Research on the Social Service Function of Open Universities: Reflection Based on the Concept of Socially Engaged Universities

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Abstract

Open universities are currently in a phase of active transformation, integrating into society through education, research, service, and other avenues to strengthen their social service functions and enhance social participation. Faced with challenges in the transformation of social service connotations and functions, as well as difficulties in quantifying social benefits, open universities need to adhere to social orientation, strengthen partnerships, emphasize practicality and community integration, and construct a comprehensive evaluation index system to fully leverage their significant role in social innovation and development.

Subject Areas

Lifelong Education

Keywords

Socially Engaged Universities, Open Universities, Social Service

1. Introduction

The predecessor of open universities was the radio and television university, primarily aimed at providing educational opportunities for degree completion and mass education. The renaming of open universities signifies not only a change in name but also a transformational reform of the system. As part of the national development strategy, this transition aims to better adapt to the changing times and societal needs, expand influence, enhance comprehensive strength, and contribute to the advancement of the national education system.

In 2012, approved by the Ministry of Education, the China Central Radio and

Television University (CCRTVU) was restructured into the Open University of China (OUC), while five provincial-level radio and television universities in Shanghai, Beijing, Yunnan, Jiangsu, and Guangdong were also restructured into local open universities, obtaining the authority to offer undergraduate programs. In 2016, the Ministry of Education's "Opinions on Running Open Universities" [1] outlined the direction for planning and construction, proposing the overall task of "elaborating the school's service orientation, providing education services tailored to different groups such as regions, industries, and enterprises, adhering to serving grassroots, industries, communities, and rural areas, and conducting workers' education, community education, elderly education, new rural education, and various types of training, emphasizing talent training characteristics and school characteristics". This implies that open universities will undertake more inclusive educational activities and multi-level educational services, with the audience no longer limited to certain key demand groups, but expanded to the broader society. Additionally, it breaks away from the traditional confines of specialized training. In 2020, the "Comprehensive Reform Plan of the National Open University" [2] addressed issues such as the positioning of the National Open University, system construction, and quality assurance, comprehensively promoting the transformation and development of the National Open University and the Open University of China in the new era, further clarifying that the construction goal of the open university is "to promote lifelong learning as its mission, supported by modern information technology, characterized by 'Internet+', and carry out open education nationwide as a new type of higher education institution". From then on, open universities at all levels began to undergo collective name changes, and their positioning began to shift towards being the main platform for lifelong education. In 2021, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the "Opinions on Strengthening Work for the Elderly in the New Era" [3], which clearly stated to establish a national university for the elderly relying on the National Open University, and build a national platform for sharing elderly education resources and public services. Therefore, the reform goal of open universities will focus on serving the construction of a learning-oriented society as the strategic mainline, undertaking more important educational tasks—insisting on the equal emphasis on academic education and non-academic education, improving the quality of open education, strengthening the development of elderly universities, exploring the creation of digital universities, promoting the "four transformations", building the "four platforms", creating core competitiveness in digital resources and digital technology innovation in open education, accelerating the construction of world-class open universities with Chinese characteristics, providing strong support for the construction of a learning-oriented society and a learning-oriented country for all people, and making new and greater contributions to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the construction of a strong country.

In modern society, the functions of universities have transcended traditional teaching and research boundaries, shifting towards broader social service and engagement. Compared to traditional universities, open universities have relatively weaker functions in teaching and research, but the vigorous rise of the third function—social service function—has brought an inspiring development prospect for open universities. The strengthening of social service functions and the enhancement of social participation will help them find fundamental support amidst their diverse operations. This is not just a new path but a path of distinctive features, essential for open universities to adapt to the trends of the times and seize opportunities. Therefore, it is imperative to clarify issues such as the connotation, forms, and pathways of the social service function of open universities.

