



Soft Power Study on Higher Education Talent Cultivation Mode of International Trade

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Abstract

Soft power of higher education is a complex and comprehensive index system. And thus the construction of soft power is a systematic project. In the course of soft power build-up, talent cultivation mode is the core underlying other educational programs. Capability outlined in talent cultivation mode can be classified as “hard” or “soft” and colleges and universities tend to focus on “hard” one rather than “soft” one. Through the case study of international trade (abr. int’l trade) undergraduate program, this paper intends to investigate the elements of soft power in terms of talent cultivation mode, pointing out the drawbacks of talent cultivation soft power in the light of awareness, mechanism, methods and facilities and discussing measures to improve soft power.

Key words: Soft power; Talent cultivation mode; Drawbacks; Measures

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INTRODUCTION

With economy worsening both at home and abroad, competition among colleges and universities is becoming intense. The competition shifts its focus from hard power such as lecture buildings, facilities and teaching staff to soft power. In recent years, the problems such as lowered admission requirements, unfilled vacancies and academic department closures have been attributed to the lacking of soft power rather than the shortage of hard power. At present time, soft power is becoming a key factor to the survival and development of colleges and universities. Soft power of higher institutions is a complex and comprehensive index system. And thus the construction of soft power is a systematic project. In the course of soft power build-up, talent cultivation mode is the core underlying other educational programs. Through the case study of international trade undergraduate program, this paper intends to investigate the elements of soft power in terms of talent cultivation mode, pointing out the drawbacks of talent cultivation soft power in the light of awareness, mechanism, methods and facilities and discussing measures to improve soft power. From the perspective of soft power connotation and characteristics of international trade program, the purpose of the thesis is to find out the drawbacks existing in promoting soft power in the light of awareness, mechanism, methods and facilities, discussing measures to promote soft power in the hope that this research will be beneficial to the study and strengthening of higher education soft power.

1. TALENT CULTIVATION MODE — THE CORNERSTONE OF HIGHER EDUCATION SOFT POWER

Over the past years, China has made much progress in higher education soft power research. Based upon the research results in this field, I hold that higher education

soft power is a peculiar culture developed by core values of a college or university. It includes education ideals, educational concept, school principles, academic atmosphere, professional characteristics, rules and regulations, campus culture and spiritual atmosphere. Despite these, talent cultivation is the cornerstone of higher education soft power. Studying the definition and connotation of higher education soft power and the necessity and urgency of soft power construction in a macro- and holistic sense will help raise people's awareness of higher education soft power, encouraging colleges and universities to build up their soft power. In contrast, the detailed and micro-analysis of talent cultivation mode can not only facilitate the construction of soft power, but also have the effect that "once the key link is grasped, everything falls into place".

In knowledge-based economy, higher institutions shoulder the responsibility to produce talents for the sake of technological development, cultural innovation and human advancement. In this sense, colleges and universities are the factories producing talents for society while students are the products of the factories. Whether the factories can produce satisfactory products really hinges on many factors. Nevertheless, the scientific management of designing, manufacturing and processing the products' capabilities and specifications is undoubtedly essential and crucial. Like a factory, colleges have to pay heed to the design of products' capabilities and specifications in order to produce satisfying products, that is to say, the design of talent cultivation mode. At the same time, factories should refine the production process. Likewise, colleges should develop an educational procedure. Factory products reflect the spirit of enterprise and operation philosophy while students embody educational ideals and concept. High-quality products are safe and durable, and talents are adaptable and competent.

2. THE CONNOTATION OF SOFT POWER IN TALENT CULTIVATION MODE

Talent cultivation mode is the blueprint for the specifications, standards and quality of talents colleges are supposed to produce. Capabilities designated in talent cultivation mode can be classified as hard power and soft power (the so-called "hard index" and "soft index"). Hard power refers to apparent indicators that can be quantified, such as school curriculum, assessment standards, attendance, academic credentials and graduation thesis. And soft power means recessive indicators that are hard to quantify but to identify. Hard power concerns whether students can graduate while soft power relates to what contribution students can make and whether they can succeed in society. Although there are shades of difference on how to define soft power, a generally accepted definition includes communication

ability, organization and management ability, teamwork-building ability, critical thinking ability, innovation ability, application ability. And these abilities can be generalized as teamwork-building ability, innovation ability and application ability.

