

# *The Mission of the Contemporary University*

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**Abstract:** Mission is an important duty and task, and the mission of the university is the concrete embodiment and external form of “what kind of people the university cultivates”. Universities are the product of social development, and their missions are constantly diversified with the development of society. It is recognized that universities have the three major missions of “talent training, scientific research, and social service”, which are not innate to universities, but have been given in different historical periods. The mission of the University defines the direction of the university’s development and reflects the functions of the university. From cultivating talents to scientific research, and then expanding to serve the society, the evolution of university functions reflects the new requirements that social development constantly puts forward for higher education. With the expansion of the scale of schools and the influence of education marketization, China’s universities are violating the basic mission, and the goal is constantly moving closer to the market, so that university education is getting farther and farther away from the mission of the university, and returning to the essence of educating has become an urgent problem to be solved.

What is the mission of a university? Mission is the subjective attribution of social responsibility to an organization, the recognition of the social responsibilities that an organization must undertake, and the clear expression of value judgments, choices, and pursuits that an organization should have. Based on the connotation of mission, the mission of a university can be defined as the determination of the social responsibility that this particular organization must assume, the judgment, pursuit, and choice of the value that a university should have. It is specifically manifested as the purpose, ideals, objectives, and responsibilities of the university organization.<sup>[1]</sup> Ernest Boyer, an outstanding American educator who served as the President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Chancellor of the State University of New York, also stated, "An effective university has a clear and extremely important mission."<sup>[2]</sup> In this diverse era, what should be the mission of a university? Higher education has developed to this day, integrating functions such as talent cultivation, scientific research, and social service. It assumes more missions and responsibilities than before. However, faced with responsibilities and missions, as well as the complex and ever-changing social reality, we often feel confused and lost: Should universities focus on nurturing individuals or manufacturing tools? Are they "ivory towers" or "pre-employment training centers"? How can universities fulfill their mission perfectly?

## 1. Historical Origins of the Mission of University Education

### 1.1 Talent Cultivation

Tracing back the birth and development of universities both in China and abroad, we can discover that the essence and original intention of university education lie in the exploration of human beings and the world, and the pursuit of truth. Although the emergence of early universities was driven by the societal and national needs of the time, the universities themselves carried a strong sense of idealism. Early universities were more like places where scholars engaged in intellectual discussions, focusing on cultivating individuals' character rather than pursuing practicality. The term "university" has long existed in China. The "Book of Rites - King's Regulations" records: "Elementary schools are to the left of the royal palace, while universities are located in the outskirts." The "Han Shu - Records of Ritual and Music" records: "In ancient times, kings regarded education and cultural transformation as significant tasks, establishing universities to educate the nation and setting up schools to transform the city." The ancient "Four Books" include a work called "The Great Learning," which begins by stating that the primary task of a university is to cultivate individuals to "be virtuous": "The way of the Great Learning lies in the illumination of one's moral character, the loving of the people, and the ultimate achievement of the highest good." These three principles, known as the "Three Guidelines," were a guiding expression of the purpose of universities and the goals of learning for later Chinese higher education. In addition to the "Three Guidelines," "The Great Learning" also presents the "Eight Steps" designed to achieve these guidelines, namely investigating things, acquiring knowledge, being sincere, rectifying the mind, cultivating oneself, managing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world. These steps represent a lifelong journey of self-improvement presented by Confucianism. In summary, the ancient Chinese concept of "The Way of the Great Learning" primarily focused on the function of "talent cultivation." The main objective of talent cultivation was to improve cultural literacy, cultivate moral character, and pursue the realization of personal perfection. This became the fundamental goal of talent cultivation.

The starting point of ancient Western higher education is often attributed to Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum, where the cultivation of well-rounded citizens and the exploration of philosophical knowledge were regarded as important missions of education.

However, there were significant differences between early higher education and modern universities. The modern concept of a university can be traced back to the establishment of the University of Bologna, a medieval university in Italy, in 1088. One of the important reasons for the rise of medieval universities was the society's high demand for professional talents, leading to the establishment of four major disciplines: arts, law, theology, and medicine. The medieval universities, through their degree system, cultivated a large number of professionals, meeting the growing demand for specialized talents in society. Scholars have regarded medieval universities as one of the most valuable and enriching legacies left to modern society. Reflecting on the achievements of medieval universities, Turgan said, "If a medieval student were to return among us and hear us talking about universities, faculties, colleges, teaching authority, doctoral degrees, courses of study, permanent and non-permanent lectures, he would probably think that, apart from the replacement of Latin words previously used, everything remains the same. It is only when he sits in our lecture halls or classrooms that he realizes the changes that have taken place. He would see that academic life has undergone a transformation, but it still flows in the channels dug for it in the Middle Ages." This statement demonstrates the great achievements of medieval universities, and even today, we still continue to use many of the institutions established by medieval universities.

