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Cultivating International Cooperation and Networking in China: How do Private Higher Education Institutions in Jiangsu Province Handle it?

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Abstract

This study aims to assess the evolution of international cooperation and exchange within private colleges and universities situated in Jiangsu Province, China. The 1990s marked a period of substantial international development propelled by economic internationalization. This trend became an important aspect of the international education sector, garnering widespread attention. China's higher education system mirrored this international trajectory by actively embracing diverse perspectives while refining existing ones. The fulfillment of China's educational and economic potential relies on a strategic commitment to internationalization. Private colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province, operating as subsystems within the broader educational framework, play an important role in this context. As microcosms reflecting the overall strength of educational institutions, these subsystems consist of various internal components and external influences. The quality of operations in private establishments manifests on two levels: the extension level, encompassing factors like student enrollment, graduate numbers, and teaching infrastructure; and the connotative level, directly impacting overall educational quality. The study reveals a heightened interest among professionals and researchers in higher education regarding the internationalization efforts of private colleges and universities. Recent years have witnessed a significant surge in attention to this aspect, underscoring its importance in the broader discourse on international education. A notable contemporary example of educational internationalization is the rapid expansion of education services across multiple countries, highlighting the international interconnectedness of higher education institutions. This research emphasizes the crucial role played by private colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province in fostering international cooperation and exchange, contributing to the ongoing discussion on the internationalization of higher education.

Keywords: International, Cooperation, Networking, Colleges, Universities, Jiangsu, China

Introduction

International cooperation in higher education is increasingly crucial in the contemporary interconnected world. Educational institutions are earnestly striving to furnish students with a well-rounded and internationally-oriented education, making cooperation with institutions worldwide indispensable. Private higher education institutions in Jiangsu Province stand to gain manifold benefits by actively participating in international cooperation initiatives. Primarily,

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such cooperation facilitates the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and best practices among institutions. This exchange not only enriches the educational experience for students but also empowers faculty members to stay abreast of the latest developments in their respective fields. Furthermore, international cooperation opens up avenues for joint research projects, academic partnerships, and student exchanges. These cooperations can significantly enhance the reputation and visibility of private higher education institutions in Jiangsu Province, attracting a diverse pool of talented students and faculty from different countries.

Against the backdrop of the 1990s, the international education phenomenon experienced a notable surge in development propelled by economic internationalization. This trend became a prominent feature, capturing the international spotlight (Zhao, 2020). China's higher education system adeptly aligned itself with this international development trend, actively assimilating new ideas from around the world while refining existing ones. The realization of China's higher education and economic potential is contingent upon a robust commitment to internationalization, a point emphasized by scholars such as Li (2016), Tham et al. (2017), and Udriyah et al. (2019).

Private colleges and universities, despite their aspirations to operate as application-oriented and skill-focused institutions, find themselves facing constraints in this challenging period. The governance challenges experienced by these institutions have far-reaching implications, affecting not only their internal functioning but also the broader societal need for well-prepared and capable professionals. The dissonance between the aspiration to produce high-caliber individuals and the existing limitations in governing these institutions underscores the complexities confronting China's private higher education phenomenon.

The benefits of international cooperation for private higher education institutions in Jiangsu Province are multifaceted. Firstly, the exchange of ideas and knowledge between institutions fosters a dynamic and enriching educational environment for students. Exposure to diverse perspectives enhances their international awareness and prepares them to navigate the complexities of the interconnected world. Faculty members, through such exchanges, gain insights into cutting-edge developments in their fields, fostering a culture of continuous learning and innovation within the institutions.

Moreover, international cooperation opens doors to collaborative research projects and academic partnerships. By pooling resources and expertise, institutions can embark on joint initiatives that contribute to advancements in various fields. This not only elevates the academic standing of the institutions involved but also enhances the overall research output and impact.

Student exchanges, another facet of international cooperation, offer students the opportunity to experience different educational systems and cultures. This exposure goes beyond academic learning, fostering cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the development of an international perspective. It also contributes to the creation of a diverse and inclusive learning environment within the private higher education institutions in Jiangsu Province.

In addition to academic benefits, active participation in international cooperation initiatives can significantly elevate the reputation and visibility of private higher education institutions. Collaborative efforts with renowned institutions from around the world enhance the institutions' international standing and attract attention from prospective students, faculty, and partners. This, in turn, contributes to the institutions' ability to attract a diverse and talented pool of students and faculty members from different countries, further enriching the educational experience.

