

Challenges and Improvements of Postgraduate Funding in China

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Abstract: With the continuous expansion of the enrollment scale of postgraduates and the conducting of the fee-charging policy in China, postgraduate education has entered a new stage of development. It is considered that the funding policies play an important role in helping postgraduates to finish the degree study. In this paper, the types of postgraduate funding and the challenges faced are reviewed, emphasizing the urgency to improve and update funding management systems within Chinese colleges and universities under new situation. Several countermeasures, including accurate funding establishment and performance evaluation, are proposed for the possible improvement.

Keywords: Postgraduate, Accuracy, Challenges, Improvement

1. Introduction

Postgraduate education plays an important role in cultivating high-level talents, and the postgraduate funding system is the basis for ensuring the long-term effectiveness of postgraduate education and motivating postgraduates to focus on scientific research [1].

With the expansion of postgraduate programs in China and the large-scale changes in training model, especially the continuous development of full-time professional degree postgraduates, the postgraduate funding policy has also begun to be continuously reformed [2]. The government has gradually introduced a fee-charging policy in the postgraduate education stage, and has established a comprehensive funding system to meet the financial needs of impoverished students from financially disadvantaged families, and to reward postgraduate students with outstanding academic performance. Postgraduate education has entered a new stage of development, and the full implementation of the charging system has put forward more stringent requirements for the postgraduate funding system [3]. Based on the background of the full implementation of the fee system, this study briefly introduces the current funding type for postgraduate student in China, and emphasizes on the challenges of the current postgraduate funding system for impoverished postgraduate, afterward several measures are proposed for the possible improvement.

2. The Types of Postgraduate Funding

2.1. Postgraduate Academic Scholarship

Belonging to National Scholarship, the Postgraduate Academic Scholarship was established in 2014 by the Ministry of Finance of the People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. The purpose is to encourage postgraduates to study diligently, devote themselves to scientific research, and be innovative and enterprising, and better support postgraduates to complete the the education under the condition of full implementation of fee-charging system. Among the various types of individual scholarships, the Postgraduate Academic Scholarship has the largest award group and amount, reaching 1,910,800 people in 2020, and the award amount was 15.131 billion Chinese Yuan ^[4].

2.2. National Grant

The National Grant is jointly funded and established by the central and local government in China, in order to subsidize the full-time general undergraduate and postgraduate. In 2020, various types of

bursaries will fund a total of 9.8372 million people in general higher education across the country, which is much higher than the number of national scholarships, with a funding amount of 35.076 billion yuan. Among them, the National Scholarship has sponsored a total of 2.1345 million postgraduate students [4], which is the most widely funded and the largest number of awards.

2.3. National Student Loans

National student loans are government-led, credit student loans provided by financial institutions to students from financially disadvantaged families in colleges and universities to help solve tuition and accommodation costs during school. The national student loan interest rate shall follow the benchmark interest rate of the same grade announced by the People's Bank of China in the same period, and will not rise. In order to encourage the enthusiasm of financial institutions to undertake national student loans and establish a loan risk sharing mechanism, the finance (university) will give certain risk compensation to the handling banks. National student loans are credit loans. Students do not need to apply for loan guarantees or mortgages, but they need to promise to repay on time and assume relevant legal responsibilities. In principle, full-time postgraduate students apply for national student loans on campus.

3. Challenges Faced by Postgraduate Funding Management

At present, the management of postgraduate funding has undergone major changes and faces higher requirements under the new situation, which are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

First, after the implementation of the comprehensive tuition and accommodation fee system for postgraduates, the economic pressure on postgraduates increases, and the original funding system cannot adapt to the new situation^[5]. At the same time, the scale of postgraduates continues to expand, the number of students in financial difficulties has surged, and the needs of students are different. The management team for postgraduate funding in colleges and universities needs to update, in order to satisfy all postgraduate students.

The identification of postgraduates from families with financial difficulties should be the original point for postgraduate funding management and be fully incorporated into the design of the policy system^[6]. However, there is no clear standard for how to identify postgraduates from families with financial difficulties at the national, local, university and other levels, and there is still no coordination mechanism for the identification work. Although colleges and universities are provided to have the autonomy and flexibility of funding identification work, the funding work usually combines postgraduate and undergraduate, and arrangements are made at the overall level. It is difficult to achieve specialized, scientific, accurate and humane postgraduate funding change. In the face of complex and diverse group characteristics and family economic conditions, rigid and single funding standards are difficult to meet practical needs, resulting in a lack of accuracy in funding identification, and identification results that cannot meet the needs of the new situation.

The existing scholarship system causes some postgraduates not to pursue the quality of scientific research, but to be proficient in the calculation, and to “research” in order to apply for national scholarships (Postgraduate Academic Scholarship), and academic competition is distorted into “thesis championships”. This is contrary to the original intention of funding. Secondly, compared with undergraduates, postgraduates are more difficult to manage with the growth of age, educational background, social experience, etc. In terms of the management model, they cannot use the methods of undergraduates to “bring out the same”. A more flexible management model is required. Finally, some impoverished postgraduates have a strong sense of self-protection and are unwilling to actively declare poverty information, and it is difficult for financial aid managers to verify their accurate situation.