## 1.2 Scientific Research

The "Humboldtian spirit," which emphasizes the integration of teaching and research, marked the transition of medieval universities in the West to modern universities. In 1810, the German philosopher and educational reformer Wilhelm von Humboldt established the University of Berlin, which was the first to combine research and teaching. It revolutionized the traditional model of universities and advocated "academic freedom" and the unity of teaching and research. Humboldt believed that universities should be solely focused on academic pursuits, including the pursuit of knowledge in science and the cultivation of individuality and morality. The University of Berlin, founded by Humboldt, became the origin of modern university research missions, and his educational philosophy profoundly influenced the development of Western universities. <sup>[3]</sup>It became a model for later German universities and gradually spread to the United States, the United Kingdom, and the world, making scientific research an inseparable part of universities. As Hillis said, the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 was a turning point in the history of universities. Almost all universities worldwide that followed were established based on the University of Berlin, bearing its imprint, and most university in China and Johns Hopkins University in the United States underwent reforms based on the research ideals of the University of Berlin.

## 1.3 Social Service

During the period of capitalist industrialization and the full development of a market economy, universities began to diversify, commercialize, and professionalize in response to the needs of economic and social development. Influenced by utilitarian philosophy and practical considerations, universities shifted their focus towards cultivating professionals who could contribute to social and economic development. <sup>[4]</sup>The concept of universities serving society gained traction with the enactment of the Morrill Act in the United States in 1862. The University of Wisconsin was one of the early 20th-century American universities that most thoroughly embraced the idea of public service. It emphasized the university's involvement in state affairs and committed to serving all residents of the state. The Wisconsin Idea clearly stated that university development must be closely linked to social progress, and universities can thrive only by serving the needs of society. These ideas elevated the concept of social service to the same level of importance as talent cultivation and scientific research.

Today, the meaning of university education has become increasingly enriched. James B. Conant, former president of Harvard University, once said, "Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything he learned." Edward Taylor, a legendary professor at Columbia University, always emphasized to incoming students, "The purpose of receiving a university education is selfish. Your mission is to build yourself." In an article on higher education, authors Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus state, "The mission of a university is to make a more interesting you." Drezner believes that the mission of a university is to transform young people into adults.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 2. The Alienation of the Mission of Modern University Education

However, with the development of the economy and social changes, the mission of modern universities has gradually become alienated, resembling highly socialized and commercialized institutions. Currently, utilitarianism and marketization have had a universal impact on educational culture, posing a common crisis for higher education worldwide. The marketization of higher education leads to a deviation from the objective laws of education and neglects the fundamental mission of nurturing individuals. Former Harvard University President Harry R. Lewis once wrote that universities have forgotten their greater educational responsibility to help students find

themselves and discover their own missions. In fact, universities can no longer demonstrate the essence of what their education provides.<sup>[6]</sup>

## 2.1 Emphasis on employment rather than education

With the large-scale expansion of colleges and universities, the employment of college students has become a serious social problem. Based on this, "employment rate" has become an important index to assess the work of universities, and "all for employment" has become the focus of many universities' work. As a result, universities no longer pay attention to the cultivation of students' noble character, but emphasize the training of the means to make a living with clear objectives; they no longer encourage students to look for unattainable ideals, but implicitly guide them to pursue well-paid jobs and worldly happiness. The university is no longer an "ivory tower" in the eyes of students, but a "vocational training center" and a "certification study room". The university acquiesces to society's value orientation: material success equals character, dignity and happiness, and transmits this value orientation to students. And college students no longer come to school to study for knowledge and truth, but to get a diploma, for better career choices and employment opportunities.

People generally began to look at higher education from the perspective of "investment and return", and majors such as law, medicine, computer science and economics began to be fervently pursued. Graduates are rushing to majors that "make money", but majors like literature that do not have "money" are very cold. Nowadays, university has become a "training course" before employment, and students are trained as "employment tools". Where the employment-related courses are not much, either cut, or no one asked for, and the opposite is incomparably popular. Professor Qian Liqun once illustrated the seriousness of this phenomenon with his personal experience. In 2007, after he finished lecturing in a university teacher training course, a university teacher asked him to give an example of what his Lu Xun class could do to promote students' future employment. He was stunned, speechless, and even a bit overwhelmed, and felt his heart ache.<sup>[7]</sup>In short, under the guidance of the marketization of education, the pragmatism of some universities has become popular and diffuse, and universities have long been no ideological position, and not to cultivate "complete personality", but have really become what Mr. Cai Yuanpei called "the place of cultivating qualifications", "the place of selling knowledge". It has become a "vocational training course", a "place for selling knowledge".

