

The Evolution Direction and Basic Strategy of Connotative Development of Higher Education in the New Era

Chunxiu Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Liaoning University of International Business and Economics, Liaoning Dalian 116052

Abstract: Compared with “extensional” development, “connotative” development highlights the essential requirements of university development and emphasizes the quality of education. This paper reviews the two phases of the connotative development of higher education in China, grasps its evolution direction in the new era, and probes into its basic strategy from the macro and micro levels respectively. Universities should not only grasp the macro strategic fulcrum: Guided by the “double first-class”, based on the quality of education, with characteristic development as the main line and reform deepening as the starting point, but also promote the micro level strategy selection: actively promote curriculum construction, create first-class curriculum resources; constantly improve the level of teaching; deeply concerned about the development of teachers and fully release their vitality; modernize the governance capacity and make it more effective.

Keywords: connotative development, macro strategy, micro strategy

Introduction

At the beginning of the year 2022, the Ministry of Education and Finance jointly issued “Several Opinions on Further Promoting the Development of World-class Universities and Disciplines”, which put forward guiding opinions on the new orientation, mission and requirements for further promoting the “Double First-class” development. In “Several Opinions”, five issues related to connotative development are mentioned, including the expressions of “deepening connotative development”, “grasping the requirements of high-quality and connotative development” at the level of basic principles, as well as the advocates for the reform of specific matters such as “enriching the subject connotation”, etc.. Deeply grasping the evolution direction and strategic fulcrum of the connotative development of higher education is the premise and foundation for the government and universities to promote the connotative development of higher education.

1. Evolution and direction of connotative development

Connotative development refers to a development mode to improve the quality of higher education by adjusting and optimizing the internal elements of higher education, rather than expanding the scale. Reflecting in different historical periods, due to the particularity of national conditions and teaching situation, the internal elements of higher education are bound to be different. The evolution of its connotation can be grasped from the process of the higher education development of China.

1.1 Two stages of connotative development in higher education

From the perspective of policy, since the reform and opening up, we have actively explored four basic phases in the

choice of higher education development mode: “Imitative development” characterized by learning from European and American higher education, “extensional development” by quantitative growth, “unbalanced” development by “211” and “985” projects, and high-quality connotative development by “double first-class” construction.^[1] Among them, the phases of learning from foreign countries and quantitative growth focus on the extensional development, while the phases of quality development focus on the connotative development. The differences are as follows.

One is the difference in development priorities. The connotative development of the key promotion phase emphasizes the full use of the existing educational resources to achieve the goal of cultivating more talents in higher education, while that of the “double first-class” phase emphasizes the teaching potential and scientific research should be deeply explored, and the overall quality of education should be improved. The other is the difference in the basis for development. The former is based on the “211” and “985” projects, emphasizing the driving and demonstration effect of higher level universities, while the later relies on disciplines and attaches importance to the fundamental role of disciplines as basic scientific research units in universities.

Therefore, the evolution of connotative development reflects the objective process of deepening our understanding of the fundamental attributes, basic functions and functions of higher education, which is not only the historical necessity of universities’ practice and exploration, but also the requirement of understanding and exploring the laws of higher education.

1.2 The purport of the connotative development of higher education in the new era

The realization of connotative development of high quality has become the core objective of higher education development in the new era in China.^[1] At the policy level, driven by the “double first-class” construction strategy, the connotative development of higher education has developed into a quality behavior of government guidance coupled with local initiative, and university action coupled with disciplinary action. “High quality” thus becomes the common value pursuit of the subjects engaged in higher education activities.

The gross enrollment rate of higher education broke through 50% for the first time in 2019, basically reaching the “popularization” standard. According to the “three-stage theory” of the development of higher education, the concept of higher education, curriculum function, teaching methods and teacher-student relationship, academic standards and other 10 aspects will also undergo qualitative changes. In addition, the principal contradiction of Chinese higher education has changed the same way as the principal contradiction of China, that is, the contradiction between the people’s ever-growing need for quality education and the unbalanced and inadequate development. Therefore, more attention is paid to the overall and balanced development of the quality of higher education, so as to meet the demand of education in the popularization stage. This is also the basic evolution direction of the connotative development of higher education in the new era.^[2]

Based on this evolution direction, this paper puts forward the strategic fulcrum and approach of the connotative development of universities from the macro and micro levels respectively. The strategic fulcrum and approach together forms the basis of the connotative development of higher education, thus laying a solid foundation for its high-quality development.

