

Curriculum Design of Literature Postgraduates in Agri-Universities

YI Li, LI Haoyue

China Agricultural University, Beijing, China

There has been a significant increase in the number of postgraduates in China in the late 20 years. However, in recent years, we have witnessed the shrinkage of vocational market, which particularly affects art graduates, especially in the polytechnic-oriented colleges. This article presents a tracking investigation conducted on curriculum design of literature postgraduates in a highly representative agri-university in Beijing. The aim is to shed light on the issue and to propose targeted recommendations.

Keywords: literature postgraduates, agri-university, employment, curriculum design

Introduction

Graduate education represents an advanced level, aiming at nurturing individuals with strong research and creative abilities in different specialties. In recent years, due to significant shifts in the job market, humanities-oriented postgraduate programs in agricultural and forestry institutions have faced the contradiction between expanding student enrollment and contracting market demand. Before the expansion of postgraduate admissions in 2002, only 624,000 individuals registered for the National Entrance Examination for Master's Degrees, whereas by 2022, this number had risen to 4.57 million (Zhao, 2007). This is particularly prominent for foreign-language major in agri-universities. Before the expansion, many humanistic disciplines used to be established in comprehensive universities with a long history, and the scope of institutions offering literature majors was even smaller. In agri-universities, the establishment of literature majors occurred predominantly within the late 10 years from 2001 to 2010. For example, the specific university studied in this article established English literature major in 2005. The settlement of the new majors at first just imitates the curriculum design of those in comprehensive universities, where there have been well-qualified faculties and extensive practical experience because of the deep tradition. They could continuously receive feedback and make revisions to their curriculum, thereby meeting the development needs.

We have investigated three comprehensive universities, including Sun Yat-sen University, Wuhan University, and Sichuan University. Students in the universities are flexible in choosing elective courses within their major, aligning them with their supervisors' research directions. In the universities, compulsory courses and major electives cover various fields, including literature, linguistics, translation, and teaching, with compulsory

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YI Li, Ph.D., associate professor, College of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University, Beijing, China.

LI Haoyue, undergraduate student, College of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University, Beijing, China.

courses emphasizing a certain direction. However, the shortage of qualified faculties at the first stage may lead to a situation where students are required to take a mixture of courses, including linguistics, English and American literature, culture, and translation. When it comes to writing their graduation theses, they are expected to separate the topics into literature, culture, translation, and linguistics. This approach does not seem to differ significantly from programs focused solely on literature, translation, or linguistics, but the depth of education differs significantly. Prior to the expansion of postgraduate admissions, foreign language master programs in traditional institutions mainly aimed to prepare students for higher education institutions, research institutes, or advanced translation careers. However, with the increase in admissions, a swarm of foreign language postgraduates have entered the job market, and simultaneously, the corresponding positions have been saturated. As a result, both the postgraduates and job market have lowered their expectations, especially for those newly established foreign language master programs.

This article comprehensively investigated the postgraduates in an agri-university in Beijing. In-depth interviews were conducted at different stages, when they were studying in the university, and when they have worked six months after employment, with the interview focusing on the aspects of curriculum design, professional positioning, and job requirements. Additionally, the interviews were also conducted with people working in internet companies, government departments, and educational institutions for the purpose of understanding the market needs. This research aims to provide a suggestion to improve the curriculum design for foreign language postgraduate programs in agricultural and forestry universities.

Literature Review

Yao (2013) pointed out that job preparation and academic pursuits are irreconcilable, which is commonly acknowledged by graduate students and the colleges. Some scholars argue that art and humanity postgraduates bear the responsibility for the difficulty in finding a job (Zhang, 2006). Yin (2007) believed that many art and humanity postgraduates are unwilling to engage in specific experimental research, but preferring to the soft sciences and theoretical research in which the results are got more easily. He also highlights that although there are hardware facilities, the investment in the professional software is insufficient. Sun and Zhao (2007) stated that rational employers, aiming to minimize their costs, will decrease their demand for postgraduates, which has been testified under our observations: at a talent recruitment fair on a campus in Beijing, where employment prospects for undergraduate foreign language students far exceeded those of their postgraduate counterparts. Qu, Hu, and Liu (2014) discovered that many postgraduates aspire to work in stable institutions, or to pursue further education overseas to enhance their academic backgrounds. However, the limitation in their curricula usually results in a significant discrepancy between the actual employment and their ideal career aspirations. Students with master degree, positioned between undergraduates and doctoral candidates, often find themselves in a state of “neither”, which means they not only lack working experiences, but proper academic status. The situation definitely becomes their obstacle in job finding (Wang & Gao, 2018). Wang, Li, and Shao (2017) conducted a study in Yunnan Agricultural University, focusing on the students’ learning and living conditions, scientific research practices, teaching environment, personal qualities, and student-teacher communication. Their conclusion includes, inadequate classroom teaching management, limited student-teacher communication, and a disparity between education and market requirement. Luo, Meng, and Li (2012) also found the disparity between education and market requirement, stating that knowledge transmission relies on classroom lectures while market places greater emphasis on practicality. Wu, Wen, and Liu (2018) believe that professional programs should have

focused more on practical training, aligning with marketing demands, instead of solely on academic research programs of the supervisors. Zhao (2007) also suggested that universities should adjust their enrollment scale promptly based on market demand.

