A Study on the Path of Transformation and Development of Colleges and Universities in China’s Frontier Minority Area—Exploration of Colleges and Universities in Northwest Yunnan

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Abstract. Based on the case study and spatial comparison, the analysis of the present situation of the survival and development of colleges and universities in the southwest frontier of China shows that the backward economic development has led to the weakening of higher education. The incompatibility of personnel training and regional development, backward development concept and poor service capacity and other issues are highlighted. Start with the colleges and universities in northwest of Yunnan Province, promote the comprehensive docking of university personnel training and local economy to implement higher education supply-side structural reform, construct school-running mechanism with border characteristics, set up government and enterprise cooperation platform and mechanism, finally realizing transformation and development of border nations regional colleges and universities.

1. Introduction

“National long-term education development and reform plan summary (2010-2020)” clearly states that local colleges and universities need to transform to applied colleges and universities[1], thus starting a new round of university reform in China. In October 2015, the Ministry of Education, the NDRC and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued the "Guiding Opinions on Guiding Local Ordinary Universities to Transform to Applied Universities" (hereinafter referred to as the “Guidance”), which marked that the transformation and development of local colleges and universities has become national macroeconomic development strategy and national will. China's first transformation and development of colleges and universities began in 1999, which is mainly a large number of higher vocational colleges upgraded to undergraduate universities, achieving the expansion of the amount of undergraduate universities. The background of this transformation is that the national economic development has transformed from rapid economic growth to quality improvement and connotative development [2]. The realization of horizontal integration, in essence, is the supply-side structural reform of higher education.

China's border areas are a collection of different ethnic groups. China is a multi-ethnic country, and has vast territory. In the overall economic development of the country, the overall economic development of border areas is at the end of the country due to the special geographical environment constraints. The development of local colleges and universities are also relatively backward. Border nations’ regional colleges and universities have distinct local characteristics and nationalities. Northwest Yunnan is one of the areas where ethnic minorities are more concentrated. In the northwestern Yunnan, the total population at the end of 2016 is 2.336 million, of which the minority population is 1.252 million. Its total area is about 60,000 square kilometers, accounting for 14.9% of the province's total area, covering Lijiang City, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture. On the land of 60,000 square kilometers, there are 14 ethnic minorities, of which the minority population accounted for 58% of the total population. Currently, there are only two colleges in the three prefectures at northwest Yunnan, namely Lijiang Teachers College and
College of Tourism and Culture, Yunnan University, which have a total of 28,000 students. As an important human resource base to support the economic development in the northwest border areas of Yunnan and ethnic minority areas, the survival and development of colleges and universities in northwest Yunnan will be closely related to the future development potential and quality of the region. Under the background that the country promotes and implements transformation and development of local colleges and universities, the transformation and development of local colleges and universities in northwest Yunnan is directly related to the sustainable development of economy and society in northwest Yunnan in a way.

2. The survival predicament of the border nations local colleges and universities

2.1 The lagging of economic development has weakened the development of higher education

An important symbol of superposition of border and nations in China's regional development space is poverty. For a long time, the regional development policy of China is to give priority to the development of mid-east region. Until 2000 when China began to implement the western development, the western economy began to develop fast. But the long-standing problem of poverty in the western border areas has not been fully resolved. Among the 14 most poverty-stricken areas in the country, the border areas and ethnic areas account for two-thirds, of which the Yunnan border areas and Tibetan areas in Yunnan belong to the most poverty-stricken area. While the country is promoting poverty alleviation in poverty-stricken areas, the poverty alleviation of higher education has not been effectively implemented in the border areas [3]. At this stage, the country waives all the costs of nine years of compulsory education in poverty-stricken areas, and monthly pays subsidies and implements other measures to give children in poor areas a strong guarantee for enrollment. But the country still hasn’t start vigorously helping higher education in backward areas. Therefore, the lagging economic development of the border areas makes the higher education extremely fragile. Take the northwest of Yunnan as an example. The region is located in the southeastern end of Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Geographical conditions and natural environment constraints make the region have a low economic development level. Coupled with poor traffic conditions and poor accessibility, its economic development level has been at the end of country and province. In 2015, the per capita net income of farmers in the region is 6283 yuan, far lower than the average 8242 yuan in Yunnan Province, almost the same as 58% of the national per capita net income of farmers (national per capita net income of farmers is 10,772 yuan in 2015). The lagging of economic development causes the poverty and backwardness of local education to be far more than expected. Taking Nujiang as an example, the consolidation rate of nine years of compulsory education in Nujiang is only 65.82%, and the enrollment rate of high school is only 46.2%. At the stage of compulsory education from primary school to junior high school, nearly 35% of children in the prefecture drop out of school, and only less than 50% of children can receive high school education, and the gross enrollment rate of higher education is less than 10%. The backward primary and secondary education levels have led directly to the slow development of higher education in the region.

