courses, there is a lack of integration between subjects in the general education curriculum, and there is a separation of arts and sciences, which does not reflect the concept of "general education". On the one hand, general education courses are limited to ideological and political courses, foreign language courses, and public sports courses. On the other hand, basic courses such as history, geography, science, philosophy, traditional culture, and so on are often divided into elective modules, making it difficult to meet the needs of students' personalized development. Besides, the general education courses seldom involve other aspects of knowledge resulting in students' narrower knowledge, lower humanistic literacy, and poorer comprehensive ability. For example, it is difficult to realize the goal of "cultivating high-quality talents with deep traditional culture" proposed by University C in the cultivation program under such a general education curriculum. Some students have also put forward their own suggestions on general education: *"I think general education means learning knowledge in all aspects, and I hope that the general education program can be enriched a little bit more, so that my humanistic qualities and comprehensive abilities can be improved."* Therefore, general education must also shift from "subject-specific teaching" to "holistic and comprehensive" knowledge education, so as to expand students' knowledge and develop their comprehensive abilities.

1.2 Specialized courses: the total number of courses is too large and the structure is too rigid, with a small proportion of research courses.

Professional education courses are mainly courses in specialized fields designed to cultivate and enhance undergraduates' professionalism, master professional knowledge, and achieve professional development. The study found that the specialized courses cover a wide range of areas and account for a high percentage of the total, but there are also problems such as a lack of integration, duplication of content, and a lack of students' right to make their own choices.

First of all, it can be seen from the allocation of credit hours and credits in the talent cultivation programs of the three universities that the three schools generally have the highest proportion of credits in specialized courses, with the proportion of all of them above 55%. Although the coverage of specialized courses is wide, there is a lack of integration and connection, and there is duplication of content, wasting students' time and energy. A student mentioned in the interview, *"I think there are too many major courses, almost every day was full of classes in my sophomore year, and there was no time to review what I learned, and there was a lot of pressure at the end of the semester."*

Secondly, the course structure is too rigid, with the implementation of specialized courses dominating and a low proportion of electives. According to the talent training program of the three colleges and universities, the professional courses are divided into professional compulsory courses, which make up approximately three-quarters of the program, and professional elective courses, which account for about one-quarter. Although there are professional elective courses, in practice, some of the elective courses are mandated by the colleges as compulsory. Many students in the interviews expressed the view that, *"All of my professional courses are mandatory, and I will take whatever is arranged in the schedule. I didn't know that professional courses could also be optional. Although mandatory courses allow us to acquire comprehensive professional knowledge, I also hope that we can have some freedom of choice to pursue our personal interests."*

Finally, the proportion of research courses is low and has not attracted enough attention. For example, University A puts forward the cultivation objectives of the talent training program, "to have basic educational research ability, abide by the academic ethics and academic standards of scientific research, master the basic methods of educational scientific research, be familiar with the selection of the topic, literature retrieval and integration, research design, educational surveys, academic papers, and other major research processes, and master the basic methods of data querying and analyzing, be able to independently carry out educational scientific research". Be able to independently

carry out educational scientific research." But in fact, the proportion of research-oriented courses in University A is quite low, and most of them exist in elective courses, which is not conducive to the achievement of this goal.

1.3 Educational practice: ineffective courses and disconnected from theory

Educational practice is a kind of comprehensive practice course, which should guide students to form preliminary professional emotions, form correct concepts of teaching, help them gain strategic knowledge in education, learn critical thinking in education and teaching to carry out good communication expression, organization and coordination, communication and collaboration, etc. (Liu Canqun, 2008). At present, educational practice is still not sufficiently emphasized and the results of educational practice are not satisfactory.

First, the quality of educational practice is not high. Although the three schools put forward in their training programs: "Cultivate educational talents who can be engaged in educational teaching." But the actual educational practice has not been paid enough attention. For example, the educational practice of education majors in University A only accounts for 9 credits. Some students expressed their views on educational practice in the interview: "*Based on my personal experience, I think the quality of the internship is not high, because the internship is arranged in the third semester of the university, which is already busy, and the internship is also sloppy, and we can choose to go back to our hometown to have decentralized internships, and the assessment is not very strict, so there is very little to learn in this case*". In addition, the educational practice lacks complete system planning, the supporting systems are not perfect, and the assessment method is also relatively single, which leads to the poor effect of the educational practice.

