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Current implementation status and optimization pathways of general education music courses in regular higher education institutions in the context of the new era aesthetic education policies

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Abstract: In the new era, numerous aesthetic education mandates have emerged, and relevant aesthetic education policies put forward new requirements for general music courses in non-art universities; however, a significant disparity persists between official requirements and classroom offerings. By examining the evolution of aesthetic education legislation alongside fundamental investigations into general university music programs, this study constructs an analytical framework comprising four dimensions: curricular availability, instructional execution, academic personnel, and assessment frameworks. Utilizing empirical data from diverse higher education institutions, it thoroughly demonstrates that general music classes remain in a condition of marginalization—credits diminish causing status erosion; traditional formats fail to inspire learner engagement; assessments prioritize factual recall over evaluating aesthetic competencies. Consequently, a three-dimensional enhancement strategy, namely "institutional realignment–instructional model revitalization–assessment structure transformation", is suggested; rigid credit rules must be utilized to preserve the core role of these courses; interdisciplinary integration might rejuvenate classroom environments, and process-oriented assessments fulfill profound objectives of aesthetic learning.

Keywords: aesthetic education policies; general education music courses; higher education institutions; curriculum implementation

1 Development of aesthetic education policies and the research foundation of general education music courses

1.1 Phased changes and main orientations of aesthetic education policies

In the new era, policies on aesthetic education advance from advocacy to regulation, and then to in-depth advancement. The 2015 document mainly required universities to recognize the value of aesthetic education and provide every student with access to arts learning. In 2019, the Ministry of Education identified three main components of college aesthetic education: universal arts education, professional arts education, and arts teacher education. It required all universities to offer public arts courses, and arts practice to be brought under credit management as part of university talent cultivation [1]. This is the origin of the rule that public arts courses be shifted from optional to mandatory.

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The 2020 document represented a major phase of policy. Nationally, it described school aesthetic education as "cultivating roots and forging souls", proposing to cultivate people with beauty, transform people with beauty, and nourish roots with beauty. Within this policy framework, the 2022 guideline on public-art courses issued by the Ministry of Education stipulates both course categories and credit requirements. Students are required to obtain at least two credits before graduation. These courses are divided into two categories: aesthetics/art history/theory courses and arts appreciation/criticism courses, as well as art experience/practice courses. Institutionally speaking, this means providing a policy basis for determining the function of general-education music classes. That is, music classes should not exist merely for appreciation; instead, they require an educational sequence ranging from cognitive comprehension, all the way through aesthetic assessment, to practical experience.

Policy internal logic: In policy terms, the aesthetic education policies of the new era can be understood as embodying three key dimensions. Firstly, they make the positioning of aesthetic education change from being "icing on the cake" to becoming a concern over "cultivating roots and forging souls" and thus showing that it can't be replaced by any other kind of moral cultivation through educational means. Secondly, curriculum construction turns "quantitative coverage" into "quality improvement", paying more attention to the content and results of the courses. Thirdly, the way aesthetic education is realized has shifted from a single, one-off experience to multiple, sustained experiences, with more focus given on interweaving of different areas as well as putting what has been learned into practice.

1.2 Research foundation and theoretical framework of general education music courses

Existing studies on general education music courses in China are quite extensive and can be roughly divided into three orientations. The first one is the value-interpretation orientation, which takes the educational function of general education music as its research object, and explains its irreplaceable educational significance from aspects like aesthetic literacy [2]., humanistic spirit, psychological adjustment and comprehensive quality improvement. The second is the problem-diagnosis orientation, which conducts practical investigations to reveal dilemmas encountered during curriculum implementation. some studies take university G as an example and use questionnaire survey method, in-depth interview method, classroom observation methods to argue that public music education has problems such as unclear teaching objectives, incomplete curriculum system, poor classroom teaching effect, weak faculty resources. The third one is the reform-pathway orientation. It puts forward the improvement measures for the curriculum system reconstruction, teaching model innovation and resource ecosystem integration.

In terms of international comparison, general education music generally belongs to the General Education or Liberal Arts framework of universities in Europe and America. Within this framework, the curriculum focuses on how music connects with other disciplines such as the humanities, society, and history, rather than merely on teaching music skills or appreciating musical works. This idea aligns with China's recently-proposed new liberal arts construction initiative. Under this framework, the development of new liberal arts disciplines endows public music courses in higher-education institutions with a new-era mission: aesthetic education will be required to move beyond the cultivation of sensory appreciation of beauty toward the formation of values and the cultivation of the spirit.

2 Current implementation status and optimization approaches of general education music courses in regular higher education institutions

2.1 Core dilemmas: triple structural contradictions

Policy needs differ from institutional practice: The Ministry of Education clearly stipulates that public-art classes must be included in talent cultivation programs and granted course credits, but there's still a considerable gap between policy requirements and institutional reality. Some universities treat general-education music courses merely as general electives,

which carry only 0.5-1 credits. Such arrangements thus fall below the minimum requirement of 2 credits stipulated by policies. Even for those institutions with required courses, provision remains at the "a course exists, and that suffices" stage, with no sustained attention to course quality. Institutional choices favoring lower over higher standards directly relegate such general-education music courses to a marginal position within the overall picture of university curriculum systems.