Teamwork ability has been universally considered as the most important quality of employees. In Japan, "the Principle of Spinach" containing "reporting" and "communicating" (these words take on a harmonic tone as *ほうれんそう* in Japanese) has become a common practice in Japanese business culture. The successful aerospace engineering programs in China are a case in point. Without smooth communication and cooperation among team workers, China would not have achieved great success in this industry.

Innovation ability is the driver of social advancement, business development and personal success. Innovation needs people who have capability to innovate. People with an innovative mind are talents and those without are fools. Eleven years ago, back in 2002, Japan Economic New Agency published a book entitled as *College: factory of knowledge*, an investigative report. The book introduced the innovative practice of college transforming itself from Ivory Tower into Knowledge Factory, which caused a sensation at that time. Thus, higher institutions should give priority to cultivating students' innovative mind, producing talents who dare to innovate and know how to innovate.

Application ability refers to the ability to apply concept and thinking mode and planning to practice, namely, the ability to transform knowledge and theory into concrete and physical products. Society needs talents with application ability and whether higher institutions can fulfill their mission depends on whether or not college graduates possess application ability. Currently, it's a common practice that colleges in China lay emphasis on knowledge acquisition rather than knowledge applications; theory rather than practice; classroom lecturing rather than outside-class activities. This affects the cultivation of students' soft power.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF SOFT POWER IN TALENT CULTIVATION MODE OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE

As an applied field of study, international trade degree program is offered in an alarming number of colleges and universities in China. This program is not only provided at economics schools and universities, but also at institutes of technology and foreign language institutes. According to statistics, this program is offered at 387¹ colleges and universities here in China. And in Liaoning Province

¹ Ifeng education (<http://app.edu.ifeng.com/college/major/22>). Data of higher institutions. China college information enquiry system. (In Chinese)

where I'm teaching, the degree program of international trade is offered at 35² universities and colleges. Therefore, studying the features of soft power in talent cultivation mode of international trade is of great importance.

The characteristics of international trade program determine the scope of soft power in cultivation mode, which should include such abilities as international consciousness, cross-cultural communication and adaptability besides team-work building, innovation ability and application ability.

So-called international consciousness refers to comments on, opinion of and attitude toward international society or a particular event or phenomenon. The 21st century sees a smaller world and a global community thanks to the development of communications technology and transportation. In the 20th century, human beings fulfilled many dreams and had many regrets. For example, the problems—frequent skirmishes around the world, environmental degradation, energy depletion, food shortage, population explosion, widening gap between rich and poor, inequality and injustice invoked by superpowers—posed a direct threat to human survival and advancement. Solving those problems is far beyond any individual country's capability and it demands the global efforts. In fact, eradication of these problems relies on each individual's sense of responsibility and foresight. In this sense, international consciousness is the awakening consciousness, the sense of crisis and advanced consciousness. It is global consciousness that transcends national boundaries, nations, society and cultural barriers, and in which issues are pondered from the perspective of the world peace and the future of human beings.

Cross-cultural communication ability mainly refers to language acquisition ability and cross-cultural understanding ability. Based upon the status quo of international trade program at Chinese universities, cross-cultural communication ability can be divided as followings: solid knowledge of Chinese culture; proficient language skills; international consciousness (the world citizenship); multicultural knowledge (of many nations); tolerance of foreign languages; scientific attitude toward different cultures; adaptability to different cultures and the skill to deal with them. The 21st century is a global age of cross-cultural communications. The world will become a global village with people of different colors or languages, or from different countries or cultural backgrounds living together and working together. International trade students should also equip themselves with cross-cultural communication ability, that is to say, from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, they are supposed to

place the mutual understanding between nations, cultures and races in an important position. They should bear it in mind that there is no difference between high culture and low culture and each nation has its own unique culture. With cultural relativity theory, they should engage in cross-cultural communication and nurture their ability to live with different cultures and different nations.

