

Internationalization of Liberal Arts' Education in Chinese Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities

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Globalization has greatly impacted the design and the implementation of Chinese higher education system (Altbach, 2009). With the prevalent need for international scholarly exchange and the mobilization of young talents across borders, higher education systems are forced to re-think the goals and requirements of their education. To produce students that is capable and adaptive across multiple cultures has become a common requirement for all disciplines in higher education. In response to these needs, universities in China have developed many strategies for internationalization, such as bilingual education, short-term oversea exchange programs, and international summer schools, etc.. These strategies have provided multiple platforms and opportunities to promote students' knowledge and skills and to enrich students' international experiences.

Compared to the increasing internationalization of the curriculum and their implementation for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines, however, the disciplines in Liberal Arts are facing greater challenges in their efforts for internationalization. Our report focuses on different challenges that are facing the internationalization of Liberal Arts' education in Chinese higher education.

First of all, compared to STEM disciplines, limited bilingual (Chinese and English) courses or courses taught in English were observed among the disciplines in Liberal Arts (Zhuang & Sun, 2004; Zhang, Chen, & Sun, 2013). According to a descriptive analysis by Zhang, Chen and Sun (2013), disciplines in humanities account for much fewer courses that were taught in English than Science and Engineering. In specific, Literature accounts for 2% of all courses taught in English in 2011; none for History. Meanwhile, Science accounts for 14% and Engineering accounts for 12% of all coursed taught in English. Similar case applies for bilingual courses. In 2010, Literature accounts for 3% of all bilingual courses; History for 1%; and none for Philosophy. Meanwhile, Science accounts for 28% of all bilingual courses and Engineering for 26%.

Difficulties in bilingual teaching or teaching in English for most disciplines in Liberal Arts can be attributed to several possible reasons. Different from STEM disciplines, Liberal Arts disciplines concern more about local history and cultures, whose meaning can sometimes be difficult to grasp. Moreover, because English textbooks play an important role in students' learning, the lag in keeping textbooks up to date can also render further learning obstacles

(Zhuang & Sun, 2004). This is due to the fact that students heavily rely on textbooks in their studies with English as a second language for most students.

Moreover, limited number of international summer programs were launched in Liberal Arts disciplines. According to a report by the Ministry of Education, most international summer programs were in Science and Engineering (2005). As one of the initiatives, it was suggested to create more international summer programs in Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines. Fortunately, several universities, such as Peking University and Fudan University in China have started to launch these types of programs in Liberal Arts. Still, more such programs are needed to enrich the international experiences of Chinese students in Liberal Arts disciplines and to promote the scholarly exchange between domestic universities and universities abroad in these disciplines.

Additional challenges include the limited adoption of advanced teaching methods and/or pedagogical tools, the lack of appropriate assessment methods for courses taught in English or bilingual courses, and difficulties in designing and implementing diversified summer programs.

Considering these challenges, several preliminary measures will be proposed and discussed. These measures include, creating opportunities for faculty members to promote their global awareness and professional skills, diversifying Liberal Arts' curriculum to incorporate cross-cultural elements, introducing active learning into classrooms to enhance student engagement, etc. These and other possible measures may potentially help prepare our students in their development of global competencies. Nonetheless, the difficulties inherent in Liberal Arts disciplines still render their internationalization and the adoption of possible reformative policies a challenging process.

References

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