

Feasibility Analysis of Practical Education for Graduate Students in Universities: An Exploration of Viable Paths

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Abstract: *Whether in learning or working, a focus on practicality and hands-on experience is essential as practical experience leads to genuine knowledge. Implementing practical education to cultivate the ability of "unity of knowledge and action" in graduate students is one of the vital approaches for universities in talent development. However, there are practical challenges that higher education institutions face in carrying out practical education, especially in the context of the new era and the development philosophy. Thus, it is necessary to continuously explore the feasibility of practical education, optimize the mechanisms for practical education in universities, and fulfill the fundamental mission of moral and intellectual education in higher education, ultimately providing a new direction for nurturing well-rounded talents in society.*

Keywords: Graduate students; practical education; exploration paths

1. Introduction

On February 23, 2023, in the "Opinions on Enhancing the Effectiveness of College Students' Social Practice Activities in the New Era and Deepening the Work of Youth Practice Education" (referred to as "Opinions" hereafter), it was pointed out: "Practice-based education is a critical link in implementing the fundamental task of moral and intellectual education, an integral part of the ideological and political work system in universities, and an effective way to cultivate the new generation of young people who will shoulder the great responsibility of national rejuvenation." Universities serve as the cradle for nurturing comprehensive socialist skilled talents, and practical education is an essential part of talent development. In the context of the new era, universities must effectively bear the responsibility of cultivating socialist builders and reliable successors. To achieve this, it is essential to understand the development patterns of practical education and conduct socially significant practices according to the diverse needs of graduate students.

2. The Significance of Strengthening Practical Education for Graduate Students in Higher Education

Practice serves as a crucial means for students to understand and apply theoretical knowledge, enhancing their practical skills and innovative thinking. By successfully applying theory to practical work, students can better comprehend and master knowledge, develop practical capabilities, and improve problem-solving skills. Thus, practice is considered the best method of learning.

2.1 Strengthening Practical Education for Graduate Students Is a Necessity for the Development of Education

"Strong youth lead to a strong nation." We must treat youth work as a strategic task, equip young people with scientific theories, inspire them with the original mission, and become intimate friends, enthusiastic supporters, and guides to young people. The renowned educator Tao Xingzhi once said, "Education can only exert its power through life practice." Practice is an intrinsic attribute of education. It is the objective activity in which people transform the objective world autonomously, displaying characteristics such as practicality, autonomy, and creativity.^[1]

Practical education emphasizes that practice is an intrinsic attribute of education. The "Opinions" state: "Youth organizations at all levels should base themselves on the 'Three Strengths, One Degree,

and Two Guarantees' work framework of the Communist Youth League, fully leverage the crucial role of the Communist Youth League's practice education in the 'Great Ideological and Political' work system of universities and the 'Three Comprehensives' education framework." To deepen education that cultivates individuals for the country, political functions are key, and the focus should be on the main responsibilities and main tasks.^[2] The development of organized, regular, normalized, and long-term social practice activities should be promoted to lead graduate students in aspiring to become young people with ideals, a sense of responsibility, the ability to endure hardship, and the determination to strive.

2.2 Strengthening Practical Education for Graduate Students Is a Necessity for the Basic Attributes of Higher Education

Practical education in higher education takes various forms, focusing on different aspects for undergraduate and graduate students. Practical activities for graduate students, such as internships, practical training, and research projects, mostly emphasize the development of professional skills. These activities enable students to apply the theoretical knowledge they have acquired to real-world situations and enhance their problem-solving abilities.

By the time graduate students reach their third year, most of them are facing the practical issues of graduation and employment. The practical activities conducted in the first two years of graduate school can help students gain hands-on experience in work procedures and operations. They can gain insights into the operational rules of enterprises or industries, improve their practical skills, and enhance their problem-solving abilities. This is beneficial for their career development and competitiveness in the job market, as it allows them to accumulate a certain level of professional competence and practical skills during their time in graduate school. For employers, they are more inclined to choose candidates who have practical experience, can quickly adapt to work environments, and solve practical problems.^[3]

2.3 Strengthening Practical Education for Graduate Students Is a Necessity for Achieving the Fundamental Mission of Education

In the context of the new era, adhering to the practice-based education of socialism with Chinese characteristics is a necessary and effective way for universities to carry out ideological and political education for students. It is based on the principles, viewpoints, and methods of scientific socialism, addressing the problems faced in China's higher education systematically. Grounding practical education in the fundamental task of moral and intellectual education, adhering to the ideological and political work of cultivating the new generation of young people who will shoulder the great responsibility of national rejuvenation, and leading young students to actively engage in social practice are vital.

