The Recruitment of Graduate Students and the Use of Information Technology

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How to recruit talented graduate students is a great challenge for the University of Science and Technology of China (USTC), and the challenge results from three factors: (a) the location of USTC, (b) the structure of USTC academic programs, and (c) the trend of USTC undergraduate students going abroad.

USTC is located in the capital of Anhui province, Hefei, a moderately large city in the midst of China, and the city is located at the middle and lower of the Yangtze River. Compared with the surrounding big cities like Nanjing and Shanghai, it is less developed, and there are fewer opportunities to find a good job. Besides, USTC is the only tier-one university (Project 985 universities) in this city, and there are not enough qualified applicants choosing to study in this city.

USTC academic programs are mainly science-based, such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, material sciences, geography and biology, and there are some fields related to technology, such as computer, information, mechanics and energy. This academic structure limits the recruitment of qualified graduate students because fewer students tend to pursue science all over the country.

In USTC, the majority of undergraduates choose to go abroad rather than attend USTC for graduate studies.

Faced with such a big challenge, USTC has taken measures to recruit talented students to its graduate programs, including recruitment strategy innovation, massive recruitment marketing of faculties, and the use of information technology.

Strategy innovations include some policy making and execution. The first is to increase the ratio of "exam-free recommendation" graduate students because only excellent students can get the qualifications to be exempted from the graduate entrance examination by the Ministry of Education. In 2011, 2012, and 2013, the numbers of students we recruited from this category were 890, 970, and 1,130 respectively. Now the ratio of exam-free recommendation graduates is 60% of the graduate student body. Additionally, we recruit students from the top universities, such as 985 and 211 universities.

The second measure is to develop integrated master's-doctoral graduate programs, in which students directly receive a doctoral degree without a master's degree. In general, they spend five to six years completing their graduate studies. Meanwhile, we reduce the three-year doctoral programs that recruit master's degree holders, and thus most graduate students can spend more time getting very good academic training and doing research. This policy is beneficial for the development of graduate programs.

The third measure is to establish a feedback mechanism of graduate program quality assurance. For every degree granted, the graduate school will do assessment work to control the quality of graduates in each major and this assessment will be linked with the following year's recruitment quotas of graduate students in each major. This feedback mechanism ensures that each department and school in the university will pay more attention to the graduate's quality.

The graduate school has taken many initiatives in marketing to recruit excellent students. We have arranged for many professors (usually over 100-200 professors each year) from

different schools to go to big cities to do marketing (16 cities in the last three years). We have visited almost all the main cities where there are top universities in China, and usually we rent a 5-star hotel to hold a recruitment fair in each city. We attract many undergraduates from famous universities in the city. We give introductions to academic programs, schools and the University as well. Interviews are done at the same time, and letters of pre-acceptance are issued for qualified students. Additionally, we have held seven summer camps involving most of the big disciplines at USTC, admitting over 1,000 graduate students from all over the country to USTC.

We also use IT to improve our recruitment work. We first built a special recruitment web page for graduate programs. On this web page, there is information about each program, including the goals and content of the program, the details of professors' research and teaching, as well as famous alumni information. Second, we established an IT system to accept the applications for interviews in the local cities in the period of faculty direct marketing. The applicants need to fill in the required information on the website, and this informs us how many students will be interviewed in the target city, increasing the efficiency of the arrangement of review work for professors in different cities. Third, we built a system to recruit attendees of summer camps. The applicants to summer camps provide the required information on the website and then send their paper materials by post. We organize experts to review these materials and select the most excellent applicants to take part in our camps. A web club for summer camp is set up, and volunteers answer the questions from these applicants and discuss all kinds of things about the camp. We also purchased an Internet marketing service.