

The Change and Development of Western University Concept

Lu Wang *

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, Jiangsu, China

* Corresponding author Email: Lu.Wang2002@student.xjtlu.edu.cn

Abstract: Universities have evolved alongside the advancement of human civilization. At different stages of social and historical development, universities have adopted distinct philosophies, thus shaping their unique characteristics and styles. The transformation and development of Western university philosophies have gone through three major historical phases: from the British model, which emphasized teaching and talent cultivation, to the German model, which focused on scientific research, and finally to the American model, which values teaching, scientific research, and social service. The establishment of modern university philosophies in China undoubtedly directly inherits the German model. For Chinese universities to become world-class institutions, they must effectively draw on Western university philosophies.

Keywords: University Concept; Transformation; Development.

1. Introduction

The origins of universities can be traced back to ancient civilizations, whether it was the pre-Qin period in China or the philosophical colleges of ancient Greece, all reflecting humanity's pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. However, the prototype of modern universities took shape in medieval Europe, with early institutions like the University of Bologna and the University of Paris, characterized by their cosmopolitan spirit and international academic character, becoming centers for the dissemination and innovation of knowledge. The core philosophy of medieval universities was the universal pursuit of truth and knowledge, a concept that transcended geographical and cultural boundaries, laying the foundation for the development of later universities. As society progressed, the functions of universities expanded from a single focus on knowledge transmission to include scientific research and social services. The university philosophies of different historical periods reflect the needs and values of their times, from the liberal arts education in England to research-oriented universities in Germany, and then to diversified service-oriented universities in the United States. Each shift in philosophy has driven innovation and development in higher education. [1-3]

2. Newman's University Philosophy

2.1. Universities are Places for "Teaching" and Institutions for Cultivating "Talents"

John Henry Newman was a renowned theologian, educator, literary figure, and linguist of the Victorian era in 19th-century Britain. His book **The Idea of a University** is a classic treatise on university education, with far-reaching influence and profound significance. Newman's university philosophy was deeply influenced by the classical British educational tradition, emphasizing that the core mission of a university is to cultivate individuals with broad knowledge and noble character through liberal arts education. In Newman's view, universities are not only disseminators of knowledge but also guardians of culture. He advocated for the importance of general education, believing it could help

students form a comprehensive knowledge system and develop critical thinking and independent thought. Newman particularly stressed that the purpose of university education is not merely vocational training but rather, through the accumulation and reflection of knowledge, to shape individuals with cultural refinement and social responsibility—gentlemen. This philosophy was fully embodied in Oxford and Cambridge during the 19th century, becoming a model for British higher education. However, as the Industrial Revolution progressed and social demands changed, Newman's philosophy faced challenges, especially against the backdrop of the growing importance of scientific research and practical education. The functions of universities gradually expanded from single teaching to broader fields. Its purpose, "on the one hand, is intellectual rather than moral; on the other hand, the university is dedicated to the dissemination and expansion of knowledge rather than its growth." If the purpose of a university is philosophical and scientific discovery, I do not understand what students need to do at university; if it is religious training, I do not understand how a university can become a sanctuary for literature and science. "The gentleman Newman envisioned as the product of his university was a cultivated and insightful cultural figure, which was also the educational goal of Oxford and Cambridge in the 19th century. His concept of a university is clearly a place for" teaching, "an institution for nurturing" talent." Specifically, this includes the following:

2.2. Universities Should Advocate Liberal Education

Universities should advocate liberal education which includes general education and humanities education. Liberal education differs from commercial or vocational education. This concept shares many similarities with the idea of a liberal arts education. Mr. Jin Yaoji believes that liberal arts education is in contrast to vocational or practical education, aiming to cultivate a "unified personality," while liberal education, relative to specialized education, aims to achieve "unified knowledge." [4]

2.3. The Purpose of a University is to Cultivate "Gentlemen."

Newman said, "A university is a place for imparting general knowledge." "A university primarily cares for ordinary people, endowing those who enter it with foresight and inspiration, but this is not the function of a university. The function of a university lies in cultivating fully educated individuals." "Cultivating cultured and educated individuals is the true and sole aim of education." He also pointed out, "Liberal education does not produce Christians or Catholics, but gentlemen. Being a gentleman is a good thing; possessing cultivated intellect, keen appreciation, a straightforward, fair, and detached mind, and treating others with noble and humble demeanor is a good thing - these are the inherent qualities of broad knowledge. They are the goals of a university." Thus, he established the tradition of British education, viewing universities as places for nurturing social elites and cultural figures.

2.4. Knowledge Itself is the Final Purpose.

Newman fully discussed the relationship between knowledge and learning, knowledge and professional skills. He said that the university is the "mother of abundance."