2. Concept of Socially Engaged Universities

As knowledge becomes deeply integrated into economic and societal realms, universities are increasingly transitioning from the periphery of society to its core. A global movement advocating for "social engagement" in universities has sparked discussions on the concept and practices of socially engaged universities, providing a fresh perspective for current university development. Abroad, there has been research on the theoretical foundation and conceptual definition, practical models and case studies, evaluation criteria, and methodologies related to socially engaged universities. For instance, Boyer (1996) proposed the concept of "scholarly citizenship", emphasizing that universities should undertake social responsibility and public missions [4]. Holland (2005) introduced the concept of "public engagement", suggesting that universities should establish interactive and cooperative relationships with communities and stakeholders [5]. Some scholars have discussed the development history, characteristics, and areas of expertise of socially engaged universities in different countries and regions, evaluating their effectiveness and impact from various perspectives and levels.

Traditionally, universities have focused more on teaching and research, emphasizing the role of knowledge in enhancing individual competitiveness and productivity, and viewing societal development mainly through academic education and technological innovation. However, some scholars argue that knowledge sharing is also linked to the generation of social welfare and the improvement of quality of life. As emphasized by Joanna Morawska-Jancelewicz, "In this new paradigm, the importance of knowledge is not determined exclusively by competitiveness and productivity, but by taking into account the creation of social well-being, the impact on the quality of life and co-creation of knowledge as part of public-private partnerships" [6]. University education, through the process of social engagement, directly and extensively associates knowledge itself with public interests and societal life by utilizing networked and systematic resource integration (integration of knowledge, information, and capabilities), thereby influencing social development and innovation. Examples of social in-

novation include family education contributing to social welfare creation and social welfare and community interactions enhancing community-resident relationships.

Social engagement itself arises from multiple University Social Responsibilities (USR), including operational responsibility, research responsibility, legal responsibility, stakeholder responsibility, ethical responsibility, community engagement, and charitable responsibility, and is also included in the measurement dimensions of university functions. Although traditional teaching and research universities also actively participate in socio-economic development through talent cultivation, research transformation, and university-industry cooperation, they still maintain a certain distance from society. Socially engaged universities, as a new type of university model, emphasize "breaking out of the ivory tower". The social service connotation is no longer seen as an additional or peripheral activity, but is fully integrated into all activities, organizations, cultures, and management aspects of universities. There is a deliberate transformation of traditional functions towards societal orientation, with social services becoming the main activities and focus of value for this type of university.

Given the differences in overall atmosphere and social engagement responsibilities between Chinese and foreign universities, the concept of socially engaged universities is still in its infancy in China. In 2007, Chinese scholar Xianjun Liu, inspired by Norwegian scholar Are Tjeerdal's concept of "service-oriented universities", proposed the concept of "teaching-service-oriented universities" to differentiate from traditional universities focusing solely on teaching, research, and skill cultivation. Since then, scholars have been discussing the connotations and development paths of this concept based on the actual practices of domestic universities. Many scholars from private universities have conducted case studies based on their own development experiences, suggesting that vocational colleges' teaching services should be market-oriented, emphasizing applied talent cultivation and professional skills delivery, distinguishing them from the academic education practices of traditional universities. In 2019, "China's Education Modernization 2035" [7] explicitly lays out a classification and development policy system for universities, gradually replacing "teaching-service-oriented universities" with "applied universities", with research focusing on the educational concepts, development strategies, and institutional cultures of applied universities and vocational colleges. While this trend somewhat narrows the scope of university social services, the "teaching-service-oriented" concept is somewhat applicable to socially engaged universities.

Socially engaged universities are an emerging concept and model emphasizing the close connection and interaction between universities and society, integrating social services and responsibilities into the core values and missions of universities, garnering attention from domestic scholars in recent years. Xifeng Jiang *et al.* combining the concept of social engagement with the domestic situation, elucidate three core aspects of university social engagement: outward

orientation towards society in educational direction, promoting mutual development between society and universities in educational purposes, and emphasizing interaction with society in the engagement process [8]. Therefore, the core of the concept of socially engaged universities lies in achieving deep integration with society. They are not content with being mere centers for the production and dissemination of knowledge but actively engage in promoting social progress and change. This university model emphasizes mutual assistance and reciprocity, believing that while universities provide services to society, society also offers valuable resources and practical opportunities for the teaching and research activities of universities. Through this interaction, universities can promptly respond to societal needs, closely integrate academic research with social practices, apply knowledge innovation to solve practical problems, and thus serve the development of society. Additionally, socially engaged universities carry the important mission of promoting democratic values, fostering widespread citizen participation and social justice through educational and research activities, strengthening the role of universities in the democratization process of society. The practice of this concept not only enhances the sense of social responsibility of universities but also promotes the overall knowledge level and cultural literacy of society, contributing to the construction of a more open, inclusive, and progressive social environment.

