

# Practice Reflection and Optimization Countermeasures of Undergraduate Tutorial System in Chinese Universities

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## Abstract

Undergraduate education is an important foundation of modern higher education. With the popularization of higher education in China, the cultivation of college students has become the focus of people's attention. The undergraduate tutorial system is an interactive teaching system to improve the quality of undergraduates in an all-round way and a new mechanism for ideological education and management of college students under the new situation. Western undergraduate tutorial system originated from Britain, but it faces some practical problems in the localization of China. This paper analyzes the problems in the implementation process of tutorial system. Based on the historical background and practical needs of Chinese higher education, this paper puts forward the optimization measures to promote the development of the tutorial system in colleges and universities in China from the aspects of clarifying the connotation of the tutorial system, enriching the diversity of the tutorial system, and establishing and perfecting the evaluation and incentive mechanism of the tutorial system.

## Keywords

Undergraduate Tutorial system; Practice reflection; Innovation research; Active learning.

## 1. Introduction: The Historical Origin and Characteristics of Undergraduate Tutorial System

### 1.1. Rising of Undergraduate Tutorial System in Western Countries

As early as the 14th century, William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, proposed the basic idea of an undergraduate tutorial system. It was not until the 17th century that this idea was put into practice by Oxford and Cambridge universities in The United Kingdom, which successively adopted this system in postgraduate education. In 1922, The Royal Commission identified The tutorial system as a central feature of Oxford University. In essence, the tutorial system of Oxford University is an innovation of teaching methods, which mainly focuses on the cultivation of personal thoughts and focuses on the cultivation of students' ability to think independently and to find and solve problems[1].Tutors assist undergraduates in life, ethics, behavior, and academic work. In the late 18th century, elective course system appeared in Germany, and in 1872, the credit system based on elective course system appeared in Harvard University in the United States. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, this system was introduced into Oxford and Cambridge and other universities in Britain, and creatively integrated the credit system and tutorial system in undergraduate education. After hundreds of years of precipitation, the undergraduate tutorial system has already formed a fairly complete system. The core idea of the tutorial system is to emphasize individual guidance in teaching methods, attach equal importance to morality and wisdom in teaching content, and create a harmonious, free and relaxed atmosphere in learning

environment. At present, the undergraduate tutorial system has been widely promoted in universities all over the world.

## 1.2. Characteristics of Undergraduate Tutorial System in Western Countries

The Oxford Institute for Learning (OLI) has summed up some basic characteristics of tutorial teaching. The Oxford tutor's mentoring process consists of pre -, mid - and post-mentoring stages, with the following four objectives. First, helping students to answer questions. The role of tutorial system is to ensure the effective knowledge transfer between teachers and students; Second, cultivating students' ability of in-depth research and thinking. The tutor guides students to understand knowledge in the way provided by the tutor. The tutor guides students to understand and think about the main problems. Third, developing students' interdisciplinary analytical ability. Tutors provide students with a variety of disciplinary perspectives to cultivate students' ability to examine and ask questions in a diverse knowledge background; Fourthly, realizing the exchange of ideas and the generation of new ideas between teachers and students. The tutor guides the students to express their own ideas and to expand their thinking and deepen their understanding [2]. Supporters of the Oxford tutorial system argue that it is more challenging and rigorous than other teaching methods [3]. Therefore, compared with other courses, the tutorial system is not a substitute for classroom lectures, but a supplement to course learning. The student is the main body core in the whole instruction process. The goal of the tutorial system is not only to provide knowledge and information, but more importantly, to teach students to think independently and to cultivate students' abilities of diversified understanding and critical thinking [4].

## 2. The Implementation Background of Undergraduate Tutorial System in China

The undergraduate tutorial system was introduced into China at the beginning of the 20th century. At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the research and application of the undergraduate tutorial system in China have been strengthened due to the competition of universities and the demand for qualified personnel training. The emergence of undergraduate tutorial system also conforms to the practical needs of the vigorous development of higher education in China.

