

## Studies on the Course System Characteristics of British Open Universities and Inspiration to Chinese Open University Education

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### Abstract

British open universities are generally people-oriented in the organization of professional curriculum, and achieve flexible and efficient professional setting, curriculum development, curriculum system development, etc.. British open universities' professional curriculum setting and management model are the core elements of guarantee for their high quality teaching. Chinese open universities need to use the British open universities for reference and learn from their successful experience in professional curriculum organization, and establish a people-oriented, open education philosophy. At the same time, Chinese universities should constantly improve the professional curriculum development, focusing on using the modern educational technology, and monitor the teaching quality, and really achieve the sustainable development of modern distance education.

**Key words:** British open universities; Professional curriculum; International; Innovation

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China promulgated the “National long-term education reform and development plan (2010-2020)” in 2010 and takes “running the Open University” as the method to realize “building a flexible and open system of lifelong education”. So far, there are 60 colleges and universities

which have been named “Open University”. The first British open university was established in 1969 and has gained reputation worldwide because of its grand scale, professional settings, innovative forms of education, advanced teaching media, the low cost of cultivation and excellent quality of education. It has become the world's model of adult education (Lu, 2008). This paper analyzes the course system characteristics of British open universities and their successful experiences in education, and strives to provide useful inspiration and reference for China's open universities.

### 1. COURSE SYSTEM FEATURES OF BRITISH OPEN UNIVERSITIES

On the one hand, there is curriculum carrying the training objectives of higher education; on the other hand, it reflects the universities' educational philosophy and characteristics. British open universities with high quality of teaching have been widely praised, and the reason is that they are people-oriented, and have flexible and efficient management of the professional curriculum which are the core elements of ensuring the quality of teaching (Li, 2007). British open universities have set up more than 600 various courses of different levels, covering 14 subject areas, including undergraduate classes, master degree programs, doctoral degree graduate courses, and Continuing Profession Development (CPD). The construction of their professional curriculum reflects the following characteristics:

#### 1.1 People-Oriented Professional Programs

The theoretical basis of modern distance education is that students are the learning subjects, and teaching should be student-centered instead of teachers or textbooks. The students' role has changed from the traditional “passive recipients of knowledge” to active builders of knowledge and abilities. British open universities recognize that the

main motivation of adult learning comes from building or upgrading career prospects; therefore, in the professional curriculum setting, universities attach great importance to helping learners based on their needs and the environment so as to develop their professional competence better and faster (Tan, 2006). British open universities set general knowledge and education on the basis of courses and credits for the students from an early stage. In the 1970s, in order to meet the needs of learners at all stages of life, British open universities, local educational institutions and businesses worked together to provide non-academic education. Open universities were set up as well as a large number of vocational training schools to provide updated knowledge and technology courses for serving officers. In the 1990s, British open university degree in education began to shift to the professional-oriented degree in education, allowing learners to flexibly combine the professional interdisciplinary courses.

British open universities have also set up special continuing education courses, aiming to meet the social service personnel need to develop vocational skills, and to help working adults to achieve updating of knowledge and career enhancement. Open universities, industry technical associations and professional organizations maintained close cooperation, with emphasis on joint enterprise to carry out staff training programs and to provide certification program. The training qualification certificate was highly respected and affirmed by the business owners and over 50,000 organizations.

### **1.2 Unique and Innovative Curriculum Development Mechanism**

The success of British open universities is inseparable from the course team with a sound mechanism. Course group mode refers to a multimedia course design and collective collaboration by a course team. Course team members are subject experts (team leaders), editors and directors from the British Broadcasting Corporation, educational technology experts and curriculum coordinators. There might also be full-time counseling teachers, copyright experts, librarians, network experts and so on (Chen & Liu, 2006). In addition, they also employ a dedicated member who will undertake the critical reading of the first draft, and each professional has to hire outside evaluation experts. Experts produced high-quality, high standard of course materials through interdisciplinary division and cooperation (Hong, 2006). Curriculum development process is divided into planning, preparation and production, each of which has repeated discussions, comments and serious modifications. Through rigorous checks, the general construction of a course lasts 2-5 years, and is updated again after five years. The successful operation of the program group mechanism is an important feature of open university course management.

