Problems and Solutions in Implementing Modern Apprenticeship in Higher Vocational Institutions

Kong Xiang-feng
Qingdao Ocean Shipping Mariners College, Qingdao, 266071, China

Abstract: With the furthering of educational reform in higher vocational institutions, China’s vocational education has given a new connotation to modern apprenticeship. The government makes efforts in promoting the modern apprenticeship and this is met with active response of the higher vocational institutions. However, in the practical situation of the higher vocational institutions, the implementation of modern apprenticeship is still faced with lots of problems. It is the author’s opinion that the government and higher vocational institutions should overall integrate the planning for scientific and systematic designing of the implementation of modern apprenticeship to create an integrated environment for the enterprises to actively participate in the higher vocational education. The institutions and enterprises should join hands in the management of higher vocational education, strengthen the pilot institutions and promote the apprenticeship to solve the problems in the implementation and enhance the development of the higher vocational education of China.

Key words: Higher vocational education, modern apprenticeship, problems and solutions.

On February 26th, 2014, the executive meeting of the State Council put forth in promoting the development of modern higher vocational education, “lay out pilot in modern apprenticeship in institution-enterprise joint enrollment and cultivation”. [1] In August, 2015, the Ministry of Education selected 165 institutions for the first group of pilots and leading candidates for the practice of modern apprenticeship. This formally started the pilot of modern apprenticeship. As a new educational model in higher vocational education, the modern apprenticeship is welcomed by the educational administrations and higher institutions, which has popped up a nationwide boom of “modern apprenticeship”. The modern apprenticeship is the “enrollment of students is the enrollment of workers” based on the needs for talents in the industries and enterprises. The learning and work are carried out alternately and to meet the calls for the participation of industries and enterprises and the mutual guidance of the teachers and masters. This not only improves the pertinence of education and solves the problems of “shortage of hands,” but also reduces the economic burden of the parents and students, promotes the construction of “dual teachers” of the institutions and impels the sustainable perfection of the modern vocational education system of China. Then what does this educational model that benefits the country, enterprises, students and institutions lead to the problems in the practical operation? How can we solve the problems? These questions need the answers.

1. Development and Connotation of “Modern Apprenticeship”

The apprenticeship has a long history. It plays an important role in the heritage of human knowledge and techniques and has different characteristics in different stages of its development.

1.1 The Development of “Modern Apprenticeship”

The apprenticeship is, in the realistic workplace, the apprentice acquires the knowledge and skills under the
teaching and guidance of the masters. This is the meaning of the traditional sense. People generally believe that the systemized apprenticeship appeared in the Middle Ages and the term came into use around the 13th century. On account of the influence of politics, economy, religion and culture, etc., the later-on development of the apprenticeship went through different practices in various countries and this has demonstrated different characteristics, taking as an example, the “dual system” of Germany, the “youth training program” of Great Britain, the “new apprenticeship” of Australia and the “cooperative education” of the United States, etc. The common characteristics they shared are that these countries have found the best combination between the educational development of their own countries and the apprenticeship. Therefore, the modern apprenticeship is the product of the harmony of modern school education and traditional apprenticeship. In comparison with traditional apprenticeship, it has gained the support of the government and guarantee of the law and is featured in the combination of education and production[2].

In China, the apprenticeship came into existence in earlier times, but the modern apprenticeship was put forth in 2011. Under the guidance of the government, the higher vocational institutions cooperated with enterprises in cultivating the highly qualified and technical talents with necessary theoretical knowledge and practical skills according to the training model of the combination of work and study. This was piloted in Xinyu city of Jiangxi Province. From 2012, the Ministry of Education pinpointed the modern apprenticeship as the key work, formulated a series of policies and clarified the measures for the development of the modern apprenticeship as the governmental financial support, building of institution-enterprise cooperation platforms and setting aside the funds training in enterprises, etc., which provided the policy guarantee for the modern apprenticeship with Chinese characteristics.

1.2 The Connotation of “Modern Apprenticeship”

With the furthering of Chinese vocational education, especially that of the institution-enterprise cooperation and work-study combination, China’s vocational education has been given new connotation of modern apprenticeship. First, the modern apprenticeship is the further step for the model of work-study combination so that the vocational institutions are faced with the social balance of educational resources, which has further enriched the connotation of higher vocational education by means of the reform of educational concept, the improvement of educational model, restructuring of the course system, the development of the off-campus bases, the optimization of the teaching staff, the perfection of multi-assessment system and the facilitated development of the students’ professional ability and vocational ability. Second the modern apprenticeship has brought back the essence of vocational education in that vocational education should be based on humanity, with emphasis placed on the overall and sustainable development and the needs of social demand and self-development. This is exactly where the innate value of the vocational education lies[3].

