

Analysis of the Transformation and Path Selection of Cultural Construction in Grassroots Colleges of the Open Universities

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the successful transformation and development of the Open University of China, the positioning and transformation of grassroots colleges in open universities are critical to the further reform and innovation of the entire open university system. The transformation and adjustment of cultural construction in these grassroots colleges are central to the sustainable development of the entire open university system. Therefore, it is essential for grassroots colleges to specifically analyze the challenges and issues encountered in their cultural construction transformation and path selection. They must also clearly understand the significance, characteristics, and principles involved. Based on this understanding, they should actively consider strategies for their transformation and path selection.

Key words: Grassroots colleges of open universities; Cultural transformation; Construction path

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In October 2010, the State Council issued the “Notice on Carrying Out Pilot Reforms of the National Education System,” designating Beijing, Shanghai,

Jiangsu, Guangdong, Yunnan, and the Central Radio and Television University as pilot units for exploring the construction model of open universities. In July 2012, the National Open University was established, and the remaining five provincial (municipal) open universities were subsequently transformed and established. Since then, various provinces (municipalities, districts) and their local governments have also introduced relevant policies to support and promote the renaming and transformation of grassroots radio and television universities at all levels within their jurisdictions. With a chorus of favorable voices, the national open university system has embarked on a new journey of reform and development.

However, due to the lack of a unified, detailed transformation model, authoritative theories, or ready-made research results to follow during the transformation process, local governments have implemented similar transformation policies, to some extent affecting the implementation of the “favorable” policies for some grassroots radio and television universities. In some cases, a few grassroots radio and television universities have experienced abnormal phenomena that have led to a gradual weakening of the original radio and television university system due to confused positioning. Against the backdrop of problems in enrollment, teaching, and community education and elderly education, as well as changes in the composition of students in the radio and television university system and changes in national higher education policies, the construction of the open university system faces significant challenges.

Fortunately, the original radio and television university system, after more than 40 years of development, has a solid foundation, and its academic culture has not been significantly affected. However, drawing lessons from the successes and failures of many policy-oriented educational practices in China’s educational history, it is necessary for the open university system to be vigilant about the risk of gradually disappearing into the new era of education

due to a slow pace of transformation. We believe that the disappearance of a title is a natural law of social and educational development. What is important is whether its high-quality cultural deposits continue to shine in the river of history. Therefore, how the open university system can both follow the laws of national education development, find a transformation path suitable for its own reform and development, and accumulate its own academic culture, continuously showcasing its high-quality cultural brilliance, is of particular importance and necessity. It is for this reason that exploring the successful transformation and development of grassroots open university colleges from the perspective of cultural deposits has become the top priority for everyone in the open university system today.

1. PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN THE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF OPEN UNIVERSITY GRASSROOTS COLLEGES

1.1 Incompatibility of Educational Positioning and Methods with Local Socioeconomic Development Requirements

Most of the national radio and television universities were established in the late 1970s to early 1980s, and their educational forms were basically under government leadership, providing opportunities for further education for a large number of individuals who had delayed their studies during the Cultural Revolution or for young people who could not attend university in the early stages of reform and opening up. In that social context, these universities made significant contributions by providing emergency talent for society, bridging the knowledge gap, and improving the structure of educational qualifications. Consequently, a huge four-tier educational system and scale were formed nationwide. However, after entering the new century, China's socio-economic situation underwent significant changes, and educational concepts and practices changed rapidly. In particular, the wave of massification of higher education has brought unlimited opportunities for the development of the open university system but has also presented unprecedented new problems and challenges. For example, the most discussed issue regarding the establishment of the National Open University is its educational positioning and methods. From our perspective, for the grassroots colleges of the open university, how to better adapt their educational positioning and methods to local socio-economic development has become a crucial issue regarding whether the grassroots radio and television universities can successfully transform into open universities.

However, the current situation of grassroots radio and television universities is not optimistic. For example,

some of them still focus on traditional educational models, such as offering only associate degrees, and their educational practices remain limited to traditional enrollment, teaching, and examination methods. They also lack innovative approaches to school culture development, social service effectiveness, and enhancing overall academic reputation, which has led to stagnation and laxity. The main reasons for this are, firstly, these grassroots radio and television universities rarely consider issues from the perspective of local socio-economic development in their educational practices, and secondly, they are reluctant to develop the broader market of non-degree education. Consequently, they are increasingly marginalized by local society. In this situation, the cultural development of open university grassroots colleges has become an empty phrase, and it is not surprising that concerns about elimination and extinction have arisen over time.