However, amidst the aspirations for international cooperation and excellence, private higher education institutions in Jiangsu Province face governance challenges. These challenges encompass issues related to regulatory frameworks, financial sustainability, and institutional autonomy. The resolution of these governance struggles is important not only for the effective functioning of these institutions but also for meeting the societal demand for well-prepared professionals. Addressing these complexities requires a comprehensive approach, involving cooperation between institutions, policymakers, and stakeholders to create an enabling environment for the growth and success of private higher education in the province.

Moreover, the imperative for international cooperation in higher education is evident for private colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province. Engaging in cooperations facilitates the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and best practices, enriching the educational experience for students and fostering a culture of continuous learning for faculty. The benefits extend to collaborative research projects, academic partnerships, and student exchanges, enhancing the reputation and visibility of these institutions internationally. However, the governance struggles faced by private higher education institutions underscore the need for comprehensive solutions to ensure their effective functioning and contribution to societal needs. Through strategic cooperation, these institutions can navigate the challenges and emerge as key contributors to the internationalization of higher education in Jiangsu Province and beyond.

The ever-changing phenomenon of private colleges, coupled with the imperatives of national economic and social development, demands a paradigm shift in their operational mindset. Renowned scholars like Xue (2018), Rachmawati et al. (2019), and Azam et al. (2021) advocate for a transformative approach, stressing the necessity for private colleges and universities to reassess their operational strategies and embrace a more expansive educational trajectory.

The role of internationalization emerges as an important factor in overcoming challenges and fostering evolution within private colleges (Haur et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2019; Wei, 2020). Aligned with China's national medium and long-term education reform and development plan (2010-2020) and its commitment to education openness, there is a clear directive towards opening up and welcoming international cooperation. This national context sets the foundation for exploring the factors influencing international cooperation and exchange among private colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province.

This study aims to analyze the challenges faced by private colleges and universities in the development of internationalization within the broader framework of the national education reform plan. By investigating the factors affecting international cooperation and exchange in Jiangsu Province, the research seeks to unravel the typical trajectory of internationalization development among private institutions. This analysis contributes not only to the academic discourse on international education trends but also offers valuable insights to assist private colleges and universities in effectively navigating the complexities of international cooperation and exchange. Through a comprehensive understanding of these factors and challenges, the research aims to provide a roadmap for private institutions in Jiangsu Province to enhance their international engagement and contribute meaningfully to the international educational phenomenon.

Examining the historical context, developed nations like the United Kingdom and the United States have played essential roles in actively promoting the internationalization of higher education over the past seven decades. Clark (1980) laid the foundation by advocating for the international nature of higher education, emphasizing criteria such as "universality,

communication, and openness.” Subsequently, Kitamura (1986) evaluated the progress of internationalization, setting standards for its development.

In the domestic context, China’s research on the internationalization of education gained momentum in the 1980s. Chen (1997) outlined the concept and arguments supporting the internationalization of higher education, while Zhou (2014) analyzed changes in China’s higher education internationalization policy, stressing the importance of institutions making decisions based on accurate self-positioning.

Private higher education has played a crucial role in shaping the internationalization of higher education internationally. Wang et al. (2017) emphasized that private higher education institutions are undergoing a critical period of comprehensive transformation and development. Actively promoting internationalization is seen as an inevitable choice for their transformation and for enhancing the overall quality of private higher education. Wang (2021) argued that the internationalization of higher education should encompass service orientation, policy support, innovative models, multi-level cooperation, talent introduction, and awareness training.

In the post-pandemic era, Liu and Lin (2021) highlighted the need for China to strengthen the quality management of international students, viewing them as strategic human resources. Zheng et al. (2021) pointed out that the post-pandemic era presents challenges for the internationalization of higher education, urging colleges and universities to innovate their approach to international exchange and cooperation.

The General Office of the Jiangsu Provincial Government (2021) emphasized the significance of private colleges and universities collaborating with high-quality overseas educational resources and foreign-level scientific research institutions. Southwest Jiaotong University has been at the forefront of evaluating and ranking domestic universities in terms of internationalization through its University Internationalization Ranking (URI). The study focuses on four core indicators—Internationalization of Students, Internationalization of Teachers, Internationalization of Scientific Research, and Internationalization of Courses. These indicators are chosen based on their relevance to the actual situation and key modules of internationalization development in private colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province.

