

The Opportunities, Dilemmas, and Paths for the Development of Adult Higher Education in the New Era

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Abstract: This paper comprehensively analyzes the development opportunities and realistic dilemmas faced by adult higher education in China in the new era, and puts forward corresponding strategies as solutions. With the construction of a learning society, the development of digital technology, and the popularization of the concept of lifelong learning, adult higher education has unprecedented development opportunities. At the same time, these forms of education are facing a series of dilemmas due to challenges such as unsound guarantee mechanisms and traditional enrollment competition. Through the establishment of perfect legal and policy guarantees, transformation of school running mode, meeting the diversified needs of learners, and other multi-faceted measures, the development of adult higher education can be effectively promoted to meet the needs of individual and social development.

Keywords: Adult higher education; Opportunities; Dilemmas; Paths

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1. Introduction

Adult higher education refers to continuing education for adults who have completed basic education or have some work and life experiences, including academic education and non-academic education, aiming to meet the growing needs of society and individuals for knowledge and skills. It emphasizes flexibility and relevance and aims to provide education that is closely related to the workplace and strengthens learners' adaptability and competitiveness in a changing socioeconomic environment. In addition, adult higher education is an important component of a lifelong education system that encourages learning and growth throughout the life cycle of an individual for his/her self-fulfillment and positive contribution to society^[1].

2. Empowering lifelong learning: Adult higher education embraces new development opportunities

Adult education, as a key component of the lifelong learning system, has become more and more prominent as

a “bridge” for lifelong learning with the continuous construction and improvement of the national qualifications framework and credit bank. It not only empowers individuals to obtain, accumulate, and cash in their learning achievements in various ways but also promotes the effective articulation of different levels and types of qualifications within the education system. It not only gives individuals the opportunity to acquire and realize learning outcomes through various means but also promotes the effective articulation of different levels and types of qualifications within the education system.

In this context, the potential of adult education has been further unleashed. Adult education has become a key force in promoting the sustained development of individual careers and in upgrading the overall quality and adaptability of society. Therefore, it can be foreseen that with the in-depth implementation and support of national policies, adult education will play a more crucial role in the future.

2.1. Adult education is ready for development: The key driving force in the construction of a learning society

Adult education plays an important role in the construction of a learning society and benefits from the new opportunities brought by the construction of a learning society. First of all, as a key component of the lifelong learning system, adult education provides critical support for the construction of a learning society. With clear support and guidance from national policy documents, adult higher education has been given wider space for development. In addition, through the concept of “three-education integration,” it will be integrated with general education, continuing education, and vocational education, complementing each other’s strengths and weaknesses, realizing the sharing of educational resources and complementary development, and innovating the teaching mode, so as to better adapt to the needs of a learning society.

In the construction of a learning society, the role of adult education cannot be ignored. By building community education to decentralize the functions of adult education to communities, villages, and towns, and providing educational services to vocational farmers, enterprise workers, and so on, adult education has been able to realize the overall layout from bottom to top and better promote the development of adult higher education.

To sum up, the construction of a learning society provides a new opportunity for the development of adult education, which plays an important role in the construction of a learning society, and the construction of the learning society itself also puts adult education in a more favorable environment and provides new opportunities for its development. Through the promotion of the concept of “three-education integration,” adult education will be more in line with the needs of society, build a more comprehensive and modernized teaching system, and provide more opportunities and guarantees for the development of society and the growth of individuals.

2.2. The development of digital technology injects new vitality

The integration of digital technology and education has brought opportunities for teaching innovation and personalized learning to adult higher education. This development trend will further promote the change and enhancement of adult higher education, and promote learners’ all-round development and personal growth.

First of all, the application of information technology brings new teaching methods and learning resources to adult higher education ^[2]. Through online platforms, online courses, and distance learning, learners can access teaching content anytime and anywhere, and utilize online learning communities and resource-sharing platforms to interact and communicate with teachers and learners. This flexible and interactive teaching method provides adult learners with a more convenient and autonomous learning environment, which promotes the motivation and effectiveness of learning.

Secondly, the application of big data technology supports personalized learning, which can better meet the

learning needs and interests of adult learners and improve learning motivation. In addition, artificial intelligence technology can provide targeted answers and guidance based on learners' learning needs and feedback, recommending suitable learning resources and activities. This intelligent learning environment and services help to enhance learning effectiveness and meet the personalized needs of learners.

2.3. Lifelong learning concept drives the development of adult higher education

Since the concept of lifelong learning was put forward in the Outline for Educational Reform and Development of China in 1993, the concept of lifelong learning has received wide attention in educational policies and practices, and "everyone can learn anywhere and any time" has been deeply rooted in people's hearts, which has brought great opportunities to the development of adult higher education^[3].