After the stage of compensatory education for academic qualifications, open universities have transitioned into a broader societal trajectory through avenues distinct from conventional universities, such as undertaking non-degree education and exploring lifelong learning models for society. Undoubtedly, the socially engaged model has provided them with more valuable concepts and normative guidelines. Combining traditional service functions with the essence of social engagement, open universities, assuming multiple roles including primary providers of social education, service providers, education researchers and planners, participants in regulatory construction, centers for exploration and innovation of models, talent cultivation bases, promoters of lifelong learning, bearers of social responsibility, and explorers of educational innovation, closely align their educational philosophy with social service, demonstrating tremendous potential to become socially engaged universities [9]. Emphasizing the universality of education and the mission of lifelong learning, they actively promote research in social education, facilitate the construction of a learning society, and strive to cultivate individuals with a sense of social responsibility and practical skills, all of which are highly consistent with the goals of socially engaged universities. Therefore, with its multifaceted characteristics, open universities are poised to develop unique advantages under the support of the concept of socially engaged universities, paving the way for their own distinctive path.

3. Current Status, Issues, and Challenges of Social Service Practices in Open Universities in the New Era

China has established a comprehensive open university system covering both

urban and rural areas nationwide. Taking the National Open University as an example, it consists of a headquarters, 45 branches, and 3735 learning centers [10], implementing a "two-tier coordination, four-tier education" system. It has formed a vast organizational network for education in provinces, cities, and counties across the country. The predecessor of open universities was the Radio and TV University, which inherently possesses systematic, platform, and technological advantages. Specifically, the Radio and TV University system is the only education system in the country that can penetrate rural communities, serving learners of all ages and backgrounds, including children, adults, and the elderly. Additionally, both the academic and non-academic education provided by the Radio and TV University have vast development space and policy advantages in lifelong education, learning community, and learning city construction. The optimized application of information technology is a prominent feature of Radio and TV University education, demonstrating its technological advantages by conducting precise, inclusive, and equitable education for all through informatization means. Some open universities have also explored new approaches to educational services. For example, Shanghai Open University's "OMO mode", Fujian Open University's "cloud-management-output mode" [11], and Jiangsu Open University's comprehensive "1-5-4-2" online teaching quality assurance system [12] are all effective practices in smart learning construction. Communities nationwide are actively establishing community education service centers, guiding community schools and community streets to provide educational and lifestyle services, while also establishing affiliated senior universities under open universities to ensure elderly education work.

However, in recent years, conventional universities and social educational institutions have gained sufficient experience and achieved good results in online education. The use of information technology and the development of courses relying on it are no longer unique advantages of open universities. At the same time, the more than 40 years of educational practice by the Radio and TV University system also exhibit significant shortcomings, such as inefficient management systems and low educational quality, insufficient autonomy in running schools, low enthusiasm among local Radio and TV universities, imperfect professional and disciplinary construction, a strong sense of closed system and bureaucracy, unclear educational advantages, and incomplete service capabilities. "Although it aspires to sink its roots into the lower strata of society as a 'giant university', there are still many obstacles between its lofty ideals and practical operations, leading to much confusion" [13]. With the intensification of demands for changes in learning methods, the popularization of higher education, and the diversification of learning needs, the educational model and management system of the Radio and TV University system face new challenges. Traditional advantages can also easily become constraints on development, with new problems emerging incessantly.

Open universities often jest about themselves as "universities that are not quite like universities". The long-standing dilemma in their positioning stems

from a misalignment with traditional standards that emphasize teaching, research functions, and the cultivation of elites or skilled professionals. This ambiguity in nature and characteristics has affected the depth of issues related to educational features, operational mechanisms, and public influence. With the collective renaming, open universities have embarked on a truly transformative journey, extending their development towards a learning society to meet the increasingly diverse and personalized learning needs of the people. On the other hand, how to demonstrate more unique value in the process of socio-economic development has become a practical problem that open universities need to address.