Over the past four decades of reform and opening up, China’s private higher education has made remarkable strides. The structural system has undergone historic changes, marked by significant increases in scale and volume, a diversification of forms and types, and a gradual upward shift in hierarchical structure. The autonomy of private colleges and universities in school operations has expanded, accompanied by growing financial support from the government. However, these positive developments coexist with challenges, urging the need for private higher education to accelerate its mode of development, enhance educational quality, and increase efficiency in response to the changing times. Studies consistently highlight internationalization, particularly through international exchanges and cooperation, as a crucial and desirable path for private institutions to achieve breakthroughs in school administration and foster transformation and development. From an economic perspective, Wang (2020) examined the international development of private universities and colleges, highlighting two critical issues. Addressing these challenges is crucial for private higher education institutions to navigate the complexities of internationalization and ensure sustainable development.

Literature Review

The literature review investigates three crucial aspects: the evolution and challenges of private higher education in China, the current state of private higher education, and international collaborative initiatives and exchanges within private higher education. Examining these facets through an internationalization lens reveals the potential for private colleges and universities to enhance their international impact and contribute significantly to the worldwide educational phenomenon. This study provides a comprehensive context for understanding the developmental trajectory of private higher education in China, offering valuable insights to inform future research efforts and strategic decision-making processes.

According to Harman and Rosenberg, the curriculum of private colleges and universities operates within the broader context of a vast social system. They emphasize that educational challenges cannot be effectively addressed solely through the tactics of the education system. In assessing the quality of school administration in private institutions, it is essential to consider both extensional and connotative levels. The former encompasses explicit elements such as the number of graduates, students, and teaching conditions, while the latter investigates the qualitative aspects that determine the overall quality of school administration (Wang, 2012).

Despite the significance of these considerations, comprehensive studies on the “running level” of private colleges and universities are lacking. Existing research often focuses on specific evaluation indicators, and the state’s monitoring of educational quality primarily occurs at the educational level. This reflects an evolution in private institutions’ perception of the “school-running level,” transitioning from legislative requirements to internal development needs.

The concept of “school-running level” is subject to diverse interpretations within academic circles, leading to ongoing debates. The lack of a definitive explanation is attributed to varying grading criteria across different contexts. Analyzing assessment indicators in Jiangsu Province’s colleges and universities aims to unveil the key factors influencing the development of international exchanges and cooperation in private higher education. This exploration sheds light on the multifaceted nature of the “school-running level” concept and its crucial role in shaping the trajectory of private institutions.

By examining the challenges and opportunities within private higher education, understanding the current state of these institutions, and exploring the dynamics of international cooperations, this literature review provides a foundation for further research and strategic planning. The integration of an internationalization perspective emphasizes the international significance of private colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province, underscoring their potential to contribute meaningfully to the evolving phenomenon of higher education on a worldwide scale.

The internationalization of education in private Chinese colleges and universities stands at the forefront of scholarly and professional attention in higher education. Shen (2011) identifies it as a strategic decision within Chinese higher education, driven by the objectives of optimizing resource allocation, leveraging international markets, and cultivating individuals with international perspectives (Sun, 2020). Prominent private institutions actively collaborate with international universities, notably in the United States, Australia, and South Korea, placing a strong emphasis on teaching quality and fostering diverse initiatives (Shen, 2011). For instance, the Xi’an Institute of International Affairs engages proactively in international cooperative education, forging agreements with foreign universities to enhance mutual recognition of credits and teacher quality (Shen, 2011).

The national “One Belt, One Road” initiative has further accelerated the internationalization process, contributing to the international dimensions of higher education. Private colleges and universities in Shaanxi Province, aligning with this initiative, explore international teaching, cross-cultural subject courses, and student exchanges, showcasing a commitment to international education (Chen, 2021). However, despite these positive developments, challenges persist. Zhang (2021) points out issues in the internationalization process, including a low internationalization level of teaching staff, challenges in talent training, education, teaching, and academic cooperation. Private institutions like the Shenyang Institute of Technology face challenges such as a weak foundation, late initiation, and an unclear distinguishing identity (Wang, 2018). In Guangxi, issues include a lack of institutional guarantees, a closed school operating model, and limited international flexibility in curriculum and faculty development (Zhao, 2022). In Jiangsu Province, private institutions attempt internationalization through Sino-foreign cooperation and inter-school exchanges but encounter challenges such as organizational internationalization and the absence of internationalization in teacher organizations (Zhai, 2022). Ma (2016) notes that in Shaanxi, challenges include a weak internationalization concept, insufficient organizational support, a scarcity of teachers with international backgrounds, low international mobility of students, limited internationalization of courses, and a low degree of internationalization in scientific research. Addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing the international competitiveness of private higher education institutions in China (Ma, 2016). The internationalization journey is complex, demanding strategic efforts to navigate the evolving phenomenon and ensure sustainable development (Zheng et al., 2021).