The practice of cultivating talents with socialist core values is emphasized in practical education. The integration of socialist core values into the entire process of practical education is essential. Through continuous closeness to practice, return to practice, and the inclusion of outstanding traditional Chinese culture, students are guided to firmly establish four correct views, resolve theoretical contradictions, and cultivate individuals through practical education.

Carrying out practical education activities in universities is a systematic project that promotes the comprehensive development of students, improves the effectiveness of ideological and political education, and accelerates social progress. To fulfill the responsibility of nurturing new talents for the era who possess ideals, a sense of responsibility, and competence, universities need to ground practical education in the profound practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics. They must actively lead students to participate in the wave of social practice, find the source and driving force of theories rooted in the practical world, and cultivate individuals with ideals, a sense of responsibility, and competence for the country and society.

3. Issues in Practical Education for Graduate Students in Chinese Universities and Feasible Paths to Strengthen It

In the context of graduate education in Chinese universities, we have identified several issues pertaining to practical education, which significantly impact the healthy development of our country's education system. These issues include:

3.1 Insufficient Emphasis on Practical Education for Graduate Students

Chinese universities acknowledge the importance of practical education for students, but limitations such as inadequate resources, insufficient funding, and a shortage of specialized guidance teachers, combined with traditional beliefs that prioritize theoretical instruction over practical learning, have resulted in an insufficient level of attention given to practical education for graduate students. Although the Ministry of Education has issued policy documents regarding practical activities in schools, some universities have not effectively implemented these policies. Some institutions still predominantly employ a "teaching-oriented" approach to practical activities, neglecting the development of students' practical skills, thus hindering the integration of theory and practice. Consequently, many students' practical experiences remain at an elementary stage, with a lack of individualized practical activities and effective guidance. Some existing practical activities are criticized for being mere formalities, thus failing to achieve their intended educational outcomes. Additionally, certain universities have not effectively aligned the format, educational content, and developmental direction of practical activities with the specialized strengths and educational goals of graduate students. This results in a disconnect between practical education and the professional development of graduate students, undermining the practical value of these activities.

Furthermore, the numerous functional and service departments within universities face difficulties in coordinating and communicating effectively due to unclear roles, impeding the real-time sharing of valuable resources and hindering the establishment of an effective collaborative mechanism for practical education.

3.2 Need for Strengthening the Faculty

The faculty responsible for guiding practical education activities play a pivotal role in ensuring the success of such endeavors in universities. The quality of these faculty members directly influences the educational standards and efficiency of graduate programs. However, some guidance teachers merely replicate past activity content without adapting to new forms, requirements, or innovative ideas. The professional qualities, political stances, and ethical conduct of teachers involved in practical activities have a subtle yet significant impact on students and the quality of practical education. In the face of rapid developments in our new era, including changing societal dynamics and the nation's growth, teachers participating in practical education must continually enhance their teaching capabilities, broaden their horizons, and enrich their own practical experiences.

While universities may organize faculty from various disciplines to lead practical activities, they sometimes overlook the importance of considering teachers' backgrounds and capabilities. Additionally, part-time and full-time teachers leading these activities may vary in their commitment and may not receive systematic, professional training. When universities hire external mentors from corporate entities to guide student teams, a lack of understanding of the university's talent development plans on the part of these mentors may hinder students' timely adaptation and lead to suboptimal outcomes in practical education.

3.3 Need for Innovative Forms of Practical Education

Practical activities serve as an effective means of enhancing the professional and career competencies of graduate students. To remain relevant and meet the evolving demands of students in a rapidly changing society, universities must innovate and adapt practical education. In recent years, the age range of graduate students in Chinese universities has shifted from those born in the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. This demographic shift brings changes in students' perceptions and expectations of practical activities. The proliferation of fragmented information and the fast-paced evolution of society pose challenges to keeping practical activities aligned with contemporary needs.

Regrettably, some universities adhere to traditional practices, offering repetitive practical activities year after year, relying on the same outdated practice sites and organizations. Consequently, students' choices of research topics for practical activities tend to be conventional, failing to fulfill the primary purpose of practical education. Many students perceive participation in practical activities as time-consuming and lacking practical significance unless these activities are mandatory. The internal practical activities organized by universities often fail to exert a strong appeal to graduate students.

