

Teaching Reform Exploration of the “Economics” Course for Application-Oriented Professional Master’s Degree Program: Taking Shanghai University of Political Science and Law as an Example

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Abstract: Application-oriented professional master’s education is now an important type of cultivating high-level professionals in China; it is a key link connecting academic frontiers with industrial practice and fosters a compound labor force for promoting high-quality economic development. In response to the various problems existing in current teaching process of professional masters’ course “Economics” in our university, based on “profound foundation, strengthen practice and important application”, combined with the New Business Science concept, applying digital technologies to enhance teaching, with the goal of promoting students’ abilities, through restructuring the course content system and deeply embedding digital technologies such as human-computer collaboration into both teaching and evaluation, we build a new teaching paradigm of industry-education integration composed of concise theory, policy frontiers, case study and project training considering about the reality of China’s economic development. We aim to let students apply economic theories to find and analyze practical problems, solve problems, and then conduct scientific evaluations. Ultimately, we aim to be high-level applied professionals with good professional ability and quality, capable of doing practical work creatively, thereby strengthening the practical skills of professional master’s graduates and contributing substantively to China’s high-quality economic development.

Keywords: Application-oriented; Professional master; Economics; New teaching paradigm

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1. Introduction

Since 2009, the Ministry of Education has decided to expand master’s degree program enrollments, admitting recent undergraduate graduates to take full-time professional master’s degrees. “The general plan for the

Development of Master's and Doctoral Professional Degree Postgraduate Education" issued by the State Council Academic Degrees Committee in November 2010, clearly defines the concept of the professional degrees ^[1].

So far, the cultivation of professional masters has experienced two transforming stages as planned: The first stage is to achieve the transformation of postgraduate education in China from focusing on cultivating academic talents to paying equal attention to both academic and applied talents by 2020. The second stage, the "Educational Development Program (2020-2025) of the Professional Degree Postgraduate" issued by the Ministry of Education in 2020, pointed out that the enrollment scale of the professional masters will expand to about two-thirds of the total masters by 2025 ^[2]. The available data now shows that the goals of the two stages of professional master's development have all been achieved, and the cultivation of professional masters has become the main parts of postgraduate education now. For professional master's program, the main target of the current curriculum system and teaching reform is how to transform the teaching mode from emphasizing research and teaching to prioritizing application and practice. As a compulsory foundational course for postgraduates in economics and management, "Economics" serves as an essential curriculum for cultivating professional masters' program in School of Economics and Management in Shanghai University of Political Science and Law. It is a theoretical course with a long history emphasizing economic logic, but in the professional masters' framework, it must be equipped with stronger practical significance at the same time. For this demand, it is imperative to reexamine the conceptual framework, teaching methods and instructional objectives of the Economics course in professional masters' programs. During the current period characterized by the rapid development and widespread application of artificial intelligence, it is critical to identify existing challenges in current teaching practices, implement targeted reforms, use Artificial intelligence digital technology (AIDT) to enhance the individualized teaching, improve the quality and efficiency in both teaching and learning, strengthen the practical application of theoretical knowledge, boost instructional outcomes, and enrich students' theoretical knowledge reserves, AI application skills and professional ability in economic analysis. Such measures aim to meet the fundamental requirements for cultivating high-quality, application-oriented, and interdisciplinary professionals in professional masters' education and modern social economy.

2. Current situation and problems of the economics course teaching in our university's professional master program

At this stage, our professional master's program offers three majors: International Business, Digital Economy and Auditing, and two economics-related programs, one management specialization. As a teacher, how to give the economics class meeting the training requirements of different disciplines has already been considered and practiced. During the process, the following main problems have been found.

2.1. Application-oriented training model is difficult to achieve due to insufficient class hours

The graduate Economics course acts as a continuation of the undergraduate Economics curriculum within graduate programs in economics and management, and requires further enhancement in both depth and breadth. As a professional master's economics class, meeting the need of promoting ability for future careers, it must not only deepen and broaden theoretical knowledge but also apply the theory into practice

to strengthen the practical skills of professional masters, thereby establishing a curriculum framework that balances profound theoretical expertise with better practical application; this conflicts with the current 3 credits, 45 class hours course framework. Theoretically speaking, current master's programs in economics and management divide the economics curriculum into advanced microeconomics and advanced macroeconomics, totaling 8 credits and 120 class hours. Integrating advanced economic theories fully into this 3 credits, 45 class hours framework has become a major challenge for teachers in designing teaching materials. Especially when practical application training and assessment are added, the shortage of class hours becomes even more serious.

