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Research on the Construction of Characteristic Curriculum Systems in Local Universities under the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract:
Education, science and technology, talents are the basic and strategic support for comprehensively building a modern socialist country. As China implements a more proactive opening-up strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative is further developed, the demand for high-level talents familiar with the countries along the Belt and Road is also gradually rising. China's institutions of higher learning should actively connect with the national strategic needs, actively explore the characteristics of the curriculum system to meet the national needs, further boost local social and economic development, and train qualified socialist builders and successors to meet the national strategic needs.

Key words:
The Belt and Road; Local colleges and universities; Characteristic course; Personnel training

1. Introduction

The direction of China's higher education development must be closely aligned with the country's practical goals and future aspirations. It must serve the people, support the governance of the Communist Party of China, contribute to the consolidation and development of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, and promote reform, opening-up, and socialist modernization.[1] With the deepening of the Belt and Road Initiative, trade, investment, and social exchanges between China and the countries along the route have become increasingly close, creating an urgent need for a large number of high-level talents who are familiar with the local customs, languages, and social environments of these countries. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, significant progress has been made in China's higher education, propelling it into the top tier globally and making substantial contributions to the modernization drive. However, there is still considerable room for development in serving the Belt and Road Initiative. Local universities need to thoroughly explore the construction of characteristic curriculum systems to cultivate professionals who meet societal demands, thereby supporting the steady and long-term advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative.

2.The Importance of Building a Characteristic Curriculum System for the Belt and Road Initiative

Education is a fundamental strategy for the nation and the Party. The core questions of education are:

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whom to cultivate, how to cultivate, and for whom to cultivate. Actively guiding local universities to promote the construction of a characteristic curriculum system is of great significance, both in terms of fostering talent development and advancing local socio-economic growth. This importance is reflected in the following aspects:

2.1. The Belt and Road Initiative has become a significant driver of China's economic development.

By the end of June 2023, China had jointly signed over 200 cooperation agreements on the Belt and Road Initiative with more than 150 countries across five continents and over 30 international organizations. This has significantly boosted trade, investment, and infrastructure construction between China and the countries along the route. According to statistics, from 2013 to 2022, the total import and export volume between China and the Belt and Road countries reached US$19.1 trillion, with an average annual growth rate of 6.4%. The total amount of two-way investment between China and these countries has exceeded US$380 billion, of which China's direct investment scale is over US$240 billion. The total amount of newly signed contracts for engineering projects undertaken by China in these countries and the completed project turnover have reached US$2 trillion and US$1.3 trillion, respectively. In 2023, China's total import and export volume with the Belt and Road countries reached 19.47 trillion yuan, accounting for 46.6% of the total import and export value. [2] The deepening trade and investment between China and these countries not only helps to promote the diversification of China's exports, break through the trade discrimination against China by some Western countries, and enhance the resilience of China's international trade, but also brings positive impacts such as business opportunities, technological upgrades, and capacity transfer to relevant domestic industries. It also helps to enhance China's economic strength and international competitiveness.

2.2. Building a characteristic curriculum system is an important pathway for universities to serve society.

In the rapidly evolving social landscape, universities, as hubs of knowledge innovation and dissemination, have transcended their traditional educational roles to become vital forces in driving social progress and serving national development. Constructing a characteristic curriculum system centered on national strategies and local development priorities is a concrete manifestation of universities actively fulfilling their social responsibilities.

With the deepening implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, the demand for various professional talents has become increasingly urgent. As incubators of high-level talent, universities bear the mission of providing intellectual support and talent assurance for national development. Building a curriculum system with distinctive Belt and Road characteristics, effectively integrating regional and country studies with professional teaching, can enrich students' professional application scenarios, broaden their international perspectives, and enhance their global competence. This will cultivate a group of interdisciplinary talents who understand the history, culture, economic development, policies, regulations, and opportunities and challenges of international cooperation in Belt and Road countries, thereby providing solid talent support for the high-quality development of the initiative. At the same time, universities can continuously optimize their faculty structure and disciplinary attributes, creating new think tanks with regional characteristics and providing strong intellectual support for developing characteristic courses and serving society.