### **1.3 The Curriculum Modular**

British open universities are in accordance with the academic level of courses, which are divided into different modules for organization and management (Li, 2007). They include: Opening courses, aimed to help learners with a lack of confidence in learning skills and learning the basics knowledge of a discipline; short courses, study period of 5 months, now covers Liberal arts, science, social science and technology disciplines. In addition, the regular undergraduate curriculum is divided into three levels: Level 1 is the foundation courses, and its content is to study skills, learning technique and professional knowledge, all as a compulsory subject; Level 2 covers a wide range of courses, including a comprehensive interdisciplinary curriculum; Level 3 is for the professional courses, in terms of its relative higher academic difficulty. In addition, there are also master and doctoral level courses (Wang, 2007). In this way, the same subject at different levels of professional courses is consolidated, not only conducive to the optimal combination between programs between different disciplines, to avoid the overlapping of different courses, but also help students to plan elect courses according to their learning interest, reflecting the diversity of educational levels and the flexible mode of education.

### **1.4 Combination of Plate-Type Mode for the Course Content**

In order to meet the dispersion characteristics of the distance education learners geographically and temporally, British open universities have designed the unique plate type modular for the curriculum content. The performance of each course consists of several sections related to a combination of the teaching content. As each section is written by a dedicated team, they have their own clear teaching objectives and requirements, teaching methods, learning methods, operational requirements, timing plans and reference materials, etc., and each section also contains several learning modules (units) (Bai, 2005). In this way, students can for the bulk of the whole take the previous system, lengthy course content into a separate part of the relatively short learning anytime and anywhere.

After the students' registration, they will receive the "teaching package" with multimedia presentation, including written materials, audio-visual materials, teaching requirements, learning guide, scheduling, test description, academic year schedule, face to face programs, experimental materials and so on (Wang, 2007). The "teaching package" completely meet the needs of individualized learning for distance education, focusing on the dialogue of written material, the practical aspects of interaction, assessment and evaluation of the relevance and usefulness of the media. After each student finished one or several learning modules, they need to complete a work by the tutors for marking (Wu, 2007). Practice has proved that this approach not only avoids unnecessary

duplication of the course content, but is also convenient and flexible. It is very suitable for adult amateur learning.

### **1.5 The Hierarchical Certificates System**

British open university undergraduate education is divided into three levels: certificate education, diploma education and degree education. Graduate education is divided into two levels: academic education and degree education. Certification of education, academic education and degree education in the curriculum constitute a structure from low to high (Cai, 2006). This form which converges certification education, academic education and degree of education fully adapted to serving officers characteristics who have less time to learn and are relatively not concentrated, so that students can choose to accept what levels of education according to their own actual situation and needs. Students learning courses at different times can be recognized and receive the corresponding certificate or certificate of academic education, not only to improve the learning efficiency, but also reduce the cost of learning (Hu & Yang, 2001). For the aspect of degree education, learners can obtain specific professional certificates, diplomas and degrees through learning a specific course. They can also take courses in different disciplines to obtain an "Open Degree".

Students have chosen profession from the beginning, but they can flexibly adjust profession according to their needs during the learning process, which fully embodies the distance education concept of student-centered and lifelong learning. In addition, there is a foundation degree which is the professional-oriented. Learners must be serving staff or an occupational field volunteers. Foundation degree is officially announced by the British government according to the new higher education qualification certification method in 2000. The purpose is to adapt to changes of the UK economy structure, reflecting the concept of higher education and business cooperation.

