



The Connotation and Realization of Student-centeredness at Cardiff University, UK

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Abstract: Through field research at Cardiff University in the UK, this paper points out that the connotation of Student-centeredness (SC) can be summarized into four aspects: centering on students' physical and mental health and quality of life, students' participation, students' learning outcomes and students' learning experiences. The core of these four points is centering on students' learning. Cardiff University guarantees the realization of student learning-centered through the establishment of an academic support system, the provision of year-round on/offline training, the development of students' learning skills, and a comprehensive organization and policy, forming the SC university culture that combines ideas and actions. The university culture is a combination of SC philosophy and action, which reveals that Chinese universities in the post-epidemic era need to realize a cultural transformation based on SC, and the concept of SC ultimately needs to be implemented into undergraduate learning-centeredness. Technology, teaching, management need to shift to supporting, guiding and serving all students.

Keywords: student-centeredness, connotation, realization, cultural transformation

1. Introduction

Student-centeredness (Hereinafter referred to as SC) is not a new topic in either the international or Chinese education sector. In July 2012, the theme of the Fifth International Symposium and Annual Conference of the Institutional Research Branch of the Chinese Society of Higher Education was an Institutional Research: the transformation of SC Undergraduate Education, in which experts from home and abroad extensively discussed the inevitability, connotation and realization of SC undergraduate education[1]. In July 2016, the first academic conference on teaching and learning at Shanghai Jiao tong University was themed From Teaching to Learning - A Paradigm Revolution, focusing on the SC teaching model and the innovative practices under this model[2]. On September 8, 2017, Minister Chen Baosheng of the Ministry of Education in China wrote an article in the People's Daily, pointed out that we should be striving to run a good education that satisfies the people, proposing to start a classroom revolution and always adhere to the learner-centered approach, provide personalized, diversified and high-quality education services for different levels and types of educated people. In addition, we will promote learners' active learning, unleash their potential and develop comprehensively.[3] From the SC undergraduate education to the SC teaching model to the SC classroom revolution, although the scope of SC education is getting smaller and smaller, what is the specific connotation of SC and how to realize SC has long been discussed by both policymakers and university administrators and teachers in theory and practice. Theoretically and practically, neither policymakers nor university administrators and teachers have been clear about what SC means and how to realize it.

I had the privilege of visiting Cardiff University in the UK for a short period of time in 2018. As a university teacher and a researcher in higher education, I have long been concerned about the theory and practice of SC at home and abroad. The UK government published Student at the heart of the system, a white paper on higher education in June 2011 which is the first national policy document in the world that directly uses SC as the title, which elevates the status of students to the center of the higher education system from the policy level and clearly points out that the construction and development of higher education in the UK and quality assurance will be closely focused on students in the future, however, there are few concrete examples of SC at UK universities. In April 2018 the UK dedicated the Office for Students (OFS), whose strategic aims for 2018-2021 focus on four areas: student engagement, student experience, student learning outcomes and value for money for the tuition fees students pay, by which the OFS assesses individual schools to further safeguard the implementation of SC policies. Therefore, I took the study of how Cardiff University complying SC as one of the objectives of my study visit, and through my personal experience and research on the concept and concrete measures of SC, I was able to clarify the meaning of SC and its application in the UK and have a deeper thought on the meaning of SC and how to realize SC in Chinese universities.

2. What is the connotation of SC?

Referring to the connotation of SC, we are actually focusing on the question of what exactly the university is centered on students. Cardiff University suggests that "We regard the student experience as our core business and this is reflected in our strategic and operational plans." [4] Obviously, the student experience is still abstract and vague. In order to clarify what Cardiff University is centered on, I first conducted a textual analysis, taking all the texts related to students from Cardiff University's website and the university's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) report, strategic plans, etc. It was found that there are about 40 words and phrases often associated with the word "student", among which the phrases of "student learning experience, student learning support, student learning skills, student employability, student future, student learning outcomes, student physical and mental health" were the most frequent. Through my interviews and research and according to the UK Office of Student Affairs and Cardiff University's website, it can be concluded that Cardiff University focuses on the following four aspects of students.