1.2 Outdated Teaching Service Awareness and Traditional Teaching Activities Lacking Innovation

Compared to the previous century, some grassroots radio and television universities still show little change in their awareness of teaching management and institutional development. For instance, the concepts and comprehensive qualities of many teaching managers are not in line with current social and economic development. Many teaching managers still rely on experience, do not understand the relationship between management and service, and lack an understanding of the management characteristics and laws of modern distance education. They have a short-sighted approach, lack initiative and enthusiasm, and are not innovative in their work. Such a situation leads to foreseeable inefficiencies in work. More importantly, this status quo creates a negative atmosphere that adversely affects the learning culture, examination culture, and service culture of teachers and students.

This phenomenon manifests in teaching activities, resulting in monotonous and dull teaching activities, increasing student dropouts, and poor teaching outcomes. The existence of these phenomena not only affects the school culture development of open university grassroots colleges but also undoubtedly seriously affects the innovative development and educational transformation of the schools as they transition to open universities.

1.3 Misalignment in Faculty Development, Inadequate for Current Transformation Needs

Teachers have always been the core of schools and one of the main drivers of school culture development. In school culture development, whether it's material culture, spiritual culture, or institutional culture, human factors are indispensable. Therefore, faculty development in open university grassroots colleges is naturally one of the most important aspects of their cultural development. However,

the current situation of faculty development in grassroots radio and television universities is not optimistic overall. The main manifestation is that the direction of faculty development is wrong, and the overall quality of the faculty is worrying. From the perspective of the current situation and direction of grassroots radio and television universities, the faculty development of grassroots open university colleges should be different from that of regular full-time colleges or primary and secondary schools, and it should also be different from provincial and municipal open universities. The faculty of grassroots open university colleges should focus on professional management skills, with classroom teaching as a supplement. On the one hand, efforts should be made to improve the effective learning of professional courses from the perspective of students. On the other hand, teachers should be familiar with network and information skills, and integrate teaching management with learning services organically. In layman's terms, teachers in grassroots open university colleges should have the management skills of general college teaching and administrative staff, as well as the high-level professional analytical ability of college teachers. However, the current reality of faculty development in grassroots open university colleges is precisely the opposite of the above direction. Either they continue to follow the old path of focusing on professional knowledge and research abilities, which is neither practical nor academically conducive due to the lack of a general academic atmosphere, or they simply have no direction, and faculty development becomes an empty phrase. Therefore, this trend and situation are not only detrimental to the cultural transformation and path selection of grassroots open university colleges but also extremely unsuitable for the overall transformation and development of grassroots open university colleges under the background of building a national open university.

1.4 Weak Institutional Mechanism Construction and Strong Arbitrariness in Internal Management with Low Efficiency

Institutional culture is one of the important core contents of school culture construction. It not only relates to the behavioral norms of the main body of cultural construction but also affects the ultimate values and educational concepts of a school. The cohesion and guiding role of the institution actually directly reflect the service and education functions and the incentive and harmony functions of school culture. Therefore, institutional construction will ultimately affect the overall development of a school. In recent years, the original radio and television university system has attached great importance to institutional mechanism construction, and has also achieved significant theoretical and practical results. However, the problems existing in this regard are also

obvious. For example, the problem of weak operability of the system, the lag in system updates and failure to keep pace with the times, and the lack of execution of the system leading to the system being ineffective, etc. These problems greatly weaken the effectiveness and efficiency of institutional mechanism construction and bring great negative impacts on the comprehensive development of the original grassroots radio and television universities. From another perspective, for the original radio and television university system to smoothly transition to a national open university, there must be a complete framework system, and within this framework system, relevant institutional design and the improvement of operational mechanisms are undoubtedly crucial. Just for this reason, the institutional culture construction of grassroots open university colleges and even the entire open university system is of particular significance and urgency.