Secondly, educational practice is detached from the study of theoretical knowledge. In many colleges and universities, educational practice is often arranged in the last semester, and students first study the theoretical knowledge of their majors and then practice education at the end, so the theoretical knowledge fails to cross with practice effectively. For example, University C stipulates in the training program that the recommended semester for a professional internship is the sixth semester. The interviewees also expressed their dissatisfaction with this: "*Our educational internships are arranged in the second semester of the third year of college, which is half a year at a time, and if I encounter some problems during the internship, I can't solve them well by using the theories I have learned.*"

2. Models of American university curricula in the context of universalization of higher education

According to UNESCO statistics, the gross enrollment rate of higher education in the United States reached 51% of the population of the appropriate age in 1975, stepping into the threshold of universalization. Since the United States entered the universalization stage, especially since the 1990s, the undergraduate education of American colleges and universities has undergone many changes and achieved good results in the process of higher education curriculum reform. In general, the structure of undergraduate programs in American universities basically consists of general education, specialized education (majors and minors), free electives, and extracurricular activities (non-classroom activities) (Boyer, E.L. Levine, & Arthur, 1981).

2.1 General Studies Program: Emphasis on general education and strong holistic curriculum

At the beginning of the 19th century, Professor Alpheus Spring Packard of Bowdoin College in the United States proposed the term "general education" (Qiao, G. & Gao, J. M., 2012).

Currently, numerous universities in the United States offer general education courses and place significant emphasis on them. Undergraduates at MIT who want to earn a bachelor's degree must complete 180 to 198 credits. There are 17 required courses in the college's general education category, which amounts to roughly 45-55 credits (Zhang Tiyong, 2009). Beginning with the freshmen entering in 2013, Harvard University decided to increase the proportion of general education courses to 1/4 of the minimum credit requirement for an undergraduate bachelor's degree (Zhang Tiyong, 2009). At Massachusetts State University (MSU), each undergraduate student is required to complete 9 to 11 courses in 7 areas: Arts, Humanities, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social and Behavioral Sciences, World Cultures, and Languages. This totals to 33 credits, which accounts for 27.5% of the total number of credits (Zhang Tiyong, 2009). Additionally, American universities prioritize interdisciplinary learning in their curricula and place significant emphasis on a balanced distribution of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. For example, the current core curriculum of Harvard University covers the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. It consists of six major categories, including foreign cultures, historical studies, literature and arts, moral reasoning, natural

sciences, and social analysis (Ren Gangjian, 2006). Yale University's curriculum is divided into four major areas: literature and the arts, architecture and history, anthropology and sociology, and astronomy and natural sciences. And students are required to take 36 courses and complete 12 courses outside of their required areas, as well as no more than six courses from the same department, in order to receive a bachelor's degree (Ren Gangjian, 2006).

2.2 Specialized courses: focusing on diversity and flexibility and giving students more room to choose courses

American universities are very flexible and streamlined in their professional curriculum. For example, Stanford University's professional curriculum in education is mainly divided into three categories, namely, core courses, foundation courses, and elective courses, which account for about 20% of the total curriculum. Among them, the core courses and foundation courses are mainly designed to enrich students' theoretical knowledge reserve in education and improve their professionalism (Wang, Songjie, 2016). Specialized elective courses allow students to choose more freely their preferred direction of specialization, such as education courses aiming at training educational practitioners, and educational research and policy aiming at training educational researchers and administrators (Wang, Songjie, 2016). This practice fully hands over the power of free choice to students, giving them more room for choice while placing demands on them, ensuring the enhancement of their literacy, and promoting their personalized development.