2. The macro strategic fulcrum of the connotative development of higher education

Nowadays, universities are deeply “embedded” in the social system and become an important part of it. To meet the needs of regional economic and social development and actively adapt to the transformation of social principal contradictions is the connotation of the development of higher education. Therefore, Chinese universities should grasp the strategic fulcrum of the following four sides deeply, and make efforts to build an orderly and favorable macro environment for the connotative development of higher education.

2.1 Under the “double first-class” construction, comprehensively improving the education quality

The “double first-class” construction launched in 2015 is a major strategic deployment made by the country to adapt

to the new situation of higher education in the new era. It starts with the construction of first-class universities and disciplines, and leverages the active participation of the government, universities, society and other parties to build a high-quality higher education system. From the national level, it concerns the realization of a powerful country under the higher education strategy; from the perspective of universities, it is a “reshuffle” of higher education structure optimization, function remodeling and resource efficiency improvement. It is in this sense that the connotative development of higher education must be guided by the construction of “double first-class” which is the strategic task of Chinese Higher Education nowadays and comprehensively promote the quality of education to a new level.

2.2 Based on the quality of education, improving the quality and efficiency of higher education

The connotative development should take the improvement of the quality of higher education as the fundamental principle, and enhance the efficiency of higher education by optimizing the layout, integrating resources, highlighting functions and tapping potential. If the extensional development focuses on the scale effect and economic benefits of higher education, then the connotative development emphasizes the quality effect and social benefits of higher education. The former realizes huge economic benefits by expanding scale and decreasing marginal cost, while the latter realizes higher social benefits by improving quality and enhancing positive externality of education.

2.3 For the purpose of functional display, fulfilling the historical mission of higher education

Teaching, scientific research and social service are the three basic functions of higher education. The connotative development of higher education in the new era requires that its function be manifested to a greater extent. So we must strengthen the educational ability of universities, and train a large number of high-quality senior professional talents to meet the needs of high-quality economic and social development; exercise the knowledge innovation ability of universities, and give back to society with new knowledge, ideas, achievements and inventions so as to promote the continuous development of social culture and science and technology; strengthen our ability to provide social services, deeply participate in regional economic and social development, and provide intellectual and talent support for economic and social development.

2.4 With characteristic development as the main line, exploring suitable development path of universities

In the popularization stage, the social demand for higher education is more diversified in content, more rich in level, and more flexible in form. Especially in the context of “double first-class” construction, with the competition among universities and even within universities becoming increasingly fierce, distinctive features have become the core competitiveness of universities. Characteristic development can clarify the development orientation of universities, gather the joint efforts of teachers and students and the wisdom of the masses, and promote the deepening and innovation of connotative construction.

3. The micro strategy of the connotative development of higher education

At the micro level, the connotative development of higher education requires universities to carry out deep cultivation in the four aspects of curriculum, teaching, teachers and governance, and to take high-quality curriculum resources, high-quality teaching activities, excellent teachers and the creation and cultivation of modern governance as strategies to promote the fundamental and overall work of connotative development.

3.1 Actively promoting curriculum construction

In 2019, China planned and deployed many major initiatives to comprehensively revitalize the undergraduate education based on connotative development. It has issued “Notice on Implementing the ‘Shuangwan Plan’ for the Construction of First-class Undergraduate Majors” , “Opinions on the Construction of First-class Undergraduate

Courses”etc.. It has also launched a series of plans and reforms, such as the “Six Excellence and One Top-notch” Plan 2.0, paid close attention to quality construction, and deepened the reform of undergraduate programs, curricula, education and teaching, as well as the cultivation of outstanding talents. China and relevant departments at all levels pay more and more attention to curriculum construction, which reflects the basic idea of “people-orientation” and returning to teaching. However, curriculum construction is easily interpreted as building “elite courses” and using “elite teaching materials”. Although they are very important, it is more important to create a curriculum system that conforms to its own school-running goals and characteristics according to different regions, types and levels of universities, and to compile textbooks that adapt to the school situation and local needs. For example, the curriculum and selected textbooks of research universities should reflect the subject frontier and emphasize knowledge innovation; application-oriented universities should set up more practical courses in line with local economic and social development; higher vocational colleges should be more in line with the society, set up practical and skill-based courses, and compile corresponding textbooks.

