

Thoughts on Promoting the Cultivation of Free Normal Graduates for the Professional Master's Degree of Education in China

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Abstract

The year 2015 is the fourth year since the six normal universities directly under the Ministry of Education in China enrolled free normal graduates for the professional master' degree of education, which means a full round of “Enrollment - Cultivation - Graduation” mode has been completed. During the past four years, Southwest University of China has been continually exploring and summarizing, from which we have summed up the following five problems in the cultivation of free normal masters of education. First, the enrollment requirements are not demanding; second, the teaching effects are not satisfying; third, teaching practice is not sufficient; fourth, the quality of academic dissertations varies; fifth, the current management lacks professionalism and intensity. To cope with the above problems, we propose the following three coping strategies. First, we should be strict in the enrollment requirements; second, we should be strict in teaching management; third, we should be strict in assessing the quality of graduation dissertations.

Key words: Free normal masters of education; The quality of cultivation; Thoughts

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2015 is the ninth year since the Policy of Free Education for Normal Students in China was implemented and it is the fourth year since the Normal Universities directly under the Ministry of Education in China enrolled free normal graduates for the professional master' degree of education, which means a full round of “Enrollment-Cultivation-Graduation” mode has been completed. At present, some of the first free normal masters of education have received a master's degree certificate and diploma. During the past four years, Southwest University of China has been continually exploring and summarizing, aiming to probe into the cultivation mode of free masters of education.

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION OF THE CULTIVATION OF FREE NORMAL MASTERS OF EDUCATION

In 2010, the Ministry of Education in China promulgated *Implementation Measures for Free Normal Graduates to Apply for the Professional Master's Degree of Education in the Six Normal Universities Directly under the Ministry of Education in China (Provisional)* (teacher [2010] No.3) (The Ministry of Education in China, 2010), and set the provisions that graduates from the six normal universities directly under the Ministry of Education in China can be reenrolled as on-job postgraduates to apply for the professional master's degree of education without taking an entrance examination on the condition that they have been teaching in primary and secondary schools for one year and can meet the enrollment requirements. They will take professional courses while in service. And if they are qualified in teaching assessment and can pass the dissertation defense, they will receive graduation certificates and diplomas of Master of Education. Until

now, Southwest University has enrolled 10,163 free normal graduates in total from 19 majors.

2. PROBLEMS IN THE CULTIVATION OF FREE NORMAL MASTERS OF EDUCATION

The cultivation of free normal graduates for the professional master's degree of education is a new thing coming after the implementation of the Policy of Free Education for Normal Students. Therefore, we are still in the exploring stage concerning the enrollment, cultivation and management of master students. In this paper, we will take the free normal master students in Southwest University as objects of our study. And we will sort out the problems of educating free normal masters of education in aspect of enrollment, cultivation and management based on the statistical analysis of surveys and interviews and work out corresponding solutions.

2.1 The Undemanding Enrollment Requirements

According to the enrollment prospectus of the six normal universities directly under the Ministry of Education in China: Graduates from the six normal universities directly under the Ministry of Education in China can be reenrolled as on-job postgraduates to apply for the professional master's degree of education without taking an entrance examination on the condition that they have been teaching in primary and secondary schools for one year and can meet the enrollment requirements. That is to say, free normal graduates can study for a master's degree through a simple application without taking any examinations as long as they can meet the basic requirements. However, as a matter of fact, each free normal graduate varies in professional foundations, daily teaching tasks and personal development planning, thus not all free normal graduates are qualified for a master's degree in one year immediately after graduation. Since the enrollment requirements are comparatively less demanding, most graduates apply for the degree without careful considerations, leading to the unevenness of the source of students.

2.2 The Unsatisfying Teaching Effects

It is difficult to achieve the desired teaching effects in teaching free normal graduates because of the limited time and heavy tasks in the education of free normal graduates. According to the provisions of the relevant policies of the state, the main courses are conducted through distance education and intensive class teaching in spring and summer vacations. Of which the intensive class teaching is arranged in spring and summer vacations, lasting for about a month in total. Since the time is limited, each teacher usually has to complete one

course within 4 to 6 days. Therefore, students who lack of independent learning time often can not understand the course thoroughly, resulting in unsatisfying learning efficiency. Network course learning constitutes the most of distance education. Students make use of the Internet to learn in their spare time after work, but some of them do not take the study serious and only log in while doing other things online. It is the fact that these master students are possessed with dual identities as "primary and secondary school teachers" and "graduate students" that causes these problems, for they put more emphasis on the former. Most free normal graduates are entrusted with heavy teaching tasks, and a considerable number of them are also in charge of the class or other administrative work. In addition to classroom teaching, student guidance, classroom management, teaching assessment and competitions, group lesson planning, grade activities, performance assessment, title value and professional training and other arduous work leave them little time to attend to postgraduate courses. As a result, the advantages of distance education are not realized to the fullest and online teaching tends to be labeled with "mechanization" and "formalization".

