

Status and Development Trends of Freshman Seminar Courses in Domestic and Foreign Universities

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Abstract: Freshman seminar courses, as an important component of university education, aim to help first-year students adapt to the university learning environment and improve their overall quality through interdisciplinary discussions and critical thinking training. These courses originated in Western countries, particularly in Europe and the United States, and have gradually spread and developed worldwide. Firstly, the paper explores the origins and dissemination of freshman seminar courses, analysing their implementation in foreign universities, especially in Europe and the United States. Secondly, it provides a detailed description of the implementation of freshman seminar courses in Chinese universities, taking into account the characteristics of Chinese higher education. Finally, the paper forecasts the future development trends of these courses, suggesting that they will increasingly play a critical role in fostering student innovation, critical thinking, and social adaptability, becoming an essential platform for talent cultivation in universities.

1. Introduction

With the continuous global advancement of higher education, the education model and curriculum design for university freshmen have attracted growing attention from educational circles worldwide. In many western countries, freshman seminar courses have become an important part of university education systems^[1-4]. These courses help freshmen adjust to the university environment, improve academic skills, and emphasize the development of critical thinking, teamwork, and interdisciplinary perspectives. With the deepening of higher education reforms in China, some domestic universities have begun to draw on foreign experiences to explore the establishment and implementation of freshman seminar courses^[5-7]. The paper analyzes the implementation of these courses both domestically and internationally, aiming to highlight the commonalities and differences in freshman education across countries and explore best practices for freshman seminars to provide useful insights for improving and developing freshman education in universities.

2. Origins and Dissemination of Freshman Seminar Courses

The concept of freshman seminar courses originated in the United States in the early 20th century and gradually developed into an important teaching format alongside higher education reforms^[8]. In the U.S., freshmen face a significant transition from high school to university, encountering challenges in academic pressure, societal demands, and the learning environment. Many universities designed and implemented freshman seminar courses centered on orientation to help students adapt. Initially, these courses lacked a unified standard and were tailored to individual schools' needs, focusing on cultivating freshmen's academic skills, psychological adaptation, social skills, and time management. Their aim was to establish effective learning models for students, preventing academic decline due to difficulties in adjusting to the university's academic and social pace. In the 1960s, institutions like Harvard University and Yale University incorporated freshman seminars into their orientation programs, guiding students from passive learning to active learning and encouraging independent thinking, critical analysis, and problem-solving. Over time, these courses evolved into more diversified academic seminars, no longer limited to adaptation and foundational academic skills but also emphasizing interdisciplinary knowledge, academic research methods, and teamwork skills. For instance, freshman seminars at Columbia University and Stanford University not only covered basic writing and time management but also encouraged students to engage in deep discussions and research on specific academic topics such as ethics, philosophy, and social sciences.

After achieving initial success in the U.S., freshman seminar courses were gradually adopted by universities in other countries, particularly in Europe and Australia. These countries quickly integrated freshman seminars into their educational systems as a product of teaching reforms, localizing them according to national cultures, educational backgrounds, and student needs. In Germany, some universities began offering freshman seminars in the 1990s, focusing on training critical thinking and encouraging independent research, analysis, and discussions. In France, freshman seminars often centered on cultural contexts and intercultural communication, helping students develop a global perspective and understanding of diverse cultures. In Australia, freshman seminar courses were designed to be more flexible, with interactive discussions at their core, emphasizing active student participation. As globalization deepens, universities in many non-English-speaking countries, including South Korea, Singapore, and China, have also begun introducing similar freshman seminars to help students adjust to university life and improve academic and cross-cultural communication skills^[9-10].

