

## Research on the Current Situation and Problems of the Transformation and Development of Local Undergraduate Universities

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**Abstract:** Local undergraduate universities and colleges compose an important part of China's higher education system; their transformation and development are the requirements of higher education development as well as the social and economic development. Since the Report on the Work of the Government clearly put forward that we should "promote the transformation of qualified ordinary undergraduate universities into application-oriented universities", the state, the local governments and universities have actively promoted the transformation and development of schools. But in this process, there are still some problems such as unclear school running ideas and the construction of teachers' team.

### 1. Introduction

At present, our country has built the world's largest higher education system, which has made tremendous contributions to China's social and economic development. However, with the economic development enters the new normal state, the structural contradictions of higher education become increasingly prominent.

In China's current higher education system, the positioning of research-oriented universities and higher vocational colleges is relatively clear. As a "sandwich layer", local universities often have the confusion of "being unfit for a higher post but unwilling to take a lower one".

Universities in China can be divided into ministry universities and local universities according to their different affiliation relations. However, in practice, especially after the enrollment expansion in 1999, the higher education system in China has shown a pyramidal hierarchical structure. At the top of the higher education system is the nine university alliance (C9), which is composed of nine top schools such as Peking University and Tsinghua University. The nine universities plus the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences are top universities in China with the goal of establishing world-class and high-level universities. The second level is composed of other "985" and "211" universities other than the 10 universities on the first level, with a total number of 102 schools. The third level includes old undergraduate colleges, namely, 435 institutions which gained the undergraduate admission qualifications before 1999. The fourth level is composed of newly-built undergraduate colleges, mainly referring to undergraduate colleges built after 1999. The number of these schools reached 673 (including 283 independent colleges) in 2015. The fifth level includes 1341 higher vocational colleges. <sup>[1]</sup>

The local undergraduate universities discussed in this paper mainly refer to the old and newly established undergraduate universities in the third and fourth levels of higher education. Local undergraduate universities are the majority of China's ordinary universities; the vast majority of undergraduate students attend these schools. Their development reflects the overall situation of China's higher education.

However, in the current pattern of higher education in China, on one hand, undergraduate education has always been positioned as "elite education"; the development of local undergraduate universities has also targeted this positioning. On the other hand, the market definition of "elite" tends to focus on talents trained by the first and second level universities. The society lacks sufficient recognition and supporting resources on the talents trained by local undergraduate

universities. Therefore, the development of local undergraduate universities has shown a situation of deviating from their own characteristics and striving to keep pace with famous universities. However, in the case of uneven distribution of educational resources, talents trained by schools which do not have precise orientation and educational objectives could not have enough competitiveness in the market. Thus, there is a structural contradiction between the large number of unemployed graduates and the shortage of talents in the market.

## **2. Necessity and Current Situation of the Transformation and Development of Local Undergraduate Universities in China**

### **2.1 The necessity of transformation and development of local undergraduate universities**

Firstly, the transformation and development of local undergraduate universities are the need of higher education development in China. China's higher education has made tremendous achievements in the past 40 years of reform and opening up. Especially after the enrollment expansion of universities in 1999, local undergraduate universities sprung up, making important contributions to the popularization of higher education. However, the consequent convergent development of schools has led to the irrational structure of the higher education system and the irrational professional settings, which exposes increasing problems in the development of higher education in China. Therefore, in order to solve the problems of assimilation, low quality and non-characteristic development of higher education and realize the rational and sound development, it is a realistic choice to promote the transformation of local undergraduate universities as well as the optimization of the higher education structure.

Secondly, the transformation and development are the realistic choice for local undergraduate colleges to develop themselves. In the process of specialty setting and discipline construction, Chinese local undergraduate universities, especially a large number of newly-built undergraduate colleges, often lack rigorous scientific analysis and market research. They usually choose low-cost and so-called "hot" specialties, but ignore their own characteristics and the local industrial structure. In addition, most of the local undergraduate colleges follow the positioning of famous universities, but they do not have enough connotation construction, or excellent teaching staff and adequate school-running funds. As a result, students they trained do not have the ability of theoretical research and technological innovation, or the ability of practical operation required by professional posts. They are appraised as having "grandiose aims but puny abilities" in the labor market. In the long run, crisis of poaching talented students and the survival of universities will break out in the market, which will affect the development of universities as well as the healthy and sustainable development of Chinese higher education. Therefore, the transformation and development of local undergraduate universities are the general trend.