4. Countermeasures for the Funding Improvement

The reform and adjustment of the funding management work model have laid a solid foundation for the postgraduate funding work in colleges and universities, and various funding work has been performed and initial achievements have been made. Through careful analysis and thinking, it is believed that the further reform of funding management should start from the following aspects:

4.1. Establish the Accurate Funding System

Colleges and universities should set up special funding procedures according to the actual situation of students to ensure full funding coverage for postgraduate from families with financial difficulties. In particular, the identification of students from families with financial difficulties must be objective, and fair. Both results-based management and process-based supervision should be considered [7].

It is possible to promote the establishment of an "Internet + Financial Aid" platform for the financial difficulties of students' families, adhere to the principle of combining qualitative and quantitative identification, and regularly conduct comprehensive assessments of students' background characteristics and financial needs, in addition to considering the family's annual income and other economic conditions. In addition to the status indicators, indicators such as the support status of the student's family, debts due to illness or accident, past financial aid, tuition fees, living expenses, and evaluations by tutors and classmates should also be included in the identification system. As the result, a comprehensive identification system should be established. According to the principle of "one person, one policy", a precise funding plan can be formulated to realize the dynamic adjustment of the postgraduate database and the classification results of families with financial difficulties. Meanwhile, targeted funding policies should be implemented for different types and levels of postgraduate students, such as doctoral students and high-level innovative masters. Research-oriented and incentive-based outcomes can be designed within the funding policy to encourage and guide postgraduates to develop fundamental research.

Implement the management work mode, in which the Civil Affairs Department first identifies the impoverished postgraduate, and the education department then subsidizes it. Large, funding targets and standards are not easy to delineate or clear. Determining poverty simply through the school's regulation of policy standards, counsellor surveys, students' declarations, etc., is difficult and ineffective, and it is difficult to ensure relative fairness, and some impoverished students with high self-esteem are resisting. It is suggested that in combination with the targeted poverty alleviation work of the Civil Affairs Department, the information of the registered poor family members, the urban and rural subsistence allowance family members, the disabled and their family members, etc. should be shared with the education subsidy management department. The data are compared to identify the funding individuals. The university financial aid management department is responsible for implementing various financial aids in accordance with national and school policies and regulations, which not only saves a lot of efforts of financial aid management personnel but also achieves a relatively fair and justice.

4.2. Improve the Performance Evaluation

Performance evaluation is the management method that checks and evaluates the performance of the personnel within an organization according to certain standards and scientific and reasonable methods, and then determines their performance [8]. The performance evaluation of postgraduate funding work can be combined with scientific and reasonable inspections and assessments based on the actual achievements of the postgraduate funding work carried out by colleges and universities. For the improvement of the performance evaluation of postgraduate funding work, the evaluation concept should be reformed and a third-party evaluation agency should be introduced.

Firstly, an objective and impartial evaluation of the postgraduate funding work of colleges and universities can be set up, and a multi-party linkage development evaluation mechanism including the government, colleges and universities, teachers and students, and social donors is proposed to form; Secondly, a funding performance evaluation system is built, to promote efficiency and fairness; on the other hand, it is necessary to conduct in-depth investigations and observe the actual economic situation of the recipients in various aspects; Finally, the postgraduate funding management centre of each university can regularly check the results of postgraduate funding work and funding goals in light of the actual needs of the university's postgraduate funding.

4.3. Implement the "funding" and "education"

Postgraduate funding policy in China has changed from the original postgraduate education single-track system to the postgraduate education dual-track system, to today's comprehensive charging system in recent years. The development of the policy also indicates that the connotation of funding is being continuously deepened, from the initial simple postgraduate financial aid to nowadays. The cultivation of graduate students' innovative abilities has changed from the concept of guarantee-oriented funding at the beginning to the current concept of development-oriented funding. If the college just singly uses high

funding to attract talents, it is easy to form an academic atmosphere of academic misconduct and only targeting-publication among students, then the connotation of the state funding policy is bound to be distorted.

Therefore, all postgraduate training units must firmly grasp the correct direction of the national funding policy, create a healthy academic atmosphere, and ensure the effective implementation of the funding policy. On the one hand, each postgraduate training shall create a cultural environment supported by integrity and gratitude, fully explore the typical deeds of outstanding postgraduates such as recipients of Postgraduate Academic Scholarship, play an important role, and do a good job in publicity and education. On the other hand, attention should be paid to improving the credit awareness of graduate students applying for national student loans, so that they can fully understand the loan regulations and defaulted behaviour. At the same time, the postgraduate funding process should be ensured to follow the principles of fairness, openness and transparency at all levels, and be vigilant against attempts to violate funding rules.

5. Conclusions

The funding work for postgraduate is an indispensable link in the national poverty alleviation strategy. With the continuous deepening of the targeted poverty alleviation work and the continuous expansion of the enrollment scale of postgraduates, the management of postgraduate funding should be improved and updated. It is necessary to constantly make reforms and improvements to adapt to reach accurate funding, to better solve problems for impoverished postgraduate students, and help them complete their studies. Finally, university higher education is a key step in cultivating poor students to succeed. The improvement of all funding management models is for colleges and universities to give full play to the function of educating people based on completing funding.

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