2.3 Educational practices: more holistic and integrated

American colleges and universities attach great importance to educational practice courses, which account for 30% to 35% of the entire course structure and are conducted in two phases. The first phase is a decentralized teaching practice with simulation and field practice throughout the teaching program of teacher education majors, which is about 300 credit hours (Ren Gangjian, 2006); the second phase is a pre-graduation intensive educational internship, which usually lasts for 15-24 weeks, which is applied after completing the required courses in arts and sciences, professional disciplines and educational fields, as well as the pre-internship teaching practice activities (Chang, S. L., 1990). In addition, educational practicum courses are interspersed with educational theory courses. For example, at the University of California, Berkeley, educational practice activities are conducted in half-day sessions, with the rest of the time spent discussing and adjusting the goals, tasks, and problems identified in the apprenticeship and internship with the supervising teacher, and students are required to return to the university to participate in a communication seminar after the internship time has accumulated to 24 to 28 hours (Guo, Yao, 2016). This mode of internship arrangement provides students with an opportunity to "learn in practice and practice in learning", and students are not only able to apply theories in practice and solve problems encountered in the process of practice but also able to strengthen the consolidation of theoretical knowledge through practice.

3. Analysis of differences in the curriculum of Chinese and American universities

Differences in the curriculum of Chinese and American universities are specifically reflected in various aspects such as cultivation objectives, teaching methods, and educational philosophy.

Differences in the educational philosophy of the curriculum. One of the reasons for the development of higher education in the United States is that it takes "student-centeredness" as its educational philosophy. Students as the main body of teaching means that in the process of teaching activities, teachers, teaching materials, teaching methods, and teaching tools should serve students (Li, Y.F. & Xu, Q.F., 2012). American university courses are student-centered, the teacher-student ratio is no more than 1:10, and the class size is usually between 20 and 30 students. For example, Stanford University has more than 6,000 undergraduate students and 2,000 faculty members in more than 6,000 undergraduate programs. On average, each student can be individually assigned to a course, while ensuring that the university assigns a mentor to each student, effectively providing comprehensive communication between faculty and students (Jiang Guilian, 2013). American colleges and universities have different educational philosophies, but both the world's leading universities and ordinary colleges and universities pay attention to freedom of innovation, teaching basic theoretical knowledge, focusing on practical skills, and paying special attention to students' interests as the starting point for the elective courses (Jun Cui & Xia Wang, 2013). China's higher education philosophy, on the other hand, is manifested in the textbook and curriculum as the center, without paying too much attention to the content outside the curriculum system, ignoring the main position of students. The total number of courses, especially specialized courses, is too large, which inhibits the space for students to make free choices and ignores the

development of students' personalities.

Differences in curricula in terms of training objectives. Since the rise of the higher education reform movement in the 1980s, the United States has made the cultivation of innovative and well-rounded talents one of the main goals of educational reform. Yale University has clearly expressed its adherence to the concept of generalist education in the famous *Yale Report*. This concept of generalist education is to provide students with the ability to think independently, innovate, and develop their own abilities necessary to cope with future social life, not an encyclopedic all-rounder. It can be seen that American colleges and universities attach great importance to the education of comprehensive basic knowledge and, on this basis, emphasize the cultivation of students' ability to innovate and develop. In addition, American universities also attach great importance to the cultivation of students' scientific research ability. For example, many universities in the United States require that students in the lower grades must take "Scientific Research Methods", and teachers have to help students master scientific research knowledge and methods, and cultivate students' scientific research thinking and ability (Zheng Ming, 2007). China's university training goals are characterized by a strong "specialization education", paying more attention to the study of professional knowledge, and training specialists. The proportion of professional courses is much higher than the general education courses, which ignored the general education, and relatively diluted the comprehensive quality of the students.

Curriculum implementation differences in teaching methods. In the process of classroom teaching in U.S. colleges and universities, teachers usually encourage students to review the material before class. They do not explain all the content during class but instead focus on key points, difficulties, and other topics that require further explanation. Teachers in the classroom employ heuristic teaching methods, wherein they gradually guide students to identify, analyze, think, and solve problems, thereby fostering students' critical thinking skills (Li Pan, 2020). At the City University of New York in the United States, the teacher in class throws out relevant open questions based on the content of the lecture. Students discuss the problem and provide ideas and statements to solve it. Then, after discussing various ideas, they ultimately reach a relatively unified conclusion, while sometimes also maintaining different perspectives for students to further learn and contemplate (Wang Lei & Wu Jianfeng, 2017). Different from the United States, China's colleges and universities rely on teachers to impart knowledge while students passively learn, resulting in insufficient student participation in the classroom. There is a phenomenon called "information overload" that results in a passive classroom atmosphere, low student motivation, and poor teaching effectiveness. Although in recent years, the state has vigorously advocated changing the status quo of college classroom teaching, the teacher-student interaction in the college classroom usually follows a mechanized and formalized mode of "teacher questions, student answers, and teacher comments" (Wang Lei & Wu Jianfeng, 2017).

