

# Dilemma and Breakthrough: Structural Contradictions and Systemic Reform Pathways in Undergraduate Legal Education from the Perspective of "New Liberal Arts" Development

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## ABSTRACT

The "red card" warning regarding employment prospects for law majors does not stem from a decline in national or societal demand for legal professionals, but rather from deep-seated structural contradictions within undergraduate legal education itself. The root causes of the cooling job market for law graduates lie in the expansion of educational scale, rigid pedagogical models, and structural shifts in market demand. Internally, these contradictions manifest as misaligned educational objectives, outdated curricula, and a loss of value rationality in undergraduate legal education. The key to resolving this crisis lies in reconstructing the ecosystem of undergraduate legal education from the strategic perspective of the "New Liberal Arts" initiative. This involves: reaffirming the fundamental mission of legal education—to uphold justice and serve the rule of law in China—through strengthened value-based guidance; establishing a diversified talent-development framework aligned with institutional types and regional needs; revitalizing curricula to create an integrated, modular ecosystem that blends general and specialized knowledge with theory and practice; and fostering collaborative education by building an open, participatory community involving universities, government, enterprises, and civil society. Only through such comprehensive reforms can undergraduate legal education emerge from the shadow of the "red card" and truly become an elite talent incubator that responds to the challenges of our time, serves national strategies, and fulfills the enduring aspiration for fairness and justice.

## KEYWORDS

Legal education; structural contradictions; New liberal arts; Educational reform; Talent development

## 1 Introduction: A Timely Inquiry under the "Red Card" Warning

Legal education, as the primary source of talent for the rule of law, directly influences the nation's level of legal civilization and the modernization of its governance capacity. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China—and especially over the past four decades of reform and opening-up—legal education has undergone a historic transformation, evolving from post-revolutionary restoration to explosive growth, thereby cultivating a vast cohort of professionals who have significantly contributed to socialist rule-of-law development.

However, in recent years, employment reports consistently issued by MyCOS Institute have highlighted that the undergraduate law major has repeatedly been designated by China's Ministry of Education as a "red-card" program due to persistently low employment rates, low job satisfaction, low salary levels, and limited career advancement prospects. In 2024, the employment rate for law undergraduates stood at 74.9%, falling below the national average for bachelor's degree holders. This "red-card" warning not only signals a mismatch between labor market supply and demand but also exposes deep-seated structural crises within the current system of undergraduate legal education.

As China advances its comprehensive strategy of governing the country according to law, there is an urgent national and societal demand for high-quality legal professionals. Yet the existing undergraduate legal education system struggles to nurture the next generation of elite legal talent, resulting in a structural imbalance characterized by "an oversupply of low-end talent and a critical shortage of high-end expertise." The traditional model of undergraduate legal education has become ill-suited to meet the evolving needs of socioeconomic development and the construction of a rule-of-law China, necessitating a systemic self-revolution. The emergence of the "New Liberal Arts" initiative—centered on interdisciplinary integration, empowerment through modern technologies, and alignment with national strategic priorities—offers a timely conceptual framework and catalytic momentum for reforming legal education. It demands a fundamental departure from the outdated paradigm centered on rote knowledge transmission and exam-oriented training, toward a new paradigm that places "value formation" at its core, "competency development" as its orientation, and "integrative innovation" as its defining feature. Therefore, grounded in the strategic vision of the "New Liberal Arts," it is imperative to re-examine the "red-card" predicament facing undergraduate legal education, diagnose its root causes, and respond through a holistic transformation: reaffirming the core values of legal education, reconstructing diversified talent-development objectives, re-engineering curricular systems, innovating collaborative education mechanisms, and reclaiming the ethical and normative foundations of the discipline. Only through such an integrative, quality-driven evolution can undergraduate legal education fulfill its mission and responsibilities in the new era.

## 2 Historical Retrospect and Current Assessment: The Genesis of the “Red Card” Warning

The “red-card” predicament facing undergraduate law graduates should not be simplistically attributed to individual students’ insufficient capabilities or mere oversupply. Rather, it is the cumulative and interwoven outcome of multiple factors—namely, the expansion of legal education enrollment, rigid pedagogical models, and structural shifts in market demand—acting over an extended period.

