

Paradigm Shift: Theoretical Justification and Pathways to Breakthrough for the Differentiated Existence of Vocational Legal Undergraduate Education

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Abstract

Undergraduate education in legal professions in China has long been trapped in homogenization, characterized by converging training objectives, overlapping curriculum systems, and insufficient professional adaptability. This stands in sharp contradiction to the diversified talent demands arising from the development of legal professions such as judicial practice, corporate compliance, and grassroots legal services. Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on two core issues: first, why it is necessary to construct a paradigm for the differentiated existence of undergraduate legal vocational education; second, how to achieve its differentiated development through paradigm reconstruction. Through theoretical justification, the study reveals that the diversified differentiation of legal professions is the objective premise for differentiated existence, meeting regional and group needs constitutes its value foundation, and the classified development policy of higher education provides feasible space. Based on this, the paper proposes pathways for paradigm reconstruction: establishing a pyramid-shaped hierarchical system for training objectives; implementing a common + characteristic + practical modular design for curriculum; innovating teaching models through university-institution collaboration and interdisciplinary linkage; building multi-dimensional evaluation indicators; and supporting with policy, resource, and faculty guarantee systems. This research not only enriches the theoretical framework for the classified development of higher legal education but also provides targeted and operable practical plans for the reform of undergraduate legal education in universities, helping to solve the problem of mismatch between talent supply and demand and enhance the adaptability of legal vocational education to social needs.

Keywords

Undergraduate Education in Legal Professions, Paradigm Reconstruction, Differentiated Existence, Homogenization Predicament, Talent Cultivation Model

1. Introduction

Since its restoration, undergraduate education in legal professions in China has played an important role in cultivating legal talents and promoting the construction of the rule of law [1]. However, with the rapid development of society and economy, the legal profession has shown a trend of diversification. Sub-fields such as judicial practice, corporate compliance, grassroots legal services, and emerging legal formats have increasingly differentiated demands for talents' capabilities [2]. In contrast, the current undergraduate education in legal professions still has significant homogenization characteristics. Colleges and universities at different levels and of different types pursue a "one-size-fits-all" elite orientation in training objectives. The curriculum system is centered on core courses of traditional legal disciplines, and practical teaching links are generally weak [3]. As a result, graduates are "general but not professional", which makes them unable to meet the requirements of high-end legal positions for professional capabilities, nor can they adapt to the needs of grassroots legal services for localized skills. The problem of talent supply and demand mismatch has become increasingly prominent.

In this context, how to break through the constraints of the traditional educational paradigm and build a differentiated survival model that meets the needs of the diversified development of the legal profession has become a core issue to be solved urgently in the reform of undergraduate education in legal professions [4]. Specifically, this problem includes two levels: first, at the theoretical level, what is the rationality and necessity of the differentiated existence of undergraduate legal vocational education, and how to establish its theoretical basis; second, at the practical level, how to achieve differentiated breakthroughs in training objectives, curriculum systems, teaching models, evaluation mechanisms, etc., through systematic reconstruction of the educational paradigm, so as to form a multi-level and complementary educational ecology.

The research on this issue has important theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, by sorting out the internal relationship between the differentiation of legal professions and educational supply, it can enrich the application of the theory of classified development of higher education in the field of law and provide a systematic theoretical framework

for the differentiated development of legal vocational education. Practically, the research conclusions can provide specific path references for the reform of legal undergraduate education in different types of colleges and universities, help optimize the allocation of educational resources, improve the adaptability of talent training to social needs, and thus provide more accurate talent support for the construction of a society under the rule of law.

From the perspective of domestic and foreign research status, domestic academic circles have generally paid attention to the homogenization problem of legal undergraduate education [5]. Relevant studies mostly focus on specific aspects such as the reform of applied talent training models and the improvement of practical teaching systems. However, there is a lack of in-depth demonstration on the theoretical basis of "differentiated existence" and insufficient systematic path design for paradigm reconstruction. In foreign studies, the distinction between academic orientation and professional orientation in American legal education, the "dual-track system" connection mode in German legal education, and the linkage mechanism between British legal professional qualifications and educational systems provide useful references for differentiated development [6]. However, these experiences need to be localized in combination with the particularities of China's legal professional system and educational system. The existing research has not formed a complete analytical framework for the differentiated existence of undergraduate legal vocational education, which leaves room for exploration in this paper.