Finally, the transformation and development of local undergraduate universities are the requirement of the new normal economic development. With the promotion of major strategies such as Internet +, China made 2025, and the "Belt and Road" Initiative, local universities need to enhance their ability of adapting to local economic and social development situations, identify their positions of transformation and development under the background of the new normal economic development, and provide technological and personnel support for industrial development, so as to serve the local economy and society and embody their own value.

### **2.2 The current situation of the transformation and development of local undergraduate universities**

From the national level, on March 5, 2015, Premier Ke-qiang Li put forward in the Report on the Work of the Government that we should "promote the transformation of some local universities into application-oriented universities". On March 5, 2016, the Report on the Work of the Government clearly put forward that we should "promote the transformation of qualified ordinary undergraduate universities into application-oriented universities". Since 2015, the Ministry of Education has held a number of training courses to promote the deep transformation and development of universities.

From the local level, since the Opinion on Guiding Some Local General Undergraduate Universities to Transform into Application-oriented Universities was issued, more than 20 provinces (regions, cities) including Guangdong, Henan, Liaoning, Jilin, Yunnan and Hubei have issued documents to guide some ordinary undergraduate universities to transform into application-oriented schools, and issued relevant policies to support for the transformation and reform of universities.

From the perspective of universities, a number of pilot schools have actively explored reform methods from the aspects of school-government cooperation, school-enterprise cooperation, teacher team construction, personnel training program, curriculum system reform and school governance structure. For example, Hefei University has established the school-enterprise cooperation mechanism from three levels: the school level, the secondary teaching unit level and the basic teaching team level. The local government and industries, as well as relevant enterprises participate in the whole process of applied talent training. In recent three years, 34 application-oriented universities in Jiangxi have voluntarily suspended or stopped recruiting 208 specialties that are not suitable for the needs of transformation and development and have poor quality of employment. Zhengzhou Institute of Technology has implemented the transformation and development mode of combining the overall transformation with the transformation of some specialties, fully integrating school resources, combining similar specialties into a group of disciplines and specialties, and highlighting the cultivation of applied talents. At present, the school has formed a number of application-oriented disciplines and specialties which are highly consistent with the development of local economy. The reform experience of pilot universities has been learned by many local universities; the scope of reform has expanded.

## **2.3 Problems in the transformation and development of local undergraduate universities**

### **2.3.1 The transforming of school operating concepts**

The core issue of school running is “what kind of school should we build”. Local undergraduate universities, especially newly-built local undergraduate universities are mostly merged and upgraded by technical colleges. The main parts of these schools have undergone a process of transformation from specialist-oriented to undergraduate-oriented departments. The pursuit of elite education has always been an unchangeable “complex” of these schools. Therefore, in the process of transformation, it is imperative to transform the school running idea from “elite education” to “application education” which serves local social economy.

### **2.3.2 The transformation of disciplines and specialties**

Local undergraduate universities usually imitate first-level universities in professional settings. Most of the newly-added majors are so-called “hot majors” which are established without rigorous scientific analysis or enough market research. Most specialties do not match with the socio-economic structure of the region, but they have formed mature teaching and learning procedures in development of universities. In the process of transformation, according to the new situation of economic development as well as the local social and economic development, schools need to set up disciplines and specialties according to their own characteristics, and setup professionals that can meet the requirements of the new situation. This process does not only need to modify or even rebuild the existing discipline and specialty system, but also need schools to spend a lot of time and energy on analysis, investigation and construction. The financial support of specialty construction, as well as the improvement and adjustment of teacher’s team are also necessary. The transform involves many subjects and has a great influence. Schools are easy to face various difficulties and problems and lead to the phenomenon of “much cry and little have done“, resulting in the superficial transformation and development.

### **2.3.3 The transformation of teachers’ team**

The transformation of local undergraduate universities needs the construction of a “double-qualified” teacher’s team. At present, most teachers in local undergraduate universities

directly took the job after graduation; they lack practical experience in the industry or enterprises. Their abilities of practical teaching and on-site guidance are weak. It can be said that schools have “uniform” theoretical teaching staff.<sup>[2]</sup> The keys to the training of applied talents are the application oriented transformation and development of the teachers team. However, there are many difficulties and pressures for some local undergraduate colleges to implement and complete the transformation of teacher’s team with high quality in short time.