College graduates including those with international trade degree take responsibility to accomplish the tasks of state and local economic construction. Therefore, they must have a strong sense of service and adaptability. Sense of service means learning job specifications and requirements based on their professional knowledge. International trade graduates mainly work in the field of local economy and regional economy. So they should have a strong sense of duty. In terms of target customers, the adaptability of the graduates can be classified as:

(1) Adaptability to regional economic environment. Regional economy, the organization of local economy, takes on different forms in ownership, classification of industries, industrial scale and management and operation mode. Thus, the graduates must possess the ability to work in regional economic environment.

(2) Adaptability to front-line working environment. Most of graduates work on front-line, performing specific jobs. At work they usually come across the problems they are not able to solve merely with the knowledge they have acquired at school, which requires their flexibility in dealing with the problems on their own.

(3) Multi-Tasking ability. Private business and small business have a flexible and lean organizational structure with an emphasis on efficiency, which demands staffs who are both equipped with varied knowledge structure and capable of performing many tasks. Therefore, graduates should not only learn professional knowledge, foreign languages and computer knowledge, but also improve their comprehensive ability and ability to coordinate.

4. THE LACKING OF SOFT POWER IMPROVEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE TALENT CULTIVATION

At present, the major problems with soft power talent cultivation of international trade are incorrect positioning, innovation deficiency and ineffective measures. All these are reflected in forms of practical teaching link that has become a mere formality, the disconnect between research and teaching, ineffective administration mechanism with emphasis on formality rather than effects. This results in low job attainment of graduates on this degree program.

4.1 The Disconnect Between Positioning Talent Cultivation Mode and Market Demand

With the rapid development of China's foreign trade at WTO era, profit-driven and eager to upgrade themselves,

² The Liaoning province ordinary higher education network (http://www.upln.cn/html/2013/Column_0103_0206/1794.html). Notice of Liaoning Province education department publishing the outcomes of overall assessment of computer science and technology at Liaoning ordinary universities. (In Chinese)

many universities in China initiated international trade degree program. However, the change in social demand caused by the changed situation of foreign trade and the shift of exporters from big enterprises to small businesses, and ignorance of feedback on graduates but emphasis on the build-up of hard power instead of soft power, all these have a long-term impact on soft power of international trade program and the future development of higher institutions. The result is that the more students are recruited, the more pressure is exerted on job attainment and the lower the unemployment rate among graduates.

According to a research report on the employment rate of Chinese university graduates issued by Mycos Institute, during the period of 2009 and 2011, the graduates who majored in international trade faced a much higher unemployment rate and had much lower average salary. And the degree program was graded as “red status”. Again in 2012 they faced the same fate, except for “yellow status”³. Of course, there was a special reason for this outcome. Besides this, graduates with major in international trade proved to be in “buyer’s market”. For the first time in 2012, Liaoning education department conducted a comprehensive assessment of five undergraduate programs (including computer science & technology, international trade, English, marketing and accounting) that most universities and colleges in Liaoning province offer. International trade program was on the list, which showed the rapid increase in student enrollment. Of 170 universities and colleges surveyed, 35 higher institutions offer undergraduate program of international trade, which not only include “211”, “985” universities, but also consist of ordinary universities and independent colleges. The assessment outcome is that comprehensive universities have a strong and excellent international trade program and some independent colleges offer a much better international trade program than ordinary universities do.