### 2.1 Expansion of Educational Supply Driven by Scale

The original purpose of establishing the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the Imperial University of Peking in the late Qing Dynasty was to cultivate elite talent for national governance. During the Republican era, although legal education expanded in scale, the proliferation of private institutions led to significant disparities in educational quality—ironically reinforcing an “elitist” model of legal education. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the restructuring of pre-existing law schools did not fully dismantle this historical tradition. Many scholars who had received modern legal training carried forward the ethos of “elite-oriented education” into their teaching practices, thereby perpetuating the elitist orientation of legal education. While this elitist model helped ensure the quality of talent supporting socialist legal system construction, it inevitably resulted in insufficient scale and structural imbalances in talent supply—making it difficult to meet the comprehensive, nationwide demands of China’s legal development. Following the launch of reform and opening-up, the explosive growth in societal and state demand for legal professionals triggered a period of rapid expansion in legal education. Driven by both the nationwide university enrollment expansion and the desire of comprehensive universities to offer full disciplinary portfolios—and given the relatively low institutional barriers to establishing law programs—universities across the country rushed to launch law majors. By 2023, more than 600 regular higher education institutions nationwide offered law programs, producing nearly one million law students annually. This dramatic surge in student numbers severely diluted already limited high-quality faculty and practical teaching resources, leading to an overall decline in educational quality. Legal education supply became largely disconnected from the real, nuanced needs of the state and society for legal professionals, resulting in low-level, repetitive program development and a form of “overcapacity” in talent production.

### 2.2 Rigid Educational Models Fail to Meet Contemporary Challenges

For a long time, undergraduate legal education in China has been deeply influenced by the civil law tradition, giving rise to a “dogmatic” teaching model centered on legal concepts, principles, and rules. Despite multiple rounds of pedagogical reforms, the dominant approach remains lecture-based instruction, with student evaluation primarily focused on rote memorization of legal knowledge and performance on the National Unified Legal Professional Qualification Examination (commonly known as the “bar exam”).

Faculty members typically emphasize the deductive exposition of legal theories and the interpretation of statutory provisions, while students are preoccupied with memorizing vast amounts of doctrinal content to pass standardized exams. Although this model enhances the efficiency of knowledge transmission, it severely neglects the inherently practical nature of legal education. As a result, students receive little systematic training in critical thinking, practical legal skills, interdisciplinary knowledge integration, or the application of modern technologies. Moreover, they rarely have opportunities to engage with real case files, participate in courtroom advocacy, conduct legal negotiations, or draft rigorous legal documents. Employers—particularly law firms and corporate legal departments—commonly report that new law graduates are “slow to get up to speed” and suffer from a gap between theoretical ambition and practical capability, often requiring one to two years of additional on-the-job training before they can competently handle even basic legal tasks. This rigid educational paradigm has created a profound chasm between legal theory and practice, placing the core competitiveness of traditionally trained graduates under serious challenge.

### 2.3 Structural Shifts in Market Demand Intensify Supply–Demand Mismatches

As China undergoes socioeconomic transformation and the legal services sector evolves, market demand for legal professionals has shifted from sheer “quantity” to “quality” and “specialization.” On one hand, the high-end legal services market urgently seeks elite talent equipped with interdisciplinary knowledge, international perspectives, and strong practical capabilities. On the other hand, vast segments such as grassroots legal services and corporate legal departments require practice-oriented professionals capable of navigating localized, complex social and legal relationships. However, the traditional, homogenized model of undergraduate legal education struggles to respond to these nuanced, differentiated demands. This mismatch has led to a paradoxical situation: graduates face significant difficulty finding suitable employment, while employers simultaneously experience acute shortages of qualified candidates—highlighting

a pronounced problem of structural unemployment.

Moreover, using "employment rate" as a rigid benchmark to evaluate the effectiveness of an academic program—or even an entire university—is deeply flawed and misleading, further exacerbating the imbalance between supply and demand in the job market. For a profession like law—characterized by a long career development cycle and high entry barriers—the initial post-graduation employment rate fails to capture graduates' long-term professional potential or their broader societal contributions. Yet this distorted "performance indicator" has induced widespread employment anxiety among law schools, prompting many institutions to adopt short-sighted coping strategies—such as lowering graduation requirements or encouraging students to "take any job first and choose a career later"—instead of fundamentally re-examining and reforming their educational models. Such symptomatic, piecemeal responses not only fail to address the root causes but also intensify the utilitarian drift in legal education, steering it further away from its foundational values of pursuing fairness and justice.