### 2.1. The Development of Higher Education in China Has Changed from Elite to Universal

Gross enrollment rate of higher education is an important indicator of development, which refers to the ratio of the number of students in higher education to the school-age population. The working-age population refers to the number of people aged between 18 and 22. It is generally considered that the higher education gross enrollment rate below 15% belongs to the elite education stage. 15%-50% is the stage of higher education popularization; More than 50% are in the stage of universalizing higher education. The gross enrollment rate of higher education in China has increased from 0.26% in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded, to 2.7% in 1978 at the beginning of reform and opening up, reaching 26.5% at the turn of the world in 2000, and 54.5% in 2020 (See Table 1). Since the founding of new China, the development of China's higher education and the development of the country has achieved remarkable results. Especially since the 1990s, China's higher education gross enrollment rate has been increasing year by year, making great strides from popularization to popularization. In 2020, the total number of higher education in various forms reached 41.83 million, and there were 2,738 regular institutions of higher learning in China [5]. With the expansion of the scale of undergraduate students in colleges and universities in China, more and more attention is

paid to the quality of undergraduate education. As a kind of auxiliary personnel training system, the tutorial system has been prevailing in various colleges and universities in China.

**Table 1.** Gross Enrollment Ratio in Tertiary Education in China

Year	1949	1965	1978	1990	2000	2015	2019	2020
The total enrollment (Ten thousand)	11.7	109.5	228	382	1229	3647	4002	4183
The gross college enrollment rate (%)	0.26	1.95	2.7	12.5	26.5	40.0	48.1	54.5

Notes: The above data are compiled based on the 2019 Statistical Bulletin on the Development of China's Education released by the Ministry of Education on May 20, 2020 and the data released by the Ministry of Education in March 2021.

## 2.2. China's Medium - And Long-term Personnel Training Goals Have Clear Requirements

As an auxiliary personnel training system, the undergraduate tutorial system has gradually become an important reform measure for China to adhere to the construction of "student-oriented" and "double first-class" undergraduate education. China's undergraduate tutorial system should be more conducive to the cultivation of undergraduates' professional skills and the shaping of socialist core values[6]. In January 2005, the Ministry of Education issued several opinions on further strengthening undergraduate education in institutions of higher learning, which clearly stated that colleges and universities with conditions should actively implement the tutorial system and strive to provide high-quality and personalized services for the all-round development of students.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education issued the Outline of the National Medium - and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020). In 2012, the Ministry of Education issued several Opinions on Comprehensively Improving the Quality of Higher Education. In September 2019, the Ministry of Education issued the Outline of Deepening the Reform of Undergraduate Education and Teaching. Opinions on comprehensively improving the quality of talent Training. This series of documents clearly points out that attention should be paid to the different characteristics and personality differences of students. By reforming the mode of talent training and implementing the reform of teaching management system such as tutor system, innovative talents are cultivated [7]. The system of undergraduate academic tutor should be established and perfected, allowing qualified teachers to guide students' study and formulate individualized training programs and academic career plans. Thus, the country has promoted personalized talent training to the strategic level. It is undoubtedly a beneficial attempt to carry out the tutorial system in the undergraduate stage of university education.

## 3. Problems in the Practice of Undergraduate Tutorial System in Chinese Universities

Compared with some famous universities abroad, China's undergraduate tutorial system started late and developed later. In general, the implementation of undergraduate tutorial system in China has achieved some results, but most colleges and universities undergraduate tutorial system is still in the early stage of exploration. In practice, the undergraduate tutorial system in Chinese universities needs to respond to the requirements and challenges of the new era by constantly innovating ideas and adopting precise policies. The main problems are as follows:

### 3.1. The Role Positioning and Responsibilities of the Tutor Are Unclear

The undergraduate tutorial system originated in Britain, and many universities in China have combined their own conditions in the process of introduction and practice. Some universities have adopted the British tutorial system, which is regarded as a teaching system. Some regard it as a counselling system for individual guidance or as a supplement to classroom teaching, and so on. The definition of its concept is different among colleges and universities, its connotation is not unified and standardized definition, implementation types and specific trial methods are also different. How the undergraduate tutorial system should serve the existing talent training mode is the premise of effective implementation. If the theory and practice are not clear, it will cause the responsibility division of tutor, teacher, counselor is not clear. This not only increases the administrative difficulty and workload, but also creates conflicts between different guiding bodies[8]. At present, most colleges and universities only issued or revised the policy guidance documents such as the implementation method, system and work regulations of undergraduate tutorial system. However, these policy guidance documents only provide a rough implementation framework for undergraduate tutorial system and cannot be directly used to specify the implementation of undergraduate tutorial system. Various administrative departments need to coordinate and organize each other to standardize different types of undergraduate tutorial system, and formulate corresponding training quality standards, so that the guidance of the tutorial system can be truly implemented to students.

### 3.2. Shortage of Tutor Resources and Insufficient Promotion Support Policies

Although the expansion of college enrollment in China at the end of the 20th century relieved the pressure of college entrance examination to some extent, it also brought pressure from other aspects to higher education. Due to the limitation of financial investment and development conditions, some provincial and local colleges and universities have long had difficulties in introducing high-level teachers and the uneven quality of teachers. At present, most colleges and universities only calculate the workload according to the class hours of teachers, but the support for the guidance of tutors is far from insufficient. Some necessary conditions for the implementation of undergraduate tutorial system, such as fixed exchange space, office equipment and special funds, are insufficient. The lack of guidance resources and sound operation mechanism cannot guarantee the smooth implementation of undergraduate tutorial system. At the same time, due to the huge gap in teacher-student ratio caused by college enrollment expansion, the tutors themselves are faced with great scientific research tasks and teaching pressure, and objectively cannot devote enough time to guiding undergraduates.

### 3.3. The Evaluation and Examination Mechanism of Undergraduate Tutorial System Is Not Perfect

Lack of reasonable supervision and assessment mechanism, resulting in a good communication link between the tutor and the student has not been established, the guidance relationship is relatively loose. There is no specific guidance scheme and management system for undergraduate tutorial system, and there is no objective and fair evaluation standard for the tutorial system. All these result in the implementation of the tutorial system paying too much attention to the form and failing to highlight its effect[9].The evaluation of tutor's work lacks scientific classification standard, and the comprehensive evaluation system of tutor's self-evaluation and student's evaluation is not perfect. In addition, there is no qualitative and quantitative management method for the periodic performance and task completion of students in the guidance period. Some students are just passively taught, wasting guidance resources. The supervision and assessment of tutors and students are not clear, and corresponding measures are not taken for students who do not fulfill the obligation of guidance and lack of learning willingness, resulting in the undergraduate tutorial system becoming a

mere formality. When some schools run the undergraduate tutorial system, they only make clear the obligation and responsibility of the tutor, but lack of necessary incentive measures. The above factors form certain difficulties to the effective implementation of undergraduate tutorial system.

#### **4. Countermeasures for Effective Implementation of Undergraduate Tutorial System**

The tutorial system is not only a kind of teaching method, but also a kind of personnel training system including training concept, curriculum content, organization and management, assessment and evaluation. Up to now, the undergraduate tutorial system has been widely implemented in many colleges and universities in China and is increasingly valued. It is necessary to combine the development of the tutorial system with the cultivation of undergraduate talents in China to improve the implementation efficiency of the tutorial system from different angles and on the basis of the advanced experience of the tutorial system abroad.

##### **4.1. Strengthen the Guidance of Undergraduate Tutors to Students and Combine Academic and Moral Education**

The localization of undergraduate tutorial system in China should solve the problem of "what to guide, how to guide?" Lin Jianhua, former president of Peking University, believes that undergraduate tutors are more about changing students' learning methods and thinking patterns from middle school to college[10]. In January 2018, The State Council issued the Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of teacher Team Construction in the New Era. This is the new requirement for college teachers in the new era. Although the current popular undergraduate tutorial system in Chinese universities originated from the Oxford model, in fact, Chinese universities place more emphasis on the ideological education of students by tutors, rather than just cultivating talents with a single professional purpose. Therefore, the responsibility of undergraduate tutorial system should focus on academic guidance and care about students' ideological progress at the same time. Through guidance, students can clarify their learning objectives and growth goals, correct their professional thinking and learning attitude, and promote their knowledge, ability and quality coordinated development [11]. Only when the mentor's responsibilities are clearly defined can the mentor's work be measured and evaluated fairly. In order to promote the practice and innovation of undergraduate tutorial system in the new era, we should further clarify the two basic responsibilities of "moral education" and "learning guidance" of tutors, promote the professional development of tutors and perfect the incentive system which is consistent with the responsibilities and rights of tutors.