### **1.6 Students Select Subjects with Flexibility and Freedom**

As open university students are mostly part-time learners, British open universities also reflect a high degree of flexibility in curriculum choice design. Students according to their interests, existing infrastructure and needs, under the guidance of school teachers, selected various courses by science, technology, literature, social sciences, education and mathematics. Six colleges offer for free combination, form their own course of study plans, and make changes and adjustments according to the learning situation and temporary needs.

The universities only provide the most basic requirements: those students who wish to get a bachelor degree need to pass two or more basic courses and obtain credits; those who hope to get honorary degree should study twenty-three level course credits accounting for

1/4 of all credits; students pursuing graduate degrees can research in a given thematic area, write papers that are assessed by the defense committee, and they can also combine course study and paper writing in order to obtain the master degree. This will undoubtedly provide a broad autonomy for learners.

### **1.7 The Scientific Credit Exchange Mechanism**

British open universities implement the credit system and credit transfer system. Each course sets credits according to the level and the amount of learning and provides a more flexible policy on credits recognition, calculation and conversion. The students of British open universities can study degree course offered by other universities, but the open universities do not offered such courses through a cooperation agreement of open universities and other universities. The students are also able to apply for other UK university or foreign university degrees. Students with bachelor degrees of open universities may compete with graduates of normal universities to obtain further study opportunities. In addition, British open universities allow students to save credits for many years, in order to facilitate the students' self-coordination learning progress and to complete their studies.

### **1.8 Quality of the Course Monitoring and Evaluation System**

British open universities have established a strict quality program monitoring and evaluation system, including assessment within the university and internal assessment. Universities set up a course evaluation committee, whose main duty is to implement regular assessment and inspection. Each time someone is responsible for assessment, analyze the problem and propose measures for improvement. After a period of improvement, re-evaluation examination will be implemented. Also, some important test results must be validated by the experts to ensure the accuracy of assessment and to improve effectiveness (Ji, 2004). Some external social assessment organizations, for example, UK Higher Education Quality Assessment Association (QAA), can also carry out spot checks of the quality of open university courses, assessing whether they meet the appropriate standards. Universities adjust and improve timely based on the results of assessment. British open universities strictly implement internal and external evaluation system, to ensure the scientific curriculum and reasonable and sustained improvements in the quality of teaching.

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## **2. IMPLICATIONS OF BRITISH OPEN UNIVERSITIES' PROFESSIONAL CURRICULUM TO CHINA'S UNIVERSITY EDUCATION**

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## 2.1 Establishing a People-Oriented Concept of Open Education

Although China's open universities have just started, early in 1979, China set up a dedicated distance education institution - Radio and TV University. "Radio and Television University" highlights the "hard environment" of modern educational technology in the role of distance education; but British open universities have a prominent open-educational philosophy because they pay more attention to the "soft environment" effect, which is from the learner's needs, combined with the media characteristics, development and use of the teaching resources.

In a learning society and "lifelong learning" trend, the primary task for China's construction of open universities is open to ideas, that is, to absorb all the advanced ideas and concepts for our own use (Liang, 1995). In order to completely break the shackles of traditional education concepts, and truly achieve modern education, we need a system which is popular, democratic, equitable, humane and lifelong, only to establish a free elective subject system which is people-centered, promoting the credit transfer system and implementing the "program supermarket" and the "Credit Bank", to provide courses of study methods with individual needs and to be more flexible for students, in order to achieve a real sense of change from teaching to learning, and ensure the effectiveness of distance learning.

## 2.2 Setting up a Multi-Level, Multi-Channel Platform of Courses

In the curriculum, China's open universities should change the traditional model of rigid teaching plan to enable learners to have more choice of courses and learn ways to achieve self-set learning goals.

