

How to realize social fairness and equality through distance and open learning?

A case study of CCRTVU

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Abstract:

The right to education is one of the fundamental human rights. Many international laws, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, etc set forth the equal right of every person to education. Accordingly, many countries have developed corresponding laws and regulations to guarantee the implementation of education rights. So it is with China. For the past decades, China has formed a relatively perfect legal system for education. The Constitution of People's Republic of China adopted on December 4, 1982 stipulates the general principles of equal rights to education. On the basis of that, China established a dozen of specific laws and regulations on education in which concrete rights to education are proclaimed.

To realize equal right to education is to guarantee most people to receive education and more people to enjoy higher education. Applying the American scholar, Professor Martin Trow's concept about the three phases of higher education, which are Elite Education, Mass Education and Popularizing Education, China is now stepping out of the elite education phase and progressing to the mass education.

For the past ten years, China's higher education is developing fast. The overall active enrolment from various kinds of higher educational institutions has amounted to 23 million and the recruits from higher education institutions have reached over 5 million by 2005. Though the gross rate for enrollment has been 21%, many people who intent to continue their study are closed outside the door of the higher education institutions and many who want to upgrade their knowledge and skill cannot find the places suitable to their concrete conditions. Therefore, there is great potential to develop open learning and distance education so that different people's requirement for education and training can be satisfied.

Keywords: Equal right to education, mass education, equity

Introduction:

I. Theory of education democracy and human right

The right to education is one of the fundamental human rights. Many international laws set forth the equal right of every person to education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted and proclaimed in 1948 is

actually “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations”, which stipulates the right to education as “everyone has the right to education. Meanwhile, it emphasized that “higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.” “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.” It is also the kernel of UNESCO's mission and an integral part of its constitutional mandate. UNESCO's Constitution adopted in London on 16 November 1945 expresses: “The Belief of its founders in full and equal opportunities for education for all...advance the ideal of equality of educational opportunity...” The right to education is reiterated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted in 1966 and entered into force in 1976. It emphasizes that “Education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society...Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education.” The UNESCO's Director-General on the occasion of Human Rights Day on December 10, 2003 further declared, “ The right to education is fundamental for achieving human rights in general.” So we may say that enforceability of the right to education is indeed a challenging task. It primarily depends upon national legal system.

Many countries have developed corresponding laws and regulations to guarantee the implementation of education rights. So it is with China. For the past decades, China has formed a relatively perfect legal system for education. The Constitution of People's Republic of China adopted on December 4, 1982 is the nationally fundamental law. In the Article 46 of this law, it outlines, “Citizens of the People's Republic of China have the duty as well as the right to receive education. The state promotes the all-round moral, intellectual and physical development of children and young people”. On the basis of that, China established six related laws on education, among which, Education Law of People's Republic of China is regarded as the basic one, which was made into effect on September 1, 1995. The Education Law specifies the equal right of each citizen to education. It sets out that “Citizens in the People's Republic of China shall have the right and obligation to receive education.” And “citizens shall enjoy equal opportunities for education in accordance with the law regardless of their ethnic group, race, sex, occupation, property status or religious belief.” The Education Law focuses on the equal education opportunity to different minority ethnic groups, females, disabled persons and regulates to provide assistance and convenience to them for education. Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China, which came into effect in January 1, 1999, also stresses the higher education right to each citizen. It highlights to guarantee the minority nationalities and students with financial

difficulties to receive higher education. As for the disabled students, the Law illustrates that “Institutions of higher learning must admit disabled students who meet the admission standards set by the state and must not refuse to admit them for their disabilities.” Besides that, other specific laws such as Compulsory Education Law, Vocational Education law, Education Regulations for Disabled Persons also make specific regulations about citizens’ equal right to education.

According to UNESCO World Education Report in 1995, the higher education enrollment rate of North America reached to 82% in 1992, 21% for the middle-income countries, and 6% for the lower-income countries. According to Professor Martin Trow’s concept about the three phases of higher education, which include Elite Education, Mass Education and Popularizing Education, China is now stepping out of the elite education phase and progressing to the phase of mass education. America, Korea, Japan, Brazil, India and some western European countries have been already in the process of popularizing higher education. Higher education popularizing has brought great benefits to the development of human equality, economy, society and populace’s quality as seen from the experiences of developed countries. To realize mass and popularizing higher education depends on economic development and national policy. The process of higher education popularizing has really witnessed that various and multi-level schools, multi-functional community colleges and open universities facing to the mass have indeed brought in real benefits to the social fairness and education equity.

