CHAPTER 2

Studies on Higher Education: A Multidisciplinary Perspective

When I was a visiting professor at a university in Guangdong Province in 1994, friends in the education field in Guangdong asked me to compile a new edition of the Higher Education, which was a good idea. My first edition of the Higher Education was published in 1984. From outline organizing, compiling, revising, mimeographing, and trial publishing, to being finalized, the whole process took six years. A lot of material that was collected twenty years ago was outdated. Some views also needed to be improved and perfected. To tell the truth, until the 1980s, my personal knowledge of higher education was also limited. Over the past twenty years, my knowledge has grown, and my thoughts have developed in the process of teaching and scientific research. Therefore, I accepted the task gladly and set out to organize people to modify the original book. In 1996, Beijing Normal University Press published the New Edition of Higher Education, which developed some views, changed a lot of material, deleted some chapters whose contents had become branch subjects and had their own published monographs, added some sections about the fields that were lacking of studies, and made some adjustment to the overall framework. However, the new framework was still based on the original one. It was still a book of the knowledge system (the experience system, or the work system), rather than constructing a theoretical system.¹

In order to construct the theoretical system of higher education, the National Higher Education Research Association held three consecutive annual meetings to discuss the issues on disciplines [in the] construction of higher education since its initial state. Although some progress was made, there was no result, because the parameters were not fully developed. I felt confused and overwhelmed.

---

¹ A discipline of the social science may have three related but different systems: the theory system, the knowledge system (the experience system, or the work system), and the curriculum system (the teaching material system). Each system has its own value.
Because the scientific system of a discipline refers to the concepts of the discipline and the judgments which link the concepts, form a distinct, rigorously structured logic system, through reasoning and demonstrating. The theory system of the education discipline should reveal a series of scientific concepts and laws of education science, and form a scientific theory system with rigorous logic. And the theory system should fully reflect the inherent logic of education itself.2

As a result, constructing the theory system of a discipline requires more than just imagination.

First of all, it needs a solid foundation of practical experience. Although a theory system is a kind of highly abstracted generalization, which seems to be far from the reality, it is ultimately based on a solid foundation of practical experience. Secondly, it needs a series of theories as preparatory work. And these theories should be connected to the inner essence of higher education in some aspect, rather than just generic language. Its scientific base must pass the tests of practice and time. Thirdly, the scientific methodology should be used to synthesize existing abstract theories and form a rigorous scientific system that can fully reflect the inherent logic of the discipline. If these conditions are not met, the construction of the disciplinary theory system won’t be successful. Even though it looks good, it’s like a building on sand. It’s better to go home and make a net than long for a fish in front of a pond. In order to construct the disciplinary theory system of higher education, we should carry out a series of planned research projects linking theory with practice on the basis of our study in real problems (applied research) and lay the groundwork for the theory and methodology, while approaching the goal of discipline construction step by step. This is our motive in compiling this book, A Study on Higher Education of the Multidisciplinary Perspective.

In recent years, we have perceived more deeply through our applied research of higher education that higher education is an open system with a complex multilayer structure. It requires an influx of more information, as compared with other education systems that share the same environment.

On the one hand, the basic function of higher education is to cultivate specialized talents for various fields of society. It must keep exchanging constantly changing information with other systems, such as economy, politics, culture, science, and so on. It is conditioned by related social systems, while providing service for them in order to get the social support, enhance its vitality, play its

---