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Achieving Transformation in Newly Built Undergraduate Colleges

Zhang Shan^{1*}, Sheiladevi Sukumaran¹, He Ju²

** Corresponding Author*

¹ Faculty of Education, Languages, Psychology & Music, SEGi University, Malaysia

² Faculty of Teacher Education, Nanyang Institute of Technology, China

261112338@qq.com, sheiladevisukumaran@segi.edu.my, 365463996@qq.com
Tel: +8615837739778

Abstract

With limited policy support and assorted challenges, newly built undergraduate colleges (NBUC) encounter challenges in their development. This study aimed to explore strategies for significantly enhancing the quality of NBUC. The findings highlight that NBUC grapples with issues like undefined educational objectives and an impractical faculty structure. Drawing from these challenges, this research proposes effective measures for the progress of NBUC: strengthening policy support and guidance, refining relevant policies and regulations, and fostering collaboration between universities and industries. It is imperative for colleges to articulate their institutional purpose and objectives while also establishing a diverse teaching team.

Keywords: Quality; Transformation; Newly built undergraduate colleges

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Research background

In China, a group of newly built undergraduate colleges created through mergers, upgrades, and other methods were now searching for more suitable models for their growth and development. Since October 2015, when the Ministry of Education and three other departments issued the "Guiding Opinions on Guiding Some Local Ordinary Undergraduate Colleges to Transform into Applied Universities," the government has been actively guiding the transformation of these newly built undergraduate colleges into applied universities. This guidance was based on the insights from independent reforms undertaken by some of these newly built undergraduate colleges. This shift towards transforming newly built undergraduate colleges into applied universities focusing on practical applications has become a national policy requirement. It was a unique innovation in how colleges are run and a reform in higher education that addresses supply-side challenges. The transformation and development of these newly built undergraduate colleges have the potential to provide high-quality higher education.

As the social and industrial landscape changes, the mismatch between college talent cultivation and the job market demands becomes more evident. For these newly built undergraduate colleges, achieving a quality transformation was not just a choice but a vital challenge. Completing this transformation was a critical consideration that these colleges must undertake.

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1.2 Purposes of the study

Examining the current development of newly built undergraduate colleges, it is evident that these institutions commonly encounter issues such as inadequate funding, lack of distinctive characteristics of schools, and underdeveloped teaching staff. These challenges significantly hinder the successful transition of these colleges into high-quality education. Consequently, there is an immediate need to identify and address the obstacles that have emerged during the transformation of these newly built undergraduate colleges. This will involve exploring strategies to facilitate their journey toward achieving a higher level of educational excellence.

1.3 Significance of the study

This study has identified vital perspectives and gaps based on a comprehensive analysis of existing literature. It has thoroughly examined the current state of newly built undergraduate colleges transforming. This exploration deeply into the challenges and issues obstructing achieving high-quality transformation in these institutions. Subsequently, the study has formulated specific targeted recommendations to enhance the quality of transformation. The overarching goal is to contribute to the theoretical framework surrounding the quality transformation of newly built undergraduate colleges in China.

This research aims to identify prevailing issues in the advancement of newly built undergraduate colleges by assessing their transformational progress. By identifying and summarizing the practical obstacles and underlying reasons behind the challenges faced during the high-quality transformation of these colleges, the study also sorts out the relevant factors influencing their development. Ultimately, the research presents actionable strategies to facilitate the high-quality transformation of newly built undergraduate colleges, offering valuable insights for policymakers and governmental bodies in formulating relevant policies.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Challenges in the Transformation of Newly Built Undergraduate Colleges

The process of transforming newly built undergraduate colleges is primarily marked by four distinct challenges (Pan, 2021). These include the challenge of defining objectives and constructing appropriate systems, the limitations posed by managing comprehensive transformation and localized changes, the interrelation between designing specialized programs and fostering distinct characteristics, and the clash between collaborating with businesses affiliated with the college and aligning with particular interest orientations. Li (2023) has highlighted challenges in transforming newly constructed undergraduate colleges. These include issues like the incomplete transformation of ideas, a gradual pace in the development of talent cultivation processes, and the presence of imperfections in the governance structures of contemporary universities. Recognizing the importance of addressing these concerns, it becomes imperative to implement appropriate measures that facilitate the advancement of transformation and development in these newly built educational institutions. Building upon this perspective, Qi (2023) emphasizes that newly built undergraduate universities grapple with similar obstacles while pursuing high-quality transformation. These challenges involve outdated ideological concepts, deficient needs for teaching staff capabilities, and inadequacies within internal governance systems. Drawing insights from the proven practices observed in the talent cultivation models of German applied universities, this study offers practical recommendations aimed at fostering the high-quality transformation and development of newly constructed undergraduate colleges.

