

## Exploration and Practice of Applied Undergraduate Education<sup>1</sup>

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**[Abstract]** This article highlights application and ability cultivation in current undergraduate education. It discusses how to achieve an application-oriented and ability-focused undergraduate education, taking for example Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages' exploration and practice of applied undergraduate education.

**[Keywords]** undergraduate education; application-oriented ability; internationalization

Applied undergraduate education has two focal questions: What does it offer to students and how does it educate students? According to statistics, from 1999 to 2010, a total of 319 new undergraduate-level colleges and universities were established in China. They accounted for 40.4% of all the 789 higher education institutions offering regular undergraduate education and have become the driving force in the development of Chinese higher education. Newly established, most of them are still at the climbing stage of integration, restructuring, upgrading, and development. They face a demanding task, the content construction of their undergraduate education. Among their common difficulties is the reforming of their undergraduate education mode.

Going international and focusing on application have become buzz words among Chinese higher education institutions. This study is based on the exploration and practice of the applied undergraduate education of Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Province, China (Hereafter called "Yuexiu"). The focus is to gain answers to each of the two questions above in regard to the reforming of undergraduate education in newly established Chinese universities..

### Applied Undergraduate Education at Yuexiu University

The two key words summarizing Yuexiu's advanced education ideas are *application* and *ability*. Taking application-oriented ability as the main thread, all of Yuexiu's curricula, teaching, and extracurricular activities are focused on developing students' application-oriented abilities.

#### *Six Advanced Education Ideas*

Yuexiu focuses on coordinated development of students' knowledge, ability and quality. It values four advanced international education ideas on application-oriented ability, namely research-oriented learning, service learning, critical thinking, and exploratory practice ability ("RSCE Abilities" for short). It also adopts two advanced international ideas on teaching and evaluation; they are service teaching and formative assessment.

Yuexiu places great importance on Stanford's emphasis on "Practical Education" (Lyman 2009: 2-3), through which students develop their skills and abilities by gaining personal experience and become well prepared for professional success. The University of California's mission of undergraduate education is to transmit both knowledge and ability<sup>2</sup>. Its instructional programs at the undergraduate level integrate knowledge, skills and abilities, of which it has devised a detailed, long list in terms of job descriptions<sup>3</sup>. Newman (1996) lays emphasis on the ability of independent thinking and research. Its core idea is cultivating the ability of logical thinking, the ability to think, analyst of synthesize, and judge. In other words, it stresses the coordinated development of knowledge and ability. The University of

<sup>1</sup> Paper for Global Education Consortium Annual Conference 2013, Ningxia, China.

<sup>2</sup> "UC's Mission". <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/aboutuc/mission.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Defining skills, knowledge, and abilities". <http://www.college.ucla.edu/personnel/jobdesc/ska.asp>.

Cambridge states explicitly that its education encourages a questioning spirit<sup>4</sup>. University of Indianapolis, one of Yuexiu's overseas cooperation partners, encourages its faculty, staff and students to participate in service learning and community service programs<sup>5</sup>. It has been selected for the 2010 President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll by the Corporation for National and Community Service<sup>6</sup>.

Bearing such advanced educational ideas in mind, Yuexiu encourages its students to question, investigate and problem solve. Students are encouraged to practice such specific abilities as reverse and philosophical thinking, synthetic abstraction, logical reasoning and cross-validation. They learn multi-dimensional reference and dynamic perspective. They learn how to acquire and utilize information, knowledge, technology and tools. They also learn how to function, organize, cooperate, communicate and develop themselves in a sustainable way.

### ***International Curricula***

The design of a curriculum reflects teachers' values, students' abilities and the school mission. Curriculum design is constantly changing and evolving. With RSCE abilities plus service teaching and formative assessment as its guiding education concepts, Yuexiu seeks new breakthroughs and innovative efforts in curriculum design. It integrates the developing of application-oriented abilities into courses and curricula. International courses such as *western civilization*, *critical thinking* and *public speaking* have been introduced that suit both China's national conditions and students' development of their thinking and cross-cultural communication abilities.

### ***International modular design***

Yuexiu's curriculum of a given major adopts the international modular design and is composed of three components, the major, a foreign language, and the overall quality component. The foreign language component of a foreign language major is another foreign language. Every major has its main courses, core courses, and concentration courses. Minors are open to students. A student majoring in English, for example, is expected to choose a minor, in addition to his or her concentration, such as international finance, international logistics, information management, international trade, or financial management.

Course articulation and credit mutual recognition. Yuexiu has launched several course articulation and credit mutual recognition programs with US universities. They offer students at Yuexiu a chance to study undergraduate programs in the US. They also offer teachers at Yuexiu a chance to follow latest international trends in undergraduate education, which are an indispensable driving force in the reform of Yuexiu's curricular design, teaching philosophy and teaching methodology.

International practice education. Following the latest development in international practice education, Yuexiu has launched many overseas programs to enhance the content, quality and efficiency of its practice education, an integrated part of its undergraduate education. It has established cooperative partnerships with colleges, universities and enterprises in such foreign countries as Korea, Japan, Australia, America, Britain, France, Italy, and Spain. Students are encouraged to participate in overseas internships, exploratory practice projects, visiting student programs, survey, investigation and research programs, and attend international student conferences, which help to improve their foreign language proficiency. These activities also help to enhance their overseas work experience, and develop their international vision and perspective. The project-based practice teaching integrates both projects into its knowledge frameworks and processes into its ability frameworks, making it possible for students to undergo a four-year-long practice education and ability development.