2.2 Talent training in colleges and universities is not coordinated with regional economic development

As we all know, an important background of the running of local colleges and universities is that: with the transformation from elite education to popular education, the employment situation of college graduates is becoming more and more serious. Although the combination of work and study, the integration of production and education can promote the docking of students and industry to a certain extent, because many frontier universities are located in the border areas of multi-ethnic areas, according to the economic development stage of border areas and its demand for talents, the level and specialty of talents are relatively single[4]. Such as border areas which are located in the northwest of Yunnan, the industrial structure mainly focuses on tourism, mineral resources development, biological resources and agricultural products processing. Industrialization in the region is still in the initial stage, high-tech and new energy industries have not yet generated market demand. If simply
take meeting the regional economic development needs as the goal of school, it will inevitably lead to imperfect and unreasonable professional structure of colleges and universities in border areas. At the same time, the fiscal revenue of the government in the border areas is relatively less, and the local governments have very limited fund to invest in higher education. In order to achieve the self-development of the school and meet the needs of emerging specialty in the market, some local colleges have opened a lot of new specialties, but these specialties are hard to find docking industry in the backward border areas. In addition, specialties for the border areas mainly focus on agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, such as biological resources development, agricultural and sideline products processing and other primary industries. Although the border areas have a better market demand, from the specialty choice, students are more willing to choose social popular specialties with good employment environment and common market demand, so that they can go to work in developed areas in the future. This is likely to cause a lot of students trained by the border university not willing to stay at border area and serve the area. Their contribution to border economic development is limited.

2.3 Backward development concept and weak ability to serve the local

Although the local government is also emphasizing the important role of the school think tank in promoting the development of local economy, it is generally lack of deep strategic thinking that how to use and rely on university talent and their scientific and technological achievements in the development of regional economy. There are even many local universities lack of basic cooperation and communication with the local government because they belong to provincial education departments. From the construction and development of specialties in colleges and universities, the specialty setup of many frontier universities lacks of foresight and strategic vision, and can not make adjustment with the regional economic construction and social development. Their specialty setup shows consistence with universities in the province and whole country. Many frontier universities treat traditional old specialties as key specialties of local universities, making them difficult to adapt to the needs of the times and regional needs. In addition, most of the provincial frontier colleges and universities have low degree of integration with the local economic development, less involved in policy-making consulting of local government and industry. Their research results conversion rate is low. These all make the frontier universities’ ability to serve the local become weak. From the enrollment data of Lijiang Teachers College, as an important university in the northwest of Yunnan Province, the admission rate of Lijiang, Diqing and Nujiang in the region was only 3% when enrollment was given to the region in 2016. Many students do not want to stay in the local colleges and universities, resulting in the lack of demand for regional talent and effective supply of local students.

Figure 1. The geographical proportion of students in the province admitted by technical colleges such as Lijiang Teachers College.
3. The status quo of survival and development of colleges and universities in northwest Yunnan

3.1 The foundation of college-running is relatively weak

The school-running history of northwest Yunnan is relatively short. Currently there are two colleges, mainly focusing on undergraduate and specialist education, no graduate education. Lijiang Teachers College has a relatively long history of college-running, but it only started specialist education about 30 years ago. Due to the remote location of the school, it lacks of capital investment, its quality of student source is relatively poor, and its specialty construction, discipline construction and training conditions have a gap when compared to the Middle East developed areas. It is also at the end even in Yunnan Province. From the location, its level of economic development and education is at the end in the country and even in Yunnan. It stays away from the economically developed areas, which leads to the difficulty on introducing and retaining talent. On one hand, it is difficult to introduce outstanding highly educated talent; on the other hand, some outstanding young teachers are lost. From the perspective of the construction and development of disciplines, there has not been any influential subject and characteristic discipline inside and outside the province. From the school-running resources, both the total scale and the average ratio are lower than the national average. Taking Lijiang Teachers College as an example, after the transformation and development in recent years, the overall quality of the school has been greatly improved. The construction of the new campus has increased the area to 1148.02 mu, and the total area of the school building is 227,300 square meters, teaching equipment reaches the value of 54.5918 million Yuan, the collection of paper books in the library reaches 765000 books. It makes a great breakthrough in the history of the development of the school. But compared to other schools in the country, both its teaching equipment instrument values or library collection are still in a relatively backward position.