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2.3. Building a characteristic curriculum system is also a key measure for high-quality and differentiated development of universities.

In the context of globalization and the internationalization of education, university competition is no longer confined to the domestic arena but has expanded to the global stage. Constructing a characteristic curriculum system with an international perspective and multicultural elements can help universities attract more outstanding students and scholars from around the world, promote academic exchange and cooperation, and enhance the institution's international reputation and influence.

Local universities should deeply explore their unique resources in disciplines, regions, and culture, aligning with national development strategies and societal needs to form a distinctive curriculum system that highlights openness, innovation, diversity, and practicality. Through the development of characteristic courses, universities can strengthen international cooperation and exchange, promote interdisciplinary integration, and create a more open, diverse, and inclusive academic ecosystem. This will also inject fresh vitality and strong momentum into the high-quality development of disciplines and the cultivation of international talents.

3.Challenges in Building a Characteristic Curriculum System in Local Universities at the Current Stage

3.1. Insufficient Talent Reserve and Imbalanced Regional and Country Studies.

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, as China has increasingly taken center stage in the global arena, regional and country studies have been gradually established in nearly 200 universities across the country. These studies have evolved from nonexistence to comprehensiveness and from interdisciplinary approaches to the formation of cross-disciplinary fields, gradually contributing wisdom to China's major-country diplomacy with distinctive characteristics. However, the Belt and Road Initiative spans 65 countries across vast regions, while academic research in China has predominantly focused on Europe, the United States, and ASEAN countries. Research on regions such as the Middle East, Africa, South America, and Oceania remains relatively weak. This has resulted in a shortage of faculty members familiar with the social cultures, political economies, histories, and religions of these countries, making it difficult to meet the needs of establishing a characteristic curriculum system and the growing demands of national strategies.

On the other hand, local universities urgently need to improve their mechanisms for identifying and evaluating high-level talents from Belt and Road countries. Despite continuous efforts in talent recruitment, local universities often prioritize QS rankings in practice, leading to a lack of recognition for talents who have earned doctoral degrees in Belt and Road countries. This limits the recruitment of regional and country studies experts and exacerbates the imbalance in faculty expertise in specific areas.

3.2. Outdated Curriculum Design and Slow Development of Teaching Materials in Some Local Universities.

Compared to their counterparts, local universities often face a relative scarcity of curriculum resources, particularly in fields related to the Belt and Road Initiative. Weaknesses in funding, faculty, teaching

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materials, and internationalization have resulted in outdated curriculum designs that fail to keep pace with national development strategies and local development needs. The lack of interdisciplinary integration, innovation, and international practicality in these curricula makes it difficult to meet the urgent demand for high-quality talent under the Belt and Road Initiative. This also delays the development of the "Four New" initiatives in higher education for the new era with an international background.

Additionally, the development of Belt and Road characteristic courses in some local universities has been slow, with a tendency toward homogeneity rather than differentiation. Research on Belt and Road countries is often superficial, lacking depth and breadth, and high-quality textbooks for these courses are extremely scarce. However, compiling such textbooks requires a high-level professional team, profound regional and country knowledge, extensive international work and life experience, and a wealth of detailed case studies-resources that local universities often lack. Furthermore, the lengthy development cycle, strict review processes, and significant time and effort required for textbook development hinder the establishment and growth of Belt and Road characteristic courses.

3.3. Strategic Cooperation Between Local Universities and Universities in Belt and Road Countries Needs Improvement.

Internationalization is the fifth function of universities, serving as a solid foundation for enhancing global competitiveness, building an international brand image, and creating world-class courses and faculty. However, some local universities currently lack a broad international perspective and face widespread funding constraints, which significantly impede the construction of a Belt and Road characteristic curriculum system. Particularly in the new era, with China becoming the world's second-largest economy, some local universities have set their sights too high in terms of internationalization, overly focusing on Western developed countries while neglecting the cooperative potential and strategic value of many Belt and Road countries. This limited perspective restricts the depth of collaboration and exchange between local universities and these countries in education and research, inadvertently hindering the exploration and innovation of new curriculum systems and the comprehensive cultivation of diverse talents.

3.4. The optimization and adjustment of foreign language programs have led to an insufficient reserve of talents in less commonly taught languages.

