

Comparison of General Education Models at Sino-Foreign Cooperative Universities: A Case Study of New York University Shanghai and the University of Nottingham Ningbo China

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Abstract: With the general education curriculum at New York University Shanghai (NYU Shanghai) and the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) as research objects, this paper focuses on the practical model of the general education system in Sino-foreign cooperative universities. Based on the theory of liberal education and the theory of international culture in local contexts, this paper conducts a systematic analysis of the general education curriculum in two universities in terms of their curriculum structure, curriculum objectives, teaching mode, and assessment and evaluation. The research results indicate that NYU Shanghai adopts a university-wide mandatory general education model. Similarly, it arranges the general education curriculum in the first two years of undergraduate training, with the cross-civilizational courses and the institutionalized China Studies courses as its core. Furthermore, its curriculum system implements the education mode characterized by student enrollment without declaring a major, realizing broad-based student development through six curriculum modules. By contrast, UNNC, which has not established an independent university-wide general education system, mainly distributes its general education content in the foundation transition courses and embedded modules within the specialty. Its curriculum content is mainly implemented around English for academic purposes (EAP) and foundational disciplinary competencies training. Simply put, the differences between them regarding the general education system reflect the diverse institutional logic followed by American-style general education and British-style specialized education. Concurrently, the aforementioned differences reveal the tension between the global educational paradigm and the local educational practice.

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) in 2004 and New York University Shanghai (NYU Shanghai) in 2012, Sino-foreign cooperative education has progressively entered a new stage from the exploration of school-running patterns to the development of deep integration of curriculum systems. General education, as the solid foundation of

undergraduate talent training, plays an important role in cultivating students' integrated personality, foundational thinking skills, humanistic literacy, basic scientific knowledge, and social cognition. Meanwhile, keeping students from falling into a narrow knowledge field is one of the cores of talent cultivation in top universities in Europe and America. Within this context, this paper takes NYU Shanghai and UNNC as research samples to systematically analyze the different general education curriculum systems of the two universities as well as their implementation pathways.

A majority of existing studies tend to independently explore the cross-cultural design of NYU Shanghai's general education curriculum and the British curriculum system characterized by the cultivation of critical thinking in UNNC. The two universities, as typical examples of Sino-American and Sino-British cooperative education, fully present the underlying logic of American-style and British-style general education in the design of general education curriculum and its localization practice. Hence, they are of great comparative research value.

Using the multiple-case comparative method, this paper selects NYU Shanghai and UNNC as two typical Sino-Foreign cooperative universities as double cases. By comparing and analyzing the structure, content, and implementation pathways of general education curricula in the two universities, this paper intends to present the adaptive advantages and realistic contradictions of the American and British general education paradigms in the Chinese higher education context.

Presently, domestic research on general education concerning Sino-foreign cooperative education can be divided into two directions. For one thing, certain studies take NYU Shanghai as an individual case to discuss the related issues of its general education curriculum. For another, some studies independently analyze UNNC's general education curriculum system. As a whole, the existing research rarely focuses on the comparison of general education models between NYU Shanghai and UNNC.

2. Theoretical Origins of American and British General Education

In retrospect, American general education can be traced back to Harvard University's report entitled *General Education in a Free Society* in 1945, which explicitly divided education into general education and specialized education, regarding the two as complementary. This report proposes that a structured curriculum system should be applied to ensure that students are exposed to the core knowledge of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Notably, this report was produced over a two-year period by a committee established in 1943 under James Bryant Conant, then president of Harvard University. Produced at the late stage of World War II, this report aims to respond to the challenges faced by post-war society and explore how to cultivate responsible citizens who adapt to a democratic and free society through education, thus reducing social conflicts caused by individual differences and lack of common cultural constraints. Briefly, the core objective of this report is to cultivate integrated individuals with good character, integrity as a citizen, and social practical competences, thereby building a common cultural foundation for American society ^[1].

American-style general education is closely related to the four-year undergraduate education, flexible course selection system, and flexible major switching in American undergraduate education. The educational practice of NYU Shanghai shows that its curriculum design, credit requirements, and study-abroad arrangements are highly consistent with those of NYU's New York campus. The theoretical basis of such a general education model originates from the Western liberal education tradition. John Henry Newman put forward in his classic book *The Idea of a University* that university education should first cultivate a well-developed mind rather than simply train professional specialists; students should receive extensive knowledge education first, subsequently engaging in in-depth study in their specialized fields. Jeffrey Lehman, founding Vice Chancellor of NYU Shanghai (who previously served as President of Cornell University), repeatedly quoted Newman's related ideas

when designing NYU Shanghai's general education system. Therefore, Newman's thought constitutes an important theoretical source of NYU Shanghai's general education structure ^[2].

