

Disciplinary Competitions Promote College Students' Innovation and Entrepreneurship: A Case Study of International Economics and Trade

Bingde Tan, and Xiaojun Ke*

Guangzhou Institute of Science and Technology, Guangzhou, China

*Corresponding Author. E-mail: 1529229125@qq.com, and drxjke@gzist.edu.cn *

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" era, disciplinary competitions, as important carriers of practical teaching in colleges, hold unique value in cultivating college students' innovation and entrepreneurship capabilities. Taking the international economics and trade major as an example, this paper aims to achieve two objectives: first, to identify key issues in the development of disciplinary competitions for the international economics and trade major, such as the construction of competition systems, school-enterprise collaboration mechanisms, and achievement transformation paths; second, to explore practical strategies for implementing disciplinary competitions to promote students' innovation and entrepreneurship. This study adopts literature analysis, questionnaire surveys, and case analysis methods. Specifically, a questionnaire survey was conducted among students majoring in international economics and trade from 30 national colleges, combined with typical case analyses of disciplinary competitions in the international economics and trade major, was used to systematically analyze the importance of disciplinary competitions in integrating professional knowledge, enhancing practical abilities, and cultivating innovative thinking. It also deeply explores the specific impacts of competitions on stimulating students' entrepreneurial awareness, shaping entrepreneurial skills, and connecting entrepreneurial resources. Based on the findings, this paper proposes enlightenment on promoting innovation and entrepreneurship through disciplinary competitions from three dimensions: innovation of educational concepts, optimization of curriculum systems, and improvement of policy guarantees, providing theoretical and practical references for colleges to deepen the reform of innovation and entrepreneurship education.

Keywords: Disciplinary Competition; Innovation and Entrepreneurship; International Economics and Trade; Practical Teaching; Talent Cultivation

Introduction

In China, the teaching of international economics and trade courses in the past was primarily organized around a theoretical knowledge transmission model, with the curriculum system centered on foundational theories and policy frameworks. Traditional course structures included core modules such as "International Trade Theory," "International Finance," and "Customs Practice," which were taught through lectures, textbook readings, and theoretical discussions. The teaching system emphasized mastery of classical trade theories (e.g., comparative advantage, factor endowment theory) and policy regulations, with assessments focusing on written exams to test theoretical recall. Practical components were limited—often consisting of simple case studies or classroom simulations that rarely reflected real-world trade operations—resulting in a clear separation between theoretical learning and practical application (Chen & Li, 2023).

With the in-depth development of global economic integration, the talent cultivation of the international economics and trade major is facing new challenges. Problems such as the disconnection between theory and practice and insufficient innovation capabilities of students in traditional classroom teaching have become increasingly prominent (Zhang & Wang, 2024). As a bridge connecting professional education with innovation and entrepreneurship, disciplinary competitions are receiving extensive attention from higher education workers (Lin & Liu, 2022). The 2023 China's Ministry of Education's Opinions on Further Deepening the Reform of Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education in Higher Education clearly states the need to "give play to the important role of disciplinary competitions in the cultivation of innovation and entrepreneurship talents, and build a long-term mechanism of promoting learning, teaching, and innovation through competitions."

The international economics and trade major is highly practical and interdisciplinary. Its talent cultivation goal requires students not only to master international trade theories and policies but also to possess practical abilities such as cross-border e-commerce operation, international market analysis, and business negotiation (Li & Wang, 2024). Through simulating real business environments, disciplinary competitions provide students with a platform to transform theoretical knowledge into practical innovation (Ren & Sun, 2022). Take the National College Business Elite Challenge International Trade Competition as an example. Since its launch in 2012, this competition has attracted more than 800 colleges nationwide in China. Many award-winning teams have incubated cross-border e-commerce startup projects through competition achievements, demonstrating the remarkable effectiveness of disciplinary competitions in cultivating innovation and entrepreneurship talents (Zhang & Li, 2023).

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) 100K Entrepreneurship Competition has been proven to enhance students' entrepreneurial intention effectively (Gao & Zhang, 2023). In China, Huang & Tang (2021), through analyzing the Internet+ College Students' Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition, pointed out that disciplinary competitions can significantly improve students' innovative thinking and team collaboration abilities. Liu & Huang (2024), taking the economics major as an example, constructed a trinity talent cultivation model of competition-practice-entrepreneurship. However, existing research

primarily focuses on comprehensive competitions, and special research on the international economics and trade major is still insufficient, especially lacking in-depth discussions on the integration mechanism of competitions and professional courses.