##### **4.2. Undergraduate Tutorial System Should Be Diversified in the Content and Way of Guidance**

The implementation of undergraduate tutorial system needs to be combined with the training target system of the undergraduate university, and the characteristics of alienation training can be reflected through the setting of specific programs. Although the guidance content of undergraduate tutor has some overlap with classroom teaching, practice teaching and guidance counselor, there are great differences between them. Undergraduate tutor's guidance focuses on "guidance" rather than "teaching". The undergraduate tutor is not only the ideological tutor, the academic tutor, but also the talent tutor [12]. Mentors can design diversified ways of guidance, so that the process of guidance reflects the characteristics of diversification, richness and pertinence. In addition to face-to-face guidance, students can also participate in research internships, online meetings, small seminars and other guidance. Specific instruction time and place can also be arranged according to the convenience of both teachers and students. Only



through sufficient communication can teachers and students interact more effectively, and tutors can better understand the different characteristics of students, so as to better improve the effect of guidance and promote the growth of students.

### **4.3. Establishing A Mentor Incentive System with Unified Rights, Responsibilities and Benefits**

To some extent, the tutorial system is a high-cost talent cultivation system. Only by relying on small scale and low teacher-student ratio can the deep interaction between teachers and students be realized. The undergraduate tutorial system should not only emphasize responsibility, but also emphasize the unification of rights, responsibilities and benefits based on the construction of modern university system. The university should adopt a variety of comprehensive evaluation methods to inspect the implementation of undergraduate tutors from an all-round and multi-angle and encourage them to carry out their work in a standardized and systematic way. On the one hand, the perfect evaluation mechanism can stimulate the work enthusiasm of the tutor, inspect the guidance quality of the tutor comprehensively, and promote the healthy and orderly development of the undergraduate tutorial system; On the other hand, by elaborating the setting goal of undergraduate tutorial system, we can further study the influence path and mechanism of tutorial system, and set up appropriate system to realize it. In terms of system integration, domestic universities are making efforts to explore and improve. First of all, the incentive mechanism for teachers should be adopted. Teachers who make outstanding contributions to undergraduate teaching will be rewarded at different levels. Secondly, colleges and universities provide a stable logistics support platform for tutors, such as the establishment of fixed guidance rooms, to facilitate communication between teachers and students. There are other learning, training, advocacy and networking opportunities for mentors. These measures ensure that undergraduate tutors are promoted and implemented.

## **5. Conclusion**

Driven by the change of information technology, China's undergraduate education is undergoing a high quality development stage with the double first-class goal as the guidance and students as the center. In the popularization stage of higher education, undergraduate tutorial system is an important mode to cultivate innovative talents. The implementation of undergraduate tutorial system should be based on the local situation of China, and should correspond to the educational cultural background and college system of China. Under the general trend that more and more colleges and universities allocate tutors for undergraduates, the adoption of multiple measures promotes the effective implementation of the tutorial system. Clarify the connotation of the tutorial system, provide support, improve the assessment and so on; To establish and improve the selection, assessment, incentive and logistics support system. When students' initiative and learning willingness, as well as the guidance ability and willingness of tutors are improved, the tutorial system will be more conducive to the development of students, and China's undergraduate education will also achieve a breakthrough of higher quality.

## **Acknowledgments**

This paper is supported by the project of Guangxi Higher Education Undergraduate Teaching Reform- "Active Learning Teaching Method in Bilingual Course of Selection from classics of western management".

Project No. [2018]GB112]

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