2.2 The Path of High-Quality Transformation of Newly Built Undergraduate Colleges

According to Xie (2021), building a high-quality education system is a significant decision and deployment by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. Newly built undergraduate colleges must adhere to a guiding principle where educational positioning development direction. This involves consolidating a shared developmental vision through goal-oriented management and propelling progress through comprehensive reforms. Enhancing our capacity for nurturing talent, reinforcing the construction of academic disciplines, actively engaging with societal needs, modernizing institutional governance, and propelling the advancement of these newly built undergraduate universities all contribute significantly to supporting the broader goal of crafting an exemplary education system. Huang (2022) highlights the importance of newly built undergraduate colleges in actively challenging their comfort zones and enhancing the modernization of university governance capabilities. This transformation process should involve expanding the scope of external engagement, improving the support and implementation mechanisms specific to these institutions, and effectively responding to and leading the new economic development landscape.

By promoting transformation and development, these newly built undergraduate colleges can contribute to advancing education modernization and the overall strength of higher education, thus facilitating the progress toward building a strong nation. Cheng Bin, Jiao Rong, and Cao Yujuan (2023) propose a clear roadmap for the high-quality transformation of newly built undergraduate colleges. They advocate prioritizing the educational direction and mission of addressing local social needs. This involves aligning with the principles that govern higher education to bolster the colleges' capacity for social service.

The literature review reveals that there is a wealth of existing research results, one type of which is research on the macro level of the transformation of newly built undergraduate colleges as a whole, and the other type which is an in-depth research on a particular aspect of the transformation, such as curriculum reform, talent cultivation, which provide a valuable foundation for this study. However, current research needs to pay more attention to the micro level, which is the problem this study seeks to address. On this basis, this study will attempt to use the research method of case study to analyze the case college from the meso level of each schooling element and explore the micro-level of faculty in transition.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research design

Qualitative research involves researchers utilizing various data collection methods as investigative tools within natural settings. This allows for a comprehensive and profound exploration of the subject of research. The researchers draw conclusions and theories from the original data, leading to an interpretative understanding of the subject's behavior and how it constructs meaning. This understanding was achieved through active engagement with the subject (Chen, 2000).

In this study, qualitative research was employed, primarily utilizing the case study approach. The focus of the research was N College, a newly built undergraduate college in Henan Province. This study aimed to identify the factors that impede or facilitate N College's transformation and explore into the viewpoints and firsthand experiences of the college's faculty and staff members regarding the process of college transformation. By doing so, the study intends to pinpoint the specific variables that played a role in enabling N College to undergo a high-quality change. The research employed in-depth interviews and an extensive review of relevant literature to efficiently obtain the essential data for this complete exploration. First, this study went to understand the significant developments of College N by collecting and combing relevant literature on the history of College N, critical decisions made by college leaders, and other documents. Then, the study utilized semi-structured interviews, developed appropriate interview outlines around the purpose of the study, and collected data through direct interaction with participants. These methodologies were chosen to satisfy the needs for data gathering and comprehensive examination within the scope of this study.

3.2 Data collection method

The purpose of this study was to explore the relevant variables that affect the transformation of N College by understanding the current situation and perceived difficulties faced by the faculty and staff of N College and to explore the paths to achieve transformation in colleges. To align with the study's objectives, a purposive sampling approach was used to select eight participants for interviews. This selection specifically targets educators dedicated over five years to N College, possessing valuable insights into the institution's transformation. Careful consideration of the participants' academic backgrounds, roles, and years of service was undertaken. Diverse categories of N College stakeholders were included: Academic leaders, heads of critical administrative units, departmental heads, and frontline educators.

The primary data collection method employed in this study was semi-structured interviews. Through these interviews, the researchers gathered the thoughts and opinions of the participants concerning the research topic. After each interview, an analysis report was generated, capturing key insights, concerns, and initial conclusions drawn from the data. The interview content was later transcribed and organized once the interviews were conducted outside of the on-site environment.

To ensure clear communication and avoid any potential misunderstandings, a pilot interview was conducted with colleagues before the formal interviews. The feedback from the pilot interview was used to refine and improve the interview questions, making them more understandable for the participants. This involved rephrasing questions, introducing new terminology where necessary, removing extraneous details, and optimizing the question sequence to facilitate a smooth interview process. Each interview session lasted around 30 minutes unless participants chose to extend the conversation.