2.1 Focusing on the physical, mental health and quality of life of all students

The physical, mental health and quality of life of students include not only physical and mental health as we understand literally, such as excellent sports facilities and counseling services; but also services and support for all students, which refers to students of different races, classes, beliefs, genders, including the provision of thoughtful services and support for students with disabilities, with every building on the Cardiff University campus having disability access, which is a very clear indicator that students' physical and mental health and quality of life are at the center of this. The reality is that many of the buildings and facilities on Chinese campuses do not support students with disabilities who face various inconveniences when they enter the campuses. The focus on the physical and mental health and well-being of all students reflects the UK's philosophy of equality and diversity which makes students have fair access to higher education regardless of race, gender, disability, etc.

2.2 Caring about students' engagement

Cardiff University is centered on student participation, not only in the sense that students actively interact with teachers during classes; but also in the sense that students can be key participants in the reform process and participate in the decision making of major issues of the university, such as the curriculum design and teaching process of teachers, the development of the university's strategic development plan, the writing of the university's annual quality report and teaching excellence framework report, etc.; students can also provide the university with management suggestions. Not all students are involved in these matters, but a significant number of student representatives are involved in discussions and decisions on important university matters. Cardiff University has a variety of ways in which students' voices are heard by teachers and administrators, and annual student surveys and periodic course evaluations directly reflect students' views and suggestions about their learning experience, such as increasing social and group learning spaces; revamping the feedback process and increasing job opportunities; introducing new library fines, etc.

2.3 Focusing on students' learning outcomes

Cardiff University focuses on the future of students in terms of student learning outcomes, including employment and further education, designing courses, training and counseling to equip students with measurable knowledge, skills, qualities based on the reverse of the qualities they will need to establish themselves in society. Here is an example of Cardiff University's career planning. They have a strong focus on student employability, not just on placement rates. Cardiff University offers long-term and cyclical career guidance, including how to get interviews, write a resume, become a freelancer, bring in entrepreneurs talking about starting a business, and special employability boot camps. Career guidance at Cardiff University is not focused on juniors or seniors. The university's annual open day for prospective students is a very important part of the career guidance presentation. New students receive career guidance information as soon as they enter the university, and at any time students can book a one-to-one career consultation. These consultations give students early clarity on the goals of their studies and the outcomes they must achieve.

2.4 Centering in students' learning experience

Cardiff University's focus on the students' learning experience emphasizes the whole process of student learning, not just the outcomes. In order to enhance the quality of the students' learning experience, Cardiff University focuses on the student learning process in a very detailed and specific way, including students' learning shortcomings, such as language (academic language), mathematics (statistics); learning skills training, access to learning resources, etc. Study skills include critical reading and thinking (including assessing the value of information), note-taking, essay writing, time management, academic ethics and avoiding academic plagiarism, independent study, teamwork, memory methods, examination strategies;

reports and coursework, etc. All of which are essential skills in the student learning process. China's undergraduate teaching program is the first in the world in terms of credits (credit hours), theory credits (credit hours), required credits (credit hours), weeks of classroom instruction, and hours of classroom instruction.[5] But we do not have a deep understanding of what the whole process of student learning consists of, what learning skills students need to have, and how to ensure the quality of the first in the world.

The four points above summarize the core of SC at Cardiff University, which is student learning-centered.

3. The way how Cardiff University achieves students' learning at the center

How exactly is Cardiff University centered on student learning? This is another key question after the connotation of SC, which is also the key part that Chinese universities need to learn from. Cardiff University has achieved SC learning in the following four ways.