"Knowledge itself is the end. This is the nature of the human mind." "Knowledge itself is the end; such knowledge should be called free knowledge or gentleman's knowledge. Education is for acquiring this knowledge and should be included in the scope of universities." Regarding the training of students' professional skills or the practicality of universities, he believes that education can serve two purposes: one is the educated individual, and the other is society as a whole. "University education achieves a great yet ordinary goal through a great yet ordinary means. It aims to enhance the intellectual climate of society, to cultivate the minds and bodies of the masses, to refine national tastes, to provide genuine principles for public enthusiasm, to offer fixed goals for public aspirations, to enrich and restrain the currents of thought of the times, and to facilitate the exercise of political power and purify various interactions in private life."

2.5. The Peaceful Coexistence of Science and Religion.

Newman was once a member of the Church of England and later converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845. He strongly disapproved of the exclusion of theology from emerging universities and colleges. In his preface, he pointed out that universities are independent of the church. However, without the support of the church, the university cannot fully achieve its purpose, as the church is essential for the integrity of the university, and theology, as religious truth, should be an integral part of this comprehensive knowledge system. The involvement of religion would not alter the character of the university but would instead make it more robust in fulfilling its educational responsibilities. He advocated that scientists should work freely in universities without interference from theology, and that scientists and theologians should each remain within their own domains, not encroaching on one another's fields. This marks the modern standard of Newman's university ideal.

3. Humboldt's University Concept: The University is a "Research Center"

At the end of the 19th century, the character of universities began to undergo a tremendous transformation. This change started in Germany. German universities originated in the Middle Ages and took shape in the 19th century. In early 1809, Humboldt was commissioned to reform the education system in Prussia and founded the University of Berlin. The University of Berlin first introduced a new wine into an old bottle, completely reforming itself. [5]

The university, breaking away from the academic traditions of the Middle Ages and advocating new university philosophies. Humboldt's university philosophy marked a significant turning point in modern universities. He advocated that universities should not only be transmitters of knowledge but also creators of it. The principles of "academic freedom" and "the combination of teaching and research" proposed by Humboldt became the foundation of modern research-oriented universities. In Humboldt's view, the mission of universities is to advance human knowledge through scientific research, with both teachers and students participating in this process. Humboldt's philosophy was fully embodied in the practice at the University of Berlin, which thus became a model for higher education worldwide in the 19th century. Humboldt's university philosophy not only influenced Germany but also had a profound impact on global higher education. For example, the research-oriented university model in the United States largely drew inspiration from Humboldt's philosophy, and Cai Yuanpei, one of the founders of modern Chinese universities, was deeply inspired by Humboldt's ideas, proposing the concept of "inclusiveness" in education, which laid a solid foundation for Peking University's development. Each student should place at least one brick on the ever-growing "temple of knowledge." This university philosophy differs significantly from Newman's, as it emphasizes the development of knowledge rather than its transmission. This university reform was undoubtedly a creation of German national culture, with figures such as Leibniz, Kant, Goethe, Hegel, Fichte, Schleiermacher, and Humboldt actively participating in this cultural movement and the unification of German thought. Humboldt believed that to save the German nation, teaching and research must be combined. Time has proven him right.

For German university education, Flexner identified four characteristics of utmost importance. First is the freedom of teaching and learning. Its function is twofold: to preserve knowledge on one hand, and to enhance it on the other, that is, teaching and research. Second is the selection of full professors. This process begins with the faculty submitting a list of three candidates to a committee of professors. Before submitting the list to government ministers, the faculty can make adjustments. This system serves as a bulwark against state interference in universities. It has dual functions: it ensures both universities and government departments adhere to high standards. Third is the "traveling scholar" and "non-tenured lecturer" system for university teachers. This system requires that teachers have considerable reputation and research achievements in their field before entering a university. Fourth, students are also traveling scholars. From an academic perspective, Germans benefit far more from the traveling scholar system than they pay in costs. [6]

Here, the book "The Idea of a University" by German philosopher Karl Jaspers is particularly noteworthy. This

work was written during Hitler's reign, when German universities were severely damaged. "Jaspers believed that the mission of a university is solely to seek truth with loyalty. For him, a university is merely a society where teachers and students gather to pursue the quest for truth. He held that universities should be established for those who are passionate about knowledge. A true university must have three components: academic instruction, scientific and scholarly research, and a creative cultural life. These three elements are inseparable; their separation inevitably leads to decline. Jaspers particularly emphasized that a university is an intellectual society, and thus he stressed the importance of academic freedom and tolerance. At the same time, he affirmed that the purpose of university education is to shape well-rounded individuals." [7]

The German university philosophy gradually influenced European countries and had a fundamental impact on American universities. Cai Yuanpei, a modern Chinese educator, was profoundly influenced by Humboldt's ideas and modeled his reforms at Peking University after the German university system. This laid the foundation for the basic model of modern universities in China and introduced the concept of "inclusive integration" to Chinese universities. His understanding of modern universities included two aspects: inclusiveness and specialized academic pursuits. In his inaugural address as president of Peking University, he stated, "A university is an institution for the study of advanced knowledge." He also admired the independence and freedom of German universities, often citing Germany as an example when discussing the relative independence of universities, emphasizing that even in politically authoritarian states, universities can maintain relative independence and freedom.