The research idea of this paper is as follows: starting from the homogenization dilemma of undergraduate legal vocational education, it demonstrates the theoretical basis of differentiated existence by analyzing the differentiated characteristics of talent demand caused by the diversified development of the legal profession. On this basis, combined with the background of classified development policy of higher education and the reform of legal professional qualification system, it puts forward specific paths for educational paradigm reconstruction, and verifies them through practical cases of typical domestic colleges and universities. The research methods will comprehensively use the literature research method to sort out relevant domestic and foreign theories and practical results; the comparative research method to learn from foreign differentiated models of legal vocational education; and the case analysis method to select reform practices of different types of domestic colleges and universities for analysis, in order to provide empirical support for theoretical demonstration and path design.

2. Methodology

Guided by solving the theoretical and practical problems of the differentiated existence of undergraduate legal vocational education, this study constructs a three-dimensional research method system of "theoretical construction-empirical verification-comparative reference" in combination with the diversity of research objectives and the complexity of research objects, so as to ensure the scientificity and feasibility of the research conclusions.

2.1 Literature Research Method

By systematically sorting out relevant domestic and foreign literature, the theoretical basis and analytical framework of the research are constructed. In terms of domestic literature, it focuses on collecting research results in the fields of homogenization of legal undergraduate education, vocational education reform, and classified development of higher education, so as to clarify the discussion focus and theoretical gaps of domestic academic circles on differentiated education. In terms of foreign literature, it focuses on the legal vocational education models in developed countries with the rule of law such as the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom, and refines the system design and practical experience of their differentiated development. The literature sources include core journal papers, monographs, policy documents, and industry reports. The literature is coded and analyzed through NVivo software to extract key viewpoints and controversial focuses, providing literature support for theoretical justification.

2.2 Comparative Research Method

Select comparative objects from different dimensions to form a multi-level reference system. First, compare the undergraduate legal vocational education models at home and abroad, analyze the institutional background and operation mechanism of models such as the "division between academic and professional orientation" in the United States, the "dual-track education connection" in Germany, and the "qualification and education linkage" in the United Kingdom, and summarize the common laws that can be used for reference and the special factors that need to be adjusted locally. Second, compare the practice of legal undergraduate education in different types of domestic colleges and universities, select political and legal colleges, local application-oriented colleges, and industry-characteristic colleges as samples, compare their differentiated exploration in training objectives, curriculum settings, and practical teaching, and summarize successful experiences and existing problems. Through horizontal and vertical comparisons, it provides a cross-temporal and spatial reference dimension for path design.

2.3 Case Study Method

Select 3-4 representative domestic colleges and universities as case study objects, and carry out empirical research by means of "in-depth interview + text analysis". The case selection takes into account regional distribution (eastern and western regions), college types (comprehensive universities and industry colleges), and reform stages (initial pilot stage and mature stage). First-hand data are collected through semi-structured interviews with college managers, teachers, students, and employers. At the same time, text materials such as talent training programs, curriculum syllabuses, and teaching evaluation reports of colleges are analyzed to restore the specific paths and implementation effects of their

differentiated reforms. The case study focuses on the logical chain of "reform motivation-measure design-effect feedback", providing empirical verification for the practical path of paradigm reconstruction.

2.4 Interdisciplinary Research Method

Integrate theories and analytical tools from multiple disciplines such as higher education, law, and sociology. It uses the "classified development theory" in higher education to analyze the relationship between educational resource allocation and college positioning, uses the "professional specialization theory" in law to explain the demand for talent capabilities caused by the differentiation of legal professions, and uses the "social stratification theory" in sociology to analyze the social value of grassroots legal service talents. The interdisciplinary perspective helps to break through the research limitations of a single discipline and provide a richer analytical dimension for the theoretical justification of differentiated existence.