4. Feasible Paths to Strengthen Practical Education for Graduate Students in Chinese Universities

4.1 Enhance the Emphasis on Graduate Student Practical Activities

To promote practical education for graduate students effectively, universities should allocate teaching resources reasonably and scientifically based on the teaching needs of different departments. Various functional departments, such as the Academic Affairs Office, Student Affairs Office, and Youth League Committee, should work collaboratively to provide abundant resources for the practical education system while actively strengthening cooperation with external communities, enterprises, and schools to provide students with diverse practical channels.

Additionally, universities should enhance their information technology infrastructure to facilitate communication, exchange, and resource sharing related to practical education. This will maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of practical education efforts, ultimately elevating the quality of such activities.

Practical capability development must be anchored in practical activities. Therefore, universities should increase their awareness of the importance of practical activities for graduate students and adapt these activities to contemporary societal needs. Universities should base their top-level design of the education system on the goal of talent development, integrate all necessary elements, and establish a coordinated supporting mechanism. This will drive reforms in graduate student practical activities, ensuring their practicality and effectiveness. Furthermore, practical activities should be incorporated into the overall talent development system as mandatory credits, shifting from a traditional "teaching-oriented" approach to a more "student-centered" model. To achieve this, specific quantifiable or assessable requirements for graduate students' practical activities should be established, enabling students to take initiative and enhance their professional and career competencies. Moreover, universities should incorporate elements of patriotism education and traditional Chinese culture into practical education, utilizing local ideological and political education resources to integrate ideological and political education with practical education and help graduate students develop the right values.

4.2 Integrate Educational Resources and Enhance Faculty Competence

Building a highly qualified teaching faculty with profound academic perspectives, strong professional competence, a sense of responsibility for students' development, and noble academic ethics is essential for successful graduate student education. Therefore, to enhance graduate student practical education, it is imperative to integrate various educational resources, establish a multidimensional collaborative educational mechanism, break down communication barriers among different university departments, and actively explore innovative collaboration models. Faculty members should continually improve their professional competence and expand their horizons through training and competition. Faculty involved in practical education should conduct visits and study tours to other universities with successful practical education programs to learn from their experiences and gain insights into innovative educational approaches. Encouraging teachers to make full use of available educational resources, adapt to the trends in technological development both on and off campus, and facilitate communication and exchange with different types of practical organizations will help diversify the practical platforms available to graduate students.

4.3 Maintain Tradition While Innovating Practical Forms

To elevate the quality of practical education, universities should adapt to the needs of contemporary society and transform traditional educational concepts and models. The integration of classroom teaching and practical education, guided by the principle of combining theory and practice, should be upheld. Universities should prioritize students' needs and proactively adapt to changing times, pursuing a path of continuous innovation in practical education. This entails enriching the forms and platforms of practical education, making it more appealing to students.

Given the diverse age groups among graduate students, practical activities should cater to the evolving cognitive and experiential needs of students. However, some universities adhere to traditional practices, offering repetitive practical activities year after year, relying on the same outdated practice sites and organizations. Consequently, students' choices of research topics for practical activities tend to be conventional, failing to fulfill the primary purpose of practical education. Many students perceive

participation in practical activities as time-consuming and lacking practical significance unless these activities are mandatory. The internal practical activities organized by universities often fail to exert a strong appeal to graduate students.

In conclusion, as China pursues its modernization agenda, establishing a robust practical education mechanism in universities is vital for the stable development of higher education. Universities should combine social practice with the enhancement of professional skills, scientific research, and education. This should be achieved by aligning practical education with the current context of societal development, adapting to changing needs, continuously innovating, and advancing the development of China's education sector. Emphasizing the importance of graduate student practical activities, integrating resources, improving faculty competence, and diversifying practical education forms will not only address current challenges but also pave the way for the cultivation of high-quality, high-impact talent in our society.

5. Conclusion

The exploration of the feasibility path for cultivating practical skills in postgraduate students in higher education should emphasize the integration of theory and practice, closely linking academic knowledge with professional skills. It should provide comprehensive training opportunities for postgraduate students to better meet the demands of modern society for high-level talents.

Acknowledgment

Fund Project: This paper is the phased achievement of the 2021 Jiangsu Provincial University Philosophy and Social Science Research Project "Research on the Cultivation Path of College Students' Vocational Quality in the perspective of" Cultural Confidence "- Taking Universities in Jiangsu Province as an example" (Project No.: 2021SJB0970).

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