### **3 Deep Deconstruction of the Structural Contradictions in Undergraduate Legal Education: The Interplay of Three Tensions**

The predicament of legal education is essentially the result of a prolonged failure to effectively reconcile three interrelated tensions: misaligned educational objectives, a disconnected curriculum system, and the erosion of value rationality.

#### **3.1 Misaligned Educational Objectives: The Conflict Between Elite Ideals and Mass-education Realities**

The undergraduate legal education system in China has long suffered from ambiguous and contradictory program objectives. Whether in national policy documents—such as the National Standards for Teaching Quality in Law or the Opinions on Strengthening Legal Education and Theoretical Research in the New Era issued by the Ministry of Education—or in individual universities' curriculum plans, statements of educational aims tend to be grandiose and abstract, such as "equipping students with a solid theoretical foundation, proficient professional skills, and a well-structured knowledge base" or "continuously cultivating large numbers of high-quality, morally and intellectually accomplished legal professionals." While these goals are not inherently flawed, the reality is that the vast majority of ordinary universities lack the institutional resources, faculty expertise, or practical platforms necessary to nurture "high-caliber" or "interdisciplinary" elite talent. This overly ambitious goal-setting—reaching beyond realistic capacity—has led to a severe disconnect in actual teaching and learning processes. Curricula often strive to be "comprehensive and all-encompassing," attempting to cover every branch of law, yet neglect focused, in-depth training in specific practice areas or skill development. Assessment systems remain dominated by end-of-term closed-book exams that test rote memorization rather than practical application. Consequently, students fall into a troubling gap: they fail to attain the theoretical depth and critical reasoning expected of elite legal education, while simultaneously lacking the specialized, marketable competencies needed to thrive in a fiercely competitive job market. This misalignment of educational objectives has left legal education adrift—caught between the unattainable ideal of "refined art" and the pragmatic demands of "popular craft", unable to clearly define its own identity or purpose.

#### **3.2 Disconnected Curriculum System: The Rift Between Knowledge Transmission and Competency Development**

If educational objectives answer the questions "for whom we educate" and "what kind of person we aim to cultivate," then the curriculum system addresses "how to cultivate such a person." The misalignment of educational goals has directly led undergraduate legal education into a pattern that "prioritizes knowledge over ability and theory over practice," resulting in both internal fragmentation and external irrelevance.

First, the curriculum structure is rigid. Although courses are formally categorized into general education, foundational law courses, required major courses, and electives, these modules lack organic integration. General education courses often become perfunctory, failing to meaningfully broaden students' intellectual horizons or enhance their humanistic literacy. Meanwhile, specialized courses operate in disciplinary silos—civil law, criminal law, procedural law, and others remain strictly compartmentalized, with little cross-disciplinary course design to equip students to tackle the complex, multifaceted legal problems they will encounter in real-world practice.

Second, teaching methodologies remain outdated. Although pedagogical approaches such as case-based learning and clinical legal education have been widely advocated for years, their consistent, high-quality implementation remains rare in practice. Constraints—including limited faculty capacity, large class sizes, and pressure from standardized assessments—prevent most institutions from moving beyond traditional formats. The majority of classrooms still rely on

one-way “lecture-and-listen” instruction, leaving students in a passive role and stifling the development of critical thinking and proactive inquiry.

Third, practical training components are weak. Internships and experiential learning are frequently marginalized—either reduced to brief, superficial observational placements or left entirely to students’ self-arranged, unstructured internships. These activities typically lack systematic design, professional supervision, and effective evaluation. As a result, students rarely get the opportunity to translate abstract legal knowledge into concrete strategies and professional competencies within authentic or simulated legal environments.

This “armchair lawyering” approach to education is fundamentally incapable of meeting the legal profession’s demand for “job-ready” graduates with immediate practical capability.

### **3.3 Erosion of Value Rationality: The Tension Between Justice and Utilitarianism**

Under the dual pressures of employment anxiety and utilitarian ideologies, the “instrumental rationality” of legal education has increasingly expanded, placing its value dimension at serious risk of being hollowed out. On one hand, students’ motivations for studying law have become increasingly utilitarian. Many choose law not out of genuine passion for the discipline or a commitment to justice and fairness, but rather as a strategic “stepping stone” toward respectable income and social status. Driven by this mindset, their learning naturally gravitates toward skills perceived as “practical” or “lucrative,” while they show little interest in courses such as jurisprudence, legal history, or legal ethics—subjects that may seem “impractical” but are essential to shaping the moral and intellectual character of legal professionals.