2. Problems for the Implementation of Apprenticeship

The implementation of the modern apprenticeship needs the match making of the external environments as the regulations, culture and economy, etc. and the internal conditions of the governmental supports in policy and funds, cooperation of the institutions, participation of the enterprises and recognition of the society. The apprenticeship of China is the stage of pilot and the external and internal environments are still immature for extensive implementation. Therefore, the higher vocational institutions have encountered many problems in the research and practice of the modern apprenticeship.
2.1 There Is No Detailed Top Level Design

In recent years, the Ministry of Education has attached great emphasis on the modern apprenticeship. But seeing from the level of the government, there is no top level design for the implementation in two aspects. First, there are no relevant legal regulations. The guidelines for modern apprenticeship appear in the form of documents of the institution-enterprises cooperation or work-study combination from the educational administrations. Although macroscopic, yet there is little clarification even blank in national and regional laws and regulations. For example, since the students are “apprentices” of enterprises, but there is legal name for the social status and welfare, etc. for the apprentice, which hinders the implementation of the modern apprenticeship. Second, there is the mechanism shortage of strategies and measures for the promotion, especially those for the stimulation and limitation for the participation of modern apprenticeship. The enterprises of western countries see as their responsibility and commission the cultivation of highly qualified laborers and the development of society and economy[4]. Looking back at ourselves, the establishment of modern enterprise system is still young, and most enterprises lack the sense of social responsibility. They do not feel they have the obligation and liability in the participation in vocational education and cannot win the awards from the involvement in the vocational education. They are not interested.

2.2 There Is No Management Mechanism in Vocational Institutions

The modern apprenticeship is a higher level of work-study combination in talents education and training. The implementation of modern apprenticeship surely results in greater expenditure of manpower, energy and finance, which can be of high pressure on the talent cultivation and management systems of the institutions that are used to the stabilized status. The authorities of the vocational institutions are not prepared and they are afraid of the change and even are opposed to the reform. The alternating “study” and “work” in modern apprenticeship requires that, except for staying at the institution for studies, the students should go to the enterprises for learning and practice, which entails a more complicated process in implementation. The management of the “double take” of “students” and “apprentices” is more sophisticated. The students should not only learn the knowledge but also master the skills, which gives more difficulties in assessment. Greater trouble is incurred in the evaluation and management of the teachers, because their students stay on campus under their teachers but are also guided by their masters in the enterprises. All these earnestly require that a new management mechanism be established that fuses into the management of modern apprenticeship, such as the elastic hour and credit points, adoption of multiple assessments, reformation of enrollment and change of registration, etc. In addition, teachers also need corresponding awareness and training in their teaching tasks, models, methodologies and pedagogies in the model of modern apprenticeship.

2.3 The Enterprises Are Not Enthusiastic

Although the amount of the vocational graduates is on the increase year by year, yet the misbalance between the education of vocational institutions and the needs of the enterprises results in the severe shortage of “technicians”. The model of “enrollment in vocational institutions is that of recruitment in enterprises, institution-enterprise cooperation and the modern apprenticeship of combination of work and study” can be the effective means in the solution of this problem[7]. From the point of view of the labor, the enterprises should give their support to the modern apprenticeship. But in practice, the enterprises are not interested. Analysis shows the following facts. First, limited by the situations and levels of institution operation, the higher vocational institutions are not
providing adequate service to the society and thus cannot give forth benefits for the enterprises and hence their lack of enthusiasm. Second, in the practical work, the “apprentices” cannot satisfy the posts that require skilled techniques and rich experiences, which influence the production of the enterprises. Third, the cycle of higher vocational education and training is usually at least three years, while the enterprises are often unsure whether they keep the graduates on account of the unstableness demonstrated by the young generation. Fourth, on the model of modern apprenticeship, the enterprises have to invest large amounts of finance when the “students” are at college and certain amounts of salaries for the “apprentices” when they are in the enterprises, which may not come back after three years. This ill match between investment and return is not accepted by the enterprises.

2.4 The Status of “Apprentice” Is Not Accepted by the Students and Their Parents

Although the government makes efforts in propagandizing the modern apprenticeship, yet it is not accepted by the students and their parents presently. There are four main causes. First, those enrolled into the higher vocational institutions are the lowest scores in entrance examinations and attending a vocational institution is the last choice of the students and parents. The meaning of “apprentices” has its special sense in Chinese culture. Their social status is usually low and the “apprentices of” “vocational institutions” should not be accepted. Second, most students and parents think, “going to college” means learning of knowledge, not to be “apprentices,” not even to be trained as laborers in enterprises and work in enterprises is leaving the nature of higher education. Third, the institution-enterprise cooperation is regarded as the activity of schools and factories, students and parents are not obliged to the completion of the tasks. Fourth, while the vocational institutions are training their students for the enterprises, whether the graduates are sure to work in the enterprises, or whether they will continue to work for the enterprises remains a question unanswered, what if the graduates change their jobs or enterprises? Parents and students are worried about the posted study and training of the modern apprenticeship.

3. Solutions to the Problems

Now that the modern apprenticeship is a training model under the directions of the government with the mutual efforts of the institutions and enterprises, then the attraction of the modern apprenticeship lies in four facet endeavors of the government, institutions, enterprises and students to form a joint force.

