

OBE Perspectives on the Educational Functions and Practical Pathways of University Academic Salons

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Abstract: Outcome-Based Education (OBE) now serves as a guiding framework for higher education reform and for program accreditation in China. By placing students at the center, fixing attention on demonstrable outcomes, and committing to continuous improvement, it has changed the way universities conceive of talent cultivation and given them reason to take co-curricular education more seriously. Academic salons belong squarely in that co-curriculum: they pair scholarly seriousness with open, give-and-take discussion and sit somewhere between the classroom and the research group. Read through the lens of OBE, their educational role comes into focus. This paper argues that what salons do maps onto four OBE concerns — building knowledge, developing core competencies, forming academic literacy, and supporting each student's individual growth — and that five familiar weaknesses keep them from delivering: aims that never connect to intended outcomes, passive students, lopsided content, disjointed management, and thin institutional backing. On that basis the paper sets out a series of practical reforms and offers universities both a way of thinking about the problem and something concrete to do about it as they try to strengthen co-curricular and collaborative education.

Keywords: Outcome-based Education; Academic Salon; Educational Functions; Co-curricular Education; Collaborative Education.

1. Introduction

Chinese higher education has shifted from simply expanding access to worrying about what students actually learn. Employers and the public now ask more of graduates: they should think for themselves, move comfortably across disciplines, and keep learning long after they leave school. In this setting OBE [1] has become the benchmark against which undergraduate teaching is judged and accredited. Its logic is inverted relative to conventional practice — you start from the outcomes you want and then build the teaching backwards to reach them, so the question is never 'what did we cover?' but 'what can the student now do?' As one account puts it, OBE 'emphasizes a student-centered approach in talent cultivation, employs reverse-reasoning deduction, and uses learning outcomes as the starting point for backward-designing educational content, thereby helping students transform knowledge into concrete actions that guide practice and enabling them to solve practical problems'[2].

That same shift has also put the co-curriculum under the spotlight, and its part in shaping graduates is now taken more seriously. University academic salons illustrate the point well. They are informal, fairly egalitarian gatherings built around scholarly exchange — looser, more adaptable, and more attentive to the individual than a lecture course, and they cover ground the formal curriculum leaves open: room to think inventively, to practise academic speech, and to meet real research up close. Small wonder they are often treated as a channel for education in the broad sense, not merely for handing on information but for forming judgment, temperament, and the habits of mind that outlast the degree. In postgraduate study above all, salons 'constitute a learning platform, an ideological front, and a moral education field for postgraduate students; they are effective carriers of postgraduate education, aimed at promoting scientific spirit, enhancing faculty-student rapport, and cultivating innovative

talents' [3]. The language is deliberate: the setting is meant to form the person, not only to inform them. Yet many salons on Chinese campuses stop well short of that description. Some are run for show: they barely touch the goals of professional training and carry no sense of what they are meant to produce. Others have collapsed into 'mini-lectures' — a teacher talks, students listen, and any real agency on their part quietly drains away. Topics are picked at random, cross-disciplinary material is scarce, and the educational payoff shrinks accordingly. Where assessment and improvement are weak, there is no way even to measure what a salon achieved, never mind do better next time. The result is a great deal of unused potential.

This study takes up that gap. Using OBE as the frame, it works through the educational logic a salon should have and the practical steps that might restore it, so that universities come away with both a clear reference point and something specific to act on as they build out co-curricular and collaborative education. The aim is to move beyond description toward change that can actually be implemented.

2. Conceptual Definitions and Analysis of Intrinsic Alignment

Why put OBE and the university academic salon in the same conversation? On the surface they belong to different orders — one is a theory of education, the other a fairly modest campus event. But they rest on the same assumptions about what education is for. OBE stands on three legs: students come first, outcomes matter, and improvement never stops; together these set the terms for any worthwhile educational activity — its aims, how participants are treated, and how quality is assured. A salon is more than a tidy way to fill the extracurricular calendar; its egalitarian, open, and generative feel expresses an ambition that standardized teaching rarely reaches. To see how far the two actually

coincide, it helps to be clear first about what OBE means at its core.