Data Analysis

We conducted a tracking investigation on eight postgraduate students from an agri-university in Beijing. Three in-depth interviews were conducted at different stages: (a) during their stay on campus studies; (b) right prior to their graduation; and (c) six months after graduation. The topics focused on curriculum design, job-seeking, and professional requirements. Among the eight students, four have entered the civil service system (LYD, LHR, WKQ, and ZXY), two have joined the primary and secondary education system (ZMJ and MLY), one is preparing for a doctoral program (ZYW), and one is currently in the job-seeking process (JZT).

Curriculum Design and Job-Finding

Regarding curriculum design, all interviewees mentioned that their curricula were not reasonable. ZMJ believed that the curricula lacked specialization. In her courses of 41 credits, only six credits were directly related to her major (literary theory). LHR also mentioned that the class schedule was not well arranged. Additionally, she felt that the content of major courses did not align well with the undergraduate curricula. The courses either repeated undergraduate content or focused solely on theoretical lectures. ZMJ mentioned that the curricula design should be logical and coherent. All the participants pointed out that the curricula failed to reflect the specialty of their university. Surprisingly, all interviewees were deeply impressed by the “Agricultural and Rural Education” courses offered by the university and mentioned in the interviews that this course had greatly helped them in their job search. Therefore, on the one side, they were biased as postgraduates from agri-university in job market, and on the other side, they lacked the specialty training align to the agri-university.

Regarding the relevance of employment and major, the interviewees believed that the relevance is very low and they expressed that the courses and academic training during their graduate studies were only beneficial for personal development, but did not directly help them in job finding or in practical work later on. Besides, during the job-seeking phase, the background of their agri-university did not do them any favor but elicited negative stereotypes. One story needs to mention that one student who scored top one in the teacher certification examination organized by the local education bureau faced disappointment when two prestigious local high schools chose graduates from a normal university over her only because of her educational background.

Two interviewees working as teachers contended that their ability working as a teacher primarily derived from their undergraduate studies, while the academic training in their postgraduate programs held minimal relevance to their current stage of work. The interviewees who became civil servants or held administrative roles in educational institutions noted that their day-to-day responsibilities scarcely necessitated the use of English. Their tasks mainly revolved around data integration and official report writing.

Professional Requirements

We also conducted interviews with people working in different companies, including Kwai, NetEase, Alibaba, Ericsson, LONGi, and Xiaomi, to gain insights into professional requirements. They reached a consensus that candidates being recruited should possess a certain level of proficiency in a foreign language. However, apart from language skills, other abilities are also necessary. For instance, the interviewee from LONGi Solar, who is responsible for human resources, mentioned that many domestic companies are expanding

internationally due to the globalized trend. As a result, top companies in China have certain requirements regarding foreign language skills, which are considered a foundational competency. Nevertheless, they also emphasize the need for candidates to possess other skill sets to better meet the company's demands. She further mentioned that these companies also require highly skilled individuals, such as Ph.D. graduates in foreign languages, but the demand for such talents is relatively low and mostly concentrated in the field of artificial intelligence-related technological research and development. On the other hand, for master-degree graduates, there is a greater preference for candidates with a combination of skills.

Conclusions

Xie, Yan, and Wang (2017) conducted research on the employment of master-degree graduates from agricultural and forestry universities. In the Northwest Agricultural and Forestry University, he found 47.14% of employment in enterprises, and government agencies and public institutions accounted for 36.48%. In Nanjing Agricultural University, 54.71% of employment was found in enterprises, and government agencies and public institutions accounted for 35.02%. In Beijing Forestry University, 60.20% of employment was found in state-owned enterprises, with government agencies, higher education institutions, and other public institutions accounting for 26.63%. In the South China Agricultural University, only 26.23% of graduates were employed in government agencies and public institutions, while the employment in private enterprises reached 64.58%.

In a survey conducted by Wang et al. (2017) on the primary abilities required for graduate students, a total of 484 employers were surveyed. The results revealed that 17.8% of employers emphasized the importance of professional knowledge, while 15.6% emphasized language expression, 14.5% emphasized professional ethics, 12.22% emphasized work attitude, 11.1% emphasized learning ability, and 10% emphasized innovation. Furthermore, 47.8% of the employers considered comprehensive qualities as their top priority, while only 23.3% believed that professional knowledge was the most important factor. Overall, comprehensive qualities and professional knowledge are the two most valued factors for the majority of employers.

Based on the above findings, it can be concluded that the current training for postgraduates majored in literature in agri-university is not comprehensive training. Instead, the curriculum design is inclined more to the narrow discipline in terms of academic training. Ironically, the postgraduates majored in literature from agri-university are in a disadvantaged position and sometimes facing discrimination, while they have not taken advantages of comprehensive training concerning the agricultural at all. Faced with such challenges, we suggest the improvement approach is “dynamic adjustment” in terms of timing. In the face of the crucial trend of “the rural revitalization”, the characteristics of agri-universities should become an advantage. In terms of curriculum settings, more agricultural-related classes and activities should be incorporated to empower students for their future work, rather than acting as obstacles. Therefore, the curriculum design should focus on “comprehensiveness” and take full advantage of the strengths of the respective institutions. During an interview with the School of Humanities in Zhejiang Agricultural and Forestry University, the author discovered that the Department of Foreign Languages collaborated with the Tea Science and Culture Department when they set up their “translation” master program. They appropriately collaborated on the core courses of foreign languages and courses and internships related to tea science and culture. Since Zhejiang is renowned for its tea production, this integration allows their literature postgraduates to confidently emphasize the special advantages gained from their university.

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