Service learning and community service. Besides the service learning in international practice education, students at Yuexiu are expected to earn two credits by participating service learning and community service programs, which often involve local voluntary community service opportunities and

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<sup>4</sup> "The University's mission and core values". <http://www.cam.ac.uk/about-the-university/how-the-university-and-colleges-work/the-universitys-mission-and-core-values>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://cpc.uindy.edu/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://cpc.uindy.edu/>

aim at developing students' social awareness, work ethics, moral reasoning, sense of public goods and welfare, self-regulation and self-development, civic engagement preparedness, lifestyle preparedness and the like with real-life voluntary experiences.

### ***International Teachers***

Yuexiu recruits more than 100 foreign teachers every year. There are few colleges or universities in China that have as many foreign teachers as Yuexiu. For example, this fall, its College of English, has 34 foreign teachers from several different English-speaking countries.

While foreign teachers in other Chinese college and universities are mostly language teachers, they do more than teach just language courses at Yuexiu. Many of the instructors teach more specialized courses, as in the case of cooperative teaching (to be discussed later). Besides teaching, some foreign teachers also participate in the teaching affairs management at Yuexiu. Yuexiu has established a joint collaborative management system from the perspective of cross-cultural management. Foreign teachers may function as course leaders, teaching-affairs supervisors, and workshop chairs.

So far Yuexiu has sent abroad a number of its faculty members to study doctorate programs and has also sent faculty members to study short-term programs as visiting scholars.

### ***International Teaching Methodology***

To teach a course well needs to deliver adequate information, making information close to fact and putting fact into knowledge frameworks. It also needs to make knowledge carry wisdom with it and raise wisdom to philosophical heights.

Segmented teaching and team teaching. Yuexiu introduces segmented teaching into its undergraduate education, featuring the concept of "starting low, sloping upwards, and reaching a high level". "Starting low" takes into consideration of students' starting point. Students may have a low starting point. "Sloping upwards" makes sure that the difficulty level in students' learning tasks and activities rises bit by bit so that most if not all the students can follow and catch up with their undergraduate programs. "Reaching a high level" ensures that Yuexiu produces qualified graduates.

Cooperative teaching and dual instructors. Some of Yuexiu's courses adopt cooperative teaching and dual instructors. They invite experts and scholars from universities and enterprises in both China and the US to function as instructors. They promote teaching through research questions, projects, programs, cases, problems and practice, integrating such questions and projects as mentioned in the preceding sentence into relevant knowledge and ability frameworks. Theory is combined with practice, and practice is united with theory. Both instructors and students are deeply involved in teaching activities, with students learning by doing and doing to learn. Both Chinese and American universities, communities, enterprises, and instructors are fully integrated in teaching and learning. Education programs, scientific research projects, and enterprise projects are fully integrated in teaching and learning. All of the three participants, the universities, communities and industries benefit from this type of teaching. Furthermore students enjoy the advantages of this integration in their studies.

The university-enterprise cooperative teaching is particularly helpful and beneficial. It enables students to understand corporate culture and the community and learn teamwork spirit at an earlier time than usual. It also enables students to gain better training and practice as regarding their thinking, innovation, teamwork, planning, analyzing and other practical application-oriented aspects than the traditional classroom and book knowledge. It usually involves teaching through research questions, project, programs, cases, problems and practice, which makes it possible for students to participate in instructors' scientific research and enjoy their guidance. The teaching, learning and research follow and meet the demands of society. They directly follow the market trends and first-hand information about these trends, which help update and supplement the knowledge frameworks and offer effective ways to cultivate student's innovation ability.

### ***Three-guidance Teaching***

Yuexiu has developed a three-guidance teaching methodology so as to further promote course

development and enhance teachers' teaching quality, efficiency, student autonomous learning ability and efficiency. The three-guidance teaching emphasizes the role of an instructor as a guide to students in the course of teaching and learning. Instructors are to inspire, lead, demonstrate, answer questions, make comments and interact with students before class, in class and after class. They guide students on how to do: research learning, critical thinking, exploratory practice, and strengthen students' reasoning, abstracting and analyzing ability, which help students gain competitive advantages in learning and finding jobs.

### ***Student Self-Management***

Yuexiu has set up a three-self-management system. Students are urged to practice self-learning, self-education, and self-service, which enable students to lay down a solid foundation for their sustainable personal development in their study, life and future careers.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Yuexiu has benefitted greatly from the advanced education ideas as discussed above. It started its course articulation and credit mutual recognition program with two US universities in 2009 and co-founded Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages UIndy International College with the US University of Indianapolis in 2010. According to the provincial higher education institutions' internationalization rankings released in August, 2013 by the Department of Education of Zhejiang Province, it ranks second in the provincial colleges and universities of its kind.

Its applied undergraduate education has proved fruitful. More and more of its students participate in overseas programs, attend international student conferences, and go to internationally renowned universities to study undergraduate and graduate programs. More and more of its graduates have found jobs in international companies and government public service sectors. For colleges and universities of its kind, Yuexiu's efforts in applied undergraduate education have provided good answers to the two questions raised at the very beginning of this article. And the core ideas behind its applied undergraduate education are going international and focusing on application-oriented abilities.

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