

Construction of New Liberal Arts: Challenges, Foundations, and Paths to Achievement

HAN Awei^{[a],*}; ZHANG Yongfu^[b]

^[a] Assistant Researcher, Policy Research Office, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China.

^[b] Lecturer, Policy Research Office, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

The core essence of new liberal arts lies in closely following the pace of the new technological revolution and industrial transformation, promoting the deep integration and innovative development of the liberal arts field, demonstrating its distinctive characteristics of the times, and emphasizing both Chinese characteristics and an international perspective, with the ultimate goal of achieving human modernization. This study primarily reviews the current development of new liberal arts at home and abroad, analyzes the challenges and reasons for the development of liberal arts in China, proposes the value foundations for the development of new liberal arts based on the national conditions of China, explores the construction of a local path for the development of new liberal arts, and attempts to put forward several strategic suggestions.

Key words: New liberal arts; Challenges; Foundations; Paths to achievement

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1. RESEARCH STATUS OF NEW LIBERAL ARTS

As of December 1, 2023, a search conducted on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) platform using the title "New Liberal Arts" (New Liberal Arts) yielded a total of 4,108 Chinese-language documents and 156 foreign-language documents. Subsequently, the literature was analyzed using CNKI's bibliometric visualization tool, with the following results.

1.1 Analysis of Domestic New Liberal Arts Construction Paths

Based on the CNKI search results, there are a total of 4,108 relevant documents in the field of "New Liberal Arts." Among them, there are 3,479 academic journal papers and 24 theses. These figures indicate that "New Liberal Arts" has become a current research hotspot.

According to the data shown in Figure 1, before 2018, there were relatively few academic papers by Chinese scholars on "New Liberal Arts." For instance, in 1996, Xiao Taitao, a teacher at Nanjing Transport Higher Vocational School, published an academic paper titled "The Educational Significance of the 'New Liberal Arts' Group" in the "Jiangsu Higher Education" magazine. However, the connotation of "New Liberal Arts" in this article differs from that mentioned after 2018. From 2018 to the present, Chinese scholars have published 3,462

academic papers on “New Liberal Arts,” accounting for 84.2% of the total volume, marking 2018 as the formal

starting year for the construction of new liberal arts in China.

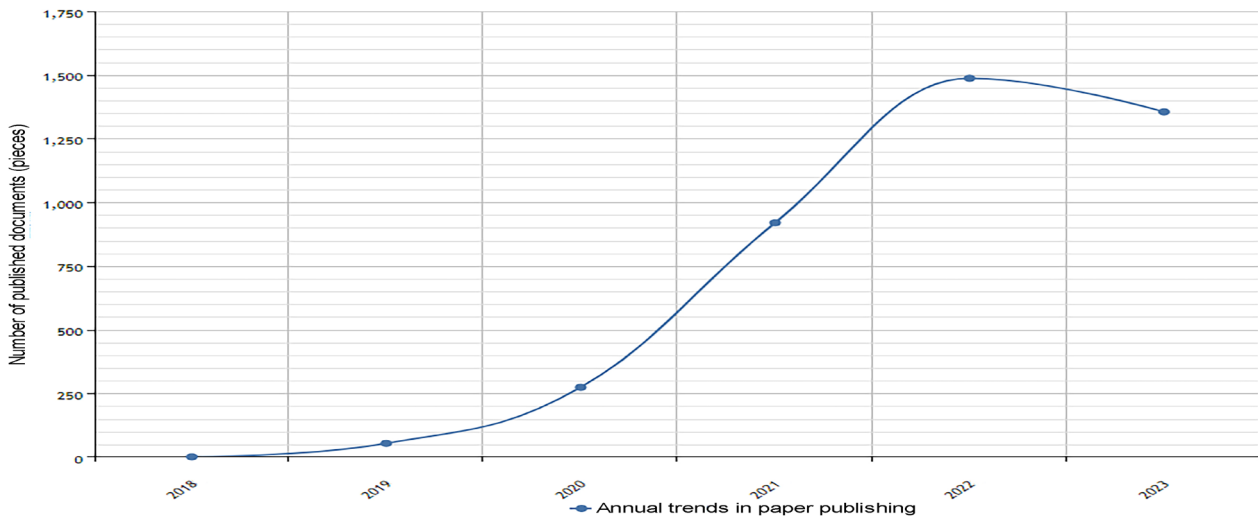


Figure 1
Distribution of Publication Time of Domestic New Liberal Arts Related Literature