3.3 Research instrument

In this study, a semi-structured interview approach was predominantly employed for the specific implementation phase. The researcher designed an interview framework aligned with the research objectives, encompassing the following five primary inquiries:

- (a) What were the initial motivations behind N College's transition into an applied university?
- (b) In your perception, what are the challenges that N College has encountered during its ongoing transformation process?
- (c) Which factors do you believe will influence the transformation process of N College? Please consider both positive and negative aspects and internal and external influences.
- (d) According to your perspective, what noteworthy successful practices has N College implemented within its transformation journey?
- (e) Based on your insights, what recommendations do you propose to ensure the high-quality transformation and advancement of newly built undergraduate colleges?

4.0 Findings

4.1 Theme1: Conceptual Perspectives

During the interviews, the faculty and staff provided insightful information about their perspectives and conceptualizations of the transformative journey that N College undertook. The analysis of the interview data led to the emergence of five distinct categories within the conceptual theme. These categories encompassed:

- (a) Governmental policy support for the college's transformation.
- (b) Corporate recognition of the college's transformation.
- (c) Teachers' perception of the college's transformation.
- (d) Students' dispositions towards internship.

(e) Administrative leadership's vision of the college's transformation.

It was evident that educators and staff members harbored diverse experiences and emotions about the evolution of colleges. In the context of enterprises' recognition of college's transformation, perspectives varied. While three educators believed that enterprises exhibited notable support for N College's transformation, the other five educators believe that the connection between enterprises and N college is not close enough. One educator eloquently expressed this sentiment:

"Many enterprises prefer partnering with renowned universities. Only when small-scale enterprises lack access to such partnerships do they consider collaboration with colleges like ours."

Similar thematic congruence was witnessed across other conceptual dimensions. Addressing students' attitudes toward practical experiences, educators uniformly noted a degree of reluctance amongst students regarding internships. Educator A3 articulated:

"As the college undergoes transformation and practical coursework hours are heightened, student resistance is palpable. The existing apprehension stems from their disinclination towards hardship. Many students are the only children in their families and are highly favored at home, while strict business management makes it difficult for them to adapt. Even so, the flip side is that students must excel during internships to ensure enterprises can accommodate candidates from our institution."

Educator A5 furthered this narrative, observing:

"Our students have grown accustomed to passive engagement within classroom settings. A more proactive approach is necessary during practical pursuits. Enhanced experiential engagement becomes imperative for their holistic development."

The thematic analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of the conceptual viewpoints offered by the interview participants, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the transformational dynamics within N College.

4.2 Theme2: Management system: Structural Overview

Upon analyzing the interview data, the theme of the management system is categorized into two main types: the internal management system and the external management system. For the external management system, the primary focus was on personnel policies. As articulated by Teacher A1:

"The professionals we've hired from industries have significantly assisted our shift towards becoming an application-focused university. However, the existing state policies don't adequately support this transition. A case in point is the provincial-wide uniform evaluation of teachers' professional titles, which leans more toward academic metrics. Since our emphasis is on application and practice, there's a pressing need to refine the evaluation criteria."

When considering the internal management system, the conversations predominantly revolved around the systems for managing scientific research and teaching staff. To illustrate, Teacher A4 commented:

"Our institution actively promotes collaborative scientific research. While there's a genuine interest in pursuing quality research among us, the current incentives could be more effective. Enhancing these incentives would certainly boost our enthusiasm and commitment to research."

4.3 Theme3: Influence in Decision-Making

From the interviews, it became evident that different groups hold varying degrees of influence over college decisions. Teacher A2 highlighted that as colleges pivot towards an applied focus, the voices and concerns of frontline teachers are often marginalized, suggesting that they're only sometimes given due consideration in transformative decisions. Teacher A7 pointed out that the school's active participation in governmental projects allows them to directly relay their achievements and challenges to city and provincial authorities, paving the way for more effective problem resolutions. Additionally, Teacher A1 stressed that the disconnect between current courses and real-world needs can be attributed to students' limited influence over course choices, instructor selections, and their inability to adequately voice their concerns, indicating that students might not always have a significant say in academic matters that affect them.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Factors Influencing N College's Emphasis on Application-Oriented Education

Several critical factors drive N College's focus on application-oriented education. The growing national economy has heightened the demand for skilled technical professionals. Newly built undergraduate colleges are an important subject on the supply side of the local economy, and their subjectivity is mainly formed by the fact that newly built undergraduate colleges realize it by providing applied talents for local industries and enterprises (Pan, 2021). Newly built undergraduate colleges, including N College, are critical in meeting this demand while supporting local economic growth. Second, with the strategic involvement of both the Henan provincial and national external authorities, N College has become a pilot college for the overall transformation and development of the Henan Province. This distinction has deeply influenced N College's educational philosophy, objectives, positioning, teaching methodologies, faculty orientation, and overall institutional culture.