On the other hand, some universities and faculty members unconsciously cater to this trend. In efforts to boost employment statistics and student satisfaction, teaching content may tilt excessively toward exam preparation and quick-fix techniques, sidestepping profound value-laden questions that require sustained reflection and ethical engagement. When legal education degenerates into mere “problem-solving drills” centered on bar exam success and technical proficiency, its foundational values—fairness, justice, liberty, and order—are in danger of being suspended or even eroded. This “value hollowing” fosters a new breed of “legal technicians”: individuals highly skilled in procedure yet ethically indifferent, adept at manipulating rules but blind to justice. Such an outcome inevitably undermines the ethical bedrock upon which a rule-of-law society depends. This mode of education ceases to be a cradle for cultivating true “legal professionals” and instead becomes an assembly line churning out “legal artisans.” While students may secure jobs in the short term, they are unlikely to mature into responsible, principled leaders capable of driving meaningful social progress and serving as genuine pillars of China’s rule-of-law future.

## **4 Systemic Reform Pathways for Undergraduate Legal Education under the “New Liberal Arts” Framework**

The structural contradictions plaguing current undergraduate legal education can no longer be addressed by piecemeal, technical fixes. In the context of the “New Liberal Arts” initiative, a systemic self-revolution—centered on a fundamental reconstruction of the educational framework—is imperative for undergraduate legal education.

### **4.1 Value Leadership: Reaffirming the Soul and Mission of Legal Education**

Undergraduate legal education must firmly embrace the value-oriented nature of the humanities and consciously take on the responsibility of nurturing students’ faith in the rule of law and their identification with professional ethics.

First, the cultivation of value rationality must be given greater weight. Through case discussions, public service, and pro bono activities, students should experience the human warmth of justice, grasp the gravity of professional responsibility, and gradually internalize a genuine belief in the rule of law within authentic contexts.

Second, legal ethics should no longer be treated as an isolated standalone course. Instead, ethical reflection must be integrated into the teaching of all core legal subjects. Whenever a legal rule is explained or a case analyzed, instructors should guide students to examine the underlying value tensions and ethical dilemmas involved.

Third, the spirit of the rule of law, civic commitment, social responsibility, and professional integrity must be deeply embedded into both the curriculum and pedagogical practices. By engaging with canonical legal texts, analyzing ethical case studies, and fostering interdisciplinary dialogues, students can come to understand the historical trajectories, philosophical foundations, and humanistic concerns that underpin the law. Only through such holistic education can we cultivate truly outstanding legal professionals who not only “know the law,” but also “understand reason” and “uphold righteousness”.

## 4.2 Reconfiguring Educational Objectives: Establishing a Clear and Tiered Goal System

Higher education institutions should formulate differentiated and precisely targeted talent development objectives based on their own institutional missions, regional characteristics, and resource endowments. This approach avoids homogenized competition in talent cultivation and enables the optimal allocation of legal education resources and precise alignment with societal needs.

Research-intensive universities should focus on cultivating academic researchers and high-end interdisciplinary legal professionals who possess deep theoretical grounding, exceptional innovative capacity, and broad international perspectives. Specialized institutions with strong industry ties should aim to develop “Law + X” applied talents—professionals who combine legal expertise with mastery of specific sectoral rules. For example: Finance- and economics-oriented universities can prioritize fields such as financial law, tax law, and compliance; Science- and engineering-focused universities can deepen specialization in intellectual property law, technology law, and data law; Normal universities can concentrate on education law, child protection law, and related areas. Regional comprehensive universities should align with local societal needs by nurturing talents specialized in grassroots legal services, mediation, community governance, and other context-specific roles. Through this tiered and differentiated system, legal education can move beyond one-size-fits-all models and deliver tailored, high-impact outcomes that genuinely serve diverse societal demands.

## 4.3 Reconstructing the Curriculum and Pedagogical System: Building a Modular Ecosystem of “Integration of General and Specialized Education, Unity of Knowledge and Action”

A pivotal lever for reforming undergraduate legal education lies in constructing a dynamic, open, and integrative modular curriculum ecosystem—one grounded in the “integration of general and specialized education” as its knowledge foundation and oriented toward the “unity of knowledge and action” as its competency goal.