Language is the core of international education, culture, politics, economics, and all forms of exchange. To deeply engage with the countries along the Belt and Road, it is essential to study their official languages, and even ethnic languages. However, influenced by new translation tools like artificial intelligence and AI translation, many domestic universities have started to discontinue language programs. According to the Ministry of Education's publicized "Results of Undergraduate Program Filing and Approval", between 2018 and 2022, at least 101 universities canceled foreign language programs. For example, Communication University of China canceled 10 lesser-taught language undergraduate programs, including Persian and Filipino, in 2018, while Beijing Language and Culture University discontinued seven master's programs, including Russian translation, German translation, and Spanish translation for 2025 admissions. The optimization and adjustment of foreign language programs may lead to an insufficient reserve of talents in lesser-taught languages, which could slow the high-quality development of the Belt and Road Initiative. In the new era, local universities should base their efforts on practical realities and leverage their own strengths

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to cultivate new types of “foreign language plus” and “plus foreign language” interdisciplinary international talents to meet national strategic needs.

4. Research on Current Status of Characteristic Curriculum System for the Belt and Road Initiative in China

4.1.Co-establishing Belt and Road Educational Institutions and Jointly Cultivating International Talents.

In recent years, Chinese universities have collaborated with universities in the Belt and Road countries, leveraging their comparative advantages to jointly establish institutions and cultivate interdisciplinary talents that meet the needs of the Belt and Road Initiative. For example, Xiamen University Malaysia has established the China-ASEAN College of Marine Sciences, offering undergraduate programs in“Marine Biotechnology” and “Marine Environmental Chemistry” to nurture high-quality, internationally oriented marine science talents for both China and the region. Suzhou University, with approval from the Lao government, established “Lao Suzhou University”,which began enrolling students from ASEAN countries and China in 2023. It offers undergraduate programs in “Computer Science and Technology” and “International Finance” , incorporating general courses such as“Lao Studies” and “Lao Politics” to help Chinese students quickly and deeply understand Laos’ political, economic, and cultural fundamentals. Zhejiang Ocean University, in collaboration with Thailand’s Progressive College, established the “Zhejiang-Thailand Progressive Maritime Silk Road College” in June 2022. Similarly, Henan University in China partnered with Kyrgyz National University to establish the “China-Kyrgyzstan Silk Road College,” providing an integrated talent training system covering preparatory, undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral programs. Additionally, Zhejiang University of Science and Technology (ZUST) collaborated with Malaysia’s Sabah Institute of Art to establish the ZUST-SIA Silk Road International College, initially offering an “Applied Physics” program, with plans to expand into fields such as “Computer Science” and “Data Science” in the future.

4.2. “Addition” Empowering Traditional Disciplines and Interdisciplinary Integration Bringing New Vitality

In response to national strategies and professional development needs, some universities have actively implemented the“Foreign Language plus” model, integrating interdisciplinary approaches to enhance traditional foreign language programs. For example, Sichuan International Studies University has broken down disciplinary barriers to promote cross-specialization, launching dual-degree programs such as “Spanish plus E-commerce” and “French plus Law”. It offers courses like “Intercultural Business Communication and Negotiation (English)” and “Diplomatic and Foreign Affairs Etiquette”, as well as virtual simulation training programs such as “Smart Logistics and Route Optimization Driven by Big Data under the Belt and Road Initiative” and “Big Data-Driven E-commerce Customer Profiling and Precision Marketing”. These initiatives aim to improve students practical skills, innovative thinking, and problem-solving abilities. The School of International Law at Southwest University of Political Science and Law has established a “Belt and Road Legal Talent Experimental Class”, implementing a “Law plus Culture plus Language” training model. It offers courses such as “Culture and Legal Systems of ASEAN Countries”, “Cross-border Intellectual Property Trade Practices”, and “ASEAN Minor Languages”, aiming to cultivate bilingual legal

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professionals proficient in both Chinese and ASEAN legal systems. Dalian University of Foreign Languages has restructured its "Russian program" by integrating regional studies, incorporating modules on language skills, Russian regional studies, and business courses. Courses such as "International Communication and Chinese Discourse", "Russian International Trade Practices", and "Frontiers in Regional Studies" merge language training, regional knowledge, and critical thinking development into a cohesive curriculum. The Asian College of Beijing Foreign Studies University offers courses like "Regional Cooperation Studies on Mongolia", "Introducing Chinese Culture in Turkish", and "Contemporary Culture and Society in Southeast Asia", balancing language proficiency training with interdisciplinary academic and applied skills development.

