

The Dilemma and Path for China's General Education Development in Universities Since 40 Years of Reform and Opening up

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Abstract: Many universities bear the important responsibility of cultivating high-quality talents for the country, and it has become an inevitable choice to carry out general education. Since 40 years of reform and opening up, general education has made great development. However, there are many difficulties to be solved in general education because the research on general education has not yet matured, and there is a lack of formed institutional norms and generalizable practice models, as well as the phenomenon of utilitarianism of the concept of general education and fragmentation of general education courses. By reviewing previous research, this paper examines the dilemma and path for China's general education development in universities since 40 years of reform and opening up. Finally, it is concluded that the future development path of general education in Chinese universities is to correct students' cognition of general education, improve the recognition of general education, and integrate the resources of general education.

Keywords: reform and opening up, general education, university education

1. Introduction

Over the past 40 years since the reform and opening up, called by policy, society, market, culture, and the requirements of the university's own development, under the continuous impetus of policy documents, social forces, market participation, and cultural development, general education has been moving forward along the needs and logic of the university's own development, and people have gradually formed a consensus on its importance [1]. Ideally, general education should have a clear conceptual scope, sober implementation subjects, and appropriate practical measures, but because the research on general education is not yet mature, and general education lacks a well-formed institutional standard and a generalizable practical model, the development of general education still faces many dilemmas in theory and practice, from which there is a need to find the real path for the development of general education. This paper studies the dilemma encountered by general education in the past 40 years of reform and opening up in China, aiming to find a way out for the future development of general education in China's universities and give enlightenment to the solution to the current dilemma.

2. The Development of China's General Education Since the Reform and Opening up

In 1978, China entered into reform and opening up, a great revolution was carried out, and general education began to develop gradually; in the 1980s, the slogan of “downplaying majors and strengthening fundamentals” was launched; in 1995, some science and technology colleges started to experiment with cultural quality education; from 1999 to 2006, 93 cultural quality bases were established. Among them, Fudan University established the Research Center for general studies and took the lead in implementing the reform of independent admissions for undergraduates in China, which realized the dovetailing of general studies training and talent selection by means of independent selection regardless of majors, and the Xiangshan Conference held at the beginning of the 21st century caused a great deal of discussion on humanities education. Until 2016, the national 13th Five-Year Plan, which established a higher education system integrating general and professional education, truly realized the progress and leap of general education in China's education system.

After many historical academic conferences on general education, the concept of general education has been popularized and deeply rooted in people's minds, being basically recognized by teachers and students nationwide. Many university faculty members have changed from opposing and questioning general education to actively participating in the reform wave. They have spared no effort in the development of university general education.

3. Dilemmas for China's General Education Development in Universities

3.1. Incorrect Understanding of General Education

A number of applied undergraduate institutions are divided in their ideological understanding. Some believe that different types of schools have different orientations in talent cultivation and not all schools should carry out general education [2], and some do not have a clear concept of general education and simply think of it as piecemeal reading. Therefore, various problems arise in its implementation. Cultivating such talents requires huge costs, and there must be a complete, scientific education system and supporting software and hardware facilities to turn this ideal into reality. The cultivation model of Harvard University in the United States can be taken as an example. Harvard attaches importance to general art education, which requires the completion of eight categories and N sub-categories at the undergraduate level, but most Harvard students will enter business schools, medical schools, and other graduate schools for further study after graduation. General art education is a national education system to achieve the purpose of education, which includes cultivating the basic cultural literacy of the nation, improving the moral level of the nation, and teaching the nation to establish a sense of compliance with the law from an early age. Nowadays, there is a phenomenon of utilitarianism in universities. In order to attract more students, the universities are offering the most popular majors that are needed for local and regional socio-economic development and are recognized by education consumers. The market-oriented and practical orientation of university talent training tends to lead the school to utilitarianism and pragmatism [3]. At the same time, the utilitarianism of education not only destroys the law of human cultivation and the sustainable development of education but also directly stifles students' learning initiative and neglects comprehensive education.

3.2. Fragmented Curriculum Setting

The fragmentation of general education courses is reflected in the limited space for setting general education courses that cannot be opened according to the ideal state, and the arbitrarily set courses that are rigidly opened according to the credit requirements. Some colleges and universities offer

various kinds of “general” and “basic” courses, which make general education a professional basic course with reduced requirements. Teachers are reluctant to teach general courses for their own reasons, and students lack interest in these courses, coupled with perfunctory assessment methods and lax school management mechanisms, the teaching quality of general education courses is generally not high and cannot achieve the purpose of general education [4]; some universities are obsessed with increasing the number of general courses and completely ignore the overall design and justification of the curriculum. Some universities only attach great importance to the increase of the number of general courses, but completely ignore the overall design and proof of the curriculum, resulting in no connection between courses and disorganization; there are also many courses in which students only make a perfunctory effort, and this seriously damage the reputation and effectiveness of general education.

