

Building Distinctive Postgraduate Programs at an Ordinary University:

A Case Study of the MTI Program at Southwest Minzu University of China

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Abstract—As the education patterns and curricula of degree programs at different universities are becoming increasingly similar, a postgraduate program could only stand out and distinguish itself for prospective applicants and employers by demonstrating its uniqueness and advantages. This paper attempts to reveal the ways of improving postgraduate programs in order to better attract applicants and score high in the assessment by the educational authorities. Taking for example the MTI (Master of Translation and Interpretation) program of the Southwest Minzu University of China, a comprehensive university focusing on serving minority ethnic groups, this paper summarizes its five years' experience and finds that a university's program of study could be distinctive only when it has advantageous features. It is advisable for the program committee to design a featured curriculum with clear targets and philosophy after exploring the features of the university's disciplines and location, and based on comprehending the nature of the program type. The teaching contents, instructional resources, and practical/fieldwork training should all be centered around the featured field of the program. The resources of the university and the opportunities in the city should also be utilized to enhance the distinction.

Keywords—MTI program; curriculum; ethnic university; Southwest Minzu University of China; distinctiveness

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese universities have undergone the transformation from the expansion and leaping-forward development pattern some 20 years ago to the content-oriented development pattern which emphasizes quality and capability. In order to secure a position in fierce competition, universities have on the one hand competed for employing teachers with high academic qualifications and achievements, and on the other hand contended for enrolling promising students. The Ministry of Education of China has also implemented various assessments and rankings, which adds more to the existing pressure on universities. How can a university's program stand out in the fierce competition and gain the applicants' favor? How to equip students with unique skills for achieving higher social recognition? These are the questions that program directors have had to answer. The Southwest Minzu University of China (hereinafter referred to as SMU), in which the author is working, has successfully passed the assessment by China National Committee for Translation & Interpreting Education within four years of obtaining qualification for the MTI

program. MTI is the abbreviation for Master of Translation and Interpreting, which is a professional Master's program of China designed to prepare students to be translators and interpreters. In contrast to academic Master's programs like MT (Master of Translation) which focuses on developing students academic ability in translation studies, the MTI program puts more emphasis on practical skills of translation and interpreting aiming for better employment after graduation. Until May 2019, there are 253 universities in China offering MTI programs[1], 11 of which are located in the same province, more precisely, in the same or a neighboring city to the one where SMU is located. Despite the competition, the MTI program of SMU, which is not yet a top university though, has enjoyed a rich student applicant pool and a good employment rate, and has earned a reasonable reputation. In what follows we will analyze SMU's MTI program in order to discover how to build a distinctive postgraduate program.

II. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECTS IN THE CASE STUDY

SMU is a comprehensive university under the direct administration of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission. It provides degree programs in 12 disciplines which are literature, history, philosophy, economics, management, law, education, science, engineering, agriculture, medicine, and art. [2] Established in 1951, it is one of the earliest ethnic universities (a kind of university set up by the Chinese government for providing higher education for ethnic minority groups, who receive some preferential treatment) in People's Republic of China. More than half of its students are ethnic minorities, and many of them have weaker academic foundation compared with their Han peers. The university is an ordinary one, ranked 220 (according to Chinese Universities Alumni Association ranking) [3] of Mainland China's 2688 universities (dated on June 15, 2019) [4] and the fourth among the 14 ethnic universities in China[3]. As one of the largest school of the university, the School of Foreign Languages boasts the First-Level Discipline authorization for Master's Degree in foreign language and literature, four undergraduate majors covering English, Japanese, French and Korean (Korean) and two research centers, i.e. "Translation and Research Center of Minority Languages and Literature" and "Research Center of Minority Cognition and Language Acquisition". It has multimedia language laboratories and simultaneous interpretation laboratories, linguistics laboratories, the

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recording, dubbing and linear editing laboratory equipped with necessary teaching and research facilities. It has formed certain characteristics and advantages in the translation of ethnic affairs and minority culture. The university obtained the qualification for the MTI program in 2014 and began to enrol students in the fall of 2015. The Southwest Minzu University MTI Education Center (hereinafter referred to as "the Center") was founded in 2015 as the administrative organ, and the MTI Education Committee (hereinafter referred to as "the Committee") was organized to decide the major educational matters. Up to September 2019, the program has 19 full-time instructors, including 5 professors, 8 associate professors and 11 doctoral degree holders. The center has also employed 5 professionals in translation and interpreting from translation agencies or other companies as part-time instructors or advisors. This program is a three-year full-time Professional Master's Degree program covering subjects of the English translation, English interpreting and Japanese interpreting.[5]

III. EXPERIENCE 1: ANALYZING THE DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT BEFORE DECIDING THE ORIENTATION

Through the analysis of the development environment of the program, its general development orientation can be determined. In terms of location, the university has two characteristics: (1) it is located in the regional center city, and (2) the region is an ethnic minority inhabited area.