3.1 Building an academic support system

Cardiff University is very concerned about the transition of freshmen and the learning shortcomings of all students. First of all, students who are new to university will have a lot of discomfort in life and academics, so Cardiff University launched a peer-to-peer student mentoring scheme for senior students to mentor first-year students, which received good results, 69% of the trainees in 2015/16 found the scheme very beneficial to their first-year transition. 93% of student mentors found the opportunity to support their peers very valuable[4]. Secondly, in response to students' learning shortcomings, Cardiff University has set up a language center and a math center. Although students have their own areas of strength and weakness, language and mathematical (statistical) problems are universal for many university students. For most students, English is not their native language, and even for English-speaking students, the transition, adaptation and improvement from English at the basic education level to academic English at university is equally necessary. The Language Centre at Cardiff University provides guidance and revision services for students writing academic papers in English, not by revising papers word by word, but by giving advice on the correct way to write; the Maths Centre is open to all students free of charge and offers public large classes and online courses all year round, and individual tutoring is available for students who are particularly poor (in math).

Professor Bie Dunrong, Director of the Institute of Education at Xiamen University, once pointed out that the Chinese Ministry of Education had introduced a policy of abolishing the "clearing exams", but in reality, without the clearing exams, the students not good at studying are still there, and no university has yet come up with an effective solution to the problem of students' academic frustration. The root of improving the quality of teaching is to improve the learning ability of students, especially the learning ability of students with learning difficulties. There should be an academic aid mechanism, but it seems that no university has yet established an effective academic aid system[6]. Xiamen University and some universities across China have already launched an academic warning mechanism, but it is not enough to just give warning and red light, the key is to build an academic help system to help students safely transition from red light to green light and dismiss the academic warning, which should be one of the important initiatives of SC.

3.2 Periodic on/offline training and study guides are provided throughout the year

Cardiff University's on/offline training is rich in specific content closely related to study, such as dealing with exam anxiety, time management, interview skills, group work, building relationships, coursework and reports, etc. The training is frequent, daily, or every other day. The content is rolling so as to meet the schedules of different students. Also, all on/offline training and tutorials are followed by an email address for a consultation, so that students can send an email to schedule a face-to-face individual tutorial or further consultation.

To meet students' needs for learning resources, Cardiff University is constantly updating its academic resources, providing the latest developments in various disciplines, sharing resources with many world-renowned universities. The materials on the university's official website are truly endless, provide all the resources needed for learning as long as students want to learn and as long as they are willing to consult.

3.3 Developing students' academic study skills in various areas

As mentioned earlier, Cardiff University in the UK refines students' Academic study skills, and the school provides training and services for all the various study skills a student needs.

For example, various methods and skills of note-taking. When students listen to lectures, what should be taken notes on the lectures? How should students take revision notes when they are going to review for an exam? How should students take notes on a book while reading? Cardiff University presents all these methods on the website, and if students have questions

they can still have individual consultations. Cardiff University also provides very detailed guidance on how to write an academic essay, including reviewing the topic, the main idea of the paper, the structure of the paper, facts are used to support; if the support is really solid? The survey showed that 93% of the students who participated in these pieces training at Cardiff University felt that their study skills were effectively improved[4].

3.4 Providing a full range of organizational and institutional safeguards

Cardiff University's SC is combined with a series of safeguards, including organization, system, learning resources, space and so on. These student organizations operate effectively, especially the Student Union, which is very powerful and can make demands on the university's policies and contribute a lot to the protection of students' rights and interests.

Although Cardiff University is also a member of the Russell Group, its five-year strategic plan (2018-2023) does not put research at the top of its strategy, instead, the first line of the strategy is education and students, which clearly states that Cardiff University should listen to students and improve teaching and learning through student feedback. Cardiff University Library is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, based on student requests and feedback, and survey data show that between 10 pm and 9 am, 10-17% of the total number of students used the library[4], meeting the needs of a significant number of students.