In face of the severe situation, higher institutions should conduct self-assessment and find faults with their international trade program. By improving their soft power and adapting to the ever-changing situation, higher institutions should reform their talent cultivation mode and develop their professional characteristics. To cope with the changes in our export commodity structure, major items of exports, mode of export and market conditions, colleges and universities should make timely adjustment to their talent cultivation mode, stressing the improvement on practical application ability and innovation ability and tightening monitoring control over teaching quality so as to increase soft power and thus boost employment rate.

4.2 The Disconnect Between Theoretical Teaching and Practical Teaching Training and Society’s Monitoring

Excellent degree programs depend on nurturing soft power and lie in the social reputation of the programs. Graduates majoring in international trade should be application-oriented talents, who can apply theory to practice. If “learning” can be done in classroom teaching and theoretical lecturing, then “application” will be done in practical teaching training and society’s monitoring. Yet, the problems — the disconnect between theory and practical applications and the disconnect between school teaching and society’s demand — are common in this degree program administration. As colleges usually emphasize classroom teaching, especially theoretical lecturing, lecture notes and tests center on knowledge of theory. There are no strict stipulations and oversight over practical application link (Zhang, 2010). Moreover, as it is difficult to implement practical teaching and society’s monitoring link, colleges and departments concerned just document them in paper and do nothing further about them. The result is that the graduates fail to match the job criteria for application-oriented talents. They usually become that kind of person who reaches for what is beyond his grasp and has grandiose aims but puny abilities.

In order to increase the enrollment and prevent program closures, some colleges lie about and even overrate their graduates’ job attainment. This malpractice is directly related to the lacking of society’s monitoring in higher education administration, human spirit and school operation concept, and the lacking of higher education soft power.

4.3 The Deviation of Research From Teaching

Teaching is the basic function of higher education. It is an undisputable proposition, but now it becomes a question yet to be answered. The actual situation of most colleges and universities is that on the lever of research and teaching, the end of research is tipped over teaching. No doubt, school operation concept runs counter to the basic task of higher education.

Teaching and academic research are supposed to complement and facilitate each other. Higher academic research level serves to promote teaching quality, which can improve the soft power of higher institutions. However, it’s a common practice that some colleges and universities emphasize academic research in an excessive and impractical way. For instance, academic research carries far greater weight than teaching excellence when it comes to tenure track or annual teacher evaluation. Incentives are assigned to academic research and no bonuses granted on grounds of teaching excellence. This practice demotivates teachers with teaching having been downplayed. As a result of this, teachers try every means to find connections to get funds and fabricate papers

³ MyCOS Institute. 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, Chinese college graduates’ employment annual report. Social Sciences Academic Press (In Chinese).

by piecing them together with a view to gain both fame and money, their energy not concentrated on teaching. It stands to reason that the school operation concept of outweighing academic research over teaching will result in the failures of college students who have a strong desire for knowledge and are full of dreams for a bright future. Due to this school operation concept, college students are neglected and ignored at the critical phase of their life where they are in a position to learn the concept of continued education for life. If this misconception persists and the vicious cycle continues, it is sure to lead to the lacking of college soft power, ultimately the failure of higher education.

4.4 The Deviation of Monitoring Formality From Its Effect

Teaching quality administration is a process involving: drafting rules and regulations; executing rules and regulations; finding out problems arising from the execution; solving the problems incurred. Each phase of the process, if missed, will affect administration quality and effect. When drafting rules and regulations, some colleges and universities adopt a top-down management style. Usually it is leaders and administrators who make the rules without any consultations from teaching staffs. The resulting rules and regulations are subjective, some failing to reflect teaching practice in reality, and difficult to execute and some even leading to confrontations between administrators and teachers. Moreover, those rules and regulations lack humanistic consideration as mentioned above. They contain too much of supervision but less stimulation, which hurts the morale of teachers and fails to improve teaching quality administration.

Many colleges are conducting on-line teacher evaluation by students. The practice goes like this: administration office gathers the survey results and sends them to teachers in secret. Teachers know their results and ranking without learning about others. And the ranking has nothing to do with their bonuses, their tenure track, rewards and promotion. As a result of this, both high ranking teachers and low ranking teachers are not highly motivated. If this practice continues, teacher evaluation is sure to lead to adverse effects.