The university is located in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province and the economic, cultural and political center of China's western region. The city is increasingly internationalized, with 16 consulates and 291 world's top 500 enterprises. Chengdu Shuangliu International Airport has opened up 102 international routes.[6] The development of local economy and culture needs a large number of high-level translators and interpreters to meet the needs of language services.

The university is located in southwest China, which is an area concentrated with ethnic minorities and rich in ethnic tourism resources. What's more, the southwest region is located in the core area of "The Belt and Road Initiative". The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the One Belt and One Road Initiative (OBOR), is short for the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road. Unveiled in 2013 by China's President Xi Jinping, it is "a transcontinental long-term policy and investment program which aims at infrastructure development and acceleration of the economic integration of countries along the route of the historic Silk Road"[7] covering Asia, Eastern Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East, a region mainly composed of emerging markets. The implement of BRI needs a large number of language service personnel to spread ethnic cultures, to handle ethnic affairs, to deal with international exchanges, and to provide services for foreign tourists in ethnic areas.

That being said as above, the university has distinct characteristics of its own. Adhering to the purpose of "serving ethnic minorities and ethnic areas and serving the country's development strategy", the university has a number of teaching and scientific research institutions such as the School of Tibetan Studies, the School of Yi Studies, the Institute of Ethnic Studies, and the national-level specialty "Minority

Language and Literature", supported by the world's largest Tibetan Literature Museum and the Yi Literature Museum. In the fields of ethnic economy, ethnic tourism, ethnic cultural research and information processing of minority languages and texts, it has a great influence at home and abroad. The university has also accumulated a wealth of teaching and academic research resources for ethnic areas. The features and the advantages of the university provide a clear direction for the development of its MTI program.

Only when adapting itself to the environment, could the program improve its efficiency. To adapt to the environment means to understand the current situation and future trend of the involved industries, the located region and the affiliated university, to meet the needs of the society, and to make the best of resources and advantages available. Based on the development environment of the program, the Committee determined the fundamental orientation of the program, that is, being rooted in the western region, serving ethnic minorities and ethnic areas, and serving the country's development strategy, keeping to the training pattern of "translation + ethnic culture", the program emphasizes the students' translation ability in the field of ethnic culture and ethnic affairs. It aims to facilitate students with critical knowledge in English, Chinese and ethnic culture as well as with proficient translation skills. The students should have firm political stance, broad international vision, and strong practical abilities. They should be morally, intellectually and physically developed, to meet the high demands of international market and the country's strategic development, especially to meet the economic, cultural and social construction needs of the western ethnic areas of China. They should be high-level, practice-oriented professional translators with international vision and cross-cultural communication skills.

IV. EXPERIENCE 2: UNDERSTANDING THE PROGRAM'S NATURE BEFORE SETTING UP THE PHILOSOPHY OF RUNNING THE PROGRAM

To set up the philosophy of running the program, the Committee must first have a full understanding of the nature of program type.

With the continuous expansion of the scale of graduate education and the changing needs of society, the employment trend of graduate students has shifted more from teaching and scientific research positions to practical areas, so Professional Degree postgraduate education for practical employment oriented skill training has developed into an important part of graduate education. Having differentiated the differences between a Profession Degree program and an Academic Degree program, the Committee keeps passing the conception to the faculty that the goal of MTI education is to train high-level applied professional translators and interpreters, which is different from training the Academic Degree graduate students in terms of program conception, objectives, methods, as well as teaching content, teaching methods and other aspects. One is practical and applied-centered while the other is theoretical-emphasized. In order to achieve the goal to prepare students for careers in practical areas, the content of the program comes more from practice. The university has also offered strong support in teacher recruitment, construction of

internship base, translation software purchase and teachers and students practice activities.

With respect to the philosophy of development, SMU's MTI program should not only combine the university's ethnic advantages to lay down its development orientation, planning and objectives, but also conform to the nature of teaching and comply with general requirements of MTI program, so as to strengthen its own characteristics and advantages.

After comprehending the nature of the program type, combining the developing conditions, we can determine the philosophy about building the program.

A. Gearing the program's training direction

On the one hand, with the acceleration of internationalization in China's western region, Sichuan Province encourages cooperation among high-end companies, and actively integrates itself into the BTI and other national strategies. As many as 291 of the world's top 500 enterprises have set up branches and each year more than 500 global exhibitions were held in Chengdu. In Sichuan Province, there are about 300 translation companies. However, the scale and translation level of the translation companies are far from meeting the needs of the local translation market. In particular, there is a high demand for specially trained high-level professional talents. The southwest minority areas are not only rich in tourism resources, but also located in the core area of BTI. The economic, social, and cultural development in ethnic areas and the "going out" of ethnic minority culture need a large number of translators and interpreters to support the implementation of the national strategy and the promotion of the national image.