The course platform not only provides both undergraduate and graduate-level academic education courses, but also provides job training, education of vocational qualification certificates and other types of non-degree education programs (projects). It focuses on the organic link between different learning levels, to achieve curriculum resources shared between the different disciplines, and to achieve coordination of academic education and non-academic education so that students can study in a cross-level, multi-disciplinary and cross-module way, to meet the needs of life-long learning of different learners (He & He, 2004). During the process of building the course platform, universities should develop curriculum construction standards, improve curriculum development process, strengthen curriculum evaluation criteria and certification systems, integration of social high quality educational resources, building excellent courses, and formation of high-quality curriculum and multi-media teaching resources (Zhu, 2009). Through setting up the course platform, building disciplines and certificate system that adapt to social and economic development,

the purpose is to meet the learners learning needs of self-design and life-long learning, and the requirements of structural optimization and coordinated development.

## 2.3 Promotion of Certificate Education

The construction of modern open universities should explore and form the "professional development" training model that is market-oriented and application capacity-centric. China's universities should enhance their cooperation with industry, business, and continually develop school-enterprise cooperation, joint development certificate education programs that adapt to the needs of employees' professional positions (Wang, 2008). For the technique of joint-build and self-build, we should build a series of certificates of educational resources, form certificate education system that is complementary to academic education (Li, 2001). Meanwhile, China's open universities can develop a variety of job training programs for reserving staffs, including education and training services of updating knowledge and technology, labor job transfer, and re-employment.

## 2.4 Implementation of "e-Credit Bank" System

In order to better reflect the "people-oriented, flexible and efficient" principle, China's modern open university professional course system should be completely a credit system replacing the traditional academic credit system, and establish the credit accumulation and conversion systems, to strengthen cooperation between colleges and universities to achieve recognition and convergence of students' learning outcomes in different types of college.

As to the registration for the degree or diploma education, students choose to learn one or several courses that are provided among a group of unique and practical open education resources provided by the open universities (Zhuang & Wang, 2006). Learners who pass the examination will receive a unified "course completion certificate" printed by open universities. The results can also be converted into a certain credits into individual student's "electronic credit bank", according to certain rules, such as exemption waiver, course direct replacement, substitute equivalent courses, certificate course portfolio, credit conversion and identification (Ji, 2004). Students can also through mutual recognition of credits mechanism of open universities and general universities get the same course credits cultivation from other universities that are replaced into the "electronic credit bank". There are a variety of ways to achieve non-academic education and academic education of convergence, mutual recognition of achievement, establishing two-way interaction mechanism of independent learning.

## 2.5 Construction of High-Quality Academic Team

British open universities' outstanding quality of teaching and their high level of faculty are inseparable. High level of academic research promoted the British open universities' academic professional development and

curriculum development, while ensuring high quality standards of teaching and teaching effectiveness (Yu & Li, 2004). The qualified personnel construction of open universities of China should be restructured as the main line to focus on personnel training, the introduction of talents focusing on the market demand characteristics of professional disciplines and the establishment of flexible appointment system for teachers and the corresponding performance file, so that competent teachers remain relatively stable. There should also be timely dismissal of incompetent teachers.

China should establish a regular training mechanism to encourage young teachers to study for a degree, implement academic leaders development plan, establish Distinguished Professor positions, (Liu, 2006) and create good policy environment and academic environment to make top-notch talent to stand out, to further improve and optimize academic team structure, including educational structure, subject structure, job structure and age structure; to set up guiding team as a unit or course of professional; to establish the guiding team of work system, management and assessment methods, and make the guidance team as the main force of the school discipline professional development, curriculum development, resource construction, and teaching reform.

## 2.6 Improvement of Evaluation Mechanism and Quality Assurance System

Rigorous evaluation system is the fundamental guarantee of excellent quality of teaching of British open universities. In contrast, China can learn from the total quality management concepts and methods to strengthen the quality control of distance education to develop improved procedures and quality standards, implement strict personal responsibility, perform appraisal system, and strengthen the teaching process management (Wang & An, 2006).

To establish the internal and external oversight evaluation mechanisms to improve the teaching quality through the disciplines setting, talent training objectives, curriculum system of evaluation and feedback, and timely correction academic professional position, clear disciplines characteristics, reform of professional content, optimizing curriculum, the professional training objectives through the curriculum should make active response to social needs and to meet the personnel training requirements.

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