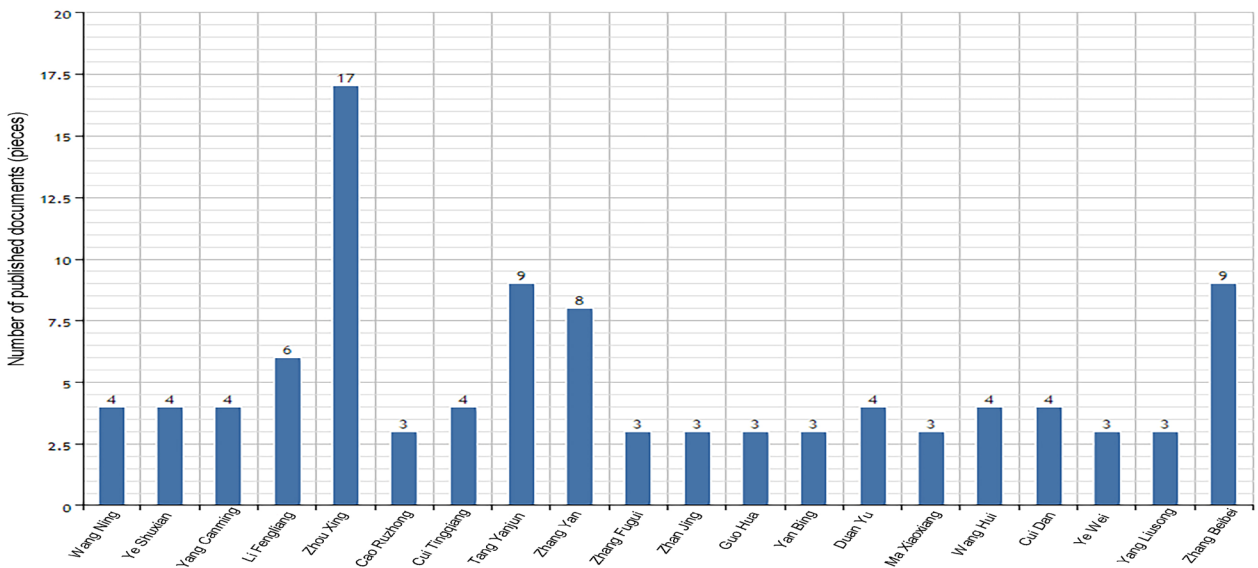


Figure 2
Top 20 Chinese Scholars in Terms of Publications on “New Liberal Arts”

As shown in Figure 2, scholars such as Zhou Xing, Tang Yanjun, Zhang Beibei, Zhang Yan, and Fan Liming have a high output in the field of new liberal arts research. Zhou Xing, in particular, has the highest number of publications, reaching 17 papers. Overall, the publication volume of each scholar is relatively low, with most scholars contributing only 1 to 2 papers. This, to some extent, reflects that “New Liberal Arts” as an emerging concept has not yet gained sufficient recognition.

From Figure 3, it can be observed that Beijing Normal University, Shandong University, Renmin University of China, Nanjing University, and Jilin University occupy

the top five positions in terms of publication output. As of December 1, 2023, they have published 53, 50, 37, 34, and 27 papers, respectively. The status of “New Liberal Arts” as a research hotspot in the current education field has prompted these institutions to actively engage in related research and publish results. Therefore, universities with strong comprehensive strength in liberal arts (such as Shandong University, Renmin University of China, and Nanjing University) and normal universities (Beijing Normal University) show a high level of interest. Overall, the majority of universities have published only a small number of papers on new liberal arts, with a low average (Yang, 2022).