3.1 The National Planning Should Promote the Modern Apprenticeship

The central government should produce overall consideration and come out with unified planning to establish a series of national level regulations and standards as the special laws and rules for apprenticeship and special management systems, such as the “regulations on the promotion of institution-enterprise cooperation”, “details for the implementation of vocational educational laws”, “rules for the training of apprentices”, etc. to establish the legal position of the apprenticeship educational and training models and clarify the rights and obligations of the enterprises, institutions and students to provide the legislative bases and guarantee for the trial and gradual popularization of modern apprenticeship. As far as the present situation of the country is concerned, the implementation of modern apprenticeship needs to go through a long term process. Therefore, it is necessary to set up trials before making it widely accepted. In August, 2015, the Ministry of Education increased its investment and, by means of financial aids, government procurement, etc. guided the enterprises and high vocational institutions to actively lay out the pilots to find out the
problems and summarize the experiences. This presumably has laid a solid foundation for the promotion of modern apprenticeship.

3.2 Create an Overall Environment for Enterprises to Participate in the Vocational Education

On the one hand, the government and institutions should enforce the propaganda, guidance and education so that the enterprises will be aware of the important meaning of modern apprenticeship to the development of the economy and industries and that the training of highly qualified technical staff is the social obligation of modern enterprises. On the other hand, the government and institutions should take measures to encourage the enterprises to elicit their support to vocational education and fully participate in the modern apprenticeship[5]. Those enterprises that participated in the pilot from August, 2015 have won the awards from the government and this policy should be gradually increased. Thirdly, the higher vocational institutions should improve their service for the enterprises. Except for providing talents for the enterprises, the institutions should make the best use of their privileges to lay out staff training, technical development and service for the enterprises, so that the enterprises win profits in institution-enterprise cooperation and improve their activeness in participating in the modern apprenticeship.

3.3 Make Scientific and Systematic Implementation Plans for the Design of Modern Apprenticeship

The institutions and enterprises should join hands to study and find out the common interests and make scientific and systematic implementation plans for the design of modern apprenticeship. First, come out of the practical situations, establish the leading organizations for the “modern apprenticeship” and set up the working group composed of the government, enterprises and institutions, with concrete duties and responsibilities. Second, bring profound understanding of the modern apprenticeship into the teaching staff, parents and students, with clarification of the meaning to the institutions and students, especially the institution and management authorities should liberate their thinking, renew their ideology, overcome the difficulties and connect the modern apprenticeship with the development of the institutions. Third, the institutions should sign the agreements that provide guarantee for the apprenticeship, such as the “agreement for institution-enterprise cooperation”, “agreement for the guarantee of teaching”, etc. to wipe out the worries of the enterprises, parents and students that the quality of teaching cannot be ensured. The institutions, enterprises and students should sign the three-party “employment agreement” to eliminate their trepidation and doubt whether the graduates will finally go to the enterprises for employment. Fourth, in the design of the talent cultivation, pay close attention to the personality and sustainability development. Except for the knowledge and skills used in the corresponding posts, considerations should be given to the development of universality and personality and increase of flexibility of employment to satisfy the needs of post change and continued development[6].

3.4 Mutual Participation of Teaching Management of the Institutions and Enterprises

According to the characteristics of “dual identities, dual cultivation, dual education and dual management” of the modern apprenticeship, the institutions and enterprises should cooperate in making the teaching management regulations that correspond to the modern apprenticeship for implementation under the supervision of the leading group of modern apprenticeship[8]. First, enforce the routine management of the modern apprenticeship. The institutions and enterprises should discuss and make the regulations as the routine meeting, attendance and evaluation, etc. to ensure the normal operation of the modern apprenticeship. Second,
ensure the implementation of the modern apprenticeship. The management documents determine the effect and level of teaching so they should conform to the practice of the institutions and enterprises. The institutions and enterprises should make mutual efforts in making the documents for the cultivation plans, course standards, education schemes, teaching progress, practice arrangements, teacher management regulations, teaching quality evaluations, master standards and apprentice requirements, etc.

Third, a joint course development becomes necessary. The present course system for higher vocational institutions, limited by the traditions, enterprise participation, etc., is not the real sense work-study system and cannot meet the needs of modern apprenticeship. Therefore, teachers and masters should sort out the skills necessary for the key posts according to the needs of the industries, in combination with the national accreditation of vocations and consideration of personal development of the students to redesign the course system and teaching contents. Fourth, establish the effect evaluation system of modern apprenticeship. The institutions should carry out segmentation of the items to be evaluated in the pilot of modern apprenticeship, highlight the assessment and evaluation on the satisfaction of enterprises, teachers and students.

In conclusion, the implementation of the modern apprenticeship will effectively promote the development of China’s higher vocational education and it is our task to enforce the practice, research and summary to find the way out for the modern apprenticeship that suits the practical situations of China.

References