II. What role will ODL play in China?

For the past ten years, China’s higher education is developing very fast. According to certain statistics, there are 1867 conventional higher education institutions, 444 adult higher education institutions and 278 private-owned higher education institutions by 2006. The overall active enrolment in 2007 from various kinds of higher educational institutions has amounts to 18 million and more than 70 million people have received higher education institutions. Meanwhile, the number of enrolment in the adult higher education institutions is nearly 2 million. Just as our Vice Premier Chen Zhili said, “China has already become a large country for higher education, which has offered strong support to our construction of modernization and made a crucial step for our country from a highly populated country to a vigorous country of human resources.” Though the gross rate for enrollment in the university has reached 23% in 2006, many people who intends to continue their study are closed outside the door of the higher education institutions and many who want to upgrade their knowledge and skill cannot find the places suitable to their concrete conditions. As traditional institutions could not be evenly distributed in the country and educational infrastructure and resources are quite different in different parts of

China, we can see observe the phenomenon that the contradictions between educational provision and deployment of the resources are still a big problem. This indicates the imbalance development for higher education between the east and west, between the urban and the rural, among different areas and communities within a certain region or between different institutions. Owing to the above-mentioned reasons, we can see that there is great potential to develop open learning and distance education so that different people's requirement for education and training can be satisfied. Meanwhile, the problem of educational imbalance can be solved by sharing resources among different regions through distance education institutions and with modern educational technologies.

China Radio and television universities were established in the late 1970's or early 1980's. Through nearly 30 years of development, the RTVUs have developed into a nation-wide distance education system with so many branch schools scattered all of the country. Many people look at the RTVUs as the stair-steps to enter higher-level education and the system itself defines its mission to offer opportunities to all of the social members. The orientation of the CRTVUs' system is obviously clarified since it was set up to serve people from the grass-roots units, from the rural, remote areas and the region with minority groups. And it has now proved through concerted efforts from both central and local institutions that large numbers of graduates have been trained and these graduates have played very important roles on their post. When many students reviewed their past experiences, they all seemed excited and proud. Many surveys indicate that the CRTVUs system has met the demand of the social members: The satisfactory rate from the employers has reached 83.3% and the satisfactory rate from the graduates has reached 80.5%. We may see that different levels of the CRTVUs' courses have drawn attention of more and more people, which include degree, diploma, single course, certificate and many other training programs. Different people with different aims have really benefited from this system.

It is true that all of the open and distance education institutions in the world are now applying new technologies to enhancing their undertakings. Both synchronous and asynchronous interactive tools enabled teaching and learning to take place at anytime, anywhere and for any people, which also facilitate the social fairness. With traditional methodology and new media, open access is now increasing and educational democracy is being realized. Many evidences show that the integrated teaching methodology has enabled distance education to be more flexible and convenient. According to local conditions, people can use different ways to acquire knowledge and skill and develop their competences. From the experiences of CCRTVU, we can see that open education has in fact increased the number of enrolment and meanwhile make contribution to the social stability and development.

III. Good practice from CCRTVU

The open idea has been rooted in the mind of our instructors and administrators since CCRTVU was established. Our philosophy is clear to all: we have to serve all the social members and try to make every endeavor to provide support and services. We uphold blended learning format, never neglect the demands from a small-sized group. We argue that it is important to develop course materials as they contain the necessary content of knowledge. At the same time, we treasure the support for distance learners more. In our view, content may only disseminate information and knowledge, and support may encourage our students to be independent learners and then to be qualified citizens to make contribution to the world. We advocate effective learning process, as it is very important for the students to be on the way to success. We encourage independent learning, collective learning, guided-learning and allow students to be adapted to various kinds of learning environment and participate proactively in various kinds of learning activities. We ask the students to make self-assessment and reflect from what they have done. We implement interactive feedback and ask our professionals to be more responsive and responsible. We take the view that the effective learning process is the basic element for quality assurance.

With a view of facilitating social convenience, relevance and flexibility, we extend our service to the general public by developing a public learning platform, where e-students may register and take examinations and relevant institutions can obtain various kinds of assistance. When we develop and build ourselves, we also adhere to the principle of collaboration and make full use of the social strength and resources to develop cost effective open education programs. For years, we have developed collaborations with some government organizations, with some trades and industries, with other conventional universities, with some corporations and companies, with the communities, associations and people's banks. The new mechanism of collaboration has been enforced through operation and in-service adult learners of all walks have benefited from the learning programs.

While, when we deliver regular open education programs, we focus our attention particularly on the people who are in best needs. We know that distance education is an integrated part of our whole nation's educational system, for distance education can provide more opportunities for various kinds of learners both in urban and rural, for continuing education or life-long learning. To look at what we have done in the past few years, we may see the achievements and success for open education practised in China.