## 2.2 Emphasis on the part rather than the whole

"Cultivating builders and successors of socialism who develop morally, intellectually, physically, socially and aesthetically" is the purpose of education in the new era. Under the influence of education marketization and utilitarianism, "all-round development" has become a slogan. Universities pay more attention to the visualization of competitions, scientific research results, the number of papers and rankings, while neglecting the role of education in the moral quality, character building and cultural cultivation of students. The talent cultivation and selection system based on knowledge not only dilutes the cultivation of students' ability, but also causes a crisis in their moral and emotional aspects, and many students lack life planning, social responsibility and interest in learning. Talent based on knowledge alone ignores the cultivation of students' comprehensive quality, so that the education of all-round development is never implemented into practice. The act of focusing on knowledge alone as an indicator and only intellectual education at the expense of the whole is an act of quick success, neglecting to look at students' learning motivation, learning attitude, learning effect, behavioral performance and the interrelationship among them with a developmental perspective. As a result, the educational results of more knowledge but less ability, scores but no personality, high IQ but low EQ can be seen.<sup>[8]</sup>

### 2.3 Emphasis on research rather than teaching

It is a common phenomenon in colleges and universities that "scientific research is emphasized over teaching". From the Ministry of Education to the local education authorities, from the leaders of colleges and universities to teachers, they all put scientific research in a very high position and have various specific and detailed measures to ensure and promote scientific research, while the importance of teaching mostly remains in words. Even the measures formulated by colleges and universities to attach importance to teaching and improve teaching quality are hardly as positive as those formulated for scientific research, and it is more difficult to mobilize the teaching enthusiasm of teachers. This has created a phenomenon that many teachers in colleges and universities suffer from the syndrome of "no publications, no papers, no future". For teachers, when faced with the choice between teaching and scientific research, they are easily tempted by the more "golden" temptations such as title evaluation and funding application to the scientific research end. The reason is that research work is tangible and easier to measure and evaluate, while teaching behavior is difficult to measure. That is why research results are also an important basis and criterion for faculty promotion. As Dr. Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, analyzed, "With a few exceptions, young professors know that if they want to get tenure or be hired at a high level school, they need to achieve a reputation for excellence in academia. This cannot be done by doing a good job of teaching, but by having an impressive record of research work and publications." <sup>[9]</sup>For colleges and universities, research is an important means for a college or university to rank, gain reputation and resources, and a higher reputation can lead to opportunities for growth and a favorable position in the competition. While the reach of teaching is extremely limited, the impact of research can extend beyond the campus and region.

### 2.4 Emphasis on short-term rewards rather than long-term planning

Due to the influence of the marketization of education and utilitarianism, in the choice of majors, college students no longer study for the simple desire to know, nor do they choose their majors for their interest or love, but may choose fields they are not originally interested in because of their wealth, qualifications and reputation. In his book "The Good Sheep," Dresevich exposes the problems with elite education in the United States. The world's top schools produce students who are "good sheep," intelligent, talented, and highly motivated, but at the same time anxious, timid, uncertain about the future, and desperately lacking in curiosity and purpose: they are wrapped in a giant bubble of privilege, and everyone is honestly moving in the the same direction. They measure the value of education in terms of short-term returns or a narrow view of practicality, and economics is the most popular major for them.

At the same time, in terms of course learning, college students are more concerned with more practical things such as grades and credits, and the pursuit of truth or interest in literature is no longer the mainstream motivation for taking courses, and more and more college students are taking courses simply because "high marks are given" or "no naming". More and more college students are choosing courses simply because of "high marks" or "no names", and purely utilitarian motives are becoming the choice of most students. The short-term benefits that education and learning can bring to them are over-valued, and the more important spiritual enrichment and character building that learning knowledge can bring to them is overlooked.

In terms of career planning, teaching and civil service are coincidentally the most sought-after career options for students. As a hotly debated topic in China, more than 70% of graduates from China's top universities, Tsinghua University and Peking University, choose to work for party and government agencies, institutions, state-owned enterprises and other institutional units. Dresevich writes in his book "The Good Sheep" that one of his students once told him that Yale graduates and

graduates from similar schools always feel that if they don't make \$100,000 a year in their first job, then their prestigious degree is a waste. College is supposed to be an arena for diversity and the best platform for students to experiment and explore themselves, but today's college students seem to be gravitating in one direction.

The reason for this is that the contemporary university curriculum and grading system has kept young people accustomed to accomplishing their immediate goals, and if they are asked about their long-term plans for life, they are caught off guard and find it difficult to answer. Young people, who have been chased by exams and higher education since childhood, are confused about choosing a major and a career, and they generally lack long-term plans for their future, but value short-term rewards from education. In such a situation of confusion among college students, it becomes normal to choose majors and industries only by relying on secular judgment standards and utilitarian pursuits.