1.5 Lack of Brand Awareness and Limited Development Space

The development of the open university system is similar to that of an enterprise and also requires something similar to core competitiveness. We believe that the core competitiveness of the open university system lies in promoting the construction of its brand under the premise of promoting the internal construction of the open university, continuously creating the brand effect of open university education. This is the key to the transformation and development of the open university. However, from the current actual situation, there are three problems in the brand building of grassroots open university colleges: first, there is a lack of brand awareness, and it is not clear how to create the brand of the open university; second, the brand awareness is relatively one-sided, focusing only on the education of open education itself, and the vision is still narrow for lifelong education; third, the digital upgrade is insufficient, lagging behind in innovation. Currently, as the original radio and television university system is comprehensively transitioning to a national open university, whether it has its own unique characteristics and brand in educational development is crucial. Therefore, facing the problems existing in the construction of the school brand, actively considering the transformation of the brand strategy is undoubtedly a key issue in the cultural transformation of grassroots open university colleges.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN OPEN UNIVERSITY GRASSROOTS COLLEGES

The importance of culture is self-evident. Liang Qichao, facing the reform of China, once said: "China has gradually realized its deficiencies in the past fifty years.

In the first stage, it felt inadequate in terms of objects; in the second stage, it felt inadequate in terms of institutions; and in the third stage, it felt inadequate fundamentally in terms of culture.” In fact, for a school, this sentence also reveals the three stages of development it must inevitably go through. It is no wonder that some say, “Third-rate schools focus on institutions, second-rate schools focus on branding (marginalizing institutions), and first-rate schools focus on culture (internalizing branding).” From this, it can be seen that school culture is the ultimate goal pursued by any school. This is evident in the development process of universities such as Peking University, Tsinghua University, and other well-known primary and secondary schools across the country. The transformation of culture in grassroots open university colleges and the choice of their development path are based on this important realization.

2.1 Cultural Transformation of Open University Grassroots Colleges Facilitates Their Role as Pioneers in Implementing “Massification of Higher Education”

The wave of higher education massification has created significant development opportunities for the open university system. However, it has also posed severe challenges, especially for grassroots colleges within open universities, amidst intense competition. Addressing these challenges and converting them into opportunities to achieve the next phase of development for the National Open University is a crucial issue for each grassroots college. From both a long-term perspective and the historical development trajectory of open universities, promoting school culture construction that meets the development needs of grassroots colleges is a prudent and urgent action. Thus, grassroots colleges must prioritize their cultural construction and continuously refine their unique characteristics during their transformation. By leveraging their strengths and mitigating their weaknesses, grassroots colleges can fundamentally become true pioneers in “higher education massification,” serving as ladders for social progress, arbiters of educational equity, and resource stations for learners to enhance and motivate themselves.

It is often said that “achievement brings recognition.” The position of grassroots colleges in the overall framework of lifelong education in China depends entirely on their development. Currently, this development largely hinges on the cultural transformation of grassroots colleges and the correct choice of development paths. The success of cultural construction in grassroots colleges will directly impact the development and status of open universities. Therefore, grassroots colleges must proactively and diligently build and successfully transform their school culture to secure their rightful place within China’s lifelong education system.

2.2 Cultural Transformation of Open University Grassroots Colleges Enhances Social Recognition of Open University Education

A system is only as strong as its individual parts. The driving force behind the development of open university education largely relies on the cohesion and synergy of the entire open university system, and cultural construction is one of the best ways to strengthen this cohesion and synergy. Therefore, it is very necessary for grassroots colleges in open universities to enhance the sense of identity and belonging of teachers and students in the open university system by improving their cultural construction. Through this, they can continuously strengthen the cohesion and combat effectiveness of the open university system, thereby improving the effectiveness of open university education and making themselves a truly trusted and relied-upon center for continuing education in the local community.

2.3 Cultural Transformation of Open University Grassroots Colleges Promotes the Sustainable Development of the Open University System

Since their establishment, particularly at the grassroots level, open universities have aimed to cultivate practical talents for local needs. This practical orientation is a key measure of the quality of talent cultivated by open universities. Achieving this practical standard and ensuring the sustainable development of open universities necessitates innovation in teaching management and services. To innovate effectively, it is essential to implement cultural construction projects. Through these projects, grassroots colleges can make their teaching more practical, social, and market-oriented. Hence, the cultural transformation of grassroots colleges and the selection of specific development paths are undoubtedly the best ways to enhance the quality of talent cultivation and promote their sustainable development.

