

Competency-based Curriculum Design for Undergraduate Vocational Education in Business Administration

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Abstract: *As industrial upgrading and economic transformation accelerate, there is a profound shift in societal demand for business administration professionals—from a traditional “knowledge-based” to “competency-oriented” talents. At present, in most undergraduate institutions of China, the curriculum system of Business Administration still has some prominent problems such as emphasizing theory over practice, divorce between teaching content and industry demand, and monolithic assessment methods, which leads to insufficient vocational competence of graduates and makes it difficult for them to meet the actual job requirements of enterprises. This study emphasizes that by deepening the integration of industry and education, building a “double-qualified” faculty team, and innovating teaching methods, it is possible to effectively enhance students’ comprehensive professional quality and job competence, providing theoretical reference and practical guidance for the cultivation of application-oriented management professionals.*

Keywords: *Competency Development; Business Administration; Undergraduate Vocational Education; Curriculum Design; Industry-Education Integration*

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Under the dual background of the popularization of higher education and the new normal of economic development, in undergraduate education, especially in the highly applied major of business administration, the quality of talent cultivation is now subject to unprecedented scrutiny and challenges. The traditional curriculum model centered on disciplinary knowledge system has been widely criticized because the students it cultivates frequently exhibit a persistent disconnection between theoretical knowledge and practical application, and lack practical ability and spirit of innovation. What enterprises urgently need are application-oriented and interdisciplinary management professionals who can quickly adapt to their job roles, solve practical problems and demonstrate sustained growth potential. This change in talent demand side urgently requires the talent cultivation and supply side—universities—to carry out profound curriculum reform. Integrating the philosophy and methods of vocational education into undergraduate education to construct a competency-based curriculum system has become an inevitable choice for Business Administration to achieve intensive development and enhance the core competitiveness of graduates. This study does not merely discuss the significance of curriculum reform in generalities, yet aims to delve into the texture of curriculum design and systematically explore how to construct a truly competency-oriented undergraduate curriculum system for business administration from multiple dimensions such as reconstruction of educational philosophy, system deconstruction, and element reorganization in order to provide actionable insights for the program development and teaching reform of application-oriented undergraduate institutions^[1].

1. The Intension of Competency-Based Educational Philosophy and Vocational Competence in Business Administration

1.1 The Core Essence of the Competency-Based Educational Philosophy

The fundamental difference lies in that its focus is not on “what teachers have taught”, but on “what students can do” between competency-based education and traditional knowledge-based education. Competency-based education emphasizes taking the concrete competencies required for jobs as the basis for learning objectives, curriculum development and assessments. Its core features can be summarized as follows: The first is the concrete and measurable objectives, that is, the learning outcomes are clearly expressed as a series of observable and measurable behavioral ability indicators; the second is practical and targeted content, that is, the course content is

closely designed around the competency objectives, and phases out decontextualized theoretical indoctrination with low occupational relevance; the third is the personalized and autonomous learning, allowing students to master the learning content based on their own foundation and progress, emphasizing “mastery learning”; the fourth is the process-oriented and authentic assessments, which run through the whole learning process and focus on testing students’ competencies in simulated or real working scenarios. Embedding this philosophy into undergraduate business administration education means that the logical starting point of curriculum design must shift from the “disciplinary knowledge system” to the “vocational competence graph” [2].

1.2 Multi-dimensional Analysis of the Vocational Competence Architecture of Business Administration Undergraduates

General management performance is a fundamental competency that managers must possess to be competent for any management position, which mainly includes planning and decision-making skills, organizational and coordination skills, leadership and motivation skills, as well as control and assessment skills. These skills are the artistic embodiment of management science and the key to distinguishing them from ordinary business personnel.

Professional business competency refers to the ability to solve practical business problems by applying the knowledge from specific functional areas. For Business Administration, it mainly includes human resource management and development competency, marketing and promotion competency, financial analysis and cost control competency, production operation and supply-chain management competency, digital tool application and data analysis competency, etc. These competencies constitute the concrete manifestation of managerial business acumen [3].

Career development competency is the “soft power” and “meta-ability” that support the sustainable development of students’ careers. It mainly includes critical thinking skills and the ability to solve complex problems, communication and expression as well as teamwork skills, innovative thinking and entrepreneurial spirit, multicultural literacy and adaptability, and lifelong learning and self-management skills. In the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) era, these competencies are increasingly important.

2.The Practical Dilemmas in the Conventional Undergraduate Curriculum System for Business Administration

2.1 The Curriculum Architecture Has Serious Disciplinary Silo Orientation and Is Disconnected from Practice Demand

At present, in most institutions of higher learning, the construction of the curriculum systems strictly abides by the logic of disciplinary system of “public basic courses, disciplinary basic courses, professional core courses, and professional optional courses”. This structure ensures the systematization and integrity of disciplinary knowledge, yet it is highly likely to cause the course content to become disconnected from the latest development in business management practice. Each course often forms its own system, and overly emphasize the depth and preciseness of its own theory, while neglecting the horizontal ties and integration among courses, as well as how they jointly support the development of a specific vocational competency. For instance, the content of courses such as “Marketing” may overlap with that of “Consumer Behaviors” and “Market Research”. However, in teaching, these courses have not been effectively integrated to form a comprehensive ability training project for solving real market problems. What students learn are mostly disjointed and fragmented knowledge components rather than the overall ability to solve comprehensive management problems [4].