This survey research, based on data from a questionnaire survey of international economics and trade students across 30 colleges (with an effective recovery rate of 89.7%), adopts literature analysis, questionnaire surveys, and case analysis to systematically explore the role of professional disciplinary competitions in promoting college students' innovation and entrepreneurship. The study first identifies the types and characteristics of typical disciplinary competitions in the international economics and trade major, then analyzes how competitions impact students' knowledge integration, skill development, and thinking patterns, followed by an examination of current problems in competition implementation using survey data, and finally proposes targeted strategies for educational practice. Specifically, this research aims to: (1) empirically verify the effectiveness of disciplinary competitions in bridging the gap between traditional theoretical teaching and practical innovation in the international economics and trade major; (2) develop a set of survey-based recommendations for optimizing competition systems to better align with the needs of innovation and entrepreneurship talent cultivation in this field.

The Significance of Disciplinary Competitions in international economics and trade

A practical platform for integrating professional knowledge

The international economics and trade major involves many courses, such as international trade practice, international finance, and cross-border e-commerce (Zhang & Liu, 2023). Disciplinary competitions promote students to integrate fragmented knowledge through project-based learning (Wang & Chen, 2022). For example, the POCIB National College Students Foreign Trade Competence Competition requires participating teams to complete the whole process of simulated operations from market research and contract signing to goods clearance. Students need to comprehensively apply the knowledge of courses such as international trade practice, international settlement, and customs practice to build a systematic professional knowledge system in solving practical problems (Li & Zhang, 2023). Survey data shows that 92.3% of respondents believe that competitions help them more clearly understand the logical relationship between professional knowledge.

An effective way to improve practical abilities

The practical ability requirements of the international economics and trade major cover many aspects, such as business negotiation, data analysis, and cross-border platform operation (Sun & Liu, 2023). Disciplinary competitions provide real combat opportunities for students through simulated business environments: the National Cross-border E-commerce Skills Competition requires teams to complete store operations on platforms such as eBay and Amazon, and students need to master practical skills such as product selection analysis, marketing promotion, and customer service (Li & Tang, 2024). The International Business Negotiation Competition exercises students' communication skills and adaptability through simulating negotiation scenarios between Chinese and foreign enterprises (Shi & Zhang, 2024). A member of a participating team mentioned in an interview: "In the competition, we

encountered deliberate price pressure from simulated foreign merchants, and we resolved the crisis by using international trade terms and exchange rate risk management knowledge. This kind of experience is difficult to provide in classroom teaching."

An important carrier for cultivating innovative thinking

In the context of the digital economy, innovative talents in international economics and trade primarily need to possess capabilities such as cross-border e-commerce model innovation and international market demand forecasting (Li & Wang, 2024). The open propositions in disciplinary competitions provide an innovative space for students. For example, the National College Students' International Trade Innovation Competition encourages teams to design new trade plans based on RCEP rules. The award-winning project Cross-border Agricultural Product Traceability Trade Model Based on Blockchain combines technological innovation with trade practice, demonstrating distinct innovative thinking (Gao & Liu, 2022). According to a survey by the Teaching Steering Committee for international economics and trade Majors of the Ministry of Education, the number of innovation points in innovation and entrepreneurship projects of students who have participated in disciplinary competitions is 37% higher on average than those who have not.

Key link in cultivating professional qualities

The international trade industry requires practitioners to have professional qualities such as teamwork, stress resistance, and international vision (Chen & Liu, 2022). The high-intensity preparation process of disciplinary competitions, such as a competition requiring the completion of a complete English business plan within 48 hours, can effectively improve students' stress resistance (Wang & He, 2023). Participating in cross-school team competitions broadens students' international vision. For example, the Cross-strait and Three Regions College Students' International Trade Forum attracts students from the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to jointly discuss global trade hot issues (Zhao & Tang, 2023). Surveys show that 87.6% of corporate employers believe that competition experience can significantly enhance the professional qualities of international economics and trade graduates.

The Influence of Professional Disciplinary Competitions on College Students' Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Stimulation and strengthening of entrepreneurial awareness

Disciplinary competitions effectively stimulate students' entrepreneurial willingness by displaying business success cases and providing entrepreneurial practice opportunities (Sun & Zhao, 2024). In the National College Business Elite Challenge, excellent participating projects can directly connect with venture capital. This "competition-incubation" mechanism allows students to intuitively feel the possibility of starting a business (Deng & Yang, 2021). The leader of an award-winning team shared: "Our cross-border e-commerce product selection plan was recognized by corporate judges in the competition, which strengthened our confidence in transforming the plan into a startup project." Survey data shows that the entrepreneurial intention rate of students who have participated in professional disciplinary competitions (34.5%) is significantly higher than that of non-participants (12.1%).