The tradition of British higher education is significantly different from the American model. More specifically, undergraduate education in Britain usually adopts a three-year undergraduate system, with students being required to declare their major upon enrollment. Meanwhile, British undergraduate courses mainly focus on in-depth study in specialized fields. This does not mean, however, that British higher education does not attach importance to general education. In this regard, Britain usually integrates the concept of general education into specialized courses, rather than setting up a separate general education curriculum module. The collegiate system implemented by Oxford University and Cambridge University, for instance, has realized the integration of students' social circle and academic circle, in which students have achieved holistic development.

Likewise, the implicit characteristics of British-style general education are embedded in the overall institutional logic of British higher education. Being an extended campus of the University of Nottingham, UNNC needs to maintain a high degree of consistency with the University of Nottingham's main campus in the curriculum framework. The traditional undergraduate education in England adopts the specialization-based education model. Under this model, students are typically required to declare their major direction before enrollment. Accordingly, the cultivation of general literacy is integrated into professional teaching activities, rather than being implemented through an independent general curriculum system ^[3]. UNNC follows the academic system of the University of Nottingham's main campus, especially the institutional arrangement featuring specialization from enrollment.

Despite the common historical origin, British and American general education has formed different evolutionary pathways. By investigating the origins and divergence of liberal education in Britain and America from a historical perspective, Shen (2016) ^[4] proposed that the traditional liberal education in Britain is rooted in the aristocratic and gentlemanly culture, with the "liberal" being mainly reflected in the self-cultivation of the elite. The traditional curriculum system in Britain only keeps a few core subjects and relies on the residential college and tutorial system to realize the implicit edification of students, without setting up an independent general education curriculum system. By contrast, after independence, the United States reflected on the limitations of British education and developed the general education curriculum into a liberal education for all citizens, with "liberal" being interpreted as spiritual liberty. On this basis, the United States has formed a curriculum system covering natural science, humanities, and other fields, while gradually establishing a four-year undergraduate education and a hierarchical cultivation structure characterized by "general education first, followed by specialized education" ^[4].

Both educational paradigms exert different influences on students. Yin (2017) ^[5] further pointed out that Britain mainly relies on the dual-degree programme and the tutorial system of Oxford University and Cambridge University to achieve interdisciplinary cultivation, whereas the United States mainly expands students' knowledge boundaries through the university-wide compulsory general education courses. This native paradigm difference is further reflected in the top-level design of NYU Shanghai and UNNC's curriculum system. More precisely, NYU Shanghai implements general education in the first two years of undergraduate study, providing students with sufficient academic exploration space. Students can determine their field of specialization after their sophomore year. Such a design is helpful for students to discover realistic academic interests. In contrast, UNNC students are guided into the specialized education track after their enrollment, thereby conducting in-depth study in the specialized field.

3. Comparison of General Education Curriculum Practices and Organizational Models at the Two Universities

3.1 Institutionalized Liberal Education at NYU Shanghai

NYU Shanghai was founded by East China Normal University and NYU, with its educational orientation being to build a global comprehensive international university. In terms of undergraduate education, this university completely continues the liberal education tradition of NYU, while forming the underlying logic with the characteristics of global liberal education, students' enrollment without declaring a major, and general education first.

Regarding the curriculum concept and structure, NYU Shanghai implements the training mode of students' enrollment without declaring a major. During the first two years after enrollment, students concentrate on the general education core curriculum, subsequently conducting specialized study in the second two years. This institutional arrangement is highly consistent with the general education model of NYU. Overall, NYU Shanghai's general education core curriculum is mainly composed of six sections, including social and cultural foundation, writing, mathematics, science, algorithmic thinking, and language. The aforementioned curriculum system aims to enable students to systematically come into contact with the core knowledge of human civilization, understand the main contents and development trends of diverse disciplines, thereby laying a solid foundation for students to finally declare their field of specialization^[6].

One of the most representative courses is the Global Perspectives on Society (GPS)^[7]. This course, as a compulsory course for all freshmen, adopts the teaching mode of combining large-class lectures with small-group discussions. The reading materials of the course span China and the West and run through ancient and modern times, covering the works of a series of influential thinkers in the East and West, including Lu Xun, Plato, and Marx. The purpose of the GPS course is to integrate the ideas of Western liberal education into the educational context of China, while incorporating the cultural elements of China to realize curriculum localization.

On the other hand, the content of NYU Shanghai's general education curriculum shows distinct characteristics. The university takes small-class teaching as the main teaching form. Moreover, students need to study abroad for at least one semester. The foregoing institutional arrangement expands the learning space of general education to a global scale, which fully embodies the emphasis of American-style education on cross-cultural experiences.

3.2 Embedded Integration Model of General Education at UNNC

UNNC, jointly established by Zhejiang Wanli University and the University of Nottingham, has adopted the British honours degree system, with its education orientation being that of a British-style specialized and academically oriented university. The overall talent cultivation of this university takes specialized study as the core. With regard to general education, UNNC has neither formulated an independent top-level system design nor set up a university-wide and centralized general education phase at the outset of undergraduate study.