4. Discussion

The connotation and initiatives of SC at Cardiff University lead us to further reflect on the need for SC cultural transformation of Chinese universities. SC is not only a concept of university teaching; but also a concept of university management, university architecture, university services. Professor Zhao Juming of Huazhong University of Science and Technology, an early researcher on SC in the United States, repeatedly emphasized that SC reform is not only about teaching and learning, but also about the whole school system, such as school culture, mission and goals, teaching and learning activities, management, technology system, resource allocation, administration, etc. and even school environment such as government policies and public opinion. If SC reform is seen as a matter for the teaching department only and not for the rest of the school, such a reform will not be successful.[7]

After I researched and experienced Cardiff University's philosophy and practice of SC, I reflected on Cardiff University's statement of making the student experience or experience the core of the university; and realized that SC is not just a word different from the word Student-cored, but a fundamental difference in action. In English, the word center is different from the word core. Generally speaking, the center is more flat and unidirectional, the core emphasizes a kind of foundation, support and decisiveness. For example, we will say core competencies or core values, but we do not say central competencies or central values. At Cardiff University, SC is not just a slogan or a formality, but a three-dimensional, all-staff, all-around, all-process approach to SC. It does not label itself as SC, nor does put "for all students, for students' all, all for students" as slogans to hang everywhere, but from the school's strategic planning to a job training or math tutoring class, from teaching to management to service, the campus embodies SC with practical actions everywhere.

In the epidemic of spring 2020, both university teachers, students, technology platforms and teaching management departments experienced large-scale online teaching and were deeply unprepared. In my opinion, one of the root causes of these problems lies in the fact that we have not yet constructed an SC university culture, and our philosophy is not clear enough to find a grip on practice. Chinese university culture needs to realize a cultural transformation based on SC.

4.1 The concept of SC needs to be ultimately implemented into student learning-centered

In June 2018, Minister Chen Baosheng of the Ministry of Education proposed at the National Conference on Undergraduate Education in the New Era that undergraduate education is the basis of the great plan for higher education; if undergraduate education is not firmly established, the ground will be shaken. He discussed the reasons why undergraduate education should be the foundation from three aspects. The essential attributes of undergraduate education, its status and role, and the consensus and trend of the development of higher education in the world; put forward extremely clear requirements for undergraduate education in terms of teaching conditions and tools, school resources, and teachers. The university's resources and faculty members have made clear requirements for the orientation. firstly, they should be allocated in the undergraduate program, meet the needs of the undergraduate program, and the teachers' energy should be concentrated in the undergraduate program. As we all know, based on undergraduate education means we need to clarify how to be based on undergraduate education and where to end up.

In June 2018 the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) released Education Policy Outlook 2018 of putting Student Learning at the Centre, which clearly puts forward the need to put student learning at the center, clarifying the importance of student learning is understood at two levels, ① Putting learning at the center of education. The

purpose of education is learning, not teaching, making students responsible for their own learning and fostering their ability to take the initiative and learn on their own is a sure way to develop lifelong learning skills. In this framework, students are the main subjects of learning, teachers are the designers of learning activities, the creators of the learning environment, and the tutors of the learning process. ② Among all the activities of students, learning is the center. It is important to hold on to this center, and the school loses its *raison d'être* without the center.[7] In my opinion, the core purpose of undergraduate education is to cultivate qualified undergraduates, so the first and foremost meaning of SC is "undergraduate-centered". In order to become qualified talents, undergraduates learn mainly through teacher-guided learning. SC ultimately needs to be implemented as undergraduate-learning-oriented, which is the inner logic of "student learning-oriented".

As Minister Chen Baosheng said, teaching conditions, school resources and teachers are the guarantees means to promote undergraduate learning, and the key to highlight undergraduate learning-oriented at the institutional level, technical level, and teaching practice in universities is to cultivate undergraduate learning skills, and the prerequisite is to clarify the connotation of undergraduate learning skills. The American Association of University Teachers (AAUT) has identified the development of student learning skills as one of the seven principles of good undergraduate education, which has been labeled as the critical foundation. In fact, this is a reflection of the teachers' failure to achieve the purpose of teaching to fish. The quality report of China's higher education undergraduate education has mentioned for several years that SC should be implemented, detailed and innovative, but in fact, it has not been done. The fundamental reason is that the connotation of SC has not been fully understood, so we do not know where to start to implement, refine and innovate, just like seeds take root, we must first find the seeds. The connotation of SC is the seed of SC; the learning skills of undergraduates are the seed of undergraduate-based learning.