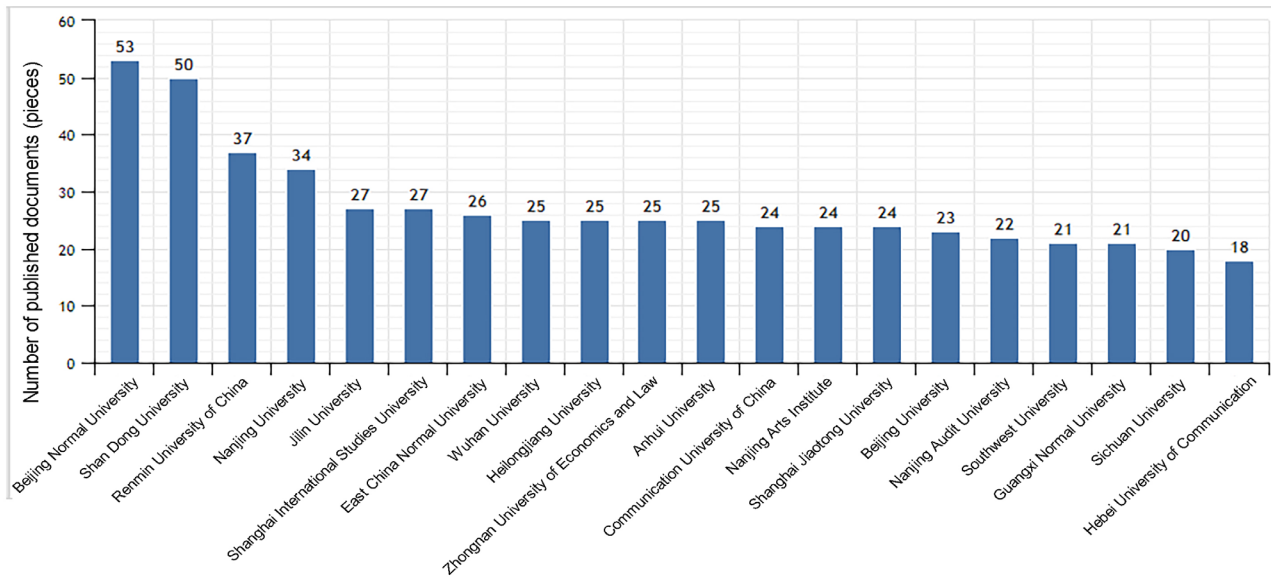


Figure 3
Institutional Distribution of Domestic New Liberal Arts Related Literature

1.2 ANALYSIS OF PATHS FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF NEW LIBERAL ARTS

As of December 1, 2023, a total of 156 foreign-language documents related to “New Liberal Arts” were retrieved

from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Among them, 124 are from academic journals, and 30 are from academic conferences. There are 68 articles in English and 82 in other languages, including 4 in Japanese and 2 in Korean, indicating significant international development in the research on new liberal arts.