2.2. Instructional level of courses varies considerably due to significant differences in students' bases

Our university now has three professional master's majors in economics and management: International Business, Digital Economy, and Auditing. The admission examinations for International Business and Digital Economy require a solid background in economics, whereas the management admission exam for Auditing does not cover any foundational economic theory. This results in many undergraduate students whose major is not economics or management having no economic basis; consequently, even when courses are taught separately by major, obvious differences in students' foundational understanding of economic theory. The foundational theories of economics are simplistic for students with prior knowledge, while advanced economic theories prove challenging to grasp for students without an economic background. The curriculum exhibits significant differences, leaving teachers in a difficult position when giving the classes.

2.3. Theoretical contents are lagging and deficient, lacking practical applicability

The curriculum framework of economics reflects abstracts of the economic development experiences of Western countries, embodying an interdisciplinary integration of political economics and mathematical methods. However, either the field of political economics or mathematics exhibits characteristics of relative staticness and stagnation. In today's world, economic development and social transformation are changing rapidly. However, the economics textbooks and related content have failed to comprehensively track, analyze, and refine these dynamic contemporary developments, resulting in theoretical gaps that are out of step with times, for example, the absence of digital elements in production model, or discussions on AI agents replacing human labor. Moreover, discussion of emerging phenomena in economic and social development remain inadequate in textbooks, even teachers use the frontier cases for supplements, some case study still lack of exact theoretical support. There are obvious and significant flaws to use traditional models deducing the phenomena and problems during process of social economic development, economic theories lack practical applicability at the present stage.

2.4. The teaching methods reform has had limited effects

Currently, the teaching methods reform of "Economics" in our university primarily focus on a transition from traditional lecture-based instruction to an heuristic teaching mode with problem-based learning (PBL) principles, while continuously increasing students' active participation time in class. For example, in case-based teaching, the instructor provides general guidance while students use various resources and tools to search for, describe, and analyze cases, often through a mixed online-offline format. However, the outcomes of these teaching reforms remain limited. Firstly, with heuristic teaching methods, teachers face lower

participation levels and poor engagement quality. Case-based instruction further shows students' deficiency in economic logical thinking; they predominantly use popular language that is highly socially acceptable but not economic words to explain and analyze cases, resulting in a lack of professionalism. Moreover, constrained by class time, both problem identification and case analysis remain superficial and insufficient. Secondly, under the mixed online-offline teaching models, theoretical previews and case preparations are typically assigned online or after class, making it difficult to monitor students' learning progress effectively. Most students lack subjective initiative, perform these preparatory tasks perfunctorily, leaving teachers with limited time for hands-on instructional activities in class.

2.5. The integration of ideological and political education into the curriculum is insufficient

Nowadays, most of the popular elementary, intermediate, and advanced economics textbooks in China are English versions or Chinese translations of classic foreign textbooks. These textbooks exhibit strong characteristics of bourgeois ideology in their theoretical frameworks, economic cases, and value orientations, which do not fully align with the developmental realities of a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics. For undergraduates, the usage of the Marxist Theory Project textbooks has facilitated localized adaptations of economic theories and cases of China's national conditions; the ideological and political education in the curriculum is relatively sufficient, alleviating ideological tensions to some extent. However, graduate students still predominantly use intermediate and advanced textbooks from abroad, leaving teachers to determine how to embed ideological and political elements on their own. Moreover, current standards for such integration are ambiguous, and assessment criteria offer little guidance. As a result, the integration process tends to be arbitrary and lacks depth. In addition, some teachers may refrain from integrating these elements due to associated risks. Consequently, ideological and political education remains inadequately integrated in professional master's programs.

3. Exploring an application-oriented teaching reform model for the “economics” course in professional master's programs

Given the existing challenges in the current teaching of the “Economics” course for our school's professional masters, based on an application-oriented approach, this study suggests that teaching reforms could be implemented from the following aspects.

3.1. Clarifying demand-oriented teaching objectives

Professional master's education represents an inevitable requirement for talent cultivation as socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics evolves from extensive development to comprehensive and refined development. Combining the background of new liberal arts construction and rapid expansion of digital and intelligent technologies, the goal of cultivating interdisciplinary professionals with refined theoretical knowledge, strong competencies, and high values has strategic priorities. This direction is imperative for economics and management master's programs to fit the nation's needs with high-quality development and industrial transformation. Demand orientation permeates the entire teaching and training cycle. Education must closely align with career needs, which is primarily reflected in curriculum design, both in content and formats, to support thesis writing and practical engagement in business projects, ultimately meeting the

mainstream social employment expectations. This focus on serving industry enables effective matching between competencies and job requirements. Demand-oriented teaching objectives not only meet the talent needs of China's current socio-economic development but also alleviate students' concerns in academic qualifications and employment prospects, representing a win-win model that satisfies both societal and individual needs ^[3].