3.2 The social influence of local colleges and universities is relatively weak

The reputation of colleges is just like the brand of the product. Good brand can bring a good return. As one of the three functions of colleges to serve the society, it requires local colleges to serve more aspects of regional socio-economic development. However, due to the low visibility and influence of colleges in the northwest of Yunnan, there are still problems of low recognition degree from local government and industries in serving the local economic development. For example, when formulating development plans and industry plans, some local governments and departments abandon local colleges which they are more familiar with, and spend hundreds of thousands or even millions of money to hire well-known experts outside the province, but the final implementation of the plan is difficult to succeed. On the employment, some local large enterprises are more willing to receive students from key universities or prestigious university. The Matthew effect formed because of the lack of "brand", will increasingly weaken the advantages of border universities, make it hard for them to recruit and introduce talents, to apply for high-level scientific research projects, or to win more projects from government and international organizations. It makes it hard for school to produce high-quality teaching and scientific research results, and train graduates with high competitiveness, which further weakens the competitiveness of colleges and universities in border areas.

3.3 Local government is lack of support and investment for universities

The era for the popularization of higher education is coming. The local colleges and universities bear more and more important responsibility on the development of higher education. That whether the financial investment is rational or not directly affects the immediate interests of local colleges and universities, students and teachers. Finance fund shortage is very prominent in the northwest Yunnan higher education. As colleges and universities in frontier minority areas, although the government attaches great importance to the development of education, in the relatively backward areas of education development, college education funding is very small. Taking Lijiang where there are two colleges for example, in 2014 the total educational fund investment in Lijiang is 2.366 billion yuan, with an increase of 3.61%, accounting for 10% of the city's total GDP, but 85% of the funds are mainly used for the city's compulsory education investment and dilapidated house transforming of
rural primary and secondary schools. Colleges in Lijiang rely more on the funding and enrollment of education department to solve the development and survival of the school.

3.4 The shortage and uneven distribution of colleges and universities in the region

The development of higher education in the northwest of Yunnan is embodied in that the backward personnel training system and professional construction, discipline development make their students not able to adapt to market and social needs. On the other hand, from the land area, the northwest of Yunnan accounts for about 15% of the province's land area; but there are only one undergraduate university and one vocational college. The number of colleges and universities accounts for only 2.8% of the province's colleges and universities. Vocational colleges which can serve diversified demands of society are in shortage. The number of high-level colleges and universities need to increase. At the same time, from the regional distribution, the current two colleges are concentrated in Lijiang, and Diqing and Nuijiang don't have one real university. From the perspective of country and province, the layout that a city at least has one college is very common. Nuijiang and Diqing become the province's only two regions which have no colleges. This also fully shows the uneven distribution of colleges in the northwest of Yunnan.

