

Exploration and Practice of Open University Serving Talent Cultivation for Rural Revitalization

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Abstract: In the context of implementing China's Rural Revitalization Strategy, the open university undertakes the social service function and mission of cultivating talents for rural grassroots governance and economy development. Adopting modern open and distance education (ODE) in fostering local talents for rural revitalization holds profound practical implications. This study delves into the case of "Village Cadres' Academic Qualification and Ability Improvement Action Plan." By utilizing unique advantages of ODE in cultivating village cadres, Yunnan Open University explores the order-based talent cultivation mode and smart teaching mode, and a number of village cadre students have grown into "bellwethers" for the local rural revitalization. By summarizing the core characteristics and practical experience garnered from Yunnan Open University's contributions to talent cultivation for rural revitalization, this research endeavors to provide a theoretical reference and practical basis for other open universities.

1. Background

1.1. Rural revitalization strategy in China

The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed the implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy since 2017 with the aim of fundamentally addressing the underdevelopment of China's agriculture and rural areas, as well as the underprivilege of its farmers. The overall objective of putting the Rural Revitalization Strategy into practice is the accomplishment of agricultural and rural modernization, with the general requirements that achieve industrial prosperity, ecological livability, rural civilization, effective governance, and well-off life. Essentially, the Rural Revitalization Strategy is a novel approach to fostering rural development that is closely intertwined with targeted poverty alleviation.

However, rural revitalization is a complicated and systematic project that involves many fields such as industry, ecology, people's livelihood, and social governance. With the advancement of rural urbanization and the outflow of rural surplus labor, talent revitalization emerges as the central aspect. However, it also turns into a limitation in the allocation of rural human resources. To fully implement rural revitalization, talents are indispensable. Consequently, there exist various levels and diverse demands for talents in rural revitalization. Both highly educated experts and grassroots practitioners with extensive experience in rural production and life are necessary.

To implement the rural revitalization strategy, it is imperative to assemble a well-rounded team of diverse talents. Previous research has divided the main body of rural revitalization talents into the following categories based on the disparity between rural talent resources and labor division: rural practical talents, returning hometown employment and entrepreneurial personnel, agricultural technological personnel, village cadres, rural teachers, and doctors[1]. This study focused on the category of village cadres.

1.2. Talent demand for rural cadres

The capacity of rural governance is currently facing new obstacles due to the downward shift in national governance focus, which has introduced a significant amount of preferential policies, superior public resources, innovative governance concepts, and technology into rural communities.

In China, village cadres, serving on the Communist Party of China Village Branch Committee and Villager Self-Government Committee (known as "Two Committees"), constitute the most direct managers of rural society, crucial for local economic development and policy implementation. Most village cadres are local farmers who are not full-time workers; generally, they are "county sages" with a good reputation, specific knowledge and skills, and high levels of acceptance in the local area. Consequently, their impacts on rural society are extensive and multifaceted. In terms of the village cadres' functions in rural revitalization, they act as a link between the masses and the government. Their capacity for work and governance has an impact on social stability and harmony as well as the execution of party and governmental policies.

As the backbone of rural governance, several weaknesses among village cadres, such as lower educational attainment, insufficient learning and ability to work, and backward governance concepts, frequently become barriers to enhancing rural governance capability[1][2]. This study mainly focused on the current situation of village cadres in Yunnan Province. After the election in 2016, there were more than 140,000 village cadres in Yunnan Province. However, there is still a widening gap between the ability, education level, and requirements for leading local villagers to become prosperous. Regarding the academic qualification, the proportion of college graduates has only reached about 10%. Especially in ethnically impoverished counties, the education level of the vast majority of village cadres is still at the junior high school level. The above-mentioned factors caused the following disadvantages for rural cadres in Yunnan province, lacking the capability to lead the masses to develop the agricultural industry, management ability, the awareness of the rule of law, and the ability to handle emergencies are relatively weak. Also, leadership and innovation in dealing with complex public affairs must be improved. Based on the above discussion, improving the educational level and the overall quality of village cadres is a critical factor in rural revitalization. Training rural village cadres is necessary to provide a talent guarantee for talent revitalization.