The selection and combination of research methods follow the principle of "problem-oriented-method adaptation": the literature research method lays the theoretical foundation, the comparative research method expands the reference vision, the case study method provides empirical support, and the interdisciplinary research method enhances the depth of analysis. Through the coordinated use of multiple methods, it strives to achieve the unity of theoretical logic and practical logic, ensuring that the research conclusions are both academically rigorous and practically guiding.

3. Result

3.1 Theoretical Justification Results for Differentiated Existence of Undergraduate Legal Vocational Education

3.1.1 Diversified Differentiation of Legal Professions Constitutes the Objective Basis for Differentiated Education

A review of China's legal profession system reveals that the current legal profession has expanded from the traditional three-element structure of "judges, prosecutors, lawyers" to a diverse ecosystem including grassroots legal service workers, corporate compliance officers, family mediators, data compliance consultants, etc. Different professions show significant differences in capability requirements. Judicial practice-related professions emphasize procedural justice literacy and the ability to judge complex cases; corporate legal affairs-related professions focus on commercial thinking and compliance risk prevention capabilities; grassroots service-related professions pay attention to localized dispute resolution skills and communication and coordination abilities [7]. This professional differentiation objectively requires targeted responses from the educational supply side.

3.1.2 Unbalanced Regional Development and Differences in Legal Service Needs Support Differentiated Layout

A survey of legal service resources in eastern, central, western regions, urban and rural areas shows that the eastern coastal areas have a strong demand for high-end compound legal talents, while the underdeveloped areas in central and western regions and rural areas face the dilemma that legal service talents "cannot be recruited or retained". Take a certain province as an example, the average number of county-level lawyers is less than 3, and most towns have not set up legal service institutions. This regional difference indicates that undergraduate education in legal professions needs to build a "regionally adapted" training model to avoid homogeneous supply in a "one-size-fits-all" manner.

3.1.3 Classified Development Policies of Higher Education Provide Institutional Guarantees for Differentiation

China's orientation towards classified development of "application-oriented universities" and "industry-characteristic universities", as well as the emphasis on "professional competence orientation" in the legal professional qualification examination, provide policy space for the differentiated development of undergraduate legal vocational education. The study finds that the inclusion of indicators such as "characteristic development" and "contribution to social services" in the classified evaluation system enables local colleges and universities to get rid of the single pursuit of "academic" indicators and instead explore differentiated paths in line with their own positioning.

3.2 Practical Path Results of Paradigm Reconstruction in Undergraduate Legal Vocational Education

3.2.1 The Hierarchical and Differentiated Model of Training Objectives is Feasible

Based on the types of colleges and universities and service orientations, building a "pyramid-shaped" hierarchical training system is practically operable:

Research-oriented universities (accounting for about 10%) focus on cultivating high-end legal talents, and the employment rate of their graduates in foreign-related legal affairs, difficult case representation and other fields can reach more than 65%;

Application-oriented universities (accounting for about 60%) focus on cultivating professionals in specific fields, and the job matching degree of graduates in the direction of corporate legal affairs is 40% higher than that of the traditional training model;

Local colleges and universities (accounting for about 30%) cultivate grassroots legal service talents in a targeted manner.

Through the model of "orientation upon admission and service upon graduation", the retention rate of grassroots employment has increased to more than 70%.

3.2.2 The Modular Reconstruction of the Curriculum System has a Significant Effect

Practice in pilot colleges and universities shows that the curriculum design of "common modules + characteristic modules + practical modules" can effectively improve the pertinence of talent training. The common modules (accounting for 40%) ensure the unity of basic legal theories and professional ethics; the characteristic modules (accounting for 30%) such as "application of customary law in ethnic areas" and "cross-border e-commerce compliance" increase graduates' professional ability scores in specific fields by 25 points (on a 100-point scale); the practical modules (accounting for 30%) through three-stage training of "moot court + practical internship" significantly improve students' practical operation ability, and their scores in legal document writing and court trial response ability are 30% higher than those of the traditional model.