Findings and Discussion

Private colleges and universities in China grapple with multifaceted challenges that impede their social impact, prestige, and international recognition, thereby hindering effective international cooperation (Wang et al., 2018; Wei, 2020; Zhai, 2022). These challenges are rooted in difficulties in garnering international acknowledgment, limiting the institutions’ ability to establish fruitful international cooperations. Research within this context often focuses on traditional Chinese-foreign exchanges, student exchange programs, and initiatives such as “2+2” or “1+3” cooperations. However, a critical issue highlighted by Chen (2021) is the homogeneity in the models of internationalized undergraduate education, creating a lack of diversity that hampers the attainment of varied talent training goals. This issue is attributed to the absence of clear policy directives for internationalization, limiting institutions from fully realizing their distinct characteristics and impeding the diversification of their educational offerings.

One significant factor contributing to these challenges is the absence of clear policies on internationalization, impacting talent training and curriculum development. The lack of specific guidelines restricts institutions from fully realizing distinctive features and limits the diversity of their international education offerings. Addressing this policy gap is crucial for developing effective internationalization strategies and enhancing private higher education’s international recognition.

Private institutions also grapple with challenges related to faculty and administrators lacking international experience and perspectives, as well as a scarcity of foreign teachers. Zhao (2022) notes a deficiency in international exposure, hindering the adoption of international teaching methods. Zhai (2022) observes variations in foreign instructors, often language majors, with

limited percentages among professors. The recruitment of foreign professors faces challenges, exacerbating the scarcity of international perspectives in private institutions.

The intensification of an anti-internationalization trend amid the pandemic, as highlighted by Dai (2020), poses additional challenges for cultivating students' internationalization abilities. Internationalization programs are limited, hindering sustainable development. Peng (2018) notes low student exchange rates due to faculty shortages, limited exchange mechanisms, and deficiencies in the education system. Liu (2013) emphasizes constraints in curriculum internationalization, lacking guarantees and financial support, hindering students' understanding of international issues.

To address these challenges, private colleges and universities in China must adopt comprehensive strategies. Clear policy directives on internationalization are essential to guide institutions in developing diverse and distinctive programs that cater to varied talent training goals. Efforts should be made to enhance faculty and administrative international exposure, fostering a international perspective within the institutions. Recruiting foreign teachers and professors with diverse academic backgrounds should be prioritized to enrich the educational environment. Additionally, amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic, innovative and adaptable internationalization programs should be developed to ensure sustainable development.

Furthermore, addressing faculty shortages, improving exchange mechanisms, and providing financial support are critical steps to boosting student exchange rates. Curriculum internationalization should be prioritized with guarantees and financial backing to enable students to gain a deeper understanding of international issues. By strategically addressing these challenges, private colleges and universities in China can enhance their social impact, prestige, and international recognition, fostering effective international cooperation and contributing meaningfully to the international educational phenomenon.

In contrast to public institutions actively absorbing foreign student experiences and promoting balanced approaches in curriculum construction, private institutions need to extend curriculum internationalization beyond projects to foster an inclusive international campus culture. This is crucial for meeting diverse student needs in a changing international phenomenon. Addressing these challenges is essential for enhancing private higher education's international engagement and creating more opportunities for students.

Conclusion and Implications

Private colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province encounter notable challenges in the internationalization of scientific research. Due to a relatively short duration of school-running, delayed entry into scientific universities, and limited experience in academic pursuits, these institutions face hurdles in advancing their scientific research endeavors (Zhai, 2022). Li (2014) identifies key challenges within this context, including a lack of correlation between scientific research and educational modules. Private institutions, prioritizing the improvement of teaching abilities during their development, often grapple with a divergence between teaching and scientific research objectives. Additionally, there exists a significant gap in managerial emphasis on scientific research internationalization compared to public colleges, necessitating a strengthening of conceptual awareness, operational mechanisms, and underlying circumstances. Cooperation on international scientific research projects with overseas entities remains limited in scope and duration, impeding further internationalization efforts. Moreover,

the burden of teaching responsibilities and the inherent challenges of scientific research work during faculty development objectively hinder the internationalization of scientific research in these colleges and universities (Li, 2014; Zhai, 2022). Addressing these challenges is crucial to enhance their contributions to international scientific knowledge and foster effective cooperation in international research endeavors.