2. Open University in the regional rural revitalization and village cadres cultivation

2.1. Difficulties faced in cultivating village cadres

Most village cadres lack the motivation and free time for self-improvement through continuing education. On the one hand, village cadres play the role of "state agents" in the mobilization work, such as poverty alleviation, COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control, and improvement of the village living environment. They also play the "head of a family" in the village and participate in the villager' civil dispute mediation work. The heavy daily workload usually leads to apparent work-study conflicts among village cadres. On the other hand, due to the older age, lower educational attainment, and relatively lower salary and rewards for village cadres, they have

insufficient motivation to participate in continuing education, both non-academic and academic education. In terms of the learning space, it is not available to provide centralized study space for village cadres due to the weak rural infrastructure and lack of teachers. Meanwhile, because of lacking self-improvement motivation and free time, it is difficult for village cadres to have the opportunity to obtain admission to the full-time university to improve their academic qualifications.

2.2. Role of the open university in cultivating village cadres

2.2.1. Serving the rural talents revitalization is the function and mission of the open university

Higher education undertakes the vital responsibility of cultivating talents required for social development. Meanwhile, colleges and universities perform the functions of personnel training, scientific research, and social services. Since each university's location advantages, talent advantages, and educational resources advantages are different, the division of tasks and role positioning of them in rural revitalization should also be different[3]. The open university is a carrier for promoting lifelong learning and education equity. Unlike other full-time colleges and universities, the open university mainly teaches through modern open and distance education(ODE). As an essential part of the Chinese higher education system, ODE has the characteristics of openness, comprehensive coverage, inclusive and systemic. ODE breaks the limitation of time and space, enabling learners to enjoy more autonomy in learning and ensuring equal educational opportunities. Facing the practical needs of the rural revitalization strategy and cultivation of village cadres, cultivating talents for rural revitalization is the embodiment of the open university's social responsibility. Previous research has suggested that it is critical to create a new driving force of rural human capital through education[4], and the core goal of local open universities is to solve the hollowing-out problem of rural human resources[5]. Under the background of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, the diversified human capital demand in multiple fields urgently require the open university to cultivate outstanding talents. At the same time, cultivating village cadres is a critical path to improving rural governance capability.

2.2.2. Unique advantages of the open university in cultivating village cadres

Advantages of the open university system. The open university has a unique and irreplaceable system advantage in cultivating rural grassroots talents. China's open universities adopted a unified school-running system, including the central (national) open university, provincial-level open universities, city-level and county-level branch campuses, and learning centers. It formed an open and distance education system covering the whole country with overall planning, classified training system, and hierarchical management system. Such a school-running system has both the advantages of system management and the enthusiasm for independent and flexible school-running. More importantly, this school-running system ensures county-level branch campuses and learning centers are able to go deep into the impoverished and remote areas. Therefore, to a certain extent, the problems of lack of infrastructure and teachers in rural areas have been solved by sharing teaching resources among the nationwide open university system.

Advantages of the teaching methods. The characteristics of various and advanced teaching methods of ODE adopted by the open university have obvious advantages in the development of rural human resources. Village cadres do not need to be concentrated in a fixed place to study since the in-depth integration of information technology and teaching. Learners in remote rural areas could study through the distance learning platform with shared high-quality study resources, which breaks the limitations of time and space. Just like the purpose of ODE, making everyone could have the equal right to be educated, could learn anytime and learn anywhere. The lenient and strict

graduate standard, as well as the flexible length of schooling of the open university, also contribute to making the university dream of village cadres come true.