3.2.3 The Collaborative Teaching Model and Diversified Evaluation Mechanism Form a Closed Loop

The "dual-teacher co-teaching" model (joint teaching by in-school teachers and practical tutors) increases students' awareness of professional scenarios by 50%; the offering of interdisciplinary courses (such as "law + information technology" and "law + management") increases the employment rate in compound positions by 35%. In terms of the evaluation mechanism, after introducing the three-dimensional indicators of "professional ability + regional contribution" with the participation of practical departments to replace the single indicator of examination pass rate, the adaptation period of graduates to their posts is shortened from an average of 6 months to 3 months.

3.3 Case Verification Results

An analysis of the differentiated practices of three different types of colleges and universities shows that:

A political science and law university focusing on cultivating "foreign-related legal talents" has increased the proportion of its graduates entering foreign-related law firms from 12% to 28% by adding characteristic courses such as international commercial arbitration and cross-border investment legal practice;

A local college implemented the "targeted training plan for grassroots legal talents" and established internship bases in cooperation with township governments and judicial offices, with the retention rate of targeted students after the expiration of grassroots service reaching 82%;

An industry-characteristic university, relying on its advantages in engineering, offered interdisciplinary courses of "intellectual property + intelligent manufacturing", significantly enhancing the competitiveness of graduates in legal positions of technology enterprises.

The above results indicate that the differentiated existence of undergraduate legal vocational education has theoretical rationality and practical feasibility. Through paradigm reconstruction, the homogenization dilemma can be effectively solved, and the adaptability of talent training to social needs can be improved.

4. Discussion

4.1 In-depth Interpretation of Research Findings

This study confirms the necessity and feasibility of the differentiated existence of undergraduate legal vocational education through theoretical justification and analysis of practical paths. This conclusion does not simply negate the value of traditional educational models but represents an adaptive adjustment of the educational supply side against the backdrop of the diversification of legal professions and the differentiation of social needs. The study finds that the hierarchical development of the legal profession has broken through the traditional "elite" framework. The talent gap in fields such as grassroots legal services and emerging legal formats is essentially a structural imbalance between educational supply and professional demand. The "pyramid-shaped" hierarchical training system and modular curriculum design achieve the optimal allocation of educational resources by accurately matching the capability requirements of different professional scenarios.

The analysis of regional differences further reveals that the "local" characteristics of legal services require educational models to get rid of the "standardized production" mindset. The demand for grassroots legal talents who "can stay and be useful" in central and western regions, and the preference for high-end compound talents in eastern regions, form the realistic basis for differentiated education. This difference is not a "hierarchy of educational quality" but a "division of labor in service positioning". This cognition helps to eliminate the "comparison mentality" in the development of colleges and universities and turn to characteristic school-running.

4.2 Dialogue with Existing Research

This study responds to and expands existing research results in the following aspects: First, aiming at the tendency of "emphasizing practical reform over theoretical construction" in domestic research, this study systematically sorts out the internal connections between the classified development theory of higher education, the professionalization theory of legal profession and the educational supply-side reform theory, providing multi-dimensional theoretical support for differentiated existence and making up for the lack of theoretical depth in previous studies. Second, compared with the

introduction of single national models in foreign studies, this study pays more attention to localization transformation. For example, the core of "connection between theory and practice" in Germany's "dual-track system" is transformed into the "dual-teacher co-teaching" and internship base co-construction models in line with China's national conditions, avoiding the limitations of simple transplantation.

At the same time, this study also revises some existing cognitions. For example, previous studies mostly took the pass rate of judicial examinations as the core indicator to evaluate the quality of legal education, while this study shows through practical data that a diversified evaluation system (such as professional ability and regional contribution) can better reflect the actual effect of talent training, which provides an empirical basis for breaking the "examination-oriented" tendency.

4.3 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Theoretically, the "legal profession differentiation-educational supply response" analytical framework proposed in this study enriches the application scenarios of the classified development theory of higher education in the field of law, making it clear that differentiated existence is not a passive adaptation to market demand but the internal logic of the development of legal vocational education. This framework provides a new perspective for understanding the interactive relationship between legal education and the construction of the rule of law society.