### **3. Reshape the Mission of Modern University Education**

University should not be a pure research station, nor a factory assembly line for mass production of talents according to uniform specifications, but an academic hall for preachers and inquirers, and a common spiritual home for exploring profound knowledge. It should teach us how to think and find the future direction of life instead of a stable and decent job; teach us to choose our heart instead of "money" professions and industries; teach us to listen to our inner voice instead of the voice of our family and society; teach us to become a complete person instead of a person who only studies and takes exams. The university should be a sanctuary of innovative scientific knowledge and a "cradle" for the cultivation of innovative talents, not a base for "academics".

#### **3.1 Adhere to the Fundamental Mission of Talent Cultivation**

The cultivation of talents is the foundation of the university. The reason why universities exist is that they can cultivate talents of different specifications and types. If a university forgets its students and its foundation, it will no longer be called a university, but a research institution or a cultural institution. In the trend of marketization, the society demands more and more from the university, and the university listens to the market more and more and more, and keeps moving closer and closer to the market. However, the university should not change its fundamental mission and become a short-sighted "processing plant for technical personnel" and orient itself to the market. Rector of Moscow University Sadodnicki pointed out that "if universities are seduced by the immediate profitability and thus become fully commercialized, they will tend to produce purely practical or instrumental knowledge in society". In this way higher education will not be able to develop in a healthy way in the long term. Before meeting the needs of society as professionals, university education should first of all train students to become cultured and moral people. Therefore, universities in China should correct the current "market-oriented" orientation, and as institutions that train people, they should consider the training of students as their social responsibility that they must concentrate on, and be responsible for them. Universities should establish a people-oriented value, and devote themselves to improving and creating a nurturing environment that respects students, cares for them, loves them, and is conducive to their healthy growth and success. University education should not only prepare students for their careers, but also guide them to learn to think and judge, to become a "finished person", to develop the ability to think beyond space and time, and to be unrestricted by work. Only in this way can we cultivate well-rounded people who are beneficial to society.

### 3.2 Reviving Humanistic Education

Education should first cultivate "people" and then "talents". Humanities education can play an important role in cultivating students' sound and independent personalities, forging noble qualities, enhancing broad knowledge, and improving their humanistic qualities, making up for the shortcomings of professional education in schools, and correcting the tendency of professionalism, vocationalism, pragmatism, and utilitarianism in university education. The purpose of education is not only the acquisition of knowledge and training of professional abilities, but also the development of the personality of the educated person. Humanistic education emphasizes the concept that university education must cultivate young people as "whole persons", not only to learn to do things and become professionally competent and knowledgeable, but more importantly to cultivate them to become good, decent people and responsible citizens. As Whitehead said: "We want to create people who are both literate and have expertise. Expertise lays the foundation for their beginnings, while culture, like philosophy and art, leads them to the profound and profound."<sup>[10]</sup> University education should not only give students the skills to make a living, but also focus on the development of people themselves, guiding them to pursue the value of existence, to understand the true meaning of life, and to pursue the meaning of life.

### 3.3 Establish a Scientific Evaluation System

The evaluation system is the evaluation standard for the university to achieve its mission, and the evaluation of teaching and research influences the operation of the university and the behavior of teachers to a great extent. Teaching and research should have their own measurement standards, and it is not right to replace the evaluation of teaching with the indicators of research. It is also unscientific to adopt a uniform approach and standard in the evaluation of research and teaching in different schools, for different purposes, and in different disciplines. If academic papers and research results are used as the "hard currency" to measure the level of teachers or schools, this will inevitably lead to the abandonment of the two missions of human resources training and social service. Therefore, in order to make the university take up its mission, it is necessary to establish an evaluation system that is compatible with this mission, and through institutionalized guidance, the mission of the university will become the conscious action of all staff members.

### 3.4 Enhance the "Uniqueness" of the Mission

The convergent mission of university is bound to lead to the emergence of universities without individuality, and the convergent development of university indicates the great waste of resources and the suicide of university. To achieve misaligned development, the key is to find your own development goals, the prerequisite for which is to determine the mission of the university scientifically. At present, many universities are developing into research universities, but what society needs are different specifications and different types of talents. When both families and graduates acquiesce to the reasonable and inevitable behavior of "taking public examinations", what permeates the culture and is passed to college students is the pursuit of the status of public officials, the pursuit of career stability and security, and other shallow self-interested mixed values, which are incompatible with the diversified, composite and innovative talents needed for the development of society in the new era. This kind of bad values is contrary to the diversified, complex and innovative talents required by the new era of social development.<sup>[11]</sup> At the same time, the convergence of college types and college students' professional values will undoubtedly lead to the reduction of educational efficiency. Many talents who should shine in other fields rush to the ranks of employment, which inhibits the innovation ability that should play a role, and the efficiency of education will undoubtedly

be reduced.

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