3. Characteristics of Cultural Transformation and Path Selection in Grassroots Colleges of Open Universities

As institutions dedicated to modern distance and open education, open universities have distinct cultural characteristics in addition to the common elements of campus culture. These unique aspects are reflected in three main areas:

3.1 Emphasizing the Uniqueness of Educational Targets

Students enrolled in open universities differ significantly from those in traditional institutions regarding their learning foundation, attitude, methods, time management, motivation, and behavior. Firstly, open university students are adults, exhibiting characteristics unique to adult learners. Secondly, in recent years, the student population has become younger, with many being recent graduates entering the workforce, thus also displaying traits of

younger students. This blend of characteristics determines the uniqueness of cultural construction in grassroots colleges of open universities. This uniqueness forms the basis and prerequisite for the cultural construction in these institutions, giving them both the commonalities of general higher education institutions and their distinct individuality.

3.2 Highlighting the Specificity of Courses and Teaching Methods

Open university courses are conducted during students' spare time, utilizing online and other remote means for a quasi-separated teacher-student interaction. This learning model requires students to have a certain degree of self-discipline and initiative. However, given the current foundation of open university students, these abilities are often lacking. Therefore, enhancing these capabilities is crucial for the educational effectiveness of grassroots colleges. These colleges need to base their practices on reality, using cultural transformation as a starting point. On one hand, they should leverage advanced modern information technology to reflect the digital and contemporary nature of open universities. On the other hand, they should embody traditional Chinese humanistic care, offering practical, engaging, and effective online and offline courses. This approach provides students with comprehensive education opportunities, enabling them to learn anytime, anywhere, in a relaxed cultural environment.

3.3 Highlighting the Uniqueness of Teaching Management

The quasi-separation of teachers and students during the teaching process presents various challenges for open university education. Grassroots colleges face new issues in forming classes, managing student records, and organizing extracurricular activities for part-time students, which cannot be addressed by traditional methods alone. Therefore, these activities must consider the unique aspects of teaching management in grassroots colleges of open universities.

Thus, the cultural construction of grassroots colleges should always address these unique characteristics from understanding to planning, implementation, and achieving results.

Based on these unique characteristics, the cultural construction of grassroots colleges should fundamentally emphasize its permeation function, which manifests in two key areas:

Integration into Daily Work and Life: The practice of cultural construction should permeate the daily work and life of teachers, students, and staff. Specifically, it should be integrated into their attitudes, behaviors, and emotions towards teaching, research, studying, and working.

Integration into All Aspects of School Operations: The practice of cultural construction should be embedded

in all school operations, including admissions, teaching, learning support, logistics, and community education. It should especially permeate all aspects of the teaching process.

4. PRINCIPLES OF CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND PATH SELECTION IN GRASSROOTS COLLEGES OF OPEN UNIVERSITIES

4.1 Integration of School Culture Construction with Educational Philosophy

The educational philosophy is the core element of a school's spiritual culture, shaping the direction and essence of cultural construction. Practice has shown that the transformation and development of grassroots colleges in the context of the National Open University require guidance from a well-defined educational philosophy. Therefore, these colleges must ground their cultural construction in practical experience, gradually refining and establishing their unique educational philosophies through practice.

4.2 Integration of School Culture Construction with Recruitment Efforts

Recruitment is a crucial process for promoting and enhancing the brand of grassroots colleges. It serves as a vital channel for forming and accumulating brand culture. Consequently, recruitment should be regarded as an essential aspect of cultural construction. Specifically, recruitment philosophy should focus on promoting the school's image, aiming to raise awareness of the Open University's brand. Additionally, effective recruitment strategies should be designed to align with cultural activities, targeting different audiences with tailored events.

4.3 Integration of School Culture Construction with Teaching Activities

The cultural construction of grassroots colleges is closely linked to their teaching activities. While adhering to the characteristics of open education, these colleges must also consider their unique features, striving to develop teaching activities that reflect their cultural identity. This involves developing teaching models that align with open education, fostering a positive teaching, learning, and examination environment. It also includes organizing activities closely related to open education, such as instructional competitions, in-class discussions, study group evaluations, outstanding student and cadre selections, online learning contests, and essay competitions. Moreover, emphasis should be placed on the construction of teaching practice bases to embody the principle of applying knowledge in practice.