2.1. Outcome-Based Education (OBE)

OBE was first set out by the American scholar William G. Spady[1]. The claim at its heart is simple enough: the outcomes we expect students to reach should be both the beginning and the end of everything we do in education. From that claim three principles fall out. The first is student-centeredness — the student's learning and growth come first, and their particular needs and uneven pace of development have to be taken seriously. The second is outcome orientation: the outcomes we chase should be foreseeable, measurable, and attainable, and the whole system, content included, should be designed backwards from them. The third is continuous improvement, with assessment and feedback running through the process so we can tell whether outcomes are being met, adjust course, and close the loop. Taken together these move the center of gravity from teaching to learning, and they now underwrite much of the reform of talent cultivation in Chinese higher education.

2.2. University Academic Salons

For the purposes of this paper, an academic salon is an informal university gathering built around a specific scholarly theme, where faculty and students meet on equal terms and the exchange happens through open discussion, debate, and dialogue rather than through a lecture. Four things set it apart. The ordinary hierarchy between teacher and student is suspended, so people feel free to speak and to ask. The talk stays anchored in scholarship — frontier questions, live research problems, the craft of the work itself — so the conversation remains serious even when it wanders. Participants come from across disciplines, year groups, and sometimes institutions, and the format bends to fit the occasion, which is how a salon escapes the narrowness of any single classroom. And the tone is easy, which keeps the room relaxed and open and lets tacit knowledge pass around and new ideas surface, precisely the conditions in which a student finds a voice. Qualities like these are why salons reach past the formal curriculum and sit at the center of a university's co-curricular life.

2.3. Intrinsic Alignment between OBE and the Educational Functions of University Academic Salons

How closely OBE's logic and the educational nature of salons match is hard to miss. They meet first on goals. OBE builds everything around the outcomes students should reach; a salon exists to advance their knowledge, ability, and growth through scholarly exchange. In both, success is measured by what the student actually becomes. They meet, second, on the student's place in the room. OBE treats the student as the agent of learning and the teacher chiefly as a facilitator; a salon, by its nature, makes students do the work of building knowledge — they plan, take part, and gain, while the teacher guides rather than commands. Both honor student agency and want to draw out initiative. Third, they share a logic of cultivation: OBE refuses the one-size-fits-all model and watches for different student needs, and a salon is loose enough to shape its theme and format to students at different levels and stages, reaching individuals a fixed syllabus cannot — the standard curriculum must serve the average student, whereas a salon can serve the particular one. Fourth, both

depend on closed-loop management to get better. The PDCA cycle — Plan, Do, Check, Act — 'elaborates on the continuous improvement process from planning, implementation, inspection, to treatment at each stage of the training program'[4]. That is OBE's own rhythm: assess needs, design, carry out, evaluate, improve, and begin again. A salon is no different; its quality climbs only when needs surveys, program design, outcome evaluation, and feedback-driven revision are strung together into one continuous mechanism.

3. Core Educational Functions of University Academic Salons from the OBE Perspective

With that alignment in view, OBE gives us a handle for looking at what salons are worth educationally, and more systematically than before. The framework turns a vague sense that salons are 'good for students' into claims one can actually test. Its outcomes are not only about acquiring knowledge; they reach into deeper cognition, the transfer of competence, and the making of academic literacy. The effects of a salon fall along much the same line — knowledge built, competence developed, literacy formed, and the individual student grown. As some scholars note, the co-curriculum is 'an important platform for universities to cultivate students' comprehensive competencies and promote their all-round development'[5], and salons are among its clearest examples. Think of knowledge construction as the base, competence development as the layer where it gets carried elsewhere, and literacy as the layer where it is taken in and made one's own, with individual growth running through all three. None of the four stands alone, and none makes sense without the others; together they give a fair account of what a salon can do under an outcome-based view. Because OBE judges success by knowledge, competence, and literacy, and because salons answer to exactly those, they turn out to perform four main educational functions.

