

The Development and Challenges of Private Higher Education

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Abstract: Private higher education has become an important component of China's higher education industry and an important force in promoting education reform. With the need for comprehensive transformation in national policies and socioeconomic development, private higher education is also facing the problem of transformation. This article mainly sort, summarize, and analyze the private higher education based on the theoretical literature from 2000 to 2020. It is divided into three stages to sort out the development process of private higher education after the reform and opening up. It summarizes the current challenges faced by private higher education, such as serious homogenization, weak faculty, and single funding sources. In addition, it was proposed to optimize the professional settings, clarify the characteristics of the school, optimize the structure of teachers and vigorously train and cultivate them. Suggestions for optimizing fundraising channels and sharing educational expenses will be given in this paper.

Keywords: Private higher education; Private universities; Development challenges

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up in China, private higher education has gone through a preliminary exploratory stage, a rapid development stage, and a stage of institutional reform and standardized development. It has now become an important component of China's education industry. Regarding the concept of private higher education, the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of Private Higher Education" defines it as "private higher education refers to the activities of social organizations or individuals outside of state institutions that use non-state financial funds to organize higher education institutions and other educational institutions for society", which summarizes the three major characteristics of private higher education. Private higher education has three significant characteristics: its main body of education has a social nature, its funding source does not rely on national finance, and its property rights belong to the private sector. At present, private higher education in China mainly includes private undergraduate schools (regular undergraduate schools), private vocational colleges, independent colleges, vocational training schools, adult higher education institutions, and other forms. As of 2022, there are 764 private universities. Among them, 390 regular undergraduate schools; 22 undergraduate level vocational schools; 350 vocational (vocational) schools; Two adult higher education institutions. There are 9.2489 million students in private regular and vocational colleges and universities. Private higher education has been integrated into the entire higher education system, becoming a key element and an important driving force for advocating educational reform. It plays an irreplaceable important role in promoting educational equity and bridging educational disparities between regions.

2. The Development Course of Private Higher Education

2.1 1982-1991: Preliminary Exploration Stage

In 1982, the Fifth Session of the Fifth National People's Congress passed the new constitution, which established the legal status of private higher education; In 1986, the promulgation of the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China once again emphasized the encouragement of private education by the state; In 1987, the Provisional Regulations on Social Forces for Running Schools were promulgated, specifying that private education is a supplement to national education. This is the first regulation specifically targeting private education since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and private education has been officially incorporated into the education management system.

2.2 1992-2002: Rapid Development Stage

In 1992, the "Ten Year Plan for National Education and the Key Points" of the "Eighth Five Year Plan" proposed that the government and social forces jointly run schools; In 1993, the "Outline of China's Education Reform and Development" proposed the sixteen character policy of "strong support, active encouragement, strengthened management, and correct guidance" for the development of
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private higher education, requiring governments at all levels to incorporate private higher education into national economic and social development plans; The promulgation of the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Promotion of Private Education” in 2002 marked a new stage in the development of private education in China.

2.3 2003 to Present: Stage of Institutional Reform and Standardized Development

In 2003, the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Promotion of Private Education” was promulgated and revised in 2016, raising the approval threshold for establishing private universities, standardizing teaching requirements, clarifying the corporate governance structure and responsibilities, and improving the teaching quality assurance system. After governance, the educational governance of private universities in China has become more standardized, and the overall governance capacity has been improved. In order to clarify policies and eliminate uncertainty, the Implementation Regulations of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Promotion of Private Education were implemented on September 1, 2021, focusing on the core issues of classified management. Normative requirements were implemented in various aspects such as party building, support measures, establishment approval, standardization of educational behavior and internal governance, safeguarding the rights and interests of organizers, strengthening the rights and interests of teachers, and improving regulatory mechanisms.