Advantages of practical experience. After years of practice, the open university system in China has accumulated rich experience in cultivating rural talents, laying a great foundation for cultivating applied rural revitalization talents. For instance, in 2004, the Open University of China launched the "One College Student Per Village" program via its nationwide school-running system, which is a pioneering exploration of applying modern ODE to cultivate local talents in rural areas. This program aims to assist the underprivileged by encouraging intellectual development through education, especially through the hybrid teaching model based on the combination of online learning and offline tutoring. The "One College Student Per Village" program cultivated over 530,000 graduates in 1,513 learning centers covering 29 provinces in China[6], and it had a positive impact on bridging the urban-rural gap and promoting equity in education.

3. Case Analysis: the Village cadres' academic qualification and ability improvement action plan

Implementing the Rural Revitalization Strategy has put forward higher requirements for the ability and overall quality of the rural cadres. Given the current situation of village cadres in Yunnan Province, such as low level of knowledge, insufficient governance capability, lack of reserve cadres, and other problems are still relatively prominent, which is not suitable for the requirements of rural social governance and rural revitalization. Therefore, it is urgently demanded to improve the academic qualification, comprehensive quality, and ability to perform the duties of village cadres.

The "Village Cadres' Academic Qualification and Ability Improvement Action Plan" ("the Action Plan") was implemented across the Yunnan province in May 2018, led by the Organization Department of the Yunnan Provincial Party Committee, in conjunction with the Yunnan Provincial Department of Education, Finance, Human Resources, and Social Security, and Agriculture and Rural Affairs. The education and cultivation of village cadres shall be undertaken by Yunnan Open University, and Yunnan Open University established the School of Yunnan Rural Revitalization Education to undertake specific teaching support services. The Action Plan aims to improve the organizational strength of grassroots party organizations, focuses on improving the comprehensive ability of village cadres through open and distance education, and adopts practical training as a supplement to cultivate a high-quality, professional team of village cadres that meets the needs of rural revitalization. In terms of the enrollment scope of the Action Plan, the Action Plan adopts recommendation enrollment to precisely select efficient cultivation objects. 10,000 students will be admitted annually. Meanwhile, the tuition is entirely borne by provincial-level finance.

3.1. Order-based talent cultivation mode for village cadres

For the cultivation of village cadres, the cultivation plan is formulated based on a comprehensive understanding of the adult students' characteristics, occupational characteristics, and learning styles. To avoid copying the education mode of full-time colleges and universities, Yunnan Open University adopted an order-based cultivation mode for village cadres who participated in the Action Plan. The cultivation mode is guided by the local needs of rural grassroots party building, poverty alleviation, and rural revitalization. The goal of talent cultivation is aligned with the work requirements of local party committees and governments for village cadres.

In terms of the specialty setting of the Action Plan, it focuses on the talent demand of the Rural Revitalization Strategy to provide customized majors, including two undergraduate-level majors (Law, Agriculture and Forestry Economic Management) and four junior college-level majors

(Agricultural Economic Management, Public Administration, Legal Affairs, Community Management, and Service). Furthermore, the curriculum system of each major is tightly related to the actual work needs of village cadres. Given the current situation that village cadres usually lack theoretical knowledge and need to apply theories to guide their practice in daily work, innovatively, a "duty performance ability course module" was set up in the curriculum system. The duty performance ability course module aims to improve village cadres' ability to apply professional theoretical skills to solve practical problems. For example, courses in Practical Writing, Computer Application Fundamentals, Village Affairs Management, and Emergency Response and Handling of Common Emergencies in Rural Areas. In addition, since village cadres are located in different multi-ethnic cultural fusion areas; also the pillar industries in developing the agricultural economy are different. Yunnan Open University organized sixteen cities (autonomous prefectures) to design curricula and textbooks with local characteristics. For instance, the Local Weaving Brocade Technology of the Jingpo people, Language of the Dai people, and Jujube Planting Technology.

The order-based talent cultivation mode effectively solves the problem that talent training in rural revitalization is not closely related to actual societal needs and connects the education chain, talent chain, and industrial chain.