2.2 The Teaching Content Overemphasizes Theoretical Knowledge, While the Case and Practice Components Are Weak

The content of teaching materials is updated slowly. Classroom teaching mainly relies on teachers’ theoretical lectures. Although practice teaching methods, such as case-based teaching and project-based learning, are advocated, they frequently devolve into tokenistic implementation or suffer from superficial engagement. The cases used are

frequently rely on dated, sanitized “classic examples”, which dramatically divergent from the uncertainty-laden, authentic business ecosystems students will confront in their professional futures. Practice teaching components, such as experiment, practical training and internships, often become appendages of theory teaching due to insufficient resource input or lack of systematic design, and fail to form an effective pathway for cultivating students’ vocational competence. Even if students participate in internships, they mostly engage in auxiliary and marginal work, making it difficult for them to get in touch with core management business. As a result, the result of practice teaching is not satisfactory [5].

2.3 Teaching Assessment Remains Entrenched in a Single-Dimensional Paradigm with Structural Rigidity, Failing to Capture Authentic Competencies

Conventional course assessment generally relies on closed-book final exams, with the assessment content focusing on the memorization and understanding of concepts, principles and formulas. This “single-exam-decides-all” assessment approach fails to effectively measure students’ development and proficiency in complex competencies such as teamwork skills, communication skills, innovative thinking, and problem-solving ability. It leads students towards the exam-oriented learning pathway of “cramming before the exam and forgetting after it”, which runs contrary to the continuous and performance-based assessment advocated by competency-based education. For the courses that are highly practical, there is a lack of an effective assessment mechanism for formative outcomes such as project reports, scheme designs, simulation operations, and oral defenses.

3. The Core Design Framework of the Competency-Based Curriculum System

3.1 Taking Occupational Competency Analysis as the Logical Starting Point to Initiate the Backward Design Methodology for Establishing Curriculum Objectives and Content Architecture

The first step in curriculum design is no longer to study the disciplinary knowledge framework, but to delve into enterprises and conduct a detailed analysis of jobs

and vocational competence, vocational colleges and universities should precisely depict the typical job tasks and required competency lists for the target posts, such as project managers, marketing specialists, human resources assistants through various methods such as the school-enterprise cooperative committee, interviews with industry experts, follow-up surveys of graduates, and analysis of recruitment information and then, based on this, use the “backward design” principle to determine the overall competency objectives that students should realize upon graduation firstly, and break them down step by step into specific competency indicators for each academic year, each semester, each course, and even each teaching unit secondly. The selection and organization of curriculum content are entirely dedicated to achieving these competency indicators, emphasize “necessary and sufficient” theoretical knowledge, and extensively integrate with cases, projects and problems from real enterprise scenarios.

3.2 Building an Integrated Curriculum Architecture of “Platform + Module”

To break down disciplinary barriers and achieve knowledge integration and competency integration, vocational colleges and universities can establish a tripartite curriculum architecture, comprising a General Competency Platform, a Specialized Competency Module, and an Integrated Practice Module.

The General Competency Platform aims to cultivate students’ career development competency and some general management skills. The curriculum should not only cover the necessary humanities and social sciences as well as mathematical and physical foundation, but also strengthen courses such as communication and writing, logical and critical thinking, business ethics, and the fundamentals of innovation and entrepreneurship to lay the solid foundation for students’ sustainable development.

The Specialized Competency Module should align with the aforementioned professional business competency. Vocational colleges and universities should change the traditional practice of setting courses by discipline and center on the core management functions of enterprises to establish “Human Resource Management Module”, “Marketing Management and Planning Module”, “Financial Analysis and Decision-making Module”, “Digital Operation

Module”, and other modules. Each module contains several closely linked and progressive courses in content, and the course jointly implement a comprehensive curriculum design or project to enable students to integrate the knowledge learned in the module and develop a comprehensive ability to solve complex problems in the field.

The Integrated Practice Module serves as the hub and exit of the whole curriculum system, aiming to integrate and enhance all competencies. This module should run through the four years of university and form a progressive system. In the first year, students can establish perceptual understanding through enterprise cognitive internships. In the second and third years, they can carry out sand table simulation, business project planning, cross-functional simulation training, and others in combination with the specialized module courses. In the fourth year, they should achieve the final competency integration through graduation internships and graduation projects (theses). Graduation projects should strongly advocate to “solve authentic business problems” and encourage students to take solving actual management problems in enterprises as their research topics and complete a high-quality integrated solution or business plan.

