

Return of Academic Authority in Open Universities: Exploration and Analysis of the Logicality, Value and Path

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Abstract: The paper is to clarify the controversial issue as to the open university system needs or not to promote the return of its academic authority and status. Via analyzing the origin of the above controversy and the realistic dilemma, as well as the refuting and logical interpretation, it proves the important position of academic authority in the internal governance structure of open universities. Therefore, considering the era background of high-quality development of education, ensuring the status of academic authority in open universities is of great importance in improving the quality and competitiveness of education. In the end, the realization path will be proposed as how to ensure the return of academic authority in the open university system. .

Keywords: Open Universities; Academic Authority; Quality of Education

Introduction

In 2013, the “1+5” Open University education reform pilot was carried out by the Ministry of Education, which drove the traditional radio and television university to transform and upgrade to a new type of higher learning institution, open universities. In 2016, *Opinions of Ministry of Education on Successful Operation of Open Universities* (hereinafter referred to as the *Opinions*) was released, and thus the transformation and upgrading was accelerated and began to attract widespread attention from the public. Due to the historical school-running orientation and the cognitive bias of education mission within the open university system, its predecessor, radio and television university, cannot keep pace with the general higher learning institutions in academic development. Therefore, there is a wide gap between the open university system based on radio and television universities and the general higher learning institutions in the aspects of teachers’ educational level, scientific research achievements and academic influence.

At present, a certain controversy still exist within the open university system as open universities need or not to pay the same attention to the function of academic research as that of general higher learning institutions. In other words, the issue of the return of academic authority and status in the open university system should be discussed. The author believes that the clarity of it is of great significance for facilitating the conjugation of the administrative power and academic authority in open universities and thus further improving their internal governance structures.

1. Origin of the controversy and the realistic dilemma

1.1 Current situation of education and its existential crisis

In China, open universities were transformed from traditional radio and television universities which mainly assumed the function of compensation for higher education for a long period of time in the past. Such kind of school-running orientation leads radio and television universities to mainly absorb adult students. With the continuous expansion of higher education scale as well as the improvement of its quality, the position of radio and television universities education system begin to be constantly marginalized among China’s higher education system, and the quality of its students is also declining with this trend. It can be said that students in radio and television universities not only lack of good academic performance,

but also are considered mostly as “poor students who cannot be admitted to general colleges or universities”, as well as the “unemployed and non-mainstream groups”. Hence, their educational expectations are only for the “diplomas” but nothing with education, which further deteriorates the social reputation and recognition of radio and television universities. They are then considered as so-called “diploma issuing” institutions.

In 2019, China’s State Council issued the *National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan*. Just in the same year, the Ministry of Education announced that higher vocational education institutions would expand the enrollment by one million, with high school graduates, veterans, laid-off workers, migrant workers and new professional farmers as their target. However, the expansion of higher vocational education institutions caused the living space of radio and television universities to be compressed. Therefore, the originally unstable student source and enrollment scale once again was challenged greatly.

1.2 Strategies and differences of resolutions

Confronting both of the declined education quality and compression of living space, the radio and television university system begins to take active measures to seek resolutions, one of which is to carry out order-oriented training, that is, to design and provide training for specific companies or public institutions, or for special groups such as the unemployed and those who benefit from social minimum security^[1].

Proponents of the above measure believes that the first and foremost task is to ease the existential crisis, and the training activities has actually increased school attendance and brought about additional revenue, while critics insist that such a measure would damage the school’s image, especially that of the teachers, and meanwhile colleges or universities would be degraded from educational institutions to service providers, which would result in a further loss of competitiveness among the public education system and inability to cope with the impact of marketization due to the limitation of the system, and thereby would exacerbate the trend of education quality decline.

Trapped in such a development predicament, a considerable number of college leaders and teachers believe that the traditional radio and television university system cannot deal with the academic research which needs huge investment and thus lead the original academic production function to go further marginalization. But what is the reality?

2. Refutation and logical interpretation of the controversy

2.1 Engaging in academic research as one of the basic functions of universities

Based on international consensus, it is generally considered that “colleges and universities in the modern sense” stem from the foundation of the University of Berlin in Germany in 1810, which endowed colleges and universities the mission of advanced studies, and then they evolve from merely teaching organizations to academic ones. Within these organizations, the specialization of knowledge and accomplishments in academy enable teachers and professors to be endowed with specific academic authority^[2], and knowledge production has also become a hallmark trait of modern universities different from other social organizations. Therefore, as a new member of higher education system, open universities should also assume the mission of academic research naturally.

2.2 Intensifying academic authority as an important issue in improving the internal governance structure of open universities

In the *Opinions*, “to improve the governance structure and promote the governance capacity” is one of the twelve main tasks in successfully operating open universities. The relationship between administrative power and academic authority has always been an important issue in the internal governance of colleges and universities. Academic authority is of great importance on account of the essential attributes of colleges and universities and their academic functions. Due to reasons such as historical development and education system, the loss of academic authority in China is often caused by the offside and generalization of the administrative power of colleges and universities. Such a problem is particularly prominent in the open university system where the academic production has not been obvious. Therefore, returning academic authority and

carrying out democratic management is of great importance for the improvement of the internal governance structure in open universities.