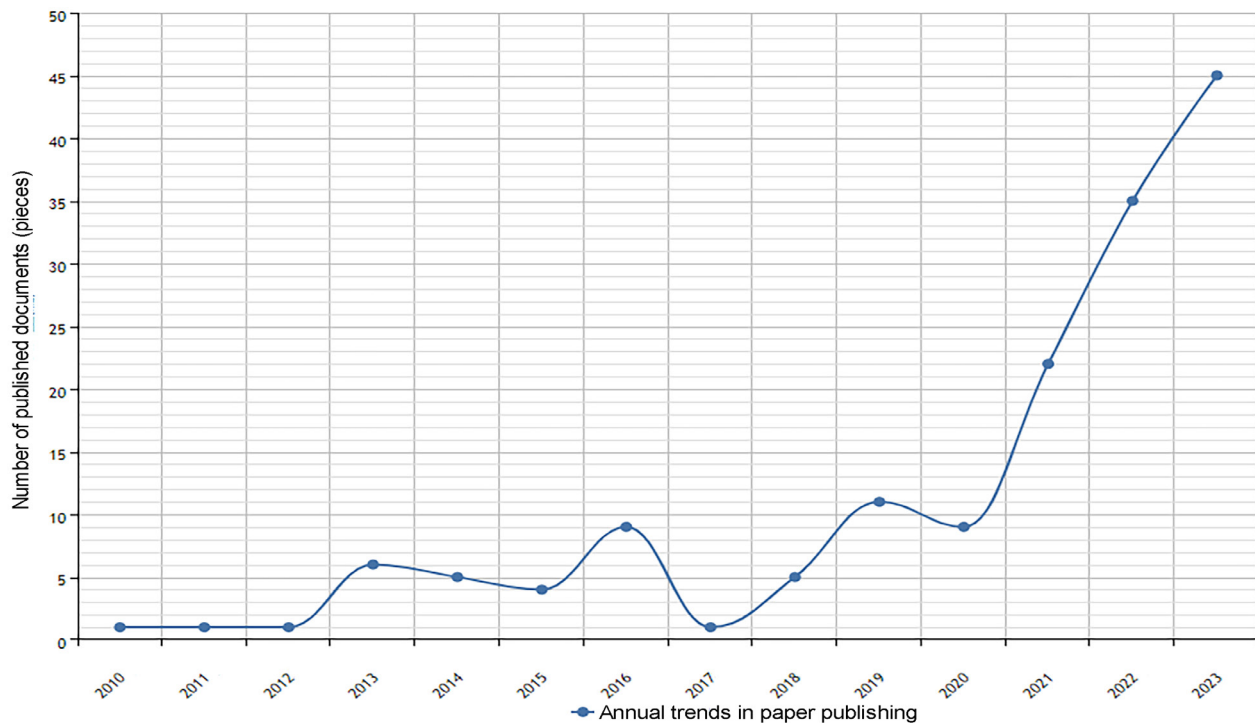


Figure 4
Distribution of Publication Time of Foreign “New Liberal Arts” Related Literature

The research on “New Liberal Arts” abroad has shown a “wave-like” upward trend in publication volume since 2012, reaching 45 papers in the annual output for 2023. From 2012 to 2020, the publication volume advanced in a “wave-like” manner but was not significant. However, from 2018 to 2022, influenced by China’s advocacy of new liberal arts, there was a significant increase in the publication volume, growing from 5 papers in 2018 to 45 papers in 2023. The attention to new liberal arts reached a new high but is still relatively weak. After 2018, a total of 127 foreign-language articles on new liberal arts were published, with Chinese authors contributing 69 articles (Zhang, et al, 2021).

2. CHALLENGES FACING THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW LIBERAL ARTS

2.1 Inadequate Adaptation of the Discipline Classification System to the Demands of Era Development

The current discipline classification system in China plays a crucial role in promoting knowledge production and academic innovation. However, with rapid economic and social development, disciplinary boundaries have become blurred, and the rigidity of existing disciplinary evaluation standards limits the diversity and innovative development of disciplines. Some scholars have pointed out that “the increasing specialization has led to prominent problems in disciplinary classification, especially hindering the development of disciplines in the fields of humanities and social sciences” (Yuan, Liu, & Ye, 2009). The existing discipline classification system is no longer able to meet the requirements of new liberal arts construction.

2.2 Constraints on Interdisciplinary Integration Due to the Form of Grassroots Academic Organizations

The form of grassroots academic organizations hinders the promotion of interdisciplinary integration, manifested in several aspects: Traditional academic organizations are usually divided according to disciplines, with clear boundaries between various disciplines, restricting communication and collaboration between different disciplines. The traditional academic evaluation system often evaluates research outcomes based on the standards of a single discipline, lacking an effective evaluation mechanism for interdisciplinary research. In traditional academic organizations, resources are often allocated according to disciplines, making it difficult for some interdisciplinary research projects to obtain sufficient support. The traditional structure of academic

organizations is often rigid and difficult to adapt to the needs of interdisciplinary research.

2.3 Existing Talent Training System and Discrepancies with the Requirements of New Liberal Arts

Indeed, there are discrepancies between the existing talent training system and the requirements of new liberal arts. New liberal arts emphasize interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and cross-cultural integration, requiring students to possess abilities such as innovation, critical thinking, and cross-cultural communication. Existing talent training systems often follow traditional disciplinary divisions, making it challenging for students to transcend disciplinary boundaries and lack interdisciplinary knowledge and perspectives. The current curriculum content is not updated promptly, has limited knowledge capacity, and presents low levels of challenge. Some universities lack a comprehensive and systematic curriculum system for liberal arts majors. New liberal arts require students to have cross-cultural communication skills and an international perspective, areas often not sufficiently emphasized in the existing talent training systems.

2.4 Existing Evaluation System and Insufficiency in Supporting New Liberal Arts Construction

The existing evaluation system typically assesses students’ learning outcomes based on a single academic standard, lacking assessments for the abilities emphasized by new liberal arts, such as interdisciplinary skills, innovation, and critical thinking. While new liberal arts highlight practical and problem-solving abilities, the current evaluation system often overlooks the assessment of practical components, resulting in students lacking practical operational skills and problem-solving capabilities. The “Break the Five Only” evaluation system has not undergone fundamental changes. Universities tend to prioritize the quantity of academic papers and monographs in the research assessment and promotion of faculty, neglecting the innovation of faculty research results and insufficient attention to whether these results involve interdisciplinary innovation (Ma, Li, & Sun, 2021).