4.4 Integration of School Culture Construction with Internal Management

Institutional and managerial culture is integral to the cultural construction of grassroots colleges. Therefore, this construction must be integrated with internal management. At the institutional level, colleges should gradually improve their institutional systems, compiling them into handbooks and ensuring strict implementation to maximize the educational and cultural functions of these systems. Practical measures may include activities centered around teacher evaluations, behavioral norms, and other aspects, tailored to the school's specific circumstances.

4.5 Integration of School Culture Construction with Research Work

Research work serves as the wings and driving force for the further innovation and development of the Open University, closely linked to its actual management, teaching, and educational practices. The formation of a research atmosphere in a university is not only one of the contents of school culture construction but also of great significance for enhancing the theoretical research level of the school culture itself. Therefore, the construction of school culture at the grassroots level of the Open University should be closely integrated with the school's research work. Firstly, it should establish an active participation mechanism: combining with the actual teaching and management, and integrating with the realization of the value of the faculty, so that teachers can realize their self-worth in scientific research while truly caring about the development of the school. Secondly, it should encourage through exemplary achievements: using a red list format and reward system, linking it with annual assessments, and excellence awards.

4.6 Integration of School Culture Construction with Campus Environment

Campus environment construction is also one of the important contents of school culture. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully design the cultural atmosphere in the campus environment, taking into account the characteristics of the grassroots Open University colleges and the practical campus environment. For example, motivating teachers and students can be achieved through the collection and display of "quotations from ordinary people," while enhancing the campus aesthetics can be accomplished through the installation of cultural stones. Activities such as "civilized office creation" can also be implemented to achieve a certain level of cultural permeation. Additionally, displaying "learning norms" in all classrooms, and elaborately designing and producing "school affairs publicity columns," "homework display columns," and "honor display columns" can create an atmosphere of civilized culture throughout the campus.

5. COUNTERMEASURES FOR CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND PATH SELECTION IN GRASSROOTS COLLEGES OF OPEN UNIVERSITIES

5.1 Transition in Educational Positioning and Approach: Emphasizing Both Academic and Non-Academic Education While Expanding Resources

The positioning and mode of operation of grassroots Open University colleges are of particular significance for both the cultural transformation and sustainable development of these institutions. Therefore, the transformation and upgrading of grassroots Open University colleges should first prioritize the transformation of their cultural development. The transformation of cultural development undoubtedly needs to start with the transformation of their educational positioning and mode of operation. Specifically, the operation of grassroots Open University colleges should shift from a focus solely on academic education to a dual focus on academic and non-academic education, gradually establishing a local system for lifelong education and lifelong learning. This entails transforming these colleges from institutions compensating for academic credentials into comprehensive local centers for adult higher education, distance education, community education, senior education, social work education, and local human resources training. In terms of educational functions, there needs to be a departure from the traditional educational functions of Open University colleges to include a broader range of community education, social work education, elderly education, and job training functions. Additionally, a wide range of educational resources should be created to meet the educational needs of learners at different levels and roles.

5.2 Transition in Teaching Service Methods and Approaches: Combining Internal and External Resources with Efficiency as a Priority

The foundation of a school's cultural development naturally lies with its people. Similarly, the cultural development of grassroots Open University colleges is closely tied to how teachers better cultivate students. Therefore, the transformation of the cultural development of grassroots Open University colleges should pay special attention to the transformation of their means and approaches to teaching management and services. Previously, teaching management at grassroots Open University colleges mostly focused on classroom teaching and simple material provision. However, with social development and changes in the student population, this simple service model and teaching support are far from meeting the teaching needs of students at grassroots Open

University colleges. Therefore, the teaching services at grassroots Open University colleges must shift from focusing solely on in-class activities to a balanced approach both in and out of the classroom. They should center around teacher-guided learning, homeroom teacher-led learning promotion, and student-initiated self-learning. This shift requires a significant reform effort to maximize the benefits of in-person attendance, online learning, and access to teaching materials. At the same time, there should be a focus on expanding student learning groups and actively creating student organizations and associations. Based on the actual situation of the school, regular selection activities such as “Outstanding Students and Student Cadres,” “Outstanding Student Volunteers,” “Outstanding Study Groups,” and “Online Learning Pioneers” should be conducted to continuously improve the enthusiasm and initiative of students’ learning. This approach aims to fundamentally change the school’s ethos, class atmosphere, and learning atmosphere, helping the majority of students to stand out in all aspects.