3.3 Establishing an “Immersive” Practice Teaching Ecosystem

Practice teaching should no longer be a supplement to theory teaching, yet should become the main channel for competency development. First of all, vocational colleges and universities must vigorously establish high-level on-campus training bases, such as inter-disciplinary comprehensive training hubs and virtual simulation training rooms, to simulate real business environment and enable students to “learn by doing”. Secondly, they must deepen industry-education integration to jointly build stable off-campus internship bases, industry-academia collaborative colleges or corporate-customized talent programs with high-quality enterprises, extend the classroom to the front line of enterprises, and carry out project cooperation, on-the-spot teaching and post practice. Finally, they must actively incorporate the second classroom into the practice teaching ecosystem to comprehensively train students’ organizational, planning, leadership and innovation competencies by organizing students to participate in various business competition, such as the “Challenge Cup” and “Internet+” contests, establish student clubs, and operate simulation companies.

3.4 Implementing a “Diversified and Process-Oriented” Teaching Assessment Mechanism

The assessment mechanism serves as a baton and must undergo comprehensive reform. It is necessary to establish a diversified assessment system that takes competency assessment as the core and integrates multiple assessment methods, and reduce the weight of final exams and significantly increase the proportion of process-oriented assessment. Process-oriented assessment may include: case analysis reports, project scheme designs, group discussions and demonstrations, practical training operation records, internship logs and assessments, oral defenses, etc. The assessment framework must evolve beyond sole teacher assessment to encompass a multi-stakeholder assessment system integrating teacher assessment, industry mentor assessment, and student self/peer assessment. The assessment criteria should be clear and public, and strictly correspond to the competency objectives of a course, with a focus on the knowledge application ability, skill proficiency, thinking level and professional quality demonstrated by students in the process of fulfilling tasks.

4.The Key Guarantee for the Effective Operation of the Competency-Based Curriculum System

4.1 Deepening Industry-Education Integration to Establish a Long-Term Mechanism for School-Enterprise Collaborative Education

Competency-based curriculum design is highly dependent on the deep engagement of enterprises. Colleges and universities must take the initiative to break down the walls and establish a deep cooperative relationship with enterprises featuring “mutual benefit, resource sharing, process co-administration and win-win results”. This requires them to jointly make talent cultivation plans, jointly develop courses and teaching resources, jointly build teaching teams, jointly establish practice bases, and jointly assess the quality of talent cultivation. By establishing enterprise workstations, hiring industry professors, conducting horizontal research projects, etc., the latest practice, real projects

and technical demand of enterprises can be continuously introduced into the campus to ensure that the course content is always in step with the development of the industry.

4.2 Building a “Double-Qualified” Faculty Team to Break Through the Bottlenecks in Teaching Implementation

Teachers are the ultimate executors of curriculum reform. The prerequisite for cultivating students’ practical ability is that teachers themselves have rich practical experience. Colleges and universities must vigorously strengthen the construction of the “double-qualified” faculty team. On the one hand, it is necessary to establish and improve the system for teachers’ enterprise practice, encourage and support professional teachers to regularly assume a temporary post for personal training and development, serve as advisors or offering consultation services to accumulate practical experience. On the other hand, it is necessary to engage a large number of senior managers and technical experts from the front lines of enterprises as part-time teachers to undertake practice course teaching, and guide students’ internships and graduation projects to form a high-quality faculty team integrating full-time and part-time members. At the same time, systematic training on competency-based educational philosophy and teaching methods should be provided to teachers to help them master modern teaching methods such as project-based learning, case-based teaching, and situational teaching.

4.3 Innovating Teaching Methods and Learning Environment to Cultivate Student Agency

Teaching methods must shift from the “teacher-centered” lecture-based teaching to the “student-centered” inquiry-based and participatory one. Colleges and universities should employ a wide range of teaching methods such as case studies, project-based learning, group learning, role-playing, and analog simulation extensively to transform the classroom into a place where students can think actively, do practice, and collaborate in teams. At the same time, they should actively build learning environment that supports new teaching models, such as smart classrooms, open discussion areas, and makerspace, and make full use of online course platforms and digital teaching resources to support the blended and personalized learning of students, and maximize their learning initiative and creative learning ability.

5. Conclusion

It is a comprehensive and profound systematic project involving educational philosophy, curriculum architecture, teaching content, teaching methods and assessment mechanism to establish a competency-based curriculum system for undergraduate vocational education in business administration. It requires us to depart from the fundamental societal demand and the development of students, to break the inherent discipline-based thinking with courage, and unswervingly take the cultivation of vocational competence as the main logic and final destination of curriculum design. By departing from the analysis of vocational competence to conduct backward design, establishing a modular and integrated curriculum architecture, building an immersive practice teaching system that runs through the whole process, and implementing diversified assessment methods, we can effectively transform knowledge-transference into competency development. The realization of all this ultimately depends on the deep integration of industry and education, high-level “double-qualified” faculty teams, and student-centered teaching methods.

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