As a whole, UNNC's education system follows the British higher education model. At the time of enrollment, students are required to declare their major direction. Undergraduate education usually adopts a three-year system, while certain majors adopt a four-year system. Thus, its curriculum is highly focused on specialized fields. Nevertheless, as an institution of higher education operating in China, UNNC still needs to meet the basic requirements of undergraduate education in China, especially the setting of a general education curriculum.

Instead of setting up an independent general education curriculum like NYU Shanghai, UNNC integrates general education into specialized courses in an implicit manner. Among them, the

curriculum design of Chinese Culture serves as the most typical case. Founded in early 2015, this curriculum consists of four subjects: Introduction to Chinese Thought and Culture, Modern and Contemporary Chinese History, Chinese Legal Studies, and Ideological and Moral Development of University Students. Simultaneously, it offers research-oriented lecture series on Chinese culture courses for domestic undergraduates in China^[8]. The aforementioned research-oriented lecture series, as one of the three implementation pathways of Chinese culture courses, is mutually referenced and supplemented with theoretical courses. Based on a Chinese perspective as well as a pluralistic and mutually comparative perspective, this curriculum is taught in the form of thematic lectures through qualified external faculty. Students may participate independently according to their personal interests. Furthermore, taking culture, China, and Chinese culture as the scope of investigation, and promoting and transmitting Chinese culture as the mission, the research-oriented lecture series implements relevant teaching from the perspective of comparative study. Based on this, this curriculum explores the humanities and social issues that modern youth are concerned about from diverse perspectives. Through the form of thematic lectures, this curriculum is mainly taught in Chinese, supplemented by appropriate English teaching. Moreover, this curriculum systematically studies and discusses related academic and practical issues, aiming at cultivating intellectual youth with sound moral cultivation, aesthetic cultivation, and the ability to reflect on and investigate life and the world.

3.3 Differences in General Education Organization, Teaching, and Localization Strategies between the Two Universities

Regarding the organization of general education, NYU Shanghai realizes the institutionalization and modularization of general education, which has been regarded as the core teaching content of the first two years of the undergraduate curriculum. By contrast, UNNC adopts the implementation mode of implicit integration, without setting up an independent general education system. Rather, it integrates the educational concept of general education into specialized courses and extracurricular activities. The different models of the two universities intuitively reflect the traditional divergence between American-style explicit general education and British-style implicit general education^[9].

In terms of curriculum content, NYU Shanghai's general education focuses on building an integrated knowledge system of human civilization, providing students with diverse cross-cultural ideological resources with GPS courses as the main carrier. Similarly, UNNC's Chinese culture curriculum puts more emphasis on cultivating students' identity with local culture.

With regard to teaching methods, NYU Shanghai takes small-class discussion and inquiry-based writing as the core teaching methods, emphasizing students' classroom participation and critical thinking training. By contrast, UNNC mainly adopts the teaching method of combining thematic lectures with extracurricular club activities, continuing the traditional British model featuring lectures and independent research.

In the course of curriculum implementation, both universities are facing the adaptive tension between the imported educational paradigms and the Chinese local culture. Nevertheless, they adopt different localization pathways. Specifically, NYU Shanghai sets the Chinese culture curriculum as an independent general education credit section, incorporating it into the general education system in an institutionalized way. On the other hand, UNNC relies on a comprehensive Chinese culture curriculum to implement local educational requirements, while integrating excellent Chinese cultural content into students' extracurricular study and practice activities by virtue of club activities.

4. Conclusions

This paper takes NYU Shanghai and UNNC as cases to clarify the structural differences of Sino-foreign cooperative universities in general education under the American and British educational

paradigms. The research results reveal that NYU Shanghai adopts an explicit, modularized, and independent general education training mode, adhering to the American-style liberal education tradition characterized by general education first, followed by specialized education. In contrast, UNNC employs an implicit integration mode to integrate the concept of general education into professional teaching and campus activities, continuing the British-style specialized education pathway featuring specialization from enrollment.

In terms of localization adaptation, the two universities demonstrate significant differences. NYU Shanghai incorporates Chinese culture curriculum into the fixed general education section, realizing the institutional integration of global education paradigm and local education demand. UNNC, under the British-style specialized education framework, sets up a Chinese culture curriculum separately and implements campus club activities, thereby balancing the cultivation objectives of local talents. Simply put, both universities are facing the internal tension between global educational paradigms and Chinese local educational requirements.

For local universities in China, the general education practices of NYU Shanghai and UNNC are of crucial reference value. These two general education models are not absolutely superior or inferior, but only suitable for different educational resources, institutional environment, and talent cultivation orientation. Consequently, local universities in China should make reasonable choices and adjustments based on their educational conditions and talent cultivation objectives when learning from American-style and British-style general education implementation experiences.

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