Shaping and improvement of entrepreneurial skills

Skills required for innovation and entrepreneurship, such as market analysis, business model design, and team management, can be systematically trained in competitions (Zhang & Li, 2023). Taking the Challenge Cup National College Students' Extracurricular Academic Science and Technology Works Competition as an example, the international economics and trade professional participating teams need to complete the whole process from topic selection and research to achievement transformation, which is highly consistent with the development process of entrepreneurial projects (Zhang & Li, 2021). Data from a college's entrepreneurship incubation base shows that among the entrepreneurial projects transformed by competition teams, 82% of the core members have competition experience, and their business plan integrity and feasibility scores are 29% higher than those of non-competition teams.

Docking and integration of entrepreneurial resources

Disciplinary competitions often bring together multiple resources such as colleges, enterprises, and investment institutions, providing docking channels for students' entrepreneurship (Liu & Zhang, 2023). The international economics and trade track of the China International 'Internet+' College Students' Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition sets up a school-enterprise cooperation special project, and excellent projects can obtain enterprise tutor guidance and incubation support; some colleges' international economics and trade professional competitions have also established a competition alumni resource database, where previous award-winning players provide entrepreneurial experience sharing for new teams (Chen & Lin, 2021). According to statistics, the proportion of international economics and trade professional startup projects that obtain angel investment through competitions reaches 18.7%, which is higher than the average level of other majors.

Cognition and response to entrepreneurial risks

The simulated entrepreneurship links in disciplinary competitions help students recognize entrepreneurial risks in advance (Hu & Lin, 2023). In the Comprehensive International Trade Skills Competition, teams need to deal with simulated risks such as exchange rate fluctuations, trade barriers, and supply chain disruptions. This training improves students' risk prediction and response capabilities (Chen & Wu, 2022). A student who failed in entrepreneurship confessed, "Fortunately, we simulated the situation of sudden exchange rate changes in the competition. We purchased foreign exchange futures in advance in our actual entrepreneurship, so we avoided capital chain breakage." This cultivation of risk awareness is significant for graduates who are new to the workplace.

The Current Situation and Problems of Disciplinary Competitions in international economics and trade

Inadequate integrity of the competition system

The current disciplinary competitions in the international economics and trade major have the phenomenon of "emphasizing quantity over quality". The types of competitions mainly focus on traditional trade practice fields (such as document production and customs declaration processes). In contrast, the coverage of emerging fields such as digital trade and green trade is insufficient (Fang & Xu, 2022). The survey shows that among the competitions

offered by the international economics and trade majors of national colleges, those involving cross-border e-commerce account for 68%, while those involving digital trade account for only 21%, reflecting the disconnection between the competition system and industry development. In addition, the competition hierarchy is not clear enough, and the connection mechanism between school-level, provincial-level, and national-level competitions has not been improved, resulting in unclear participation paths for students.

The depth of school-enterprise collaboration needs to be improved

Although most competitions emphasize enterprise participation, the actual cooperation still stays at a superficial level. Enterprise judges mostly participate in final reviews and rarely intervene in competition design and process guidance; some school-enterprise cooperation competitions have a "nominative" tendency and lack substantive resource investment (Wu & Zhou, 2022). A participating student's feedback: "The enterprise judges asked very professional questions during the defense, but we had no chance to communicate with enterprise tutors before the competition. This kind of cooperation is limited to helping improve the quality of work." This situation leads to deviations between competition results and actual enterprise needs.

The mechanism for transforming achievements is not sound

The proportion of competition achievements transformed into entrepreneurial projects is low, mainly due to: first, the lack of professional incubation guidance, making it difficult for student teams to transform competition plans into business plans; second, the unclear attribution of intellectual property rights, as the copyright of some competition works belongs to schools or organizers, which inhibits students' enthusiasm for transformation; third, the lack of follow-up financial support, as competition rewards are mostly honorary certificates, lacking continuous entrepreneurial funding (Xie & Hu, 2022). According to statistics, among the award-winning projects of the international economics and trade major, only 9.3% have successfully registered as companies, which is far lower than the transformation level of science and engineering competitions.