3.2. Smart teaching mode for village cadres

Yunnan Open University adopted a "smart teaching mode" to cultivate village cadres based on the open and distance education model. In detail, this mode includes one online learning platform, four classrooms, six expert teams, and multiple practice teaching bases.

3.2.1. Hybrid teaching mode of online learning and offline tutoring

Yunnan Open University built an online learning platform ("Yunnan Rural Revitalization Institute") that could be used for both PC and mobile APP terminals. The studying records data synchronization could be achieved. A hybrid teaching mode of Four Classrooms is innovatively proposed to solve the work-study conflict and lack of high-quality study resources problems of rural cadres.

The Four Classrooms consist of one online classroom, "Air Classroom," and three face-to-face classrooms, "Fixed Classroom," "Mobile Classroom," and "Field Classroom." In detail, the "Air Classroom" is used for online autonomous learning. The learning tasks that students must complete include watching video learning resources, participating in live broadcast teaching, and completing quizzes or course papers. In the Yunnan Open University system, there are 118 branch campuses or learning centers distributed in 16 cities (autonomous prefectures) and responsible for organizing face-to-face tutoring. For the other three offline classrooms, students must concentrate on the campus near the villages to complete the following study tasks, including participating in face-to-face tutoring, group discussion, and visiting the practice bases related to the course they studied. To standardize the offline tutoring and learning process, it requires students to take GPS attendance, while teachers are required to upload the teaching record forms through the learning platform. Open and distance education quality is guaranteed by employing a strict teaching process and emphasizing formative assessments.

3.2.2. Smart learning big data analysis and evaluation system

How to effectively achieve teaching management and supervise the whole process of student learning is the issue that is worth exploring in open and distance education. Through the Smart Learning Big Data Command Center, Yunnan Open University has achieved real-time monitoring, statistics, and analysis of the whole process of online and offline teaching and learning at 118

teaching centers in Yunnan Province. The Smart Learning Big Data Analysis and Evaluation System extracts the primary data of the Yunnan Rural Revitalization Institute, qualifies the evaluation indicators, and establishes an ODE data model to realize the digitization and visualization of the whole learning process. Also, the system draws portraits of students and teachers to evaluate the online autonomous learning and offline tutoring situation of 118 branch campuses or learning centers. This system has an Operation and Monitoring Center with an early warning function. The real-time warning information will be issued for students who are behind in learning progress and homework completion and teachers who fail to carry out offline teaching and mark homework on time. The application of the Smart Learning Big Data Analysis and Evaluation System solves the problems of lax control of the teaching process and weak supervision of learning centers in open and distance education. Moreover, the enthusiasm of learning centers has been improved, and the teaching quality of the Action Plan also improved effectively.

3.2.3. Faculty team and effective learning support services

Considering the work-study conflicts and scattered locations of village cadres, Yunnan Open University formed six faculty teams to provide learning support services, which improves the convenience and efficiency of learning by serving village cadres in various forms. The six faculty teams include (1) a team of specialists in disciplines and industry development, (2) a team of guided teachers from Yunnan Open University, branch campuses, and learning centers, (3) a team of assistant teachers, including the university student village officials and members of the village task force, to help solve the problems encountered by village cadres students in online learning and professional course learning, (4) a team of teaching managers is composed of education administrative departments of governments and teaching management personnel of the school-running system of Yunnan Open University, (5) a team of practical instructors consisting of agricultural professional and technical personnel, judicial workers, and lawyers are responsible for guiding students to carry out practical learning and graduation practice, (6) a volunteer team that selected from village cadres students with outstanding ability to help guide other students in open and distance learning.