2.3 The Insufficient Teaching Practice

Being a kind of professional degrees, the practical goals of cultivating free normal masters of education require practice to be consolidated in the cultivation of these master students. However, the present cultivation of free normal graduates proved unsatisfying, since all cultivation units have not attached due importance to practice. Most of these units emphasize more on theories than practice, so what they teach can be rarely applied to teaching practice. Part of these units does not distinguish the cultivation of free normal masters of education from other types of master students, with academic cultivation being emphasized. In the specific process of cultivation, practice and teaching are so separated that it will inhibit the transferring of knowledge and the development of practical abilities.

2.4 The Unevenness of the Quality of Graduation Dissertations

Judging from the graduation dissertations of the first graduates, the overall quality of free normal masters' dissertations is not good because of different professional foundation, limited time and energy, and insufficient personal attention. Besides, some cultivation units lack systemic training for students' thesis writing in terms of setting graduation thesis writing courses. Students cannot achieve much success in writing thesis proposals and graduation theses even after completing all courses (Liu, 2014). Their thesis titles are often chosen on their own or designated by their supervisors, or simply the same as undergraduate graduation thesis titles, thus failing to take personal differences into consideration to carry

out monographic researches by referring to practical problems encountered in their teaching. In supervising the writing of graduation theses, even the system of "double supervisors" for each student fails to perform its function well as a result of insufficiency in quantity and quality of supervisors caused by a high student-supervisor ratio. Though academic background and degree levels still played an important role in selecting supervisors for students, experience of and familiarity with fundamental education research and practice receives insufficient attention. Meantime, the increase of the number of internal and external supervisors is slower than the sharp increase of the enrollment number. Therefore, the heavy tasks of the supervisors will have a serious effect on the cultivation of free normal masters of education (Zhan, 2012).

2.5 The Lack of Professionalism and Intensity in Current Management

Since the cultivation of free normal graduates for the professional master's degree of education is a new thing, many cultivation units are still in the exploring stage. Part of them even do not assign professional staff but put part-time staff in charge. The large scale of students, the complex process of cultivation management and the absence of students (due to the special cultivation mode) make the management more difficult. In charge of both full-time postgraduate students and free normal masters of education, we can observe the management of them differs greatly only by observing their submission of course papers. Full-time postgraduate students attach great importance to their study and can fully devote themselves to academic researches and studies. At the beginning of each semester, all course papers will be collected and handed in by their monitor on time. Then the monitor will arrange these papers in the order of student number and send them to their course teachers. However, it becomes completely different when it comes to free normal masters of education. Since they are only available at school in spring and summer vocations, they have to deliver their papers by mail. The teaching secretary has to urge them to hand in their papers through online instant-messaging softwares, which is often ignored, so they far miss the deadline and some individuals even do not submit course papers. After receiving hundreds of mails, the teaching secretary needs to open the mails one by one, sort them in the order of courses and student number, and then give them to course teachers. At the same time, the teaching secretary has to make a list of the students who have not submitted papers to issue a notice informing them again and again, until all students have submitted papers. The difficulty of management increases when the secretary has to manage the whole cultivation process, including students' making individual learning plans, choosing online courses, online learning, submitting course papers, completing

the compulsory courses and submitting thesis defense proposals. Due to the complexity of management, some cultivation units choose to employ the "shepherd type" to manage their students, in other words, to let the students learn by willingness, making the management of free normal masters of education unsatisfying.

3. THOUGHTS ON PROMOTING THE CULTIVATION OF FREE NORMAL GRADUATES FOR THE PROFESSIONAL MASTER'S DEGREE OF EDUCATION

The key to promoting the cultivation of free normal masters of education is to know the "characteristics" and "demand" of in-service master students and to make specified cultivation plans in accordance with their aptitude.

3.1 Strict Enrollment Requirements

We should be strict in the enrollment and specify provisions of enrolling in-service free normal masters. It is recommended that the proportion of applying for the in-service professional master's degree be controlled, application standards be improved and students to be enrolled be equipped with the capacity of academic researches and studies. Meanwhile, a scientific assessment mechanism should be established to make sure that the enrollment scale matches the capacity of each cultivation unit.

3.2 Strict Teaching Management

In strengthening the management of free normal masters, choosing and training professional teaching secretaries are particularly important. Universities should be concerned with relevant national policies, training ideas and training management to train teaching secretaries. Besides, regular forums for discussion of problems, experience and good deeds of the management of free normal masters will enhance the teaching secretaries' awareness and abilities.