The balance of student participation needs to be improved

There is a noticeable "Matthew effect" in competition participation. Key colleges and advantageous disciplines have more participation resources, and the participation rate of students in ordinary colleges is low (Feng & Jiang, 2023). A teacher from the international economics and trade major of a local college said, "We want to participate in national competitions, but the cost of purchasing competition simulation platforms is as high as tens of thousands of yuan. Due to limited school funding, students can only give up." In addition, there is also a grade imbalance in competition participation. The participation rate of junior students (67%) is much higher than that of first-year students (23%), reflecting insufficient competition guidance for lower-grade students.

Enlightenment on Promoting College Students' Innovation and Entrepreneurship through Disciplinary Competitions

Construct a dynamic competition system to align with industry development needs

Colleges should dynamically adjust the competition system according to the development trend of international trade. First, expand the types of competitions. Increase competition in emerging fields such as digital trade, green trade, and service trade, such as the "Digital Trade Innovation competition" and the "Carbon Border Tax Policy Simulation Competition". Second, improve the hierarchy design. Establish a four-level system of "course competition-school-level competition-provincial-level competition-national-level competition", and clarify the training objectives of competitions at all levels. Third, introduce cutting-edge technologies: introduce tools such as blockchain and big data analysis in competitions, such as requiring teams to use Python for international trade data visualization analysis.

Deepen the school-enterprise collaboration mechanism to enhance the effectiveness of competition education

Strengthen the in-depth cooperation between colleges and enterprises, which can start from three aspects. First, co-construct competition platforms: enterprises participate in competition proposition design and provide real business cases as competition topics. Second, introduce a dual tutor system: each participating team is equipped with a university professional tutor and an enterprise practice tutor to guide the competition process throughout. Third, establish a resource-sharing database: schools and enterprises co-construct competition case databases, enterprise tutor databases, and entrepreneurial resource databases to provide students with continuous support.

Improve the achievement transformation mechanism and open up the entrepreneurial incubation chain

Improve the support system for transforming competition achievements. First, set up special incubation funds: schools, together with local governments and enterprises, establish competition achievement transformation funds to provide startup funds for high-quality projects. Second, clarify the attribution of intellectual property rights: formulate a copyright distribution method for competition works, allowing student teams to retain the main intellectual property rights. Third, build an incubation service chain: integrate in-school entrepreneurship incubation bases, off-campus science and technology parks, and other resources to provide competition projects with full-process services from creativity to commercialization.

Optimize the competition participation mechanism to promote fair and inclusive education

Guarantee the competition participation rights of students at different levels. First, lower the participation threshold: develop low-cost or free competition simulation platforms, such as international trade simulation systems based on open-source software. Second, strengthen guidance for lower-grade students: incorporate basic competition knowledge into the introductory courses for first-year students and have seniors share their competition experiences. Third, establish a support mechanism: key colleges and local colleges establish

competition support pairs to share training resources and preparation experience.

Conclusion

As an important starting point for innovation and entrepreneurship education in the international economics and trade major, professional disciplinary competitions play an irreplaceable role in integrating professional knowledge, improving practical abilities, and stimulating entrepreneurial awareness. In the process of addressing the disconnect between traditional teaching and industry demands, disciplinary competitions have emerged as a dynamic platform for generating and applying new knowledge—that is responsive to the digital transformation of global trade, emerging policy frameworks (such as RCEP and carbon border adjustment mechanisms), and evolving market practices like cross-border e-commerce 3.0 and green supply chain management. This new knowledge, cultivated through competition-driven problem-solving, not only enriches the curriculum of international economics and trade but also ensures that educational content remains aligned with the changing social and economic landscape.

At present, although disciplinary competitions still face problems such as imperfect systems and insufficient collaboration in promoting college students' innovation and entrepreneurship, measures such as constructing dynamic competition systems (incorporating emerging fields like digital trade), deepening school-enterprise cooperation (to co-develop industry-relevant competition content), and improving transformation mechanisms (to translate competition-generated new knowledge into entrepreneurial practice) can further release the educational value of competitions. These strategies not only address the current gaps in curriculum development but also foster a culture of continuous learning, where students and educators collectively update their understanding of global trade dynamics through hands-on competition experiences.

In the future, colleges should deeply integrate disciplinary competitions with professional education and innovation and entrepreneurship education, treating competitions as a core channel for injecting new knowledge into the curriculum. By doing so, they can form a benign ecosystem of "promoting learning, teaching, and innovation through competitions"—one that not only cultivates high-quality international economics and trade talents with international vision and innovation capabilities but also ensures that the discipline itself remains vibrant and relevant amid global economic changes. This integration will ultimately enable the international economics and trade major to fulfill its mission better by serving societal needs and driving economic development in the new era.

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