4.3. Designing Belt and Road-Themed Courses to Enrich the Silk Road Experience

China is promoting the internationalization of professional talents to better serve the Belt and Road Initiative, which requires universities to integrate knowledge of Belt and Road countries, regional studies, and national characteristics into existing curricula, thereby offering more interdisciplinary and globally-oriented courses. For example, Beijing Normal University invites former government officials and global business executives from various countries to teach students at the Belt and Road Academy to foster cross-cultural understanding. Its flagship course, "Belt and Road Leadership", features a lecture by former Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan, "Zhoomart Otunbayeva", while the course "Economics and Development of Emerging Market Countries" is taught by Enrique Garcia, the former President of the Latin American Development Bank. Peking University's Belt and Road College has partnered with 11 alliance institutions, including York University and Spain's IE Business School, to launch the "Future Leaders" international undergraduate program. This program offers required courses such as "Intercultural Communication" and "Immersive Exploration of China's Development" for Chinese students. It also provides elective courses like "Doing Business with the Chinese People" and "Investing in China" for international undergraduates, aimed at nurturing a new generation of international leaders with both strong academic credentials and a sense of responsibility for the shared future of humanity. The Silk Road Strategic Research Institute at Shanghai International Studies University offers a range of undergraduate, master's, doctoral, and post-doctoral courses related to the Belt and Road, including the national flagship course "History of China-Arab Civilization" and the core course "New China's Cultural Diplomacy". These courses highlight the distinctive characteristics of the Belt and Road Initiative. Jiangxi Normal University's Business English major offers elective courses such as "Southeast Asian Socioeconomic Topics", "Introduction to U.S. Asia-Pacific Strategy", and "Introduction to Japanese Culture and Literature" to help students broaden their international perspectives. Peking University offers elective courses on the social and cultural aspects of Belt and Road countries, such as "Contemporary Arab World" and "Contemporary Israeli Studies", opening a window for students to explore and understand the world beyond China through Silk Road-themed education.

5.Recommendations for Local Universities to Build a Belt and Road-Themed Curriculum System

5.1. The leadership of local universities may attaches great importance to the initiative and focuses on making top-level designs.

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Compared to top-tier universities with "Double First-Class" status, local universities face certain gaps in areas such as talent recruitment, funding, and academic platforms. When it comes to promoting educational internationalization and serving national strategies and local economic development, local universities can also cultivate their own unique strengths and advantages. The Belt and Road Initiative spans 65 countries, each with distinct customs, social systems, and economic conditions. Local universities should closely align with national strategies and provincial or municipal development plans, focusing on top-level design. Based on their own strengths and historical foundations, they should actively promote the internationalization of teaching, research, and student services. Moreover, local universities should invest in cultivating regional and national expertise among faculty, carefully developing a Belt and Road-themed curriculum system, and training high-level talents with knowledge of the social, economic, historical, cultural, political, and linguistic contexts of Belt and Road countries. This will support the national strategy, assist local enterprises in participating in Belt and Road development, and contribute to the rapid growth of international trade, investment, education, and social and cultural endeavors in the region.