2.3 Complementing the shortcomings of scientific research as an important channel for promoting the transformation and upgrading of radio and television universities

Via sorting out the experience of the “1+5” Open University pilot reform, the *Research Report on the Foundation & Development of the Open University System with Chinese Characteristics* submitted to the Ministry of Education by the research group of the International Research Institute of Education of Shanghai Open University shows that the target of “enhancing the scientific research level” must be reached by radio and television universities if they transform and upgrade to open universities. Practical experience indicates that it is imperative for traditional radio and television universities to work on academic production if they intend to carry out transformation and upgrading, and thus complement the shortcomings of academic research. On account of many reasons such as the education system, historical development and school-running orientation, long-term absence of the academic production of the traditional radio and television universities has also become a shackle for the transformation and upgrading. Therefore, the capacity of academic production is very important in promoting the activity.

3. Response to the era of high-quality development of education

3.1 Quality of education as the lifeline of the development of colleges and universities

In 2019, the *Notice on Serving Lifelong Learning for the People and Promoting the High-Quality Development of Online Education in Pilot Universities of Modern Distance Education* was released by the General Office of the Ministry of Education. On Jan.15, 2020, Vice Premier Sun Chunlan of the State Council investigated and surveyed the Open University of China, emphasizing that it should highlight the type characteristics and focus on enhancing quality of education, and then summarized and extracted a key word---“high-quality” through further combining with the principles of the *National Education Conference*. High-quality development of continuing education is the mission and task of colleges and universities in the new era, which cannot be avoided and questioned. No matter facing what kind of survival predicament and choosing which school-running route, teachers and professors in the radio and television university system and even those in the upgraded open university system must have profound understanding that they are standing on the critical position of China’s promotion of lifelong education and the fairness of enjoying high-quality higher education resources. If they slack off in the pursuit of education quality, the legitimacy of its existence will be impacted seriously.

Among the fundamental factors to guarantee the high-quality development of continuing education, high-level teaching staff is the key. However, desperate lack of such teachers is considered as a critical element in limiting the improvement of the education quality of open universities. Generally speaking, in first-class universities, besides the rich teaching experience and skills, the academic level, scientific research output and academic influence are also seen as important consideration factors in evaluating teachers’ academic capability. Such kind of evaluation criteria is formed based on China’s academic-based tradition in modern universities. Just as we say “the greatness of a university lies in masters rather than buildings”.

3.2 Academic production promoting the improvement of education quality

At present, we are stepping in a society with rich knowledge. With the continuous development of modern information technology, approaches for people to grasp knowledge and information are becoming increasingly diversified, and the speed of knowledge dissemination and iteration is accelerating. The “wall of the university” is gradually being dismantled, and universities are no longer the only source of knowledge. Meanwhile, with the popularization of higher education, the education level of the public has been greatly enhanced, and teachers in colleges and universities are gradually losing their

identity and status of knowledge authority. It can be said that the legitimacy crisis of modern universities is impending. Low-performing teachers in colleges and universities have descended to “knowledge porters”, and their outdated knowledge systems cannot cope up with the ever-enhancing educational demands from students, and thus are accompanied by the decline in the quality of higher education.

Therefore, the open university system, which is in the midst of a declining educational reputation and long-term absence of academic production, has been struck more quickly and directly than any other universities. Only part of the colleges and universities in the system can maintain their student scale through continuously lowering entrance and graduation requirements. Such a measure can temporarily alleviate the existential crisis, but their educational reputations are thus damaged fundamentally, with their operation trapped in a vicious circle.

In 2013, the “1+5” open university education reform pilot implemented by the Ministry of Education can be said to be a top-down “education rescue operation”. Based on the author’s survey, the selection criteria of the candidates for leaders of open universities are almost the same as those of general higher education institutions. They are all equipped with rich educational management experience, higher educational level and academic research capabilities, and are committed to promoting the scientific research capabilities of the whole open university system to enhance their competitiveness. However, From the overall perspective of the system, the reform effect is still not outstanding.

4. Realization path of the return of academic authority

4.1 Shelving the controversy and clarifying the objectives

In comparison with general higher education and vocational education, it is indeed that financial funding investment is very limited for the National Open University system, and the low tuition fee cannot maintain the huge school system and school-running scale, which has also led to lacking enthusiasm for increasing investment in education and improving the scientific research environment. Therefore, it is understandable to seek diversified financial sources, but it must be clear that open universities are not to make money, and their orientation is to be new-type educational institutions to provide higher education opportunities to all the people who are capable and willing to receive high-quality education. Thus, open universities should be devoted to providing necessary support for teachers and researchers who work on improving the quality of education, scientific research capabilities, and educational influence.

4.2 Taking their respective duties and implementing democratic management

Among all the powers of modern universities, the competition between academic authority and administrative power has always been the core issue within internal governance of colleges and universities. Of the two, academic authority is devoted to consolidating the knowledge authority of colleges and universities as academic institutions, while administrative power is for the effective allocation of the internal resources, promoting reform and enhancing management efficiency. The long-term absence of academic authority in the open university system has led to the decline of education quality, insufficiency of the competitiveness of education, and the serious backward development. Therefore, administrative power, as a kind of serving power within the open university system should assume the inevitable mission to cultivate and support academic authority and ensure academic autonomy and freedom.

4.3 Keeping system interaction and learning from each other

In the process of promoting academic progress of the open university system, the Open University of China should function as the leadership and take the leading role, striving to gain more national financial support and promoting system integration and scientific research innovation through continuously optimizing the internal scientific research environment, and thereby provide more substantial assistance for outstanding teachers and scientific research talents within the overall system. All local branches and learning centers should further strengthen their interaction, enhance mutual understanding and support via scientific research cooperation, talent exchanges, study visits and the like, and then achieve common progress by learning from each other.

References

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