4. Effectiveness of the Village cadres' academic qualification and ability improvement action plan

4.1. Wide coverage of the Action Plan promotes educational equity

The wide application of Internet technology in education has effectively promoted the reform and innovation of teaching methods, and it also enables high-quality educational resources to extend to remote rural areas and benefit more people in need. During the implementation process, the Village Cadres' Academic Qualification and Ability Improvement Action Plan have benefited 118 counties in the whole Yunnan Province and gradually becomes a virtual open and distance learning platform for the education and training of village cadres. By the end of 2023, a total of 45,000 village cadres had been successfully enlisted within the ambit of the Action Plan. Furthermore, a total of 10,000 village cadres will start school in the fall semester of 2024, while the number of admissions is further skewed to counties that are vital assistance objects in rural revitalization.

4.2. Effective cultivation: a large number of students have grown into "bellwethers" in regional rural revitalization

In participating in the Action Plan, most village cadres have enhanced theoretical knowledge and

practical skills through the hybrid learning mode and accumulated experience through on-the-spot observation. It has effectively strengthened the capabilities of developing rural collective economy and characteristic local industries, promoting agricultural project investment and grass-root governance. After three years of studying, village cadres' political quality and professional ability have been greatly improved. They have played a significant role in local poverty alleviation, and regional rural revitalization, reflecting the responsibilities and effectiveness of a "head goose."

Many village cadres' capabilities have been affirmed and recognized by local party organizations and the masses, and a large number of outstanding students emerged, and 2,143 students received various national-level or provincial-level awards during their studies. For instance, one village cadres student was elected as a representative of the National People's Congress, and one student was named as a "National Excellent Party Worker," one student was recommended as a National Model Worker, six students won the commendation of "good village cadres for poverty alleviation" in Yunnan Province.

4.3. Graduates are highly recognized by employers: the vitality of talents continues to be stimulated

Village cadres are a particular group different from national civil servants and marginalized from the administrative cadre system. Moreover, subject to problems such as low educational attainment, difficulties in upgrading academic qualifications, and poor career advancement channels, it is not easy to arouse the enthusiasm and motivation of rural cadres. According to statistics, in 2020, among graduated students of the Action Plan were 96 village cadre students employed as civil servants, 48 students were admitted to public institutions, and 73 students became members of the local villages and towns' administration. In 2021, 12,316 students were employed by the local Communist Party of China Village Branch Committee and Villager Self-Government Committee (known as "Two Committees"), accounting for 78.3% of the total number of students. In summary, implementing the Action Plan lays a solid foundation for selecting rural grassroots talents and provides a talent guarantee for implementing the Rural Revitalization Strategy.

5. Recommendations for Optimizing Cultivation of village cadres

As of 2024, the Village Cadres' Academic Qualification and Ability Improvement Action Plan have been implemented for six years. A new round of the five-year Action Plan is about to conduct according to the work arrangement of the Organization Department of Yunnan Provincial Party Committee. Therefore, it is of crucial practical significance to explore how to continue to adopt the advantages of open and distance education to cultivate village cadres on the basis of the existing talent training model.

A questionnaire was designed to collect data about the learning situation of village cadres who participated in the Action Plan, and a total of 7,598 valid questionnaires were returned. This research proposed development recommendations for implementing ODE in the training of village cadres based on summarizing Yunnan Open University's practical experience and analyzing the survey's data. The survey findings indicate that an overwhelming 80.4% of village cadre students are "very satisfied" with the hybrid teaching mode, with an additional 16.57% expressing "satisfaction." Conversely, a relatively small percentage of 2.79% rate the mode as "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied," and a mere 0.24% express "dissatisfaction."

5.1. Sticking to a demand-oriented approach and optimizing the discipline construction

From previous village cadres' cultivation experience of Yunnan Open University in the Action

Plan, it is necessary to insist on being student-centered and stick to the demand-oriented approach to optimize the talent cultivating plan of each specialty.

