

## Seeking Appropriate Modes of Undergraduate Education<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Over the past two decades, Chinese universities have been promoting the reform of general education, and have developed an educational mode combining both general and professional education. By reviewing and reflecting on the educational reform process of Chinese universities, we attempt to reveal its inner logic and inevitability. The reform of undergraduate education in Chinese universities has a long way to go, and we hope that this reflection and understanding will enable us to develop a clear vision for the future of educational reform.

*Keywords:* general education, professional education, educational reform, talent cultivation

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The mode of teaching and learning has always been the core issue regarding the reform of higher education. Universities in China mainly focused on professional education, and after the country's Reform and Opening up, the limitations and shortcomings of professional education turned noticeable and the American model of liberal arts education began to be introduced to transform China's higher education system. However, it was soon discovered that there were some inherent contradictions between general education and the professionalization tendency of universities and faculty, as well as the construction of world class research universities, which prompted people to consider the education mode suitable for the actual situation of their respective institutions.

Seeking an education mode should first consider the needs of students and the education mission of university. Peking University has been a community, where premier Chinese students has gathered to study. The university aims at fostering outstanding scholars and leadership talents from a variety of disciplines, which becomes a solid foundation for establishing a talent-cultivation mode. Second, research universities committed to undertaking multiple social functions such as talent cultivation, academic research and social services, involving faculties, administrative

departments, student affairs office, teachers, students, and many other bodies. In such an exceptionally complex system, the interests of various groups are not entirely consistent and sometimes conflict with each other (Kerr, 2001/2019). Undergraduate education involves all aspects of the university and requires coordination and coherence among all parties for effective implementation; therefore, the appropriate educational mode is often not idealized, but agreed upon. Moreover, due to the fact that each mode has its own characteristics as well as historical and social origins, the mode that is appropriate for one university may inappropriate for another, and the selection of educational mode should take into account the university's characteristics and status quo.

### **The mode of general education**

General education (or liberal arts education) is a widely acclaimed educational mode that originated from ancient Greece and Rome, and flourished in the United States. General education upholds that the education is of the whole person, that is, to nurture human talents and develop the ability to think and understand independently so that people can use their brains freely without being affected by utilities (Levin, 2003/2004). There are not