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Exploration of the Outstanding Talent Training Model for Economics and Trade Disciplines in Local Universities from the OBE Perspective

Tao Wang*

School of International Trade and Economics, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, Jinan 250014, China

****Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.***

Abstract: Under the background of the New Liberal Arts construction in China, independently cultivating a large number of application-oriented and interdisciplinary outstanding talents in economics and trade has become a major issue facing local universities. These new generations of talents must embody an international vision, a deep sense of national commitment, and exceptional global competitiveness. To achieve this goal, an increasing number of universities advocate carrying out teaching reform and innovation based on the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) concept. The OBE concept is consistent with the extensive, useful experiences and practices derived from outstanding talent cultivation in higher education. To implement the OBE concept and systematically reconstruct the training of outstanding talents in economics and trade, a series of systematic reforms and explorations is required. These include defining talent cultivation goals based on internal and external needs, optimizing program structures by leveraging disciplinary advantages, strengthening program characteristics through interdisciplinary integration, continuously refining the curriculum system, empowering teaching method innovation with technology, and reinforcing the guarantee of teaching resources.

Keywords: OBE concept; Local universities; Economics and trade disciplines; Talent training model

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1. Introduction

In the practice of new liberal arts construction, more and more universities and scholars advocate promoting the reform and innovation of outstanding talent training with the OBE (Outcome-Based Education) concept. The OBE concept was first proposed by American psychologist Spady in the 1980s. It is a learner-centered and learning outcome-oriented educational concept, advocating that "before the start of educational activities, there is a clear vision of the learning outcomes that students can achieve, and then courses are designed, teaching is organized, and evaluations are implemented to ensure the achievement of these learning outcomes" [1]. This concept of reverse designing and reconstructing educational activities based on measurable learning outcomes has been widely recognized in the field of international higher engineering education and has continuously penetrated

into other disciplinary fields as an advanced teaching model. However, domestic research on OBE teaching reform carried out at the professional level is mainly concentrated in science and engineering universities and science and engineering majors; research into economics and trade majors remains significantly underdeveloped. It is of great theoretical and practical significance to explore how to use the OBE concept to lead the innovation of talent training models for outstanding economics and trade talents. Such exploration helps implement the New Liberal Arts construction, respond to the new requirements of the information age for talents, address the emerging difficulties in the international economic and trade environment, give full play to the distinctive advantages of local universities in cultivating high-quality compound and application-oriented innovative talents, promote local economic and social development, and advance high-level opening-up.

2. Optimizing program structure and characteristics

2.1. Differentiated development for application-oriented talents

Compared with research-intensive universities, local universities have a significant gap in scientific research capability and the training of top-notch talent. Among the 3 batches of "Top-notch Student Training Base in Basic Disciplines" announced by the Ministry of Education, only one local university, Dongbei University of Finance and Economics, was selected as an economics top-notch student training base. However, this does not mean that top-notch talent training is the exclusive preserve of research-intensive universities. Both local universities and higher vocational colleges can cultivate top-notch innovative talents, albeit of different types: local universities focus on cultivating application-oriented outstanding talents, while higher vocational colleges focus on cultivating skilled outstanding talents [2]. Leveraging their close connection with local economic and industrial development, cultivating customized application-oriented talents that serve local areas and industries is an inherent requirement for the training of outstanding talents in local universities.

2.2. Fostering distinctiveness via interdisciplinary integration

Deep intra-liberal arts integration, cross-disciplinary integration with STEM fields, and digital intelligence empowerment are both essential requirements and common practices of the ongoing New Liberal Arts construction.

First, finance and economics universities should leverage their strengths in liberal arts such as economics and management, as well as their characteristics of program specialization, while fully utilizing deep intra-liberal arts integration and STEM empowerment. In terms of integration within liberal arts, economics and trade majors should actively explore interdisciplinary integration not only with closely related fields, such as finance and financial management but also with secondary disciplines like literature and law, based on competency requirements and disciplinary relevance. For example, Dongbei University of Finance and Economics explores an interdisciplinary model combining law and international trade [3], while Shanghai University of International Business and Economics developed an all-English talent training model featuring "English + International Trade" [4].

Second, comprehensive universities should make full use of broad disciplines, exploit economies of scope, and identify feasible connection points for "economics and trade +". For example, Yantai University has adopted an all-English talent training model in the form of "all English + International Economy and Trade" [5]. \

Third, science and engineering universities should exploit their strengths in STEM disciplines and industry-specific characteristics to empower economic and trade majors and courses through science and engineering. For example, Wuhan Polytechnic University takes food international trade as a professional program feature [6], Northeast Petroleum University has explored a "3+1" school-enterprise cooperation talent training characteristic, agricultural universities such as Hunan Agricultural University [7] and Anhui Agricultural University [8] highlight its feature in agricultural product trade, and universities in Guangxi such as Guilin University of Technology have developed ASEAN-focused characteristics[9].