3.1. Transformation of Social Service Connotations and Challenges in Functional Transformation

Based on the economic and social characteristics, as well as the demands, degree of marketization, talent requirements, and historical foundation of the local area, the connotation and characteristics of social services provided by universities vary. In comparison to regular undergraduate and college institutions, open universities exhibit a diverse trend, encompassing various aspects such as education targets, learning methods, teaching resources, learning support, service functions, and evaluation and accreditation. Apart from traditional academic education, open universities also need to expand into areas such as continuing education, elderly education, public and community engagement, universal cultural support, and mutual recognition of achievements. These new service areas pose higher demands on open universities, requiring them to possess stronger social adaptability and innovation capabilities.

At the same time, the new era requires open universities to play a greater role in serving national strategies, promoting regional coordination, advancing industry-education integration, and meeting diverse needs. This implies that open universities need to undergo systematic transformations, including transformations in knowledge compensation, skills enhancement, educational mechanisms, and service functions. Therefore, open universities need comprehensive reforms and innovations in educational concepts, curriculum systems, teaching methods, and more.

3.2. Quantifying Social Benefits and Influence Challenges

In today's fast-paced, utilitarian modern society, the pursuit of economic interests often becomes a crucial criterion for measuring success. However, in the field of education, especially for open universities operating on the fringes of the university community, economic benefits are not their sole pursuit. Instead, they should focus more on the implicit, long-term social service values, which, though challenging to quantify, have profound impacts on societal development and human progress. Under the prevailing academic-centric measurement indicators, the social service contributions are often difficult to assess, making it challenging for open universities to demonstrate advantages within the general university community, leading to a disadvantageous position in seeking resources and pol-

icy support. How to scientifically evaluate the social service effectiveness of open universities and enhance their social acceptance is an important challenge they face. Moreover, adhering to the original educational mission and pursuing long-term values is not an easy task in itself, undoubtedly posing another significant test for open universities.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of social services provided by open universities presents its own set of challenges, such as adapting to rapid societal developments and changing demands, balancing the expectations and needs of different stakeholders, and utilizing digital technology and innovative methods to improve educational effectiveness.

4. Development Strategies for Open Universities Based on the Concept of Socially Engaged Universities

The novel model of socially engaged universities emphasizes that universities should actively integrate into society through various means such as education, research, and services, becoming significant drivers of societal progress. This concept not only provides clear theoretical guidance for open universities but also delineates practical directions for their social service endeavors. As leaders in lifelong education, open universities bear the responsibility of constructing a nationwide, lifelong education network system covering all ages, occupations, and stages of development, to meet the diverse and personalized learning needs of learners.

To effectively address current challenges and promote the deep development of social services in open universities, this paper, based on the core concept of socially engaged universities, proposes the following strategies and suggestions. The aim is to provide useful references and guidance for the social service practices of open universities, in order to better fulfill their social functions and promote comprehensive societal progress.

4.1. Upholding a Socially Oriented Approach to Cultivate Social Responsibility

Open universities should consider societal issues as the starting point and destination of teaching, research, and service, aiming to cultivate students' sense of social responsibility and their ability to address societal problems. In the teaching process, emphasis should be placed on guiding students to pay attention to societal issues, fostering their independent thinking, and problem-solving skills. Moreover, open universities should integrate a sense of social responsibility and civic ethics education into daily teaching to help students establish the right values and outlook on life.

In non-degree education, open universities should actively engage in remedial work for weak areas and educational deficiencies, as well as address the knowledge, emotional, and skill development needed to solve daily life problems and meet work requirements. By providing diversified educational services to meet the diverse needs of society, open universities can enhance their social service

capabilities and influence.