Under the concept of lifelong learning, the individual's career is characterized by long-term and continuous change. Individuals consciously participate in adult higher education, and they can continuously improve their professionalism and vocational ability through attending training and learning new knowledge and skills in different fields to adapt to the rapidly changing work environment and needs, providing strong support for career development.

The concept of lifelong learning has changed people's perception of education, and the mode of adult higher education has been transformed from focusing only on academic results to focusing on adapting to vocational requirements and comprehensive development. Adult education should continue to innovate the education model and provide diversified learning platforms and educational resources, such as distance education, online learning, and professional skills-oriented courses, to meet the needs of different learners. At the same time, it should focus on learners' learning experience and effectiveness assessment, and be oriented to practicability and quality, so as to adapt to the ever-changing learning content and social needs.

3. Realistic dilemmas in the development of adult higher education

3.1. Imperfect quality assurance mechanism

Compared with general higher education, adult higher education is weak in legislation and policy support. China has not yet issued laws and regulations specifically for adult higher education, and although adult education is involved in the Education Law of the People's Republic of China and other related laws, there is a lack of detailed provisions as well as specific and operational legal documents to support and promote adult higher education^[4]. The national qualification framework is in the early stage of construction, and there is a lack of laws and regulations for authoritative guarantee, and the relevant policies and regulations lack operability.

Additionally, the quality assurance mechanism is incomplete. The quality of adult higher education is the lifeline of its development. At present, the state has a relatively complete quality assurance system for general higher education, such as a series of measures to guarantee the quality of teaching through teaching evaluation and degree authorization. Adult higher education has not yet established a similar comprehensive quality assurance system. This has led to problems such as quality fluctuations and uneven levels in the development of adult higher education. While pursuing scale expansion, educational institutions may neglect the control of education quality, which in turn affects the social recognition of adult higher education and the actual ability of graduates.

3.2. Pressure on adult higher education from the expansion of general higher education

With the rapid expansion of China's general higher education and higher vocational education, the year-on-year growth of their enrollment has exerted pressure on adult higher education, which in turn triggered competition

for adult education resources in the market, leading to a series of dilemmas faced by adult higher education ^[5].

First of all, the expansion of general higher education and higher vocational education has reduced the potential source of students for adult higher education. As the popularization of higher education advances, more and more young people have the opportunity to receive general higher education and higher vocational education, which directly cuts down the number of student sources for adult education. In the competition for student sources, adult higher education is in a disadvantageous position, and it is difficult to obtain a sufficient number of student groups with development potential.

Secondly, the dilemma faced by adult higher education is multi-dimensional, not only the problem of student source caused by competition, but also the problems of insufficient connection between the curriculum and the market, low social recognition, and insufficient policy support.

3.3. Difficulties in rebuilding the talent training mechanism

Reconstruction of adult higher education talent training mechanism is a complex and important task, involving challenges and difficulties in many aspects, requiring efforts and cooperation of all relevant parties.

- (1) Continuously changing educational needs: In the speed of knowledge updating, the establishment of a talent training mechanism needs to follow technological innovation and industry dynamics, and flexibly customize the course content.
- (2) Diversified needs of adult learners: Adult learners have more complex backgrounds, including full-time workers, part-time workers, and individuals re-entering the learning environment. Their education needs include flexibility (e.g., distance learning, evening courses, and weekend courses), practicality (i.e., courses that are closely related to actual work), and personalization (e.g., personal career planning and development direction).
- (3) Optimization of school-enterprise cooperation: In order to better meet the specific needs of adult learners, cooperation between schools and enterprises is crucial. School-enterprise cooperation can maximize educational effectiveness by customizing curricula, internship opportunities, and career guidance services, as well as ensuring that learning content is aligned with actual workplace needs. In addition, enterprises can play a role in designing curricula and evaluating learning outcomes, realizing the mutual promotion of theory and practice.
- (4) Establishment of credit accumulation and certification mechanism: To motivate learners in adult higher education, it is necessary to build a flexible credit system so that learners can transfer and accumulate credits among different educational stages and institutions. In addition, the accreditation of learning outcomes needs to be aligned with international standards so that learning outcomes can be recognized on a wider scale.
- (5) Diversified professional training: Professional training courses need to be designed for the various professions in which adult learners are engaged, which may involve a variety of formats such as online courses, modular learning, workshops, professional seminars, and so on. These courses need to be constantly updated to keep up with the developments and changes in the industry.