3.The Practical Challenges of Private Higher Education

3.1 The Phenomenon of Homogenization of Running Schools is Serious

Private colleges and universities show highly similar characteristics in terms of professional settings, teaching methods, and academic research, and lack differentiation and innovation. In terms of professional settings, many private colleges and universities tend to choose popular majors or traditional disciplines, resulting in a large number of duplicate professional settings between different schools. In terms of teaching methods, some private colleges and universities may tend to adopt traditional teaching methods and ignore personalized teaching for the needs of different types of students, which makes the teaching process similar between different schools, lacks innovation and change, and affects students' learning experience and academic growth. In terms of academic research, private universities often face the challenge of limited resources in academic research, so they may be more inclined to imitate the research direction of other universities, rather than truly explore their own characteristics and advantageous areas.

3.2 The High-level Teaching Staff is Weak

Compared with public universities, private universities are less attractive to high-level talents. Public colleges and universities usually offer better salaries, more stable career paths and higher social status, which makes high-level teachers more inclined to choose public universities rather than private universities. Private universities often face limited resources, resulting in low salaries and unattractive benefits. Compared with public universities, the salaries and benefits of private universities are often difficult to compete with, making high-level teachers reluctant to go, and high-level teachers usually need a good research environment to conduct academic research. However, some private universities are relatively weak in terms of scientific research facilities and financial support, and cannot provide good scientific research conditions for teachers.

3.3 Relatively Single Source of Funding

There is a significant gap between the financial allocations enjoyed by private universities and those enjoyed by public universities. The main source of funding for most private colleges and universities is tuition income, that is, the payment of students’ tuition fees. This allows tuition income to dominate the financial structure of colleges and universities, and in order to increase the number of students, some schools may be inclined to expand enrollment, which may affect the quality of teaching. Compared with public universities, private universities are relatively limited in financing and attracting external investment. Some private universities may have difficulty obtaining external investment support, limiting their sources of funding for development. At the same time, although the government has some policies to encourage and support the development of private universities in recent years, the direct financial support of the government is usually less than that of public universities.

4.Countermeasures and Suggestions for Private Higher Education

4.1 Optimizing the Setting of Majors and Clarifying the Characteristics of Education

Private universities should adjust their professional settings in a targeted manner based on their own resources and advantages, improve traditional majors in accordance with the construction requirements of new engineering, new humanities, and new medical

disciplines, and establish a series of characteristic majors with clear educational positioning, deep integration of industry and education, excellent training quality, and high social recognition. At the same time, private universities should fully consider market demand and student interests, combine local economic patterns and industrial needs, attach importance to the needs of individual students, and strengthen the research and development of high-quality courses. Even if it involves the same major, differentiated travel arrangements should be made due to different training objectives.

4.2 Optimizing the Structure of Teachers and Vigorously Training and Cultivating Them

Private universities can adopt a strategy of relying mainly on independent training and supplemented by introduction to optimize the structure of the teaching staff and improve the quality of education. Private universities should focus on cultivating their own teachers and improve their academic qualifications and level through various means. To this end, we can promote teachers to continuously improve their own quality by providing graduate funding and supporting them to pursue further education in public universities. At the same time, actively introducing experienced teachers is also a key measure. Establishing close cooperative relationships with relevant industries, conducting school enterprise cooperation projects, and introducing industry experts to participate in teaching and guidance work can help ensure that the teaching content is in line with actual needs.

4.3 Optimizing Fundraising Channels and Sharing Educational Expenses

The theory of cost sharing in higher education points out that higher education has both private and public characteristics. This dual attribute means that higher education not only provides individual human capital accumulation for the educated, but also creates various social benefits for the entire society. Given this, the cost of higher education should be shared among multiple parties to achieve a fair and sustainable education system. Firstly, the educated themselves should bear a portion of the cost of their higher education. This not only reflects the responsibility of the educated, but also enhances students' investment and appreciation in education; Secondly, the government plays an important role in cost sharing in higher education. The government can provide financial support and public funds to support the development of higher education, especially in areas with strong public nature, such as basic scientific research and talent cultivation; The scholarship system is also an important means of cost sharing in higher education. The establishment of scholarships encourages the learning of outstanding students, reduces their economic burden, and promotes academic competition and talent cultivation.

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