4. The American University Concept

4.1. Hutchins' University Philosophy: Eternal Liberal Education

Robert H. Hutchins, a renowned American educator, believed that the eternal liberal education is the essence of the university ideal, meaning universities should be institutions that practice liberal education. Hutchins pointed out that universities symbolize complete human beings, preserve civilization, and are communities for academic inquiry, homes of the wise. Universities must lead society and should possess superior independent functions to achieve this. He held that human nature remains constant, and the purpose of education is "the improvement of what makes us human." Humans are purposeful beings marked by reason, morality, and spirit; improving humans means fully utilizing their rational, moral, and spiritual capabilities. The maintenance of these characteristics in universities is closely related to the essence of the university ideal. On one hand, the relative independence of various academic disciplines within universities requires the implementation of liberal education to enhance the cohesion of the university, which is determined by the function of liberal education in fostering interpersonal communication. On the other hand, liberal education can effectively ensure the quality of university education, as it enables American universities to combine individualized and general education, thereby putting individualized education on the right track. He also said: "Education means teaching, teaching means knowledge, and knowledge is truth, truth everywhere." [8]

All places are the same, therefore, education should be the same everywhere. "The key is to correctly understand education, to understand its purpose, which is to cultivate intellect, eternal learning, or liberal education. What is eternal learning? It is those classic masterpieces that have been around for centuries, and these masterpieces are an indispensable part of general education. This is why Hutchins advocates for the establishment of "classic masterpieces" courses.

4.2. Flexner's University Philosophy: "The Pursuit of Science and Scholarship Belongs to The University"

Yale B. Flexner was a renowned scholar and educator with significant influence in the field of American medical education reform. In his work *The Modern University: A Study of the Universities of America, England, and Germany*, he proposed his modern university concept to distinguish it from Newman's university philosophy from seventy years earlier. Flexner affirmed the importance of "research" for universities and recognized that "developing knowledge" is one of the key functions of a university. However, he did not overlook the "teaching" function of universities, stating that "no successful research center can replace a university." The specific content is as follows:

(1) Flexner believed that universities played an extremely important role in modern society, which came from the unique functions of universities. He agreed with Lord Hardinge's view that "universities are the reflection of the national soul", emphasizing that universities were the embodiment of "the age".

(2) It is believed that universities should maintain a certain distance from society and not follow social trends and preferences recklessly; they should not be as fickle and trend-following as newspapers and politicians. Based on a certain value system, universities should critically resist social fashions in a suitable manner, which helps avoid foolish and nearly disastrous rash actions.

(3) He believed that the functions of universities are even transnational, with scholars and scientists primarily concerned with four things: preserving knowledge and ideas, interpreting knowledge and ideas, pursuing truth, and training students to "carry on the cause." From this perspective, he conducted extensive critical analyses of the characteristics and issues of universities in the United States, Britain, and Germany. His criticisms mainly revolve around two points: "what universities have not yet touched upon" and "what universities should not venture into." Therefore, he argued that regardless of how society changes, universities always bear the responsibility to preserve knowledge and thought. In this sense, universities differ from research institutions.

(4) He believed that the university must be an "organism". He agreed that the university should explore the "physical world", the "community world" and the "art world"

He opposed the university's service to society and vocational education, which he considered meaningless, and strongly opposed the university becoming a service station for society. In Flexner's view, his main contribution was to further deepen the university's research function and strengthen it

The free air in the research makes the research more in-depth and high-level. This has a great impact on the development of American research universities. [9]

4.3. Today's American Universities: Kerr's View

After World War II, universities experienced rapid development worldwide, with the United States leading the way. The concept of American universities underwent significant evolution in the 20th century, especially after World War II, as the economy grew rapidly and technology advanced, expanding the functions of universities. Clark Kerr's concept of the "concentrated university" reflects the diversity and complexity of American universities. Unlike traditional European universities, American universities not only focus on teaching and research but also actively engage in social services, becoming a vital force for economic development and social progress. For example, Stanford University's close collaboration with Silicon Valley demonstrates the important role of universities in technological innovation. Additionally, the internationalization of American universities has significantly increased, attracting outstanding students and scholars from around the world, further solidifying their global leadership. However, American universities also face numerous challenges, such as commercialization tendencies, restrictions on academic freedom, and uneven distribution of educational resources, which to some extent affect the independence and academic quality of universities. [10]

Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California, authored the book *The Functions of the University*. He inherited the German tradition of emphasizing research and the British tradition of teaching, thus forming his own university philosophy and unique style that values both teaching and research, as well as serving society. In his book *The Idea of the University*, Mr. Jin Yaoji commented on Kerr's views: "Contemporary American universities, as Kerr pointed out, have long transcended the models of Germany and Britain, developing their own character. American universities are passionately seeking novelty, adapting to social changes, and keeping up with the times. Universities have fully integrated into society. Due to the explosion of knowledge and the increasing dependence and need for knowledge across various industries, universities have become a crucial hub of the knowledge industry. 'Academia and the market have merged, and universities have consciously or unconsciously become' service stations 'for society.... Their organization extends beyond colleges to include numerous research centers, publishers, exchange programs, and more. Their activities go beyond research and teaching to include external consulting, international cooperation, and more. In short, in terms of quantity, organization, membership, and activities, today's American universities are vastly different from those of the past. This university philosophy is certainly far removed from Newman's vision and also distinct from Flexner's and Yost's ideas. Kerr believed that the university in Newman's mind was just a 'village,' the university in Flexner's mind was just a town, 'while contemporary universities are a colorful' city. '... He affirmed that today's American universities will become models for universities worldwide.'" Kerr gave the Today's American University a new name, "University of Synthesis," because it is not a word. Kerr said that today's American university is no longer Flex.

Nagel's concept of an "organism" no longer possesses unity but rather is a polyhedron with high diversity. It is not the "knowledge society" as described by Yost, but rather many

different societies, or a polycentric society with multiple purposes. This is Kerr's vivid and powerful description of the leading universities in contemporary America. [11]

5. Conclusion

The university philosophy, despite undergoing several stages of transformation and development, has always been an expansion and deepening of the previous stage, rather than a replacement. The three stages of university philosophy collectively emphasize that a university is a place for the free pursuit of knowledge and the exploration of truth. It is not only endowed with the function of imparting knowledge and nurturing talent but also bears the sacred mission of creating knowledge and advancing human progress.

Currently, the era of economic globalization, social networking, and informatization has arrived, marking the dawn of the knowledge economy. International competition is intensifying, and the role of universities in social development is becoming increasingly prominent. The relationship between universities and society is growing more complex, revealing the international context of Chinese university development from political, economic, and cultural perspectives. What kind of universities should be built, and how can they become world-class institutions? These questions must be addressed in both theory and practice. In the current context of globalization and the knowledge economy, Chinese universities face unprecedented opportunities and challenges. To build world-class universities, China needs to increase investment in hardware facilities and research, but more importantly, it requires profound reflection and innovation in university philosophy. The evolution and development of Western university philosophies provide valuable lessons, particularly the research-oriented model of German universities like Humboldt and the diversified service-oriented model of American universities like Kerr, which are worth emulating by China. However, the development of Chinese universities cannot simply follow Western models; instead, they should integrate their own cultural traditions and social needs to explore a path of higher education development with Chinese characteristics. For example, Chinese universities can find a balance between general education and specialized education, focusing on students' all-round development while meeting society's demand for high-quality professionals. Additionally, Chinese universities should enhance international exchanges and cooperation to boost global competitiveness and make greater contributions to human knowledge advancement. Such breakthroughs must be premised on a deep understanding of social themes and contemporary contexts. This era requires us to learn from western university ideas well; recently, the CPC Central Committee has put forward the strategy of strengthening the country with talents, and this historical mission also requires us to learn from western university ideas well.

References

- [1] William von Humboldt, *On the Spirit and Organization of Universities*.
- [2] Clark Kerr, *The Functions of a University*.
- [3] Kim Hyo-ki, *The Idea of the University*.
- [4] Yu Guihong and Jia Yongtang, "An Examination of China's Concept of Building a World-Class University".

- [5] Philip Atthaway, Global Higher Education Trends.
- [6] Robert H. Hutchins, American Higher Education.
- [7] Simon Makinson, The Rise of Asian Universities.
- [8] English (John Henry Newman The Ideal of the University [M].
- [9] Kim Yoo-ki 6 The philosophy of university FHG 6 Shanghai: "New knowledge through life and reading".
- [10] Yu Guihong, Jia Yongtang 6 Review of China's concept of building world-class universities. Re-recognition of Hirsch's educational thought in history Fudan Education Forum.
- [11] American G Robert H. Hutchins 6 American Higher Education FHG6 translated by Wang Libing 6 Hangzhou: Zhejiang Education Press.