3. FOUNDATIONS OF NEW LIBERAL ARTS CONSTRUCTION

3.1 Theoretical Content

Firstly, it is based on the new era, promoting the integration of liberal arts, firmly establishing the subjectivity of Chinese culture, expanding international perspectives, and leading the new development of humanities and social sciences (Yang, 2021). Secondly, it builds on existing liberal arts disciplines, endowing them

with new content for talent development, continuously promoting theoretical innovation, content updates, and model reforms. Thirdly, it optimizes the talent development model in liberal arts through innovative interdisciplinary approaches (Zhou & Li, 2019). The construction of new liberal arts needs to carefully consider the adaptability of training goals and methods to meet the future needs of China.

3.2 Value Orientation

Firstly, it acknowledges traditional culture. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: “Cultural confidence is a more fundamental, widespread, and profound confidence, a more basic, profound, and lasting force. Firm cultural confidence is a major issue related to the rise and fall of the nation, cultural security, and the independence of the national spirit” (Xi, 2017). The construction of new liberal arts calls for a positive outlook on traditional Chinese culture, which is the spiritual lifeline of the Chinese nation and the foundation for standing independently among the world’s nations. Secondly, it promotes reform and innovation. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out: “The vitality of theory lies in innovation. Innovation is the eternal theme of the development of philosophy and social sciences, and it is also the inevitable requirement of social development, deepening practice, and historical progress for philosophy and social sciences” (Xi, 2016). An important task of the construction of new liberal arts is to raise the level and quality of research in humanities and social sciences, promote knowledge innovation and development, and contribute to the progress of human society. Thirdly, it breaks down disciplinary barriers. New liberal arts emphasize the fusion between disciplines, not only between arts and sciences but also within the deep cross-disciplinary integration of humanities and social sciences. With the emergence of artificial intelligence and virtual technology leading a new round of technological revolution and industrial transformation, humanities and social science disciplines cannot remain independent of these changes. They need interdisciplinary team formation, technological-assisted research, innovative education models, etc., to identify new growth points in liberal arts (Bie, 2022). Fourthly, it reconstructs research paradigms. New liberal arts emphasize learning and applying information technology. In the context of digitization, the construction of new liberal arts should reconsider the goals and models of talent development in liberal arts, seizing new paths for the development of liberal arts (Zhao, 2021).

3.3 Core Tasks

3.3.1 Talent Cultivation

Firstly, introduce a completely new educational philosophy. Build a new talent cultivation model through personalized teaching plans, experiential learning,

interdisciplinary studies, mentorship, etc., aiming to cultivate students’ problem-solving abilities and critical thinking. Foster students’ habits of lifelong learning to adapt to the ever-changing world. Secondly, promote the cultivation of outstanding and exceptional talents in liberal arts. Construct a comprehensive quality supervision and assurance mechanism for talent development, including establishing effective evaluation, feedback, and reward-punishment mechanisms, ensuring the smooth progress of cultivating outstanding talents in liberal arts. Thirdly, enhance the capacity building of the faculty team. Take various measures, including formulating career development plans, supporting the growth of young and mid-career teachers, selecting and introducing promising young scholars, establishing incentive mechanisms, strengthening team building, and addressing the physical and mental health of teachers, to ensure the sustainable and healthy development of the faculty team (Ning, 2020).

3.3.2 Knowledge Innovation

Firstly, fully leverage the core role of universities in knowledge innovation and development. Compared to other organizations, universities have clear advantages in talent cultivation and scientific research. Universities have gradually become the core engine driving knowledge innovation and development. Secondly, strengthen the cross-disciplinary integration within the field of humanities and social sciences, as well as between humanities and natural sciences, engineering, medicine, etc. Enhance collaboration between liberal arts and disciplines such as natural sciences, engineering, and medicine to better address material, spiritual, and cultural challenges facing human existence. Promote the development and progress of human society and create thought and knowledge innovation outcomes that are both national and global in nature (Ning, 2020). Thirdly, fully harness the important role of new liberal arts teams. Provide sufficient research funding, a conducive research environment, and reasonable incentive mechanisms to fully support teachers in dedicated teaching and research. Encourage close collaboration between different disciplinary teams, promote the construction of academic communities, and seek innovation on the basis of traditional research.