The above has explored the necessity and complexity of rebuilding the talent development mechanism in adult higher education, especially in the context of adapting to technological innovations. In order to effectively face and address these challenges, close collaboration among educational institutions, governments, and enterprises is needed to jointly develop more effective and sustainable development strategies for adult higher education. Through such collaboration, we can provide adult learners with a comprehensive, flexible, and interconnected learning environment to support their success in career development and personal growth.

4. Paths to realize the development of adult higher education

4.1. Establishing a sound quality assurance mechanism

We need to formulate and revise relevant laws and regulations, establish and improve the quality assurance system for adult higher education, enhance the authority and practice of adult higher education, and safeguard the quality of education through the mechanism of education assessment and accreditation. This will help adult education to better match the needs of society and provide learners with more opportunities for development, while also ensuring the healthy development of adult higher education.

A policy environment conducive to the development of adult education should be created. For example, the government should introduce more policies to support the development of adult higher education, by using tax concessions and education subsidies to reduce the financial burden of adult studies and enhance the attractiveness of adult continuing education. At the same time, more adult learners can be attracted by formulating preferential policies specifically for adult higher education, such as credit banks.

We also need to enhance social cognition and use multiple channels to publicize the practical value and long-term benefits of adult higher education, so as to raise the level of social cognition and recognition of adult education. At the same time, we can cooperate with enterprises to encourage them to support their employees to participate in adult education, so as to realize the concept of “on-the-job learning and lifelong learning.” Through the above measures, the enrollment pressure on adult education can be eased to a certain extent.

4.2. Highlighting the characteristics of school running and reforming the school running mode

- (1) The traditional academic education model is shifted to the construction of a lifelong education system. Flexible and diversified education modes are necessary to meet the learning needs of different people at various life stages. The mode of operation is reformed to provide learners with personalized and modularized courses and to realize the combination of online and offline to cope with the time and space constraints of different learners.
- (2) The enhancement of school characteristics and competitiveness needs to be realized through innovative teaching methods and means. Modern information technology, such as big data and artificial intelligence, is combined with the development of intelligent teaching content and forms to enhance learning efficiency and experience. Practice and application are emphasized, and through the close integration of education and industry, courses that meet market demand and enhance learners' employability and innovation and entrepreneurship are offered.
- (3) It is also necessary to focus on internal construction and ensure the quality of education through a perfect quality control system. This not only requires standardization of internal school management but also requires the establishment of a sound external evaluation and feedback mechanism to ensure that the quality of education services keeps pace with the times.

In short, the transformation of adult education needs to be centered around the construction of a lifelong education system. To strengthen its characteristics, it must start from various aspects, such as curriculum, teaching methods, educational resources, quality assurance, and effective articulation with vocational and continuing education, to form a complete, coherent, open, and complementary schooling system, and to truly realize the quality change and value reshaping of adult education.

4.3. Meeting the diversified needs of adult learners through transformation and upgrading

Firstly, we need to design and implement flexible education models. Adult learners usually have busy lives and work schedules, so flexible study hours, online courses, and blended learning can be set up to meet learners'

schedules, thus attracting more adult learners to devote themselves to learning.

Strengthening the cultivation of adult independent learning ability is also important. Distance education can provide flexible learning opportunities for adult learners, but it is also necessary to emphasize the cultivation of learners' independent learning ability. Providing learning guidance, tutoring services, and educational resources that support learners' participation in problem-solving and research-based learning can stimulate their interest and initiative in learning.

Thirdly, we need to respect the cognitive characteristics and individualized learning needs of each learner. The cognitive characteristics and learning needs of adult learners are highly individualized, so individual differences need to be emphasized in the curriculum and teaching process. Teachers can adopt diversified teaching methods, such as case studies, group discussions, and individualized counseling, in order to pay better attention to the learning needs and individual differences of each learner.

Lastly, we should focus on the demand of the employment market and set up targeted vocational skills training courses. Adult higher education should pay closer attention to the needs of the job market, adjust the curriculum according to the needs of the industry, and set up highly targeted vocational skills training courses. These courses should focus on cultivating students' practical and professional skills demanded by the job market, so as to enhance students' competitiveness in the job market.

Through these specific paths, adult higher education can continuously adapt to the changes in social needs, improve its quality, and promote the overall development of individuals as well as social and economic progress. The transformation and enhancement of adult higher education not only needs to take into account the changes in the teaching mode and curriculum but also needs to pay attention to the enhancement of teaching quality, the construction of faculty, and innovation in the practice of the curriculum. Only with all-round reform and upgrading can we better meet the diversified needs of adult learners and promote adult higher education to become an important driving force for social and personal development.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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