4.2 Technology, teaching and management need to shift to support, guide and serve all students

Although the hardware level of information technology in Chinese universities has developed significantly in recent years, the software level still has much room for development, for example, there is an extreme lack of online resources that can be used by students for learning and teachers for teaching. On the contrary, the official website of Cardiff University's teaching center provides materials on almost all the resources teachers may use or encounter in teaching, such as the design of the flipped classroom, the design of catechism, team learning and evaluation, new teaching concepts, etc. Some of these materials are papers, some are whole e-books, some are videos, and some are platforms for teachers to communicate with each other, which greatly meet teachers' needs for self-development. In addition to these learning resources and technical support, the Center for Teaching and Learning can provide face-to-face mentoring or workshops depending on faculty needs; as mentioned earlier, Cardiff University has an inexhaustible supply of student learning resources.

The deeper reason why Chinese universities have not built adequate support systems for teaching and learning is that most of our teaching and management are still at a relatively low or traditional level, and in terms of teaching, we have not yet shifted from teacher-centered to SC. The lack of teacher-student interaction, the teacher's lecture in class, the students' listening, the teacher's highlighting before the exam, the students' memorization and understanding, and other low-level learning goals, the lack of students' learning skills, and the lack of students' analysis, evaluation and creation of high-level learning goals have not been given enough attention. In terms of modern information support, the original online learning resources and technical support can cope with small-scale online teaching, but facing the new normal of large-scale online education, the existing technology platform and services need to be upgraded and replaced, and a smart campus that adapts to teachers' independent development and students' independent learning needs to be built to provide more digital resources and online technical support for students. In terms of management, the existing model is still based on traditional experience. Professor Wu Daguang of Xiamen University once pointed out that the most basic teaching management system, such as teaching plan, syllabus, schedule, materials and handouts, teaching workload system and preparation, which are commonly used in universities today, were all formed in the 1950s. Although various teaching reforms have been implemented since then, in general, they have not stepped out of the basic framework of teaching formed in the 1950s.[5] Indeed, the current instructional management does not reflect the generative curriculum, online course features and process-based evaluation, which in effect stifles teachers' enthusiasm for innovative teaching and learning which make it difficult to achieve SC teaching; at the same time, there is more management and less service for students. Teaching, technology and management need to be transformed into SC university culture.

5. Conclusion

SC is an SC university culture that educates, serves, and supports student growth. The SC of Cardiff University is intrinsically linked to the systems and actions that are designed to promote the development of students' learning skills, and ultimately to enable them to learn and achieve, and to become whole people with the capacity to learn, to be employed, and

to be happy. Only when the connotation of SC is combined with the system and action can a university culture of SC be formed; concept without action is vain, and action without clear concept is blind. Chinese universities generally recognize the importance of SC, but the concept is not clear yet. Teachers, students and administrators each treat SC with their own attitude, which leads to the extreme generalization in action which actually becomes inaction.

Obviously, the university culture of SC cannot be achieved overnight, as the focus of SC varies from country to country, but one thing should be common, and that is to care for students and develop the abilities they need now and in the future. We should have one thing in common. In time, we hope that most Chinese colleges and universities can really realize the concept change from teaching to learning, gradually establish a set of hardware and software systems for teaching and learning in colleges and universities, and change school management (especially teaching management) from experience to science and modernity, so as to effectively guarantee SC teaching. Otherwise, even if colleges and universities find the right connotation of SC, which is the seeds of landing; they will not be able to make a good decision. Otherwise, even if universities find the seed of SC, they may not find the soil for landing, which is SC modern teaching. This soil is the SC culture of modern teaching, technology and management.

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