5.3 Transition in Faculty Development: Promoting Specialization and Comprehensive Abilities with a Focus on Competence

As previously discussed, faculty development in grassroots colleges within Open Universities should move away from rigid replication of traditional higher education models. Instead, it should focus on creating unique features based on the institution’s realities. The current one-dimensional focus on professional expertise in faculty development needs to be replaced with a more comprehensive approach. New faculty development plans or frameworks should consider the following aspects:

(1) Professional Analysis and Learning Ability: The focus is on teachers’ ability to analyze the characteristics of various courses within their field and deduce the most effective learning methods. They should continuously develop and refine these methods while imparting them to students.

(2) Professional Service and Management Ability: Starting from the actual situation of grassroots colleges of open universities, each teacher should act as a responsible professional, managing aspects such as the learning process, learning resources, and learning support within a specific field, possessing the skills of a university counselor.

(3) Practical Research Ability: Teachers should engage in applied research related to school research, focusing on teaching management and service or professional learning. They should research fields, courses, students, and learning methods, emphasizing practical application and taking a path different from general university research that only emphasizes theoretical research.

(4) Social Engagement Ability: Teachers should utilize their professional knowledge to provide corresponding

professional services locally, aiming to establish a good reputation and strive to become a local professional authority.

5.4 Management Functions and Institutional Development: Transitioning Towards Coordination and Enhanced Substance

School systems and institutional structures form the basis of effective management and embody the unique values of the institution. These structures dictate the school’s operational methods, establish the work environment, and shape the cultural atmosphere. They not only include restrictive and regulatory functions but also encompass guidance, integration, and humanistic care. From the perspective of modern administrative theory, the evolution of management systems should aim at constructing governance systems. Thus, the transformation of management systems in grassroots colleges of Open Universities should shift from an internally focused management service model to one that balances internal and external coordination, emphasizing humanistic care within the institutional framework. Specifically, this involves: (1) Promoting democratic participation: Encouraging the involvement of all faculty and staff in the development and implementation of school policies. (2) Scientific and practical design: Ensuring the institutional framework is designed and continually refined based on scientific and pragmatic principles, with timely updates and improvements. This approach should reflect the coordination of various industry services within the educational practice and achieve comprehensive community education. (3) Implementation Culture: Fostering a culture of effective implementation, leveraging both the rigidity and flexibility of institutional policies.

5.5 Innovating Educational Branding: Broadening Horizons and Refining Distinctiveness

The importance of establishing a brand for Open Universities cannot be overstated. The challenge lies in successfully transforming this brand, which has become a new direction and focus for the cultural transformation of grassroots colleges within Open Universities. Based on the current state of these colleges, brand transformation should expand from solely emphasizing open education to incorporating community education and senior education. This transformation can be achieved through three primary strategies: (1) Expanding New Brand Projects: Developing new educational brand initiatives, such as community and senior education, by identifying key entry points in new citizen schools, regional culture, and rural culture. (2) Refining Existing Brand Projects: Deepening and detailing existing open education brand initiatives. For example, enhancing the brand of teaching management by refining processes and practical implementation, and strengthening the brand of enrollment culture through market recognition and student organization engagement. (3)

Enhancing Digital and Modern Technological Integration: Leveraging modern information technology and advanced networking to add new value to brand initiatives, making the brand more memorable and impactful.

To summarize, the path to cultural transformation in grassroots colleges of Open Universities is intricately linked to the institution's overall development. It is an integrated endeavor that breathes life into the college's growth and progress. The long-term and challenging nature of this project requires alignment with contemporary developments and social progress. By considering the actual conditions of the institution and addressing emerging issues and challenges, the transformation can be successfully navigated. Leveraging strengths and mitigating weaknesses, the aim is to ensure that cultural development becomes a solid foundation for the institution's deep and sustained advancement.

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