4. Paths for China’s General Education Development in Universities

4.1. Correcting Students’ Understanding of General Education

Since many people have a vague or even utilitarian understanding of the concept of general education, it is necessary to raise the importance of general education and position it reasonably. In order to make general education in China’s universities effective, there is a need to first solve the problem of the incorrect conception of general education. Education administrators, education policymakers, teachers, and students should change their concepts and raise their awareness of the importance of general education from an ideological point of view. It should be realized that the most fundamental purpose of general education is to cultivate individuals for their comprehensive development instead of treating them as backups [5]. General education gives students a humanistic vision and helps them create profound thinking abilities and cross-disciplinary abilities, which have an irreplaceable influence on college students.

At the same time, the stereotype that professional education has a higher status than general education is extremely wrong, but, in fact, both are equally important. General education does not cultivate a substitute for someone else but a sound human being through the activation of value rationality. Plato said that education is the turning of the mind, and he regarded the cultivation of rational and responsible citizens as the duty of education, by which he meant general education. As education becomes more and more important, professional education has become the mainstream of university education, so the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of university is professional education, and a form of indoctrination has replaced the cultivation of talents, which is very sad. In order to find a clear position of general education, this stereotype in talent training must be corrected, so that the concept of general education can be integrated into the overall spirit of university education.

4.2. Expanding and Integrating Curriculum Resources of General Education

First of all, enough space should be given to general education courses in the whole curriculum education system. General education courses should not be simplified to cope with professional courses, but are supposed to be expanded and integrated. Zhong Binglin believes that China can learn from the U.S. experience in general art education by offering elective courses that span a wide range of subjects and conducting a distributed compulsory general art curriculum [6]. The university should deal with the relationship between the integrity of professional education and the effectiveness of general education in the current talent training program, and not just push the development of professional education. Some courses are appropriately streamlined and compressed to give more space for general education courses. Freshmen should not have the

stereotype that general education is not important, and the reasonable allocation of courses also plays an essential role in the psychological orientation of students.

Secondly, the general education courses should be planned rationally while changing the miscellaneous, chaotic, and arbitrary phenomena and gradually establishing the prestige of the courses through scientific argumentation and rational planning. The classroom roll-call mechanism should be the same or even more rigorous than that of professional education, so as not to give students the idea of skipping classes perfunctorily. The phenomenon of random and unstructured general education exists in many schools, and the responsibility goes to the schools for not doing a good job in promoting general education, and the teachers for not doing a good job in guiding it.

Finally, the role of potential curriculum resources should be brought into play. If the setting and implementation of professional courses are not confined to a certain major or a certain course, but can guide students out of the narrow professional arena and focus on guiding them to perceive the common essence of different disciplines or course areas, then it can be called general education. Because the definition of general education is broad, professional education can also be called general education as long as it focuses on the enhancement and cultivation of human beings. In addition, it is important to focus on the active role of implicit curriculum construction, including campus culture, in the overall general education [7].

5. Conclusion

During the reform and opening up of China in the past 40 years, the development of general education has had its ups and downs, with many twists and turns, but it has achieved great results and development. Generally speaking, there is a positive trend and it has been basically popularized and recognized by all people. However, stereotypes and prejudices about general education still exist, leading to difficulties and setbacks in the development of general education, such as the utilitarianism of general education and the lack of correct positioning of general education. These have led to the lack of attention to general education in universities and the failure of students to learn the essence of general education. The fragmentation of general education courses has also become a major bottleneck in its development. In terms of the solutions, from the subjective side, students, teachers, schools, and even society need to recognize the importance of general education. From the objective side, it is very important to expand and integrate the general education curriculum and achieve the ideal goal of considering professional education and general education as equally important. It is necessary to set the curriculum content to focus on basic knowledge and basic ability training since solid basic knowledge and skills are the basis for mastering all knowledge in today's rapidly developing society. Moreover, the general education curriculum should be based on the Chinese traditional culture to strengthen the cultivation of students' national spirit and national consciousness, so that every student is qualified to receive equal general education. Relevant literature was reviewed and analyzed in this paper, and future studies can focus on empirical statistics and analysis. Credibility could be increased in the form of a questionnaire.

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