3. Curriculum system optimization

3.1. Aligning objectives, outcomes, and courses

The OBE concept requires clarifying learning outcomes based on internal and external needs, establishing a clear alignment among training objectives, graduation requirements objectives, and the curriculum system, and initially mapping learning outcome requirements into each corresponding course. Currently, domestic universities generally follow the OBE concept to specify the training objectives of economics and trade talents across multiple dimensions such as values, quality, ability and knowledge system (typically 5 items), and construct a training requirement support matrix covering moral cultivation, disciplinary knowledge, application and innovation ability, information and communication ability, teamwork, international perspective and lifelong learning (typically 7–9 items). Furthermore, they decompose graduation requirements into indicators (each graduation requirement is typically broken down into 3–4 items) and build a corresponding curriculum support system [10]. Nevertheless, as currently articulated, the training objectives, graduation requirements, and their decomposed connotations remain abstract and superficial in defining students' knowledge, abilities, and competencies, particularly lacking a specific measurement indicator system. The alignment between courses and graduation requirements is still coarse, and exploration of goal attainment remains limited.

3.2. Ideological and political guidance for socialist talents

The OBE concept also emphasizes the importance of values shaping in talent training. Although the OBE concept holds those social values (e.g., beliefs and attitudes) and psycho-emotional traits (e.g., self-confidence, morality, optimism and perseverance) are not learning outcomes themselves, they nonetheless serve as important purposes of learning and play a crucial role in students' achievement of learning outcomes. Many core professional courses in economics and trade majors have theoretical methods and research backgrounds primarily derived from Western developed markets, which are deeply influenced by Western social thought. Therefore, teachers need to adhere to a correct political stance, take socialist ideology as the guide, and cultivate socialist economics and trade talents who possess a firm political stance, represent China's stance, embody Chinese wisdom, and demonstrate international perspective and competitiveness. To fulfill the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education and cultivating builders and successors of socialism, we must always put value on education in the first place, comprehensively advance the educational objectives of ideological and political courses as well as curriculum-based ideological and political education, and ensure the integration of socialist ideology into both courses and textbooks.

3.3. Enhancing foreign language ability through internationalization

Foreign language communication ability is a fundamental skill and requirement for students majoring in

economics and trade. With the deepening of globalization and the development of bilateral trade, proficiency in at least one foreign language, along with working knowledge of one or two additional foreign languages, has become a necessity for international economics and trade talents. While developing a bilingual or all-English professional curriculum system has become the reform direction of domestic universities, "mute English" and "Chinglish" are still common phenomena. The improvement of language proficiency particularly depends on creating an immersive language environment. The OBE concept emphasizes the importance of creating a favorable educational environment for achieving learning outcomes. Universities should take internationalization as the starting point, vigorously promote the "bringing in and going out" strategy, create intensive international exchange scenarios for teachers and students, and strengthen foreign language communication skills based on practical application as the benchmark.

3.4. Nurturing digital competence by integrating digital intelligence

Entering the information age, technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence and cloud computing have continuously changed and reshaped the operation of the international economy and society. The digital economy has raised new requirements for international trade talents, calling for compound, innovative and comprehensive professionals. Digital strategy, digital thinking, digital execution and digital innovation ability constitute the core competencies of digital talents. Therefore, universities should take the OBE concept as the foundation, regard digital economics and trade talents as an important training direction, and adopt a range of measures to enhance students' digital competence. These measures include providing foundational digital courses (e.g., artificial intelligence, big data, and machine learning) within general education, conducting digital intelligence-based transformation of traditional professional courses, providing digital cutting-edge elective courses, and offering enterprise digital practice experience.

3.5. Modularization for a diversified and distinctive curriculum

The OBE concept advocates that all students can succeed. It also requires that each student be guaranteed opportunities for personalized development, which highly depends on diverse courses and flexible curriculum settings. However, this poses great challenges in OBE implementation. Modular design is an important approach to meet diversification requirements. In cultivating outstanding economics and trade professionals, universities should leverage their disciplinary strengths, consider the development needs of the nation, local regions, and industries, and take into account students' potential and interests for self-development. A variety of modular course groups should be built around different professional training directions and features. Within the credit system framework, elective courses should serve as the vehicle to achieve the goals of diversified and customized talent cultivation. For example, under the traditional international trade major, diverse and distinctive training directions such as digital trade, cross-border e-commerce, international finance, international law and international organizations can be offered.