3.1. Knowledge Construction: Upgrading Knowledge from Passive Reception to Active Integration

Under OBE, knowledge is not something students simply take in; they are meant to build it, and the aim is to understand and to use rather than to memorize. What a student can recall on command is not the same as what they can do, and OBE is interested in the latter. A salon is a natural place for that kind of building. Work through a focused theme in discussion and the theory met in class turns into something usable — the step from having 'heard' it to actually grasping it. Understanding tends to show up only when a student has to explain the idea to someone else, and a salon is built for exactly that moment. Salons also pull knowledge across disciplinary lines: faculty and students arrive at the same topic with different habits of mind, and the talk that follows lets them assemble a more layered picture of the field, which is close to what OBE means by the outcome of 'solving complex problems.' A third gain is harder to measure but no less real — salons hand down tacit knowledge, the unspoken habits of research thinking and the accumulated judgment of senior scholars, which a lecture course can scarcely transmit. In this way the salon's interactive atmosphere becomes a channel for that implicit knowledge to move.

3.2. Core Competency Cultivation: Implementing OBE's Comprehensive Competency Development Goals

Transferable competence is one of OBE's main preoccupations, and it is also where salons do some of their clearest work for OBE. OBE is wary of any education that leaves a student able to pass a test yet unable to act, and the salon is where ability first meets a real audience. The open, equal footing of a salon pushes students to turn a problem over from more than one side; that sort of exchange tends to sharpen critical thinking and to open up creative lines. Salons also drill students in presenting and communicating academically — they have to state a view, give an oral report, and take questions, and the steady practice builds logical ordering, speech, and the knack of scholarly conversation. Running a salon is its own education: a student team has to split the work, line up the schedule, and manage the event, which trains planning and teamwork in a direct, unglamorous way — the very skills employers ask about and classrooms rarely teach. For many, a salon is also where an academic interest first catches. Once drawn in, they are more likely to track the frontier on their own and to pick up the self-directed habits that carry learning past graduation. Each of these answers closely to what OBE wants students to be able to do.

3.3. Academic Literacy Nurturing: Achieving the Organic Integration of Value Guidance and Literacy Development

Yet OBE is after more than knowledge and skill; it wants students to grow academic ethics, professional integrity, and a sense of social responsibility, and salons feed those aims in several ways. What a student becoming a scholar actually looks like is mostly caught rather than taught. Watching supervisors and peers argue, cite, and take criticism in the room gives students a first-hand feel for what scholarly standards and honest conduct really ask of them, and they learn to bring the same rigor and honesty to their own work. Salons also help students find their research interests. When the talk turns to questions of social or national weight, they start to see how their own ambitions might attach to something larger than themselves instead of staying private pursuits. And because the room is egalitarian, students meet both respect and real feedback; they learn to take contrary views seriously and to weigh them without flinching, so that disagreement stops being a threat and becomes part of how the field moves forward. That breeds an open, inclusive scholarly temper and, in the end, a steadier character.

3.4. Individualized Growth Empowerment: Accommodating Students' Differentiated Developmental Needs

OBE also refuses the idea that every student should be trained the same. Differences between students are to be respected, and the path should vary with where they are in their studies — a first-year and a doctoral candidate are not the same learner, and one format cannot serve both well. Salons can be built that way, with content laid out in tiers. The point has been put plainly in writing on co-curricular education: efforts should be 'centred on the diverse needs of student development and disciplinary characteristics, offering students a "customised-elective" menu of courses'[6]. A tiered salon program does exactly that. First-years might join salons

on academic orientation and what the discipline is, laying foundations and waking interest. Sophomores and juniors can move to salons on research methods, competitions, and cross-disciplinary questions, where their research and practical skills harden. Seniors and postgraduates benefit from salons on thesis writing and frontier topics that deepen research capacity; at this stage the salon doubles as a workshop on becoming a researcher. Those already eyeing a career gain from salons on industry trends and professional planning that shrink the distance between study and work, a bridge from campus to employment where many curricula simply fall silent. On top of these stage-by-stage offerings, salons can gather undergraduates, postgraduates, and doctoral students on one platform and pull in partners from industry and other institutions. By taking down walls of grade, institution, and sector, they give broad, steady support to each student's growth and career.

4. Practical Predicaments of University Academic Salons from the OBE Perspective

Any real reform of academic salons has to start from the gap between what they are meant to do and what they in fact do. A salon that looks busy on paper can still teach almost nothing, and the two facts are easy to confuse. The troubles afflicting salons in Chinese universities are not random lapses; they fall, fairly steadily, against the core demands of OBE, and they sort into five kinds — goals, participants, content, mechanisms, and support — each of which maps onto a weakness in one of OBE's own commitments. The goals too often fix on how many sessions were held rather than on what was learned, so that activity becomes a line in a report rather than a change in a student. The participants drift toward teachers, with students pushed to the edge. The content turns utilitarian and same-looking, and squeezes out real scholarship. The mechanisms — assessment and feedback — barely work. And the support is scattered, so cross-disciplinary work is hard to mount. The five tangle together and between them stop salons from realizing what they could teach. Naming them is therefore the necessary first move before any practical path can be laid.