On the other hand, the advantages in disciplines and teacher resources established by Southwest Minzu University over decades are the important support for the program to focus on the field of ethnic affairs and cultures and to train high-level professional translators and interpreters for the social and economic development of ethnic minorities and ethnic areas.

Based on the two aspects above, the developing direction of the SMU's MTI program is clear. It meets the positioning and development requirements of the university's "to serve ethnic minorities and ethnic areas and to keep up with the country's development strategy", meanwhile in accordance with the urgent needs of the social and economic development of the country and the western region.

B. Determining program features

Then, the characteristics of the program are determined as follows.

Adhering to the training pattern of "translation + ethnic culture", the program emphasizes the students' translation ability in the field of ethnic culture and ethnic affairs. It aims at training students with a solid bilingual foundation, proficient translation skills, a firm political position, fluent bilingual (Chinese and a foreign language) skills, basics of foreign and ethnic minorities multi-cultural literacy, a broad international vision, and strong practical abilities.

The program makes use of the abundant local practical resources to provide students with multi-layered practice platform and a large number of practical opportunities, so that each student can obtain a wealth of practical experiences.

V. EXPERIENCE 3: DESIGNING THE CURRICULUM AND TEACHING CONTENTS ALONG WITH UTILIZING THE FACILITIES OF THE UNIVERSITY

After determining the direction and philosophy of development, the Center takes a good many measures to realize the goal and the plan. Through investigating the practice of other universities, the Center and the Committee formulated curriculum with its own characteristics.

The curriculum of SMU's MTI program not only adheres to the basic requirements of the guiding principles required by China National Committee for Translation & Interpreting Education, which aims at improving students' translation capabilities and emphasizes practical application, but also highlights the characteristics of "translation + ethnic culture". General speaking, the curriculum has the following characteristics.

(1) Focusing on developing solid translation skills. The curriculum adheres to the fundamental principle of strengthening the training of students' translation skills and teaching of translation expertise, and offers more than 15 courses on translation skills and general translation knowledge.

(2) Highlight the application abilities. The Center has hired experienced professionals from the translation industry to take on the teaching of practical courses, and secured financial supports to build leading laboratories where students are trained to use "Trados" and other translation software to improve their machine-assisted translation skills. It has also organized competitions, internships, practice in translation practice centers etc. to strengthen student's practical abilities. In order to ensure continuity and quality of students' practice, the Center has paid effort in establishing practice bases and building good relationships with translation agencies. Internally, it stipulates strict policies to ensure every student engages in all kinds of activities.

(3) To fully feature the program's "translation + ethnic culture" training pattern, special courses such as translation of ethnic affairs, interpretation of ethnic affairs, ethnic policy and culture are offered. Meanwhile, students are free to choose courses in other programs of the university, in order to further strengthen the integration of translation and national affairs knowledge. By this means, students have good knowledge of ethnic politics and culture, ready to engage in various types of translation work in related fields after three years' study.

The teaching materials of each course contain cases related to ethnic minority affairs, such as economic and trade translation, international publicity translation, translation workshops, all of which have a large amount of materials of ethnic economy, business, culture and other translation skills.

Social practice also favors ethnic cultural translation, such as interpreting for the university's ethnic museums tour, translation for intangible cultural heritage festivals, translation

of documentaries on Sichuan TV festivals, and translation of ethnic folk songs.

With these measures, students' ethnic cultural translation and interpreting ability has been greatly enhanced, and they have equipped with the translation skills that are different from those in other universities.

VI. TEACHING RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM

After the training, students have gained better professional skills, participated in multiple translations and interpreting practices, won awards, and published papers on academic journals or translation works in publishers. For example, one student in the program participated in the translation of *The Current Chinese Minority Writers and Masterpiece*, a book published in American Academic Press, and several students were involved in co-translating the novels written by minority writers. One student published articles in influential journals and presented his paper at a national conference. Most students have obtained translation certificates before graduation. About 20% of the students of each class won various prizes in translation or interpreting competitions.

Every student's thesis passed the expert's review. And each year, the number of applicants for the university's program exceeds the number of students enrolled in the previous year, thus the program can choose better students year by year, forming a virtuous circle.

VII. CONCLUSION

From the cases above, we can see that in order to make the university's program competitive, we should fully excavate its location characteristics, industry characteristics, deeply

understand the purpose and principles of running a program, and consequently determine the idea and means of running the program. In this course, we should make use of the surrounding resources and conditions to develop a curriculum system that meets the requirements, and equip the students with multi-disciplinary knowledge, and build a platform for teaching, practicing and use of library resources. At the same time, make sure to form a well-established management board to develop and exhibit good norms by strict monitoring and orderly implementation. With all the above means to be put in place, a unique degree program is more likely to be built.

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