5. MEASURES OF SOFT POWER TALENT CULTIVATION OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE

5.1 Fundamental Principles

Cultivating soft power talents is of utter importance in the soft power build-up of higher institutions. This should be treated with analytical mentality. In designing concrete measures of soft power cultivation, observed are the fundamental principles of “juxtaposition of macro and micro-aspects”, “focus on both hard and soft powers”, “timely adjustment

of static and dynamic perspectives” and “combination of classroom teaching and out-of-school activities.”

“Juxtaposition of macro and micro-aspects” means that soft power cultivation should not only focus on macro factors such as outlook, values and morality, but also specific and micro capabilities. In this way, macro aspects of soft power cultivation can be found in those capabilities.

“Focus on both hard and soft power” refers to the tendency of overrating “hard index” over “soft ones”. Modern competition is the competition for talents and the competitiveness of talents is their overall ability. Overall ability is composed of “hard” and “soft” parts of it. Hard power takes the form of knowledge, expertise and qualifications while soft power is the applications, innovation and development of hard power. In cultivating students capabilities, colleges and universities should focus on both hard and soft power, or put it in another way, the improvement of soft power.

“Timely adjustment of static and dynamic perspective” refers to the angle higher education institutions should take in talent cultivation mode. In talent cultivation mode, there are many rules and norms that have been formulated over time and thus become long-established. Thus, “timely adjustment of static and dynamic perspective” means that those rules and norms should be examined in the light of development and change, and appropriate adjustments should be made to meet the needs of economic development, society and consumers. Talent cultivation mode is kept in a dynamic state.

“Combination of classroom teaching and out-of-school activities” means that the design of talent cultivation mode, cultivation measures taken and assessment of cultivation effects all should take classroom teaching and out-of-school activities into account with preference given to outside school activities.

5.2 Concrete Measures

5.2.1 Innovative Cultivation Mode: Keeping Up With Times

As higher education teaching serves society, teaching quality of colleges and universities depends on the recognition of society. Soft power of university degree programs, to a greater extent, determines students’ competitiveness at job market. Therefore, higher institutions should stress their social functions to keep pace with times by means of accurate positioning of cultivation mode and adaptability of cultivation program to society.

The aim and guidelines of talent cultivation in international trade degree program should be in accordance with the ever-changing situation of foreign trade and the development of tertiary industry. And the adjustment of cultivation program should serve the aim. Over the past years, foreign trade body has been private business. Some are medium-sized or small-sized entities while some only engage in online trade consultations

and service. As a result, these changes should be taken into consideration when it comes to cultivating talents on international trade program. College students on this program should be equipped with intimate knowledge of foreign trade and proficient at a foreign language and communication skills. Guidelines for talent cultivation should be modified. And talent cultivation should focus on applications of international trade practice and put emphasis on cross-cultural communication skill, developing a long term vision and strategic awareness. By way of reform, innovation, devotion, perseverance, wisdom and courage, the situation can be changed that this degree program is in “red status” and “yellow status” as far as employment rate is concerned. Graduates on this program will be in “seller’s market” rather than “buyer’s market.” The students with high grades and potential can have more chance of attaining a job.

Market competition is fierce, so is the competition for talents. Only through improving soft power of international trade program and developing profession brands, will international trade degree program continue and fulfill its social function.

5.2.2 Stressing Practical Applications and Culturing Innovation Awareness: Breaking Down the Bottleneck

In the teaching process, there is a weak link in practical applications, which becomes a bottleneck hindering innovation. Students generally absorb knowledge in a passive way, failing to develop the ability to organize, apply and innovate on knowledge. So, college educators and administrators should realize that practical applications are indispensable to the teaching link. Without it, teaching process is incomplete and innovative talent cultivation impossible. Better teaching quality cannot be guaranteed. Compared with theoretical teaching, practical applications are of equal importance or of greater importance. In view of Marx’s Epistemology, theory must be tested in practice and theory which has not been tested in practice cannot be said to be useful.