3. Implementation of Freshman Seminar Courses Abroad

3.1. United States: Origins and Maturity

In the early 20th century, some prestigious American universities began to pay attention to the academic adjustment of freshmen, especially how to help them integrate into university life, improve academic performance, and develop independent thinking and critical thinking skills. Harvard University was one of the first institutions to offer freshman seminar courses. The initial courses focused on academic writing, research methods, and adapting to the university's learning model. By the mid-20th century, Harvard expanded the content of these seminars to encompass a broader range of topics, including moral philosophy, social responsibility, and political participation. Through small-group discussions, students were guided by instructors to think critically and analyze problems independently, improving their academic literacy and overall competence. Other American universities, such as Columbia University with its university writing seminars and Stanford University's thinking and writing seminars, adopted similar models. These courses not only enhanced academic writing abilities but also strengthened interdisciplinary thinking. In the late 1990s, as critical

thinking and liberal education gained traction, more U.S. universities recognized freshman seminars as an essential platform for cultivating core student competencies. The courses expanded to include academic writing, time management, leadership, intercultural communication, ethics, and social responsibility, aiming to enhance both academic literacy and social adaptability.

3.2. Canada: Integrating Academics and Social Responsibility

Canada's freshman seminar courses began relatively late but have developed distinct characteristics. Early Canadian universities primarily followed the American educational model, focusing on academic adjustment and skills training for first-year students. However, as society's expectations of education have grown, Canadian freshman seminars have gradually incorporated more content related to social responsibility and cultural diversity. For example, the University of Toronto's freshman seminar courses not only focus on academic skills but also emphasize developing students' global perspectives and cross-cultural understanding. Its university introductory course uses small classes, collaborative projects, and social research to engage students in discussions of social issues, encouraging them to think critically and communicate in a multicultural context. The University of British Columbia offers a global issues seminar that emphasizes interdisciplinary discussions and field research, allowing students to explore and reflect on global social, economic, and environmental issues, thereby fostering a sense of global citizenship.

3.3. Europe: Diversity and Localization

Europe was slower to implement freshman seminars, but as higher education internationalized, many European universities began adopting similar courses. Unlike the U.S. and Canada, European freshman seminars placed more emphasis on integrating disciplinary backgrounds and fostering cultural diversity. Germany was one of the pioneers of freshman seminars in Europe, focusing on academic writing, scholarly norms, and academic integrity. British universities largely followed the American model but with an emphasis on diversity of disciplines. For example, Cambridge university and Oxford university offer abundant academic resources and seminar opportunities, including topics such as social responsibility, history and culture, ethics, and philosophy. In countries like Netherlands and Sweden, freshman seminars focus on cultivating innovative thinking and social engagement. For example, University of Amsterdam encourages students to collaborate in small groups to research and discuss social, economic, and environmental issues.

3.4. Australia: Flexibility and Innovation

Australia's freshman seminar courses cater to students' diverse backgrounds and disciplinary needs, demonstrating flexibility and innovation. These courses are highly interactive and practical, requiring students to complete assignments, participate in extracurricular activities, and engage in field trips that help them apply classroom knowledge to real-world issues. For instance, Sydney University's freshman seminars emphasize interdisciplinary learning and creative thinking, covering topics from technological innovation to social justice, and encouraging students to engage and share ideas through group projects and discussions. Australian universities also emphasize the integration of a global perspective, encouraging students to focus on international issues.

3.5. Singapore: Integration of Internationalization and Localization

As a leading educational nation in Asia, Singapore has designed its freshman seminars to integrate international and local perspectives. National University of Singapore (NUS) draws on Western

educational concepts while adapting them to local cultural and societal contexts. NUS's freshman seminars include academic writing and critical thinking, with a focus on intercultural communication in Singapore's multicultural environment. The courses emphasize global perspectives while addressing local societal issues, such as multiculturalism, racial integration, and urban development, equipping students to solve real-world problems.

4. Implementation of Freshman Seminar Courses in China

China's introduction of freshman seminar courses began relatively late, but with the deepening of higher education reform, more and more universities have realized their importance and have actively developed these courses. China's freshman seminars draw from successful experiences abroad, especially in the U.S. and Canada, while adjusting the content, format, and assessment methods according to the local educational system and cultural context.

4.1. Origins and Development

The first freshman seminar courses in China were established in top-tier universities, particularly in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. These courses initially served as electives or minor courses, covering basic topics like academic writing, time management, and study skills, helping freshmen adjust to university life. In the early 2000s, as higher education became more widespread, universities recognized the role of freshman seminars in fostering students' overall development, particularly in improving critical thinking, teamwork, and cross-cultural communication skills. Some universities began to incorporate these courses into their compulsory curriculum and explored ways to integrate them with China's educational realities and cultural needs.