4. Suggestions for restructuring the curriculum of local universities in China

Drawing on the American university curriculum model, the curriculum of our local colleges and universities has gained the following insights.

4.1 General Studies: implementing the concept of general studies and rational planning

As we move into the stage of popularization of higher education, strengthening general education is the general trend of higher education. Firstly, we should retarget the cultivation objectives, emphasize comprehensive basic knowledge education, and cultivate the comprehensive quality of students. Secondly, we should enrich the number of general education courses, increase the proportion of credits in general education courses, actively explore new forms of general education courses, and continuously broaden the contents of general education courses. As a student mentioned in the interview, *"I hope that in addition to English, politics and sports, we can enrich the contents of the general education courses, I think that the general education courses are to expand the knowledge, and it is a kind of comprehensive learning"*. Drawing on Harvard University's practice of categorizing general studies courses, we will divide the fields according to the actual situation of the school and the development of students, guide students to take electives and increase the proportion of elective courses. Finally, emphasis is being placed on enhancing the curriculum of humanities and social sciences and natural sciences courses and increasing the number of interdisciplinary cross-curricular courses offered, so as to meet the needs of students' interests and personality development, and to play a role in improving students' knowledge structure, broadening their horizons, highlighting their personal development and improving their overall quality, so that they can better realize the task and goal of promoting the all-round development of students.

4.2 Specialized courses: reducing weight and empowering and increasing depth of learning

First of all, reducing the total number of specialized courses does not mean blindly cutting the number of specialized courses, but updating and integrating the contents of specialized courses, optimizing the structure of specialized courses, comprehensively considering the relationship between professional knowledge, professional concepts, professional skills, and professional abilities, and fostering and upgrading undergraduates' professionalism, so as to enable them to master professional knowledge and realize the connotative development of their professions. The concept of "student-centered" education is introduced into the curriculum to give students more freedom of choice, and students can also add minor courses, or choose double-degree courses or inter-professional studies according to their own personal needs. In addition, the curriculum of American universities has considerable flexibility, and our country should also give more power to students by reducing the implantation of courses, encouraging minors, emphasizing the mentorship system, etc., so as to increase the flexibility of the curriculum system. As many interviewees mentioned in the interview, *"I hope that I can have more freedom of choice to choose elective courses related to my major according to my own interests."* In line with this, the teaching mode should be adjusted accordingly, reversing the phenomenon of "filling the classroom" and improving student participation in the classroom. Finally, to strengthen the study of research-oriented courses, master the basic methods of educational scientific research, focus on cultivating the critical spirit of students, improve the ability to innovate, and initially form the ability to independently or cooperatively carry out educational scientific research.

4.3 Educational practices: throughout, focusing on integration with theory

At present, the quality of educational practices in local universities is still unsatisfactory. Educational practice is arranged in the final stage, which poses significant challenges for students to enhance their teaching skills quickly and demonstrate their competence in teaching. It also requires them to integrate their internship teaching experience with the theoretical knowledge they have acquired in specialized courses. First of all, we should learn from the "student-centered" educational concept of American colleges and universities. We need to emphasize the significance of educational practice for students and increase the proportion of credits it accounts for. Secondly, the centralized educational practice should be decentralized to each academic year, and the teaching practice courses should be based on the close integration of theory and practice. It is important to emphasize that students should go through the process of "learning-practice-learning-repeat". The teaching practice courses emphasize the continuous process of "learning - practice - learning again" for students to experience, based on the close integration of theory and practice. This not only encourages students to learn by doing but also ensures that students practice what they have learned. Finally, to ensure the quality of educational practice courses, students are provided with dedicated educational practice instructors. The objectives and tasks of educational internships and apprenticeships are clearly defined, and there is ongoing communication and exchange with the instructors. Additionally, a strict educational practice assessment system is implemented.

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