The moral cultivation of university students is an important issue in the construction of higher education courses. The essential mission of connotative education is to train college students to become well-developed and qualified successors to the socialist cause. Therefore, how to give play to the function of education to cultivate morality and people under the new situation has become an important problem urgently needed to be solved in the current development of universities.^[4] Moral cultivation is an important measure for the connotative development of higher education in the new era, which needs to integrate ideological and political education into curriculum and classroom, to cultivate humanistic spirit, scientific spirit and university spirit, so as to cultivate high-quality talents with all-round development of morality, intelligence, body and beauty for the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and implement the principle of “people-oriented, moral education first” under the new situation.

3.2 Constantly improving the teaching quality of classroom teaching

The realization of connotative development must always take the improvement of education and teaching quality as the starting point and ultimate goal, and all the work of universities should serve the study, growth and success of students. We should implement the professional education training mode based on general education and moral education, and integrate the application and practical ability training into the whole process of talent training. In addition, we should also pay more attention to what methods should be used to train specialized talents with innovative ability. Therefore, teaching construction is a more complex and diversified problem than curriculum construction.

In the traditional classroom, lecture-oriented teaching activities are still the most fundamental, but the modern classroom should give full play to students’ subjective initiative and learning autonomy. Universities should actively promote the heuristic and discussion activities, implement the student evaluation combined with multiple evaluation methods, take “question driven” and “output driven” as the guidance, make full use of multimedia and network technology, adopt new teaching mode and modern information technology, and realize the development of teaching activities towards personalized learning and autonomous learning.^[4]

In terms of teaching methods and means, we should actively explore multiple teaching modes and carry out various forms of task-centered teaching activities in teaching. Combining offline teaching with online learning, multimedia teaching methods with teaching content, knowledge teaching with skill training, language with culture, history, economy and trade, and social knowledge, teacher explanation with students’ independent learning, and students’ independent learning with group collaboration, so as to fully mobilize students’ learning enthusiasm, stimulate their learning motivation, and tap their own potential.

3.3 Giving deep attention to teacher development

Universities should strengthen the construction of teaching staff, build a higher level of talent team, and constantly improve the teaching level of teachers. To promote the connotative development of higher education, universities need to select excellent teachers and leading talents from all over the world. At the same time, they should attach importance to and strengthen the cultivation of local outstanding talents, and actively cultivate more first-class teacher resources by studying

abroad and other ways. Universities should effectively promote the reform of teacher evaluation with scientific system, diversified methods and people-oriented indicators, and encourage and support teachers to improve their knowledge reserve, teaching ability and academic accomplishment in multiple and all-round ways. So as to effectively enhance teachers' ability to take the initiative to learn, constantly update and upgrade the knowledge structure, and improve the professional teaching ability and quality.

3.4 Modernizing the capacity for governance

The modernization of university governance system and ability is an important institutional guarantee for the connotation construction of higher education. On the one hand, the modern governance system is centered on the maintenance and realization of academic power, so it is of great benefit to the maintenance and realization of the collective rights and interests of teachers and students, and can realize the basic goals of education in a greater degree, wider scope and deeper level. On the other hand, the modern governance ability is the basic ability to guarantee and realize the basic functions of teaching, scientific research and social service, and has a positive role for universities to deal with major internal and external affairs. Therefore, enhancing the modernization of governance system and ability in universities, promoting education and teaching reform and development work with higher governance efficiency is an important institutional guarantee to promote the connotative development of Chinese higher education. To promote the connotative development of higher education, universities should first strengthen the supply mechanism of normative institutions and improve the modernization of academic governance ability. Second, it is necessary to actively promote the construction and improvement of the academic power system with the academic committee as the decision-making form, and to shape the pattern of multi-center academic governance.

4. Conclusion

To promote and complete the connotative development is the inevitable path of high quality development after the extensional development of higher education. In the new historical period, facing the constantly changing international situation, we should take the overall realization of the connotative development of higher education as the major strategic goal, follow the development demands of the times and the law of universities, grasp the strategic fulcrum and direction from the macro perspective, and formulate the development model and strategy from the micro perspective, so as to effectively improve the quality of higher education and continuously transfer qualified talents for the country, strengthen the discourse power and cultural confidence of Chinese higher education in the education field of the world, and realize the great goal of a powerful country by higher education.

Conflicts of interest

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

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About the author

Chunxiu Wang, female, Fuxin city, Liaoning province, an associate professor of School of Foreign Languages, Liaoning University of International Business and Economics, doctoral candidate of School of Education, Liaoning Normal University, research direction: English teaching, English language and literature, higher education management and evaluation.