4.2. Educational Philosophy and Course Goals

Although freshman seminars in China began later than in the West, they have gradually evolved in terms of content and teaching methods, with a shift from simply academic adaptation to broader talent development. For instance, Peking University introduced freshman seminars in 2005, focusing on interdisciplinary integration and covering topics like social issues, cultural traditions, and ethics, allowing students to develop critical thinking while broadening their global perspective. Tsinghua University, which introduced such courses in 2008, emphasizes the development of innovation and problem-solving skills. Fudan University integrates social responsibility and teamwork into its freshman seminars, incorporating social surveys and community service to foster practical problem-solving abilities.

4.3. Diversity and Innovation in Freshman Seminars

With the expansion of freshman seminar courses, more universities have tailored these programs to their unique characteristics and needs. For example, Zhejiang University offers a range of freshman seminars, covering topics like social issues and technological innovation, focusing on interdisciplinary integration, teamwork, and leadership development. Nanjing University emphasizes China's traditional culture and innovation in its freshman seminars, helping students better understand and integrate into China's societal environment. Harbin Institute of Technology, a leading engineering university, began offering a freshman academic adaptation seminar in 2017, which is a required course for all new students. This course covers not only academic writing, information retrieval, and critical thinking but also interdisciplinary discussions and global problem analysis, helping students quickly adjust to the academic environment.

5. Future Development Trends of Freshman Seminar Courses

As higher education continues to evolve and student needs change, freshman seminar courses will also undergo further innovation and development. The future trends of these courses can be predicted in the following areas.

5.1. Deepening Course Content and Interdisciplinary Integration

In the future, freshman seminars will increasingly focus on diverse content and interdisciplinary integration to enhance students' comprehensive qualities. They will help students develop skills in academic research, social practice, and innovation by engaging with complex real-world issues and academic challenges. The focus will shift towards fostering independent thinking, critical reasoning, and problem-solving abilities, with an emphasis on interdisciplinary knowledge from fields such as science, sociology, philosophy, and history.

5.2. Innovative Teaching Methods and Personalized Development

With advances in information technology and the evolution of educational philosophy, teaching methods for freshman seminars will change profoundly. Future seminars will incorporate more online learning and classroom interaction, using digital resources to enhance teaching effectiveness. Personalized learning will become a key feature, with adaptive learning systems adjusting course content and learning paths based on students' progress, understanding, and interests.

5.3. Closer Alignment with Societal Needs

As society increasingly demands high-quality, multidisciplinary talent, freshman seminars will be more closely aligned with students' future career development and societal roles. These courses will address global issues, such as environmental protection, technological ethics, and international politics, encouraging students to think about their roles in solving global problems.

5.4. Transformation of the Teacher's Role

Future freshman seminars will require instructors to play more diverse roles. Teachers will need to possess strong academic knowledge, interdisciplinary expertise, and excellent communication skills to guide students through a variety of topics. Teachers will also need to be adaptable, adjusting content and teaching methods based on student feedback and teaching needs.

5.5. Innovation and Diversification of Assessment Methods

In the future, freshman seminar courses will place greater emphasis on process-based assessment, peer evaluation, and self-assessment. Process-based assessment includes classroom participation, discussion interaction, and teamwork. Peer evaluation helps students understand their performance within a team, while self-assessment encourages students to take a more active role in reflecting on their learning process and outcomes. The final results of students, such as project reports, presentations, and academic papers, will also serve as important criteria for evaluation. Through diversified assessment methods, a comprehensive reflection of students' learning attitudes, cognitive abilities, and teamwork spirit can be achieved, fostering a positive cycle of continuous learning and enhancing their overall capabilities.

6. Conclusions

As an important educational format, freshman seminar courses have gradually gained recognition in the global higher education system and show great potential for development. With continuous educational reforms and growing demands for quality talent, these courses will play an increasingly vital role in fostering critical thinking, innovation, and social responsibility. They will be a crucial platform for higher education reform, helping cultivate high-quality talent with global perspectives and innovative spirits.

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