The second contradiction lies between learners and teaching materials. General education music classes serve non-major students, who have different musical background and motivation to learn. Course contents today are extremely homogeneous with a strong tendency towards western classical music, ignoring both national music, folk music as well as more modern popular music that would be favored by students. Teaching methods are mostly "teacher lectures + playback", lacking interactivity and immersion experience design, not catering to contemporary undergraduate learning preferences. Non-music major students tend to have biases: They regard general education music classes just as electives, so they do not take them seriously [3]; alternatively, limited foundational musical knowledge leaves them apprehensive about learning music theory.

The third contradiction is that the goals of aesthetic education differ from evaluation methods. The main goal of aesthetic education is to foster students' aesthetic capabilities and humanistic cultivation, yet current evaluations largely rely on summative assessments, with examination content mostly consisting of memory of musical basic knowledge and formats mainly confined to closed-book examinations or standardized essays. Such an orientation is geared toward knowledge acquisition rather than the cultivation of aesthetic literacy; it involves neither process assessment nor the evaluation of emotional attitudes and values, and therefore fails to reflect students' aesthetic development in any meaningful way. Although students reported generally favorable satisfaction with the course, with "very satisfactory" and "somewhat satisfactory" responses accounting for more than 77%, it remains questionable whether such courses contribute to improving students' all-round development.

2.2 Optimization pathways: systematic reform across three dimensions

Pathway 1: Using the rigidity of institutions to secure the status of the course. The key to overcoming the marginalization of general-education music courses lies in binding institutional constraints. And higher education institutions need to set up compulsory general education music courses or more broad public art courses for non-art majors, require them to have no less than 2 credits, and incorporate these into graduation review as well. Secondly we should establish a long term monitoring system on aesthetics education class construction, and take aesthetic education course construction results as an indicator in departmental teaching evaluation. For curriculum design, drawing on the three categories outlined in the *Guidelines for Public Art Courses in Higher Education Institutions* as reference, universities should develop a sequence of progressive courses involving theoretical cognition, appreciative judgment, practical experience, avoiding isolated arrangements of single appreciation courses.

Pathway 2: Constructing classroom ecology through interdisciplinary approaches. The lifeline of general education music courses lies in connecting learners from diverse disciplines. The course content design cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all model; instead, different modules should be tailored to the discipline type of the institution itself and to local culture. For example, "Music and Technology" module can be tailored for engineering majors to explore how acoustic principles, digital music production, and engineering thinking interrelate. By contrast, liberal arts students may engage with a "Music and Culture" module exploring the relationships between music and social transformation as well as literary imagery. Teaching methods: A flipped classroom approach is adopted. Before class, students gather relevant information about the upcoming lesson and conduct group inquiry into pre-assigned topics; during class, they give presentations and raise questions, while the instructor provides targeted instruction. The "Music, Philosophy and Scientific Thinking" course of

Xi'an Jiaotong University was selected as an excellent undergraduate course case in Shaanxi Province in 2025, which proves that combining art and science can spark huge interest in learning for non-art major students [4].

Pathway 3: Process-based evaluation as a response to the more fundamental purpose of aesthetic education. The transformation of the evaluation system is the most difficult and most important component of general education music curriculum reform. A three-dimension evaluation framework of "learning outcomes - learning process - emotional attitude" should be constructed. Knowledge mastery, appreciation ability can be examined in terms of works analysis reports, interdisciplinary application projects, etc. Students' learning motivation, cooperation capability, and depth of inquiry can also be reflected through their participation, cooperative activities, and the depth of their exploration.The trajectory of growth for an individual's sense of aesthetics could be captured via students keeping a record of self-reflections along with their own story of aesthetic experience. From the perspective of evaluation methods, student self-evaluation combined with peer evaluation and teacher evaluation can be adopted, making assessment itself a form of extension for aesthetic education.

3 Conclusion

The aesthetic education policies in the new era give direction and safeguard to the music curriculum in general education for ordinary higher education institutions; however, there was a big implementation gap between policy text and curriculum practice.

The paper, through the application of a four dimensional survey framework as well as empirical data obtained from different schools finds three structural contradictions within general education music classes: When establishing institutional arrangements, institutions tend to opt for lower standards rather than higher ones. The second contradiction is that there's an inconsistency between standardized teaching contents and what student would like. The third one is the contradiction between the way knowledge is judged and the way students are taught to make sense of what they can see and hear for themselves.

In view of the above problems, this paper proposes three optimization paths for reconstruction from three dimensions: the reconstruction of institutional positioning, teaching model innovation and transformation of evaluation. Institutionally, use inflexible credit requirement to protect the core status of the courses; in teaching models, interdisciplinary integration is adopted to activate class ecological environment; in terms of the evaluation system, process evaluation should replace result assessment. Three parts form a supporting whole. Institutional mechanisms provide guarantees and give room for teaching reform, teaching reform provides conditions for transformation, and transformation compels real improvement in position.

General education music class improvement is not merely a technical teaching issue; it's actually a huge transformation in our understanding of university curricula [5]. When aesthetic education courses shift from a kind of bonus to essential courses, higher schools must consider where general music courses would be placed within this talent cultivating system; they cannot merely rest on the margins as some sort of accessory to specialized education but instead should form part of what makes for a "full man". Future research could follow up and keep exploring what actual differences may emerge under different improvement approaches, so that we can obtain more reliable evidence to help develop personalized development plans for college aesthetic education courses.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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