4. The path exploration of transformation and development of colleges and universities in northwest Yunnan

4.1 Achieve the overall docking of local college personnel training and regional economic development

As colleges in minority areas, due to the influence of regional industrial structure, economic development stage and scientific and technological strength, economic system, its training objectives setting and training model cannot be too ambitious [5]. The orientation of higher education in northwest Yunnan should be based on the status quo, adapt and link to the needs of regional economic development. It should make corresponding adjustment on school-running direction, talent training orientation and personnel training mode in accordance with industrial structure adjustment, industrial technology upgrading, and the needs of new technologies, new materials, new energy R&D and innovation in the future. It should build reasonable and scientific specialty structure and layout. The industrial policy, industrial pillars, emerging industries and key industries of regional economic development decide specialty layout and discipline direction of specialty group of higher education in the northwest Yunnan. It needs to break the traditional mode of specialty settings, dock with the industrial structure of regional economic development, form featured specialty group facing regional development. Clearly define the regional training orientation of “based in northwest Yunnan, serve Yunnan” relying on the existing and future competitive industries in the northwest of Yunnan. When optimizing discipline specialty layout, it also focuses on the construction of pre-school education, tourism management, biology education, hotel management and other specialties that can form a close combination with the region. Relying on government and industry, set up the corresponding research centers and research institutes, provide decision-making advice for social development in the northwest of Yunnan. At the same time, let more outstanding teachers join the development of industries, providing intellectual support and decision-making basis. In recent years, Lijiang Teachers College starts from the perspective of specialty serving industry, and builds several industry groups which serve local economic development. Its number of specialties closely related to local pillar industry accounts for 58%, effectively promoting the comprehensive docking of personnel training and regional industry [6].
After the first transition of higher education, the number of higher education institutions in China has been greatly increased, and basically has adapted to and met the current "demand" of China's economic development. But the following "serious homogeneity" and "difficult employment" make the survival and development of colleges face new challenges. With the school-running difficulties and development bottlenecks becoming more and more obvious, it has been self-evident that transformation is an important measure to achieve the sustainable development of China's higher education. But the deep-seated problems and obstacles remain unresolved [7]. The strategic measure of accelerating the supply-side structural reform proposed by the central government also points out the direction of personnel training for the current higher education in China. The supply-side problem of personnel training is very prominent. Especially for colleges in frontier minority areas, the homogenization of personnel training brings the problems of weak competitiveness and difficult employment. These problems urgently require to change the current mode of personnel training. Starting from the supply-side area, it must establish diversified personnel training concepts, attach importance to the cultivation of basic quality. It needs to teach students in accordance of their aptitude, broaden the development field, convert the existing traditional curriculum system, and open diversified elective courses and minor courses to speed up the cultivation of compound talents, so as to lay the foundation for the training of students’ comprehensive quality. Combining with the promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship in colleges, strengthen the guidance of students’ innovative thinking and entrepreneurial ideas.

4.2 Construct higher education concept with frontier national characteristics

From the building of specialty characteristics, the construction of specialty in frontier minority areas is influenced by many restrictions. It’s unrealistic to build all specialties into featured and dominant specialties. It should takes the development of frontier minority areas as its orientation. Take overall consideration of the history school’s specialty construction and development and the linkage with local economy, and choose to develop specialties which have good backing, strong specialty foundation and long school-running history, especially specialties with national and regional feature, making them into school’s featured and dominant specialties. Featured specialty construction should have clear specialty construction planning, scientific specialty construction orientation, sound connotation system and hardware resources for specialty construction, as well as the ongoing capital investment for construction and development. As the featured school-running road in frontier minority area, it is necessary to promote the development of disciplines and specialties through scientific research. The ethnic minority areas have a variety of national culture and national heritage which are worthy of study. Combine with the regional reality of the northwest Yunnan region, strengthen the research of Dongba culture inheritance and innovation, national traditional sports, World Heritage tourism development and protection, ecological management of Sanjiang parallel areas, so as to promote the consolidation and application of research results. Establish certain influence in the country with national culture and regional characteristics.
4.3 Set up school-government cooperation platform; improve the school-government -enterprise cooperation mechanism

In addition to the self-selection of college development, the cooperation between colleges in the northwest Yunnan and local economy also depends on the reasonable institutional arrangements of the local governments and the internal structural needs of regional economy. Domestic and foreign experience shows that the matchmaking and strong leadership communication of the local government play a prominent role in promoting interaction and cooperation of local colleges and and regional economic development. In the past, the problems and obstacles encountered in the field of school-enterprise cooperation and integration of industry and education have been solved satisfactorily once the government has a strong intervention and consultation. Therefore, it needs to establish a government-led multi-party consultation mechanism and networking system which functional departments and industry participate in, so as to timely communicate issues in cooperation, strengthen the top design and guidance, establish long-term cooperation and development goals, and provide all-round services for local economic development. At the same time, it is necessary to establish the evaluation mechanism of cooperation between universities and local governments, and comprehensively evaluate the contribution of local colleges and universities to the development of local regional economy and the support of local governments to colleges and universities at different stages, so as to form a benign pattern of regional economy and university interaction [8]. In addition, there is also innovative incentives. Refer to some research incentives and methods, and use distribution lever and material incentives to encourage college teachers to comprehensively participate in social services.

5. Conclusion

As a relatively backward region of China's economic development, the northwest region of Yunnan is closely related to the underdevelopment of higher education. The uneven distribution of China's higher education resources has existed for a long time. As a path of higher education in the border areas, optimizing the allocation of educational resources and enhancing the central and local financial investment is an important measure to improve the existing poor education and lagged economic development. Different from the mainstream domestic universities catching up with the development of cutting-edge disciplines in the world and cultivating international talent, national traits and regionalism decide that the region's colleges and universities should be based on serving local economic development and national heritage. They should take serving the local pillar industry as a basic goal, and train talents who adapt to local development.

6. References