4. PATH ANALYSIS OF NEW LIBERAL ARTS CONSTRUCTION

4.1 Alignment with the Timeliness of New Liberal Arts Development

The development of humanities and social sciences in the new era must abandon the “ivory tower” academic paradigm and resonate with the development of the times while adhering to the general laws of disciplinary development. Firstly, in-depth analysis of key factors

influencing the construction of new liberal arts, such as technological progress, industrial transformation, and economic and social transitions. Optimize the disciplinary classification system in line with the development needs of the times. Secondly, based on the reality of China, uphold the Chinese position, analyze and solve real problems in China, especially adhering to the Marxist standpoint, rooting in the humanistic soul, and demonstrating contemporary values. Thirdly, adhere to the Marxist standpoint, viewpoints, and methods to provide in-depth guidance to humanities and social sciences, explore some fundamental issues in the field, propose original ideas and research paradigms, and construct a Chinese characteristic philosophical and social science system.

4.2 Leveraging the Team Strength of Humanities and Social Sciences

Grassroots academic organizations in universities mainly undertake the responsibilities of talent cultivation and knowledge creation. In the new era, it is necessary to gather strength and mobilize the team research advantages of humanities and social sciences. Firstly, based on a core discipline in the humanities, widely recruit scholars from other related disciplines within the humanities to form grassroots academic organizations. This breaks the disciplinary barriers created by traditional disciplines and promotes interdisciplinary communication and collaboration. Secondly, encourage university teachers to build interdisciplinary and cross-institutional platforms for disciplinary cross-innovation, accelerating the intersection between disciplines within the humanities and between humanities and natural sciences or engineering. Construct a new liberal arts system. Thirdly, relying on interdisciplinary innovation platforms, promote the cross-fusion of different disciplines, drive collaborative efforts among government, industry, academia, and research, and accelerate the advancement of technological innovation and industrial upgrading.

4.3 Promoting the Construction of Mechanisms for Collaborative Innovation in Liberal Arts

Promoting interdisciplinary collaborative innovation requires humanities and social science teams to transition from “solo operations” to “group warmth” and “deep collaboration.” Firstly, disciplinary organizations should make choices in terms of cooperation partners, cooperation models, and organizational structures. Construct operational mechanisms for positive interaction among all participants, leverage complementary strengths, and promote collaborative innovation to advance the progress and development of humanities and social sciences. Secondly, considering that academic research results in humanities and social sciences often require a long accumulation of time and have a certain time lag in output, it is crucial to value the core competencies and practical contributions

of researchers and optimize the reward distribution mechanism in a timely manner. Thirdly, establishing a scientific evaluation and supervision mechanism is a key measure to promote the development of new liberal arts. Encourage the use of new evaluation methods, incorporate government evaluations, peer reviews, third-party evaluations, and gradually improve a diverse evaluation system.

4.4 Promoting Innovation in Liberal Arts Talent Cultivation Models

The reform of talent cultivation models from traditional liberal arts to new liberal arts is timely. Firstly, use curriculum integration to drive the deep integration of knowledge within the humanities and with other disciplines. This is a challenging issue that needs to be addressed in the construction of new liberal arts. Break down disciplinary restrictions, promote problem-solving-oriented modular course construction, and provide students with greater choice space for learning. Secondly, change mindset and shift the innovation of liberal arts talent cultivation models from policy-driven to research-driven. Strengthen the understanding and research of the intrinsic characteristics of new liberal arts and promote the construction of interdisciplinary teams for in-depth integration. Thirdly, new liberal arts construction needs to enhance the collaborative education capabilities of liberal arts, adhere to problem orientation, establish interdisciplinary talent cultivation platforms, and improve supervision and management mechanisms. Create a good atmosphere for liberal arts education and enhance the comprehensive strength of liberal arts teams.

4.5 Constructing an Evaluation System Adapted to Liberal Arts Characteristics

Constructing a scientific evaluation system plays a crucial role in accelerating the development of new liberal arts. Firstly, as the achievements of liberal arts scholars require long-term accumulation, evaluation standards and systems should not simply apply the evaluation standards of science, engineering, agriculture, and medicine. Prevent falling into the “indicator trap” and “measurementism.” Focus on the long-term and construct evaluation standards and systems oriented towards moral education, theoretical and practical innovation quality. Secondly, break the trend of overly detailed and narrow disciplinary settings and establish evaluation standards that fundamentally contribute to promoting cross-disciplinary and innovative integration in new liberal arts. These standards should encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, innovative thinking, and practical applications to promote the comprehensive development of new liberal arts. Thirdly, the evaluation of liberal arts scholars needs to break free from entrenched issues such as “solely papers, solely titles,

solely academic qualifications, solely awards, solely hats.” Create a more relaxed academic environment, allowing researchers to endure solitude and sit through the “cold bench” (Ma, Li, & Sun, 2021).

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