Continuing the order-based talent cultivation mode for village cadres and providing more customized disciplines based on the talent demand of the Rural Revitalization Strategy. Based on field research in 118 counties during the five years of the Action Plan implementation, governments and village cadres have put forward the need for additional majors according to the local economic development and governance needs, including social work, crop production and management, tea production and processing technology, and horticultural technology, and so on. Regarding the curriculum, it is necessary to stimulate students' interest in learning by building high-quality course resources that students are delighted to learn and, simultaneously, improve the effectiveness and accuracy of distance and open education. This research asked respondents what courses they were most interested in. According to the survey, 19.67% of students expressed interest in the party construction knowledge courses, while 17.74% demonstrated a keen interest in the computer basics courses. Furthermore, there was a notable level of interest in courses pertaining to common legal knowledge (16.72%), practical writing (16.52%), and agricultural cultivation and breeding technology-related subjects, which accounted for 13.7% of the total interest expressed. It can be seen that the interested course types with the highest proportion are the skills that are widely used by village cadre students in their daily work and need to be improved.

5.2. Improving the teaching condition guarantee

In response to the inquiry regarding "Terminals commonly utilized for accessing the learning platform and engaging in studies," the survey revealed that approximately 25.4% of students employ computers, whereas 42.43% leverage mobile devices for learning purposes. In addition, nearly 32% of students reported utilizing both computers and mobiles to log in to the learning platform, and 0.2% indicated the use of alternative devices. Therefore, it is necessary to further optimize the functions of the learning platform in all terminals according to the feedback of students and teachers. Moreover, improving the convenience and effectiveness of learning platform operation maintains high-quality teaching support services. In addition, an intelligent customer service subsystem can be embedded in the learning platform to provide personalized learning support services. For instance, it is essential to establish a comprehensive problem database that is enriched by the perspectives of various roles, including students, tutors, and teaching-affair administrators. This will ensure that the inquiries posed by both teachers and students can be promptly and efficiently addressed through the utilization of intelligent customer service mechanisms.

5.3. Integrating resources and forming a faculty team with a multidisciplinary background

Promoting the high-quality and sustainable development of the Action Plan is inseparable from a high-quality professional faculty team. It is necessary to strengthen the construction of the talent team further and build specialist teachers and teaching management teams equipped with professional knowledge and devoted to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. To enhance the overall coordination of the school-running system within the open university system, it is imperative to establish a teacher resources database, thereby facilitating the sharing of resource among institutions across Yunnan Province. Based on the teacher resources database, a local teacher team with a multidisciplinary background familiar with local conditions is formed to compile teaching materials and construct digital resources. It could be a positive path to ensure the teaching resources have local characteristics and pertinence for village cadre students from different areas.

For village cadre students who have already accumulated practical experience, it is vital to apply

the theoretical knowledge they have learned to real-world work. The village cadres' cultivation model's practical teaching parts include course teaching practice and professional social practice. Therefore, establishing a series of practical teaching bases with fully integrated local resources is necessary. The increase of practical teaching bases could extend learning resources, mainly focusing on training village cadre students' knowledge and skills in practical agricultural technology, business management knowledge, rural legal affairs, and governance. With the combination of learning and use, it could cultivate and improve the professional skills of students and the operational ability to solve practical problems in their daily work.

6. Conclusions

Focusing on the actual needs of regional development, continuously expanding and innovating the supply method of social services reflects the self-iteration and update of the social service function of the open university, as well as the open and distance education. In the new era of implementing the Rural Revitalization Strategy, the practice demonstrates that the open university may take on the vital social service function and mission of fostering talents for rural revitalization and grassroots governance.

In the case of the "Village Cadres' Academic Qualification and Ability Improvement Action Plan," Yunnan Open University explores innovative talent training modes based on rural reality and talent needs. It fully uses open and distance education advantages to improve the academic qualification and comprehensive quality of village cadres. It cultivated a group of village cadres that became rural grassroots governance talents and skilled talents for serving the regional rural revitalization. The open university's social responsibility in promoting local talent and rural revitalization was exemplified by this practice, hoping to provide references for other open universities in cultivating rural revitalization talents.

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