4. Technology-empowered teaching methods

4.1. Redefining roles for student-centered learning

The OBE concept reflects a "student-centered" approach, emphasizing a shift from teachers' "teaching" to students' "learning", and a transformation of teachers' role from leaders to supporters. An equal and cooperative teacher-student relationship is conducive to students' independent learning and personalized

development. To achieve this, universities should make full use of various advanced teaching technologies and integrated teaching information platforms to break down the barriers between in-class and after-class. Teachers are encouraged to build equal and cooperative relationships with students, involve them in decision-making and curriculum design, guide them to discover the joy and meaning of learning, stimulate their intrinsic motivation, and help them set personal learning goals. Furthermore, teachers should fully recognize students' individual differences, provide personalized support and feedback, help each student identify their learning progress and shortcomings, and promote continuous development. Students should be encouraged to explore their own learning methods and styles, develop self-management and monitoring skills, and cultivate independent learning ability. In particular, teachers should guide students to carry out inquiry-based learning, independently obtain information and solve problems, to cultivate students' higher-order abilities such as critical thinking and problem-solving.

4.2. AI-enabled smart courses

In the era of digital economy and artificial intelligence, to cultivate digital economics and trade talents, it is necessary to integrate smart teaching and artificial intelligence technology into classroom teaching. It also requires active exploration of new educational models and technical pathways suited to an artificial intelligence environment, to achieve the leap from blackboard to PPT and then to a digital platform [10]. By utilizing various integrated digital teaching platforms, universities can build multi-dimensional teaching communication channels and digital feedback evaluation mechanisms, develop online resources and carry out blended teaching. Generative artificial intelligence should be fully leveraged to empower education and teaching, and create smart courses and smart classrooms. Efforts should be made to explore construction disciplines- and professional- specific large AI models to promote the construction of smart courses, and to facilitate the transformation of teaching from "teacher-student interaction" to in-depth "teacher/student/machine" interaction. This transformation necessitates reforming and innovating teaching design and teaching content, teaching scenarios, teaching resources, learning situation analysis and teaching evaluation. Besides, intelligent big data analysis should be conducted on various factors affecting classroom teaching quality to realize the full-process intelligence of classroom teaching quality supervision.

5. Teaching resource support

5.1. Building a high-quality faculty team

A high-level, internationalized, digitally competent teaching team with both academic and professional experiences is essential for cultivating outstanding economics and trade talents and implementing the tutorial system. Local universities should actively recruit outstanding teachers from domestic and international sources, build international cooperation platforms, encourage faculty to participate in international cooperation projects and academic exchanges, and ensure that their research remains at the forefront of the discipline. It is also important to promote deep school-industry integration, where industry experts should be invited to participate in teaching, and faculty should be encouraged to engage deeply with industrial and enterprise projects, thereby ensuring that classroom instruction incorporates real-world industrial insights. Digital teaching should be vigorously advanced by providing professional development training for teachers and strengthening their ability to design and innovate courses using digital tools. In addition, universities should encourage teachers to integrate into major national and regional development strategies, participate in solving

key industrial and enterprise challenges, and enhance their capacity to serve society and local communities.

5.2. Developing independent and digital textbooks

Independent textbook development should be vigorously promoted. In internationalization construction and all-English teaching, economics and trade majors primarily rely on foreign English textbooks, which often have problems such as detachment from Chinese scenarios and ideological bias. Therefore, while strengthening the review of foreign textbooks, we should vigorously promote the independent development of economics and trade textbooks under the New Liberal Arts framework, taking into account the current state of international and domestic academic research and industry practice, and continuously improving textbook content according to teaching practice and student feedback. In addition, by applying modern digital technologies, digital textbooks can leverage their strong interactivity and high flexibility, facilitate resource sharing between teachers and students, stimulate students' learning interest, meet students' personalized needs, and improve teaching effect and learning experience.

5.3. Strengthening practical innovation platforms

Promoting the construction of practical innovation platforms under the new concept is crucial for creating real, authentic scenarios to enhance students' comprehensive competence, aligning with learning outcome goals and social actual needs. Universities should clearly define the learning goals of practical innovation platforms to ensure alignment with course goals and evaluation standards. Besides, Universities should also establish high-level off-campus practice bases and virtual experiment platforms, along with diversified cross-disciplinary projects and provide expert-level guidance and feedback. Furthermore, universities should encourage students to carry out cross-border cooperation and teacher-student interaction through cross-field innovation projects, allow students to apply the theoretical knowledge they have learned in practice, innovate to solve real-world industrial problems, and enhance their practical innovation ability. Platform construction should be iteratively optimized based on feedback to improve teaching quality and student learning outcomes.

6. Conclusion

Under the backdrop of the New Liberal Arts, exploring the reform and innovation path for cultivating outstanding economics and trade talents aligning with the OBE concept demands reconstructing the traditional talent training model across multiple dimensions, including program training objectives, curriculum systems, teaching content and methods, and the guarantee of teaching resources. Local universities must anchor themselves in their unique institutional positioning and disciplinary strengths, profoundly respond to the new demands for economics and trade professionals raised by the era, society, and the nation, fully realize interdisciplinary integration and digital-intelligence empowerment, and forge a training path for high-level, outstanding economics and trade talents in this new period.

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