4.1. Goal Misalignment: Absence of Outcome Orientation and Disconnection from Talent Cultivation Objectives

OBE puts outcomes first; salon practice usually does the reverse. Many universities run salons to fill a quota or to brighten campus life, not to produce learning you could measure. The event is treated as an end in itself. Count and form trump quality and substance, and the activities drift away from the aims of professional training and from what graduates are supposed to be able to do. Closely tied to this is the fact that few salons say in advance what they intend to achieve. Topics are picked with little thought, and organizers seldom state what a student should know, do, or become afterwards. With no such markers, no one can tell later whether anything educational happened, or what it changed. Nor is there much sign of the backward design OBE calls for: instead of starting from students' developmental needs and building back from there, organizers hold salons for the holding of them, and the educational worth never shows up.

4.2. Subject Absence: Weakened Student-Centeredness and Insufficient Active Participation

Student-centeredness is a second OBE pillar, and here too the practice disappoints: in most salons the student's standing as the agent of the activity is badly weakened. The very people the activity is for are the ones with the least control over it. The initiative sits with departments and faculty, who choose the theme, invite the guests, and set the procedure, while students are cast as passive attendees with little room to exercise judgment. They are present, but they are not really there as learners. Work on this suggests that how teachers and students behave is shaped by the 'degree of mandatory participation' — when faculty run the show and students feel made to come, they slip into a 'passive coping' posture, reckoning that 'investing resources in academic salon activities does not yield high returns'[7]. The logic is circular: make them come, and they stop caring; stop caring, and making them come seems the only option. The format makes it worse. Plenty of salons have become 'mini-lectures,' faculty holding forth while students listen; the discussion that defines a salon is gone, and with it the students' sense of being there and getting something. The old lesson of the lecture room applies: 'interaction between teachers and students is absent, classroom atmosphere is dull, students lack interest and initiative, and teaching outcomes are unsatisfactory'[8] — a salon that drops its discussion-based nature falls into exactly that trap. Some students answer with indifference of their own, nursing 'free-rider' and 'coattail-riding' attitudes that further wear away the basis of agency. And in not a few departments attendance is simply coerced through sign-in sheets and co-curricular credits, which breeds resentment and drains whatever willingness students might have brought.

4.3. Content Imbalance: Narrowed Educational Value and Insufficient Interdisciplinary Integration

OBE wants comprehensive competence, but the content most salons offer is badly lopsided. A salon that only drills for the next exam is hard to tell apart from a cram session. Much of it is utilitarian in the narrowest way — exam prep, job hunting, and credential-chasing crowd the agenda, which both cheapens the salon's academic character and leaves literacy and inventiveness largely untended. The things OBE cares about most — judgment, taste, originality — are exactly the things left behind. At the same time the content is highly repetitive, stuck on theory inside a single discipline, while frontier questions, social issues, and cross-disciplinary themes get short shrift. Students whose curiosity runs past their major find little to grab, and interdisciplinary thinking is barely encouraged. To compound it, salon content often sits apart from the taught curriculum: it either rehashes what class already covered or leaps to abstruse theory the students are not yet ready for. Either way it fails to do the linking-up with classroom teaching that a salon is supposed to do.

4.4. Mechanism Fracture: Absence of a Closed-Loop Continuous Improvement System and Inadequate Quality Control

The closed-loop management and continuous improvement that OBE insists on have almost no match in how salons are run today. The words are familiar on paper; in the room they

are mostly absent. Such management as exists is broken at every stage. There is no needs assessment up front, so organizers rarely know what students actually need or where the gaps in competence lie, and the theme gets chosen blind to them. There is no control during the event — no demands are set for interaction or participation, and the session drifts into a lecture, its educational effect quietly lost. There is no serious evaluation of outcomes either; what gets counted is headcount and session totals, not whether the student reached the intended learning. And there is no feedback loop: even when someone tries to evaluate, the findings are not fed back to improve the next round, so the same faults return and quality never climbs. Without a memory, improvement cannot even begin. The PDCA cycle — Plan, Do, Check, Act — is at root a closed loop of 'evaluation-feedback-response-improvement'[9], and it is exactly that virtuous circle today's salons lack.