5.2. Establishing National and Regional Studies Centers to Cultivate High-Level Professional Faculty

With the strengthening of national power, China has become more actively involved in international affairs and deeply engaged in building global industrial and supply chains, especially with the high-quality development of the Belt and Road Initiative. As a result, regional and national studies have gradually become a hot topic. Currently, there are 31 universities in China offering first-level disciplines in regional and national studies. Among them, 24 universities have been approved to offer doctoral programs in regional and national studies. Universities such as Peking University, University of International Business and Economics, Northwest University, and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies have established institutes for regional and national studies. Research institutions like Zhejiang Normal University's African Studies Institute, Xiamen University's Southeast Asia Research Center, Yunnan University's Myanmar Research Institute, China Agricultural University's Belt and Road Agricultural Cooperation Institute, Fudan University's Belt and Road and Global Governance Research Institute, and Shenzhen University's Belt and Road International Cooperation and Development Research Institute have also nurtured talents in regional and national studies, contributing faculty resources to local universities for the development of Belt and Road-themed courses. Regional and national studies not only integrate the strengths of universities, conduct in-depth research on the conditions of host countries, and provide think tank services for national strategies and local development, but also offer talent support for local enterprises going global. Additionally, they contribute to the development of teaching through research, paving the way for textbook construction, curriculum development, faculty enhancement, and talent training. Therefore, local universities should place high importance on regional and national studies, continuously gather resources, build distinctive strengths and advantages, cultivate high-level professional faculty, improve curriculum systems, and provide a steady stream of specialized talents for the Belt and Road development.

5.3. Strengthening International Exchange and Cooperation on the Belt and Road, and Co-creating Digital Shared Courses

The most important elements in building a distinctive curriculum system are philosophy, faculty, and

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relevant teaching resources. Currently, more and more local universities recognize the significant role of the Belt and Road Initiative in their development. They actively join Belt and Road-related research institutions and organizations, utilizing various platforms to promote inter-university cooperation and exchange with universities in Belt and Road countries. This includes research collaboration, teaching exchanges, academic conferences, internships, and the recruitment of international students, all of which provide a conducive environment and opportunities for developing distinctive curriculum systems. These efforts broaden the international perspectives of faculty members, enhance their international cooperation capabilities, and improve students' international literacy and competencies. For example, Shaanxi Province has established two platforms "Silk Road Education Cooperation and Exchange" and "Silk Road International Industry-Academia-Research Cooperation", which have greatly promoted the educational and research development of the Belt and Road Initiative in the province. By October 2023, over 12,000 experts, scholars, and officials from more than 60 countries had participated, signing more than 200 cooperation agreements and establishing over 20 alliances and educational research institutions. This has effectively facilitated interaction and exchange between domestic and foreign educators and researchers. Xi'an Jiao tong University has established the "Silk Road University Alliance", "Northwest A&F University" has created the "Silk Road Agricultural Education and Technology Innovation Alliance," and Chang'an University" has set up the "Belt and Road International Education Development Research Center", all of which have significantly promoted the international development of these universities and contributed to training high-level professional talents for Belt and Road construction.

Furthermore, local universities should actively recruit students from the Belt and Road countries to study in China, encouraging them to engage in various promotional activities to enhance the university's international atmosphere related to the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, universities should focus on integrating digital and intelligent technologies into teaching. By utilizing information technologies such as 5G and block chain, universities can guide students to participate in international MOOCs, international lectures, international project collaborations, and more, enhancing students' international literacy, cross-cultural abilities, and international cooperation skills.

5.4. Strengthening Textbook Development and Promoting the Innovative Development of New-Form Textbooks

Textbooks are a key component of course resources and serve as an essential medium for teachers to organize teaching activities and a fundamental guideline for instructional practices. Local education authorities and universities should place great importance on the development of distinctive textbooks, implementing policies that encourage faculty teams to write high-quality undergraduate textbooks suitable for Belt and Road teaching. These textbooks should cover multiple disciplines, languages, and levels, and may also include some classic foreign textbooks. Furthermore, domestic and international educators should be encouraged to co-create, share, and jointly develop excellent teaching materials. Attention should be given to both traditional printed and digital textbooks, as well as the integration of advanced technologies such as AI, big data, cloud computing, and virtual simulation. This includes the creation of textbooks in rich multimedia formats, such as accompanying mobile software, the met averse, and other forms of educational resources. High-quality teaching reference books, auxiliary materials, courseware, case studies, exercises, videos, and other supplementary materials should also be developed. By implementing the "Measures for

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the Management of Textbooks in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions," local universities should actively build a distinctive and high-level Chinese undergraduate education textbook system with a Belt and Road focus. They should adhere to the value guidance and educational orientation of textbooks, strengthen the review of textbooks in terms of ideology, and ensure that textbooks serve the cultivation of socialist talent and contribute to the high-quality development of the Belt and Road Initiative.

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