Classroom teaching is the basic function of college education and should be a major part of teaching quality administration. Despite of this, classroom teaching is not the only one function of university teaching. Not only the quality of classroom teaching should be assessed and monitored, but also job specifications and evaluation criteria (Chen & Xie, 2004) should be made in terms of lesson preparation, lab experiment and practical application link. In this way, the overall evaluation of teachers’ teaching excellence and teaching effects can be conducted.

Culturing students’ innovative mind relies on the investment from the school and the reform and innovative teaching mode and method on the part of teachers. Whether products are of good quality or poor quality, genuine ones or fakes depends on schools and teachers who churn out the products. To prevent graduates from being rejected at job market or demand for graduates

from declining, university administrators and teachers must have a sense of responsibility and mission and keep reflecting on the reasons for the unpleasant outcomes and take appropriate measures to tackle them.

5.2.3 Restoring the Prominent Position of Teaching: Readdressing Operation Concept

Teaching and academic research are the twin engines of college development. With either of them lacking, colleges cannot survive. No matter teaching-based colleges or research-based universities, teaching is the locus of higher education. Academic research is supposed to facilitate teaching. In *the Outline of Liaoning Province Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, teaching is laid down as the primary index of teacher evaluation. In current situation, teaching has become essential to survival and development of a college. Everything should revolve around teaching. And teaching should be restored to the prominent position.

Readdressing school operation concept should be put into action and reflected in measures taken in reality. Colleges and universities should underline the policy direction, changing the status quo of overrating research over teaching. Emphasis should be put on teaching and teaching quality. At meanwhile, incentives relevant to teaching quality should be proposed, linking teaching quality with rewards, tenure tracks and promotion. Mechanisms such as “the first in, the last out” should be adopted to make teachers responsible for the results of teacher evaluation so that fair competition is promoted.

What’s noteworthy is that the same incentive plans should be made with regard to teaching quality and academic research. Only when teaching becomes a focal point of school policy and administration system, can teachers divert their attentions to teaching. Teachers will study new teaching methods and innovate on teaching model so as to improve educational quality. Teachers’ motivation and initiative will eventually benefit their students, which can evoke a harmonious campus atmosphere. In turn, soft power of colleges will be improved and strengthened.

5.2.4 Evoking Quality Culture Atmosphere: Guaranteed by System

According to *Notice: Setting up Experimental Base for National Education System Reform*, issued by the Ministry of Education in December 2011, colleges and universities must establish teaching quality concept, refine teaching quality assessment criteria, promote quality culture atmosphere. Most of the important, teachers should raise quality teaching awareness and realize that quality is the key to survival and development of higher education. Quality is central to their teaching activities and every teacher is supposed to concern about their teaching quality and to boost their teaching quality.

Promoting quality culture atmosphere lies in a reliable and feasible system. All the school rules and regulations

should be made with a view to improve soft power and teaching quality. In the course of making those rules and regulations, the implementer, the subjects, the scope and the effects, both good and bad, should be considered in a thorough and dialectical way. The equal weight should be given to teachers and students, teaching and research, school work and after-school activities, monitoring and incentives, and administration and service, etc.

The binding function of school rules and regulations refers to the restrictions imposed on the behavior of teachers and students. Incentives inspire both teachers and students in an emotional and spiritual way. Any rules and regulations should be made in consideration of human factors. Teachers and students are the primary elements of school existence, the valuable assets of a school. Any rules and regulations should be made in favor of initiative and creativity on the part of teachers and students. If teachers have initiative, their enthusiasm for teaching can be aroused and they can be devoted to teaching and educating students. If students can give full play to their creativity and talent, they will progress and develop in an all-round way and improve the quality as a person.

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