5.2 Key Factors in N College's High-Quality Transformation

Both internal and external stakeholders influence the transformation of a university. Internally, the leaders, teachers, and students of N College play pivotal roles. Externally, businesses and government officials contribute significantly to the college's evolution.

For instance, government officials representing local governance create policies related to educational transformation, and their priorities naturally shape the college's direction. Businesses, being the primary recipients of the college's trained talent, not only influence but also actively participate in shaping the college's talent training approach. Their growth and perception of desired skills greatly inform

the college's transformation. The leadership's experiences, educational backgrounds, and values directly influence the college's direction and evolution. Teachers, being at the forefront of imparting application-oriented skills and services, have a profound effect. Their alignment with the transformation and their chosen teaching methodologies critically determine the quality of the transformation. Additionally, the caliber and practical skills of the student body also play an instrumental role in influencing the college's transformation journey.

5.3 Challenges Faced by N College's High-Quality Transformation

The transformation of N College into an institution has encountered several challenges. At the college level, there needs to be more clarity in the positioning of disciplines. This makes it hard to balance emerging, interdisciplinary, and traditional subjects. The procedures for introducing or discontinuing disciplines need improvement. There's also a pressing need to revisit the composition of the teaching staff. The current setup makes it difficult to attract top-tier talent. Many existing faculty members have educational backgrounds and professional expertise that fall short of the requirements needed to nurture top-notch applied talents. Many teachers are recent graduates of master's and doctoral programs who have solid theoretical knowledge but lack practical application experience (Qi, 2023).

Local governments and their education departments are in charge of overseeing universities from the government's perspective. Instead of following thorough and open regulations, their educational strategy heavily relies on top-down directives. This framework hampers the autonomy of universities in their operations, management, and planning. Moreover, there's a backdrop of delayed policy backing and a need for adequate financial commitment, making the progression of these universities intricate.

On the societal front, even though there have been notable advancements in collaboration between universities and industries, the tangible outcomes still need to be improved. Most progress is documented in agreements between colleges and industries rather than in forming meaningful partnerships. Consequently, there's a noticeable shortfall in creating impactful school-industry alliances, and the implementation of substantive projects needs to be revised. As businesses seek collaborations driven by tangible benefits, the existing school-industry partnerships don't resonate strongly with them.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

6.1 Refining College Positioning and Elevating Teaching Standards

Colleges must refine their educational positioning by drawing from their built educational traditions and strengths in specific disciplines. This repositioning should align with the economic needs of their respective regions. Upon defining their institutional goals, universities should establish development targets for immediate, medium, and distant futures, encouraging active participation from both faculty and students. Efforts must be made to elevate the practical skills of educators, enhancing their familiarity with dual-teacher models' attributes and purposes. To attract top-tier faculty, incentives such as housing benefits or advanced research platforms can be considered.

6.2 Government's Role in Strengthening Policy Direction and Resources

As newly built undergraduate colleges transform, local governments must strategically plan higher education development within their jurisdiction. While focusing on regional economic growth and ensuring compatibility between industrial and educational structures, local authorities must respect the autonomy of educational institutions. There's a need for increased governmental support tailored to specific regional conditions. Establishing dedicated funds for university transformation is essential, with financial aid reflecting each province's economic landscape and higher education dimensions.

6.3 Revamping Societal Perceptions and Intensifying University-Industry Partnerships

Shaping a modern employment system is vital for the market's role in advancing the transformation of emerging undergraduate institutions. Discriminatory hiring practices and standards must be replaced with competency and merit-centric mechanisms, creating an environment conducive to institutional transformation. The essence of school-industry collaborations lies in mutual value exchange. Thus, colleges should leverage their academic strengths, engaging in projects with industries to address technical challenges, optimize business efficiencies, and demonstrate the tangible advantages of such partnerships. Concurrently, businesses should proactively fulfill their societal duties, engaging comprehensively in educational transformation.

6.4 Limitations of the study and future research

In this paper, in the process of exploring the transition situation of College N, the literature collected was not complete enough, and the interview subjects did not take into account faculty and staff at different times, so some deep theoretical questions remained unanswered.

Given the different regions where the colleges are located, the background and influencing factors of transformation may differ. Future research should increase the sample size and study the transformation of colleges in different regions to gain a deeper understanding of the overall trend of the transformation of China's colleges, and to provide a more effective and efficient guiding countermeasure.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

In the context of the academic, this research not only presents high-quality transformation strategies addressing the unique challenges of newly built undergraduate colleges in China, thereby improving the theoretical framework, but it also provides practical guideline for these colleges as they strive to improve their quality. Furthermore, the findings of this study are useful for policymakers, guiding them to more effective and well-informed educational policy decisions.

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