#### **2.3.4 The school-enterprise cooperation mechanism**

In the transformation and development of local undergraduate colleges, the training of “applied” talents cannot be separated from the cooperation between schools and enterprises. At present, most local undergraduate universities regard school-enterprise cooperation as an integral part of the talent training system, but most of the cooperation is merely visits and lectures; the most in-depth cooperation is post practice. These cooperative methods do not have good interaction or promotion effects. In the process of transformation and development, in-depth school-enterprise cooperation is often faced with the problem of low enthusiasm of enterprises.

### **3. The Transformation and Development Paths of Local Undergraduate Universities**

#### **3.1 To clarify the concept and orientation of school running**

The first step in the transformation and development of local undergraduate universities is the transformation of school-running concept and orientation. According to their own characteristics and social needs, schools should abandon the concepts of “knowledge-based” and “elite education”, as well as the misconception of turning to an application-oriented school is a kind of “downgrading”. They need to establish the concept of serving the local economy and society, and take the training of application-oriented, compound and innovative talents who can meet the needs of economic restructuring and industrial upgrading as the orientation of transformation and development. Only through the propaganda of the school publicity departments and media reports, and the interpretation of policies to the school staff, can schools achieve the conceptual transformation and establish the transformation and development concepts. Then schools can truly realize the transformation and development of applied universities.

#### **3.2 To adjust and reconstruct disciplines and specialties**

Local undergraduate universities still need to pay attention to discipline construction in the process of transformation. Disciplines and specialties are inseparable, which form an important guarantee for the direction and quality of personnel training. For example, the University of Wisconsin which is known for the Wisconsin Thought is famous for serving the state’s economic and social development. When the Wisconsin State was founded, wheat-based crop cultivation was the main industry. However, owing to insect attacks, loss of soil fertility, rising prices and other factors, farmers in Wisconsin began to seek more diversified ways of development and expected universities to provide appropriate technical support. The College of Agriculture in the University of Wisconsin played an important role in this process. Stephen Babcock’s milk fat determination method enables people to test the fat content of milk more accurately; the method greatly promotes the development of dairy industry in Wisconsin.<sup>[3]</sup> Therefore, in the process of transformation and development, local undergraduate universities should closely integrate the characteristics and needs of regional industries into discipline construction and build characteristic majors with comparative advantages, so as to support the construction of characteristic specialties and improve the training of applied talents.

#### **3.3 To improve the training of “double-qualified” teachers**

The training of applied talents requires the support of “double-qualified” teachers. The training of “double-qualified” teachers can be accomplished from following aspects. First, newly introduced teachers must have industry practice before taking the teaching posts. As most new teachers are graduates with high academic qualifications, the practice experience can help them to form deeper

understanding of the industry and enterprises. With deeper understanding on the development of the industry, teachers can integrate theory with practice closely. Secondly, for the teachers who teach in schools, we should formulate a perfect training plan and arrange them to practice in enterprises in batches, so as to improve their practical teaching abilities. Thirdly, teachers should be guided to combine their teaching and research activities with the needs of local industries and enterprises in restructuring and upgrading, so as to make teachers more “close to the industry” and pay more attention to practice. Finally, enterprise personnel can be recruited to take part-time jobs, like giving lectures and opening second classes to supplement the team of double-qualified teachers.

### **3.4 To construct the cooperation mechanism between schools and enterprises**

School-enterprise cooperation is an important link in the training of applied talents. Local undergraduate universities should always uphold the principle of “relying on enterprises and serving local areas” and strengthen the cooperation with enterprises and industries. They need to understand the needs of the industry and enterprises for talents, give full play to the guiding role of the industry and enterprises in the transformation and development of schools, maintain smooth communication with enterprise managers and technicians, and meet the requirements of the industry and enterprises. The all-round participation and cooperation of industries and enterprises are also needed to promote the transformation and development of schools.

## **4. Conclusion**

Nowadays, local undergraduate universities need to change their position in the higher education system, and focus on training applied talents who can meet the requirements of local social and economic development. On the basis of transforming school running concepts, local universities need to adjust the discipline and specialty structures, improve the practice abilities of teachers, and attach great importance to their cooperation with enterprises, industries and local governments.

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