3.2. Restructuring the curriculum content system to create a new model for integrating industry and education

Now, restructuring the "Economics" content system for professional masters should adhere to three fundamental principles. Firstly, following the principle of connecting links between the preceding and the following, as an extension of undergraduate economics theory, graduate economics instruction should not merely involve theoretical review but rather entail further deepening and broadening of foundational economic theories in response to subsequent practical applications and real-world demands. For example, about the theory of consumers' behavior, teachers can generally release the strict assumptions of the different consumers' preferences, let students know different types of indifference curve models, move from general principles to specific cases, and from abstract theories to practical applications. Secondly, updating and integrating frontier findings and theories into the course is very necessary. For example, within the theory of producers' behavior, under the rapid development of the digital economy, data has become a key factor in production, therefore, the course should both contain the relevant theories and practices and then put the data into functions, as well as the development in AI skill that enhance quality and efficiency while forming the labor substitution and also the consideration of the total factor productivity ^[5]. Thirdly, the proportional balance between theoretical and practical components should be adjusted to expand applied learning opportunities. Instruction should move out from textbook theories and foreign cases to local case studies, economic practices, and project-based engagement, thereby establishing a new industry education integration model driven by theoretical instruction, students' interests, and business projects ^[6].

3.3. Exploring a new paradigm for teaching and learning methods in the "economics" course with human-machine collaboration

The widespread use of educational platforms such as MOOC's and the Chaoxing Learning Platform, coupled with the integration of innovative teaching models such as mixed online-offline instruction and flipped classrooms, has brought significant changes compared with traditional lecture-based teaching and passive learning. Teachers can now expand course content both in depth and breadth within limited class hours, while students can gain access to more learning resources and flexible learning opportunities. All the above is based on the developments of educational applications in computer science. Over the past five years, further development in artificial intelligence has given new possibilities for creative teaching models. The Government Work Report of 2024 first introduced the "AI+" initiative, providing clear direction for making full use of AI to drive educational innovation ^[7]. Based on the existing outcomes of the teaching reforms, we can incorporate human-machine collaboration to diversify teaching methods and tools, and encourage students to participate actively in the teaching reform, so as to achieve both teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes. For example, improving the hardware and teaching resources to achieve effective AI-assisted instruction. Widely use of virtual simulation experiments with human-computer interaction and the microeconomics decision-making sandbox simulations, which can guide students to transfer their roles from

simply knowing the policy reasons, challenges of the policy operation, and the policy outcomes to roles that can make policy, pose questions, and solve problems, thereby meeting personalized learning needs. AI agents are employed for instructional tracking, enabling teachers to monitor students' progress and learning effectiveness better, establishing a new paradigm for teaching and learning ^[8].

3.4. Integrating comprehensive ideological and political education and delving into the value guidance of China

The teachers should add Xi Jinping's governance philosophy, economic theories, concepts such as the community with a shared future for humanity, and the miracle of socialism with Chinese characteristics into economics teaching for the graduates. During the related teaching stages, induce the students to spontaneously identify the Chinese elements within economic theories and applications, gradually update the Western paradigms with Chinese logic, thereby achieving Chinese value leadership based on newly established economic theories. Simultaneously, implement ideological and political education to strengthen students' sense of responsibility and commitment, shift from optimal individuals to common prosperity, from objective data to humanistic concerns, and foster students' own judgments, creativity, and critical thinking through learning and practicing, allowing them to experience and realize their own value throughout the process.

3.5. Reforming the course assessment and evaluation system

The assessment system for economics in professional master's programs should treat the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) paradigm as a basis; it must turn from conventional models to frameworks of process-oriented and competency-driven targets. The assessments should focus on the learning outcomes at every teaching stage, and they should be implemented step by step. Based on **Table 1**, teachers can inspire students to think deeply about their career planning, promote functional matching, plan subsequent course learning and practical arrangements in an employment-oriented manner ^[9].

Table 1. Dimensions and Connotations of Hierarchical Assessment Evaluation ^[10]

Dimension	The Dimensional Connotation
Theoretical Foundation Dimension	Platform Tracking: Monitor the students' previewing behavior and their theoretical preparation to examine whether their learning time distribution demonstrates a gradual and sustained pattern.
Practical Application Dimension	Learning Attitude and Engagement: Teachers induce students to utilize platform resources, AI-assisted tools, simulation exercises, and related competitions to engage in case studies, project planning, policy analysis, and other related activities.
Capacity Enhancement Dimension	Empirical Judgment and Quantitative Scoring: Teachers evaluate students' competency gains according to the above two dimensions and then give scores to students' performance.

Note: 1. Definition of the frontier: It is a multi-dimensional and dynamic entirety that integrates the reconstruction of classic theories, the innovation of research methods, the response to real-world problems, and interdisciplinary approaches. It serves as the logical starting point for promoting the update of course contents, the innovation of teaching models, and the reform of talent cultivation paradigms ^[4].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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