One of the progresses within the CRTVUs' system is that up till now we have the branch schools established in every province and autonomous region, including in the Tibet. As every body knows that China has multiple minority

groups, it is important to improve the whole nation's education quality. However, owing to limited capacity of regular higher educational institutions, not all the people who aspire to higher education institutions can realize the dreams of the ordinary people. And in fact, distance education institutions have already played a very important role. It is estimated that the tuition fees from CRTVUs are only one-third of that of conventional universities, so it is affordable for most people to receive their diploma or degree education from the CRTVUs. Meantime, CRTVUs have also developed bilingual learning programs in some areas so that the local minority people can also enjoy programs in their own dialect through CRTVUs' education system. To our knowledge, the newly established Tibetan Education College has now enrolled nearly 2000 active students, which has great impact upon the Tibetan economic prosperity.

Another achievement is our efforts in providing higher education to the disabled people. As there are 60 million disabled people in China, we think that we need to consider how to allow those people to benefit from the CRTVUs. The successful story of "Steven Hawking" (1942-) has inspired our educators and give them confidence to establish an Education College for the Disabled depending on the CRTVUs system. This aspiration came true in 2002. It started in Shenzhen and now 16 teaching venues have been set up, where the disabled people can register to learn English, digital media, community administration and social work. At the college, the disabled people find their own value: though they suffer some physical defect, they can do valuable things for the society and can be useful for other people. According the latest report, the Education College for Disabled has more than 2000 people involved in the programs.

Like in many other countries, distance education can find its way in the military bases, in the camps and in the remote islands. So it is with the CRTVUs' system. To meet the demands of the soldiers and officers, we have two military colleges established, which have learning programs to the hands of the military personnel. Now more than 40,000 soldiers or officers have taken up their study. They learned knowledge and necessary skills through various kinds of courses, which has not only enriched their daily life, but also improved their educational standards and technological level. The specialties of law, administration, business management, estate management, computer science and its applications have extended their field of vision, which really added much value to them.

The popular projects of "Training women teachers for tomorrow," "Supporting 100 counties to wipe out poverty" and "One student in one village," have really gained good results. Since education for sustainable development in the rural areas should not be only for primary and secondary schooling, distance education institutions have to assume the responsibility for higher level

education programs and training projects. Up till now, the CRTVUs have not only developed many programs, but also taken the learning package to the local peasants. As the programs can help the rural peasants to lead better-off life, the peasants are willing to select different training classes and attended the learning projects. We can see that the radical issue to change the fate of the poor is nothing but education.

The outcomes of all the above-mentioned projects have created great impact. The number of students is increasing, the programs are flourishing, and the outcome is obvious. Through these practice, there is hope to transform the concept of life-long learning into social actions. Now people have recognized ODL as an effective channel to realize democracy and equality for higher education in developing countries. The social value can be seen in educational provision, and educational provision can promote social progress vice versa.

IV. How can we develop further?

There is no doubt that there is potential to further develop ODL in China. However, we need to go further by building up our capacity and strength.

First, we need to adhere to the principle of reaching quality education to every member of our society, which calls us to develop more qualified educational resources and much more varieties of supporting services. We need to do further investigation of how to make our curriculum to be closer to the market, to be useful to the potential career of our students, and to be valuable for the sustainable development of our society.

Secondly, we need to explore new methodology to make our education programs more relevant and more suitable to different kinds of learning groups and communities. We need to make a study of different people's learning motivation, their learning behavior and their learning expectations. We need to make every student to be successful through our good efforts.

Thirdly, we have to make full use of the new technologies to support ODL's development, especially the interactive-functioned tools and social software. We also need to forge technology strategy, realizing the differences existed in different areas and cultures. We need to explore further the advantages of each medium and people's attitudes towards the media so that we can have media to be better optimized.

Furthermore, we know good practice can never work without professional development and effective management. Distance education practitioners & policy-makers both need to reflect themselves at regular times. Though many fundamental changes are taking place, we can predict by scientific analysis and vision. Distance education is a long-term strategy in developing countries, so careful design and prediction have to be made and also to adjust and supplement when it is carried out.

Conclusions: It is nearly 60 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was issued. All the peoples and nations takes the right to education as one of the basic human rights and many countries have taken actions to transferred the elite education into mass and popularity of higher education among citizens. So it is with the Chinese cases. The government has developed many effective measures to promote higher education and distance education is regarded as one of the effective ways to realize the goal of popularizing higher education in China. The CRTVUs' system has made contributions to China's democracy in higher education through its operation, which offers opportunities to many people to enjoy the right of education. The different kinds of projects conducted in the CRTVUs' system has witnessed that ODL has brought about great changes in the students and trainees, which indicates the great contribution of distance learning will be boundless. Though we have done a lot, there is still a long way to go as we expect to build up a national life-long learning system and to serve the general public better. We will strive for the goodness of the whole nation through more efforts and wisdom.

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