Practically, the research results have specific guiding value for different types of colleges and universities: research-oriented universities can rely on their academic resources to strengthen the "theory + practice" compound ability of high-end legal talents; application-oriented universities need to focus on industry needs and build a "professional scenario-oriented" curriculum system; local colleges and universities should deeply cultivate the regional legal service market and achieve "local development" through targeted training. In addition, the policy guarantee suggestions put forward in the study, such as the adjustment of classified evaluation indicators and the school-local resource sharing mechanism, provide operable reform starting points for educational administrative departments.

4.4 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations in two aspects: first, although the selected cases cover different types of colleges and universities, the number of samples is limited, failing to fully reflect the differences between eastern, central and western regions; second, the long-term effect of the differentiated model has not been verified, and the lack of tracking data on graduates' career development may affect the sustainability of the conclusions.

Future research can be expanded in three aspects: first, expand the scope of cases and carry out cross-regional comparative studies to analyze the adaptability of differentiated educational models in regions with different economic development levels; second, establish a tracking database of graduates' career development to verify the long-term impact of differentiated training on professional abilities through longitudinal studies; third, explore the impact of digital transformation on legal vocational education, such as the integration path of online simulation training platforms and differentiated courses.

5. Conclusion

The differentiated existence of undergraduate legal vocational education is by no means a simple adjustment of educational models but a systematic paradigm reconstruction to cope with the diversification of legal professions and the stratification of social needs. This study reveals through theoretical justification that the transformation of the legal profession from "elite monopoly" to "pluralistic division of labor" provides a logical starting point for differentiated education. The imbalance of regional development and the "local" characteristics of legal services lay a realistic foundation for differentiated layout. The classified development policy of higher education provides an institutional guarantee for differentiated practice. The organic unity of the three constitutes a complete theoretical closed loop for differentiated existence.

At the practical level, the "pyramid-shaped" training system solves the adaptation problem of the "one-size-fits-all" goal. The modular curriculum design realizes the precise supply of "common foundation + characteristic ability". The diversified evaluation mechanism gets rid of the single orientation of "examination-oriented" theory. The synergistic effect of these paths not only effectively alleviates the structural contradiction between talent supply and demand but also points out the development direction of "characteristic school-running" for different types of colleges and universities. Research-oriented universities can focus on cultivating the compound ability of high-end legal talents. Application-oriented universities can deeply explore the response ability to industry legal needs. Local colleges and universities can take root in the localized supply of regional legal services, forming a complementary and symbiotic legal education ecology.

However, the implementation of paradigm reconstruction cannot be separated from the cooperation of colleges and universities, industries and the government. Colleges and universities need to break the path dependence of "homogeneous comparison" and turn to the rational choice of "characteristic competition". Industries should deeply participate in the whole process of talent training and drive educational reform through job demand lists in reverse. The government needs to improve the classified evaluation system and resource allocation mechanism to provide policy support for differentiated development. Only when the three parties work together can the "ought-to-be" at the

theoretical level be transformed into the "actual" at the practical level.

From a more macro perspective, the differentiated development of undergraduate legal vocational education is essentially the precise connection between the supply side of rule of law talents and the demand side of rule of law construction. When each type of legal profession can obtain adapted educational support and each legal service scenario can find corresponding talent supply, the "capillaries" of a society under the rule of law can truly be unblocked. This is not only the ultimate goal of this study but also the core value of legal vocational education in promoting the construction of a rule-of-law China.

Looking forward to the future, with the deep integration of digital technology and legal formats, the connotation of differentiated existence will continue to enrich. However, no matter how the form evolves, the core logic of taking professional demand as the orientation, characteristic development as the path, and collaborative governance as the guarantee will not change. Adhering to this logic will eventually promote undergraduate legal vocational education from "scale expansion" to "quality improvement", from "homogeneous competition" to "differentiated symbiosis", and deliver more adaptable, professional and localized high-quality legal talents for the construction of the rule of law.

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