4.5. Insufficient Support: Inadequate Infrastructure and Constrained Educational Functions

OBE cannot be put to work without adequate resources, and salons are chronically short of them. Saying a salon matters while funding it as an afterthought sends its own message. The shortfall shows up on several fronts. Organizationally, most universities have no coordination above the department: salons are run in bits by separate departments and student groups, with no common plan or guidance, and the strong silos between departments make cross-disciplinary events hard to stage. Research in the area confirms that 'various educational actors have formed their own vertical hierarchies and horizontal divisions in administrative affairs'[10], so resources stay fragmented and synergy is rare. Faculty backing is just as thin. There is no proper mentoring system; the labor of guiding a salon is not counted in teaching evaluation and no incentive exists, so enthusiasm stays low. Without recognition, goodwill alone does not scale. Material support is missing too — dedicated rooms and earmarked funds are often absent, and student organizers scramble for space and money. Last, the students themselves get no real incentive: joining or running a salon counts for little in merit ratings, postgraduate recommendations, or any other academic recognition, which naturally cools their wish to take part.

5. Practical Pathways for University Academic Salons from the OBE Perspective

The picture above leads to one conclusion: patching at the edges will not clear the obstacles blocking a salon's educational role. A salon that is merely more frequent, or better advertised, is still a salon that teaches little. Because the five problems are entangled, the answer has to follow OBE's own logic and rebuild how salons are organized from the ground. Think of that rebuild as a chain of five links — anchor the goals, activate the participants, enrich the content, close the management loop, and pool the resources. In practice this means setting clear standards by designing back from the outcomes; recovering the salon's nature through a student-led model; widening its educational depth with fuller content; driving steady improvement through whole-process closed-loop management; and shoring up support by pulling together resources on and off campus. The five hold together and lock

in place, making one practical loop that runs from design to execution. Each step assumes the others have been done.

5.1. Anchoring Outcome Objectives and Constructing a Backward-Designed Educational System

Backward design sits at the core of OBE, and to apply it to salons you first fix the outcome objectives. Start with the end, and the rest of the planning stops guessing. Universities need to line salon education up with the talent-cultivation program and state what salons are meant to achieve, so their educational aims match the program's objectives and the attributes expected of graduates. Otherwise the salon drifts from the very program it is meant to serve. Along the three lines of knowledge, competence, and literacy, those aims can be broken into measurable indicators, and every activity can then be built around hitting them. What cannot be stated as an aim is unlikely to be reached by accident. With the outcomes fixed, the content system is built backwards from them: follow the reverse order of 'graduate attributes—outcome objectives—salon themes—implementation procedures,' and universities can shape differentiated salon systems for students at different years and stages, fitted to individual needs. Last, themes should grow from real needs rather than from habit or ease. Surveys, interviews, and forums can surface students' competence gaps and developmental needs beforehand, and themes can then be set against disciplinary frontiers and national priorities — which would do much to end arbitrary design.

5.2. Reinforcing Student-Centeredness and Activating Subjective Agency

To give students their agency back, the organizing initiative has to return to them, under a model best called 'student-led, teacher-facilitated.' Ownership is the point; without it the salon is something done to students, not with them. Concretely, students should own the whole process — planning, organizing, running, and reviewing the salon. Running it teaches more than attending it ever could. Cross-disciplinary and cross-year student teams should be left to operate on their own, with faculty standing back as facilitators who give academic guidance and find resources without running the details. The teacher's job is to make themselves unnecessary. At the same time the salon has to recover what it is: an egalitarian, open space for exchange. The one-way lecture must give way to discussion and free debate, so the hierarchy dissolves and students become the leading voices in a genuinely 'non-authoritarian' conversation. The format, too, can vary to suit different tastes — mixing online and offline, and adding paper workshops, proposal-clinics, and mock conferences.

