CHAPTER 20

Running Higher Education Institutions Should Avoid Homogenization

The problem of homogenization has appeared among higher education institutions in recent years. It turned up first in higher vocational education and ordinary higher education. Many higher vocational colleges want to upgrade into universities. If they become universities, they would want to start masters and, then, doctoral programs. Eventually, they would all wish themselves to be famous research universities. As a result, everyone would be the same, and all universities would be the same.

Due to the university enrollment expansion and mergers of universities, many college and universities have been pursuing larger scales and more comprehensive programs settings. As a result, some featured programs in industrial characteristic universities have been “diluted,” which has reflected a more serious problem of homogenization. The geological mining universities used to focus on geological mining, while agriculture and forestry universities focused on agriculture and forestry. They had their own features. But many colleges and universities now, regardless of their names including political science and law or institute of technology, all make efforts in pursuing comprehensive subjects. The program settings are similar as well. Most higher education institutions have programs in English, computer science, finance, and accounting. More than 1,400 higher education institutions in China have programs of fine arts, which take up 60% of national higher education institutions (including vocational colleges). These institutions might focus on some featured subjects, but now, they have become comprehensive and weakened their original advantages.

Homogenization of school operations has also led to homogenization of teaching materials. I visited a local practicality-oriented institution in Anhui Province. The principal complained that the teaching materials for college were similar. Almost all those materials, which were written or compiled by

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the professors from several research universities, were too advanced for local and practicality-oriented colleges. So they organized a group of similar colleges later and compiled some practical teaching materials of their own. Universities of different types should use different types of teaching materials. Practicality-oriented graduates are most needed at present, so one of the currently important issues is to compile practicality-oriented teaching materials.

Many factors have caused homogenization. Problems exist in assessment modes and evaluation criteria. The assessment system has been basically made according to the standard of elite education and research universities. The system has been modified, but it still focuses on academic evaluation. The most important parameters in the assessment system of higher education institutions are the scale, the level, and the amount of degree programs. As the evaluation criteria is simple, the higher education institutions compete on the “scale”, not the “study” actually, which lead them to a way of pursuing a larger and more comprehensive scale blindly. It also involves an issue of administration. Vocational colleges are deputy positions at the departmental level, while colleges and universities are chief position at the departmental level. If the university becomes a member of “Project 985,” it might be at the vice-ministerial level. Not only the officials of the university but also the university itself have elevated their status.

Due to homogenization of higher education, the talents cultivated by higher education institutions do not meet the needs of society. Society needs diversified talents, but higher education institutions only cultivate simplified types of talents. Society also needs scientists and theorists, as well as a lot more engineering and technical talents who can transfer theories into practice, and skilled talents who can convert the blueprints to productions, constructions, management, and service. If practicality-oriented education and vocational education don’t get the necessary attention, the development of social economy will definitely be influenced.

If we want to overcome homogenization and let higher education develop well, there is still a long way to go. We should adhere to the multilevel development. The current 124 universities of “Project 211,” which can be considered academic and research universities, could play a role in the leading group. The other hundreds of colleges and universities, which could become the practicality-oriented type, will play a role in the main workforce and cultivate a great amount of practicality-oriented talents to meet the needs of society. There are still more than 1,000 vocational colleges. They can cultivate skilled talents and play a role in foundational services. Higher education institutions should have the courage to insist on the development of their own features. I appreciate