First, strengthen the foundation of general education. High-quality courses in philosophy, history, economics, sociology, psychology, and logic should be offered to help students understand the social, economic, and cultural forces underlying legal systems, thereby cultivating humanistic sensibility and critical thinking.

Second, promote interdisciplinary integration within professional courses. Rigid boundaries between traditional branches of law—such as civil law, criminal law, and procedural law—must be dismantled. Instead, cross-disciplinary, thematic course modules should be developed to reflect the complexity of real-world legal challenges.

Third, deepen the transformation of experiential learning. Practical education must be moved from the periphery to the core of the curriculum and embedded throughout the entire talent development process—from simulated trials and legal clinics to capstone projects and community-based legal service.

Fourth, innovate teaching methodologies and assessment systems. Student-centered pedagogies—such as problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, and collaborative inquiry—should be comprehensively adopted to foster students’ initiative, creativity, and capacity for independent judgment. Assessment should shift from rote memorization to evaluating analytical reasoning, ethical reflection, and practical application.

Together, these measures will forge a responsive, future-oriented legal education ecosystem that equips students not only with knowledge, but with wisdom, skill, and purpose.

## 4.4 Innovating Collaborative Talent Development Mechanisms: Building an Open “University–Government–Enterprise–Society” Co-Education Community

Undergraduate legal education cannot thrive in isolation. It must open its doors, step beyond campus walls, and achieve deep integration with the legal profession to build a collaborative practice-oriented community characterized by shared resources, shared responsibilities, and co-cultivation of talent.

First, co-construct and share practical platforms. Universities can partner with local judicial organs, leading law firms, and major corporations to establish joint laboratories, research centers, or experiential learning bases that provide authentic professional environments for students.

Second, co-develop “dual-qualified” teaching teams. Institutions should systematically recruit outstanding practitioners—such as judges, prosecutors, attorneys, and corporate legal directors—as adjunct professors or guest lecturers, bringing real-world cases, cutting-edge industry insights, and practical wisdom directly into the classroom. Simultaneously, faculty members should be encouraged to undertake secondments or internships in legal practice settings, fostering two-way professional exchange and mutual enrichment.

Third, co-design talent development standards. Representatives from the legal professional community should be invited to jointly formulate and revise program objectives, course syllabi, and quality assessment criteria. This ensures seamless alignment between educational outcomes and actual occupational demands. Drawing inspiration from engineering education accreditation models, China should explore establishing a domestically tailored professional

accreditation system for legal education—one that leverages evaluation not as an end in itself, but as a catalyst for continuous improvement and systemic reform.

## 5 Conclusion: Toward an Undergraduate Legal Education of Excellence and Responsibility in the New Era

Chinese undergraduate legal education now stands at a historic crossroads: on one side looms a crisis of survival, persistently signaled by the employment "red card"; on the other lies a transformative opportunity presented by the "New Liberal Arts" initiative. At the heart of this crisis lies a deep-seated structural contradiction—woven from misaligned educational objectives, a disconnected curriculum system, and the erosion of value rationality. The path forward, however, lies in returning to the essential mission of legal education: to reforge its soul through value-driven leadership and reshape its ecosystem through systemic reform. This entails establishing a tiered and differentiated talent-development framework aligned with institutional missions and regional needs; constructing a modular, interdisciplinary curriculum that integrates broad liberal arts foundations with specialized legal training and unites knowledge with practice ("integration of general and specialized learning, unity of knowing and doing"); and building an open, collaborative educational community that deeply engages universities, judicial and political organs, enterprises, and civil society organizations.

In the context of comprehensively advancing the rule of law in China, the breakthrough for undergraduate legal education is not merely about improving quality—it is fundamentally about transmitting the spirit of the rule of law. Through a comprehensive self-revolution, legal education must achieve a full transformation: from scale to quality, from knowledge transmission to capability development, and from technical proficiency to ethical commitment. Only then can it realize high-quality, substance-driven development and truly cultivate legal professionals who serve as the backbone of "good laws and sound governance," thereby regaining the trust and respect of society.

Ultimately, only by returning to the authentic essence of legal education can China nurture a new generation of outstanding legal talents—individuals who combine patriotic dedication, humanistic sensibility, professional excellence, and cross-disciplinary competence—and position undergraduate legal education as a premier incubator for talent that answers the call of our times, serves national strategies, and embodies the enduring dream of fairness and justice.

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