5.3. Enriching Content Provision and Expanding Full-Spectrum Educational Value

An unbalanced content calls for a fuller system built around OBE's outcomes. A workable shape is a four-in-one framework — foundational orientation, research training, innovative practice, and value guidance — that runs across the whole student cycle from entry to graduation and grows knowledge, competence, and literacy together. Each layer feeds the next, so the student is not asked to choose between them. Interdisciplinary mixing deserves special weight.

Themes that cut across fields and answer major national needs or pressing social questions can draw faculty and students from different disciplines into one conversation, and it is exactly that exchange which builds interdisciplinary thinking and the capacity to handle complex problems. The complex problems OBE names rarely respect a single department's borders. The blocks are familiar: 'persistent disciplinary barriers,' 'insufficient curricular cross-fertilisation,' and 'scarcity of interdisciplinary practice platforms'[11] dog talent cultivation today. Because salons are open and informal, they are well placed to break those barriers. Just as important is to deepen the join between the taught curriculum and the co-curriculum, so salon content meets classroom teaching naturally and acts as its extension and supplement, helping students take knowledge in and carry it to new ground.

5.4. Establishing Closed-Loop Mechanisms and Perfecting a Quality Assurance System for Continuous Improvement

Broken mechanisms can be mended only by holding tight to OBE's closed-loop logic. The loop is not a formality; it is the only thing that turns activity into improvement. What is wanted is a whole-process system in which every stage — design, conduct, evaluation — turns on the outcome objectives and feeds back into the next round. Each round should start where the last one ended, not where it began. The evaluation piece has to be turned around: instead of tallying 'session counts and attendance,' universities should build a varied assessment framework centered on what students learned, using questionnaire testing, outcome review, and students' own self- and peer assessment, so the salon's educational effect can be judged on firmer ground. Incentives have to be set on both sides. For students, joining or running salons should enter the co-curricular credit system and tie to merit ratings and postgraduate recommendations; for faculty, guiding a salon should count in teaching appraisal and link to title review and awards. Recognition is what turns a good salon into a normal one. Only when both teachers and students see the effort as worth it will the loop hold.

5.5. Integrating Supporting Resources and Building Collaborative and Synergistic Educational Platforms

Thin support calls for pooling resources from on and off campus. No single department can carry this alone, and pretending otherwise is why salons stay small. A sensible first move is a university-level coordination body — say, a central office for academic salons that issues common rules, standards, and evaluation criteria, supplies dedicated rooms, funds, and faculty backing, and tears down departmental walls so cross-disciplinary events become possible. Beyond that, a multi-party collaborative platform should be built. On campus, a mentor pool drawn from strong faculty and researchers can serve as advisers; off campus, links with other universities, research institutes, and firms can bring in industry experts and notable alumni, making inter-institutional and university-industry platforms. The outside world is where the discipline meets its uses. Related experience gives useful models: 'forming multi-to-one support teams composed of counsellors and faculty members' can shape a salon mentor pool, and 'establishing a system in which university and college leaders, disciplinary leaders, and student advisors maintain regular contact with residential

communities'[12] can give salon activities steady faculty support. Faculty support that is steady, not occasional, is what keeps a salon alive between crises. Last, the support system should go digital. A university-level salon platform could handle online posting, sign-up, live streaming, and archiving of outcomes, freeing the activities from the limits of time and place; the same platform could carry whole-process management and data analysis, supplying the evidence that continuous improvement needs.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that OBE gives the educational practice of university academic salons both a theoretical footing and a practical direction. It is not simply one more theory to cite; it is a way to decide what a salon is for. The analysis shows that salons sit naturally alongside OBE's principles and can serve as important grounds for putting those principles to work and for improving collaborative education in higher learning. Read this way, the salon is not an extra but part of the core. Where salons have fallen short, the cause lies in straying from OBE's core tenets — outcome orientation gone missing, student-centeredness weakened, continuous-improvement machinery broken. These are not separate faults but one fault seen from different angles. The fix, then, is to reorganize salon education under OBE: anchor the outcome objectives, reinforce student-centeredness, enrich the content, install closed-loop mechanisms, and pool the supporting resources. Carry these through and salons can do the educational job they are meant to, work with the formal curriculum rather than apart from it, and give real backing to the cultivation of high-quality, innovative talent.

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