3.2.1 Strengthening Process Management

Free normal graduates to pursue a master's degree of education take in-service learning, which often lasts for 3 to 5 years. Specifically, Southwest University has put forward the "1+3" mode according to actual conditions. The so-called "1" means one year of work experience after graduation. In this year, graduates can figure out their deficiency in academic researches and teaching practice after one year's teaching, then they are required to write summaries of teaching practice and research proposals. The so-called "5" means 3-5 years' postgraduate study. The first year covers the completion of the main course (intensive class teaching and online learning); the second year covers thesis proposals and thesis writing and the third year is about thesis defense.

In order to regulate the management of free normal masters, clarify the regulating scope of corresponding subjects and improve managing awareness, cultivation units should develop and consummate a series of management systems so that the management of free normal masters has regulations to abide by and is more normative for the regulations of different corresponding subjects. When implementing these regulations, cultivation units should be strict and call those who violate them to account.

3.2.2 Strengthening Teaching Management

In order to promote the teaching and improve the cultivation of free normal masters, cultivation units should implement flexible teaching methods. They can make it in the following two aspects: first, intensive class teaching has to be changed from the “teachers talk all the time” to “teachers discuss with students” to enhance mutual exchange and discussions between teachers and students, thus improving students’ initiative and enthusiasm in learning. Therefore, when arranging teaching plans and course syllabus, they should exploit a variety of teaching methods to improve teaching efficiency by closely combining the characteristics of free normal masters’ job. Second, the effectiveness of distance education should be further improved. Network education is an interactive teaching method which takes a high-tech combination of computers, multimedia, communication technology and network as the main teaching aids by means of combining text, images, animation, sound and video technology. Distance network teaching is employed as the main teaching method of free normal masters. To solve problems in distance network teaching, teaching secretaries have to help with students’ autonomous study by guiding, helping and monitoring them. Especially, they have to realize the importance of communication between teachers and students in distance network teaching (Wang & Li, 2015).

3.2.3 Strengthening the Management of Information

Free normal masters are in-service learners and they have to go back to work after the short-term study, making it difficult for teaching secretaries to manage. Such difficulties can also be found in informing students of notices. Therefore, teaching secretaries should keep pace with the time and make good use of web pages, text messages, Tencent QQ groups and WeChat groups to make sure each student gets timely notices. In addition, this can reduce the difficulty of management through online submitting course papers, thesis proposals and thesis drafts. The College of International Studies in Southwest University has specifically established a MIS (management information system) for free normal masters so that materials can be submitted online. Besides, the system has restricted login time to make sure students submit materials on time, which is a great relief for teaching secretaries.

3.3 Strict Assessment of the Quality of Graduation Dissertations

The completion of graduation theses is an important part of postgraduate cultivation and the main basis of evaluating postgraduates’ study. It is also an important symbol of measuring the quality of postgraduate cultivation. According to corresponding requirements, graduation thesis writing of free normal masters should be based on teaching practice and be applied to actual teaching practice. Students shall make use of teaching methodology, knowledge, analytical methods to solve practical problems in primary and secondary school teaching. And graduation theses have to be innovative and practical. They can be research reports, investigation and research reports or analytical reports of education and teaching cases. There are three deciding factors to assess the graduation dissertations of free normal masters. The first is about the students’ professional qualifications, the second is about their supervisors’ instructions and the last one is about cultivation units’ scientific control of the theses’ quality (Long, 2014). The three factors form the key to controlling theses’ quality and act as grasps of cultivation units to implement the control of theses’ quality. From the perspective of the students, they should constantly strengthen their theoretical foundations and increase practical experience, so that they could decide a thesis topic after the selection of topics and the thesis proposal defense with rigorous academic training and rich accumulation of practice. From the perspective of the supervisors, they should provide their students with professional guidance and advice on the whole dissertation writing process to avoid all potential pitfalls. From the perspective of the cultivation units, they must be strict in regulating the requirements and the time of topic selection and theses proposal. Meantime, they should define clear specification of the theses’ quality and provide excellent thesis outline of professional masters’. Also the writing steps should be strictly regulated to ensure that thesis writing is normative, scientific and ordering.

CONCLUSION

As a special group of postgraduate students, free normal masters of education are quite promising. The key to promoting the cultivation of them lies in the strict teaching management conducted by concerning cultivation units and supervisors. According to these students’ characteristics, we can set an integrated cultivation mode, an evaluation system of and corresponding education countermeasures to prepare them to be qualified teachers and educators.

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