4.2. Strengthening Collaborative Partnerships to Drive Social Innovation and Sustainable Development

Open universities should actively seek cooperation and partnerships with various sectors of society, including government, businesses, non-profit organizations, and others. By jointly conducting projects, research, and service activities, they can promote social innovation and sustainable development. For instance, collaboration with the government can involve vocational training projects to enhance the skills and qualities of employees. Partnership with businesses can focus on conducting technology research and development projects to understand market demands and industry trends, providing more practical entrepreneurial guidance and resource support to students, while also promoting technological innovation and outcome transformation, thereby facilitating the deep integration of academia, industry, and research. Collaboration with non-profit organizations can involve engaging in public welfare projects to promote social harmony and progress. Such collaborative models not only enhance the social service effectiveness of open universities, but also stimulate positive political, legal, and social effects, further enhancing their social influence.

Moreover, open universities should strengthen regional alliance building, continually improving their own social service systems by drawing on the experiences of other universities. Additionally, they should promote educational cooperation and exchange between different regions, facilitating resource sharing and complementarity to enhance the overall education level and comprehensive strength of the entire region.

4.3. Emphasizing Practical Orientation and Community Integration

Open universities should uphold a practical orientation in educational practice, encouraging students to deepen their understanding and application of theoretical knowledge through practical activities. To achieve this, open universities can strengthen cooperation with businesses to provide students with more internship opportunities, allowing them to enhance their professional skills and problem-solving abilities in real-world settings. Additionally, the design of on-campus experiments and training courses should closely align with industry demands, ensuring that students' learning matches market needs.

Community integration is another crucial aspect of social service provided by open universities. Through close cooperation and deep integration with communities, open universities can better understand the educational needs of community residents and offer educational services tailored to areas such as family education, skill enhancement, elderly education, and rural revitalization. For instance, they can offer open classes, lectures, and cultural activities for community residents to disseminate scientific knowledge and improve residents' cultural literacy. Furthermore, they can provide consulting and training services to address

community needs, promote community harmony and development, and achieve mutual benefit and win-win outcomes.

4.4. Establishing and Improving Evaluation Indicators System

To better assess and enhance the effectiveness of social services, open universities need to establish and refine a scientific set of evaluation indicators. This system should cover multiple aspects such as teaching quality, research outcomes, and social services to comprehensively reflect the open university's overall strength and social contributions. When constructing the evaluation indicators system, open universities should emphasize a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative indicators may include objective data such as student satisfaction, graduate employment rates, and the number of research projects, while qualitative indicators may involve feedback on teaching quality and evaluations of social service effectiveness. By comprehensively applying these indicators, we can conduct a comprehensive and objective assessment of the open university's social services. Additionally, open universities should focus on collecting and analyzing data and cases related to social services. These data may include feedback from service recipients and specific performance indicators of service effectiveness, which can help us gain a deeper understanding of the actual effects and existing issues of social services, identify shortcomings and weaknesses in services in a timely manner, and provide strong evidence and support for improving and optimizing social services.

4.5. Establishing a Social Platform and Ecosystem Favorable for Innovative Collaboration

Leveraging the educational, informational, collaborative, and networking advantages of open universities, actively exploring the provision of education and consulting on concepts, models, and practices for various sectors of society, facilitating the connection and transformation of needs, resources, and outcomes at all levels of society, providing mechanisms and conditions for the incubation and cultivation of various social entities, and promoting the transformation and upgrading of social innovation.

5. Conclusion

The emergence and practice of the concept of a socially engaged university have provided direction, theoretical support, and practical guidance for the development of open universities. In the tide of the times, open universities are moving towards a broader social stage like never before. The deepening and expansion of their social service functions signify not only a redefinition of their own positioning and mission but also a powerful contribution to the development of the national education cause and social progress. Open universities will continue to actively explore, innovate, and improve themselves, striving to enhance their role in social service. They aim to make greater contributions to achieving educational equity, promoting lifelong learning, and fostering social innovation and devel-

opment. However, this article still has some limitations in exploring the social service functions and transformation pathways of open universities. There is a lack of detailed descriptions of specific implementation strategies, with a shortage of concrete operational guidelines. Furthermore, the discussion on the localization adaptation and integration issues of foreign social participatory university models is not sufficiently thorough. This will be addressed in future research with a more targeted analysis combined with the national context.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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