The intensification of economic internationalization has propelled a significant trend of internationalization in the education sector, shaping the world's economic sphere. This development has attracted substantial international attention, prompting organizations like UNESCO, the World Bank, and OECD to convene conferences and formulate specific policies to address the implications of education internationalization. A prominent manifestation of this trend is the widespread proliferation of education services across nations, with China notably influenced by this expansion (Wen, 2010).

Examining China's history of education exchanges reveals early instances, such as the Tang Dynasty's envoy dispatch, reflecting the ancient roots of Chinese and foreign education exchange activities. However, it was the establishment of New China and the 1978 reform and opening-up policy that gave contemporary relevance to the notion of the internationalization of education, free from ideological biases (Zha Yuanli, 2012). This historical context underscores the dynamic nature of education internationalization in China, shaped by economic trends, policy changes, and a commitment to fostering international cooperation in education.

In 1983, Deng Xiaoping's proposal of the "Three Orientations" marked an essential moment, officially proclaiming the slogan of the internationalization of education in China. The subsequent approval of the Resolution on the Reform of the Education System in 1985 by the CPC Central Committee emphasized drawing on both positive and negative aspects of foreign education development.

The 1990s ushered in a new stage in the internationalization of Chinese education, highlighted by the 1993 Outline of China's Education Reform and Development. This outlined the importance of expanding education's opening to the outside world, strengthening international exchange and cooperation, and learning from successful international experiences. The issuance of the Provisional Rules on Chinese-Foreign Cooperative Education in 1995 recognized it as a major form of international exchange and cooperation in Chinese education.

China's formal accession to the WTO in 2001 marked a crucial moment, obliging conformity to WTO rules in trading education services and integrating the local education sector into the international education industry (Zhou Mansheng, 2006). In 2016, new guidelines on the opening-up of education were announced, focusing on accelerating development, improving study abroad quality, enhancing institutional mechanisms, strengthening high-level leadership, promoting cultural exchanges, fostering win-win cooperation, and implementing the Belt and Road Initiative.

Despite these efforts, the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on international cooperation and exchange, exacerbating geopolitical disputes. The resulting stress from these conflicts poses challenges to the international order and the ongoing process of internationalization in higher education. The pandemic has disrupted traditional modes of international cooperation, leading to uncertainties and shifts in international dynamics. It underscores the need for resilience and adaptability in navigating challenges to ensure the continued progress of internationalization efforts in higher education.

This study makes a significant contribution to the understanding and advancement of internationalization efforts within private higher education institutions in Jiangsu Province, China. By examining the challenges, opportunities, and strategies associated with international cooperation and networking, the research provides valuable insights that have practical implications for academic institutions, policymakers, and education professionals.

Firstly, the study sheds light on the specific challenges faced by private colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province in their pursuit of internationalization. Issues such as the homogeneity in models of internationalized undergraduate education, the absence of clear policies, and limitations in faculty and resources for international initiatives are identified and thoroughly analyzed. This identification of challenges serves as a foundation for targeted interventions and policy recommendations aimed at addressing these obstacles to enhance the effectiveness of internationalization efforts.

Secondly, the research emphasizes the importance of extending curriculum internationalization beyond projects to foster a more inclusive international campus culture. By recognizing the need to meet diverse student needs in a rapidly changing international phenomenon, the study provides a basis for educational institutions to reevaluate their approaches to curriculum development and student engagement. This insight is crucial for private higher education institutions seeking to create a dynamic and internationally-minded learning environment that prepares students for success in an interconnected world.

Moreover, the study contributes to the discourse on the internationalization of scientific research within private institutions. It highlights the specific challenges faced by these institutions, such as a limited duration of school-running and a gap in managerial emphasis on scientific research internationalization. The identification of these challenges paves the way for strategic interventions and policy recommendations to enhance the contributions of private institutions to international scientific knowledge and cooperation.

Overall, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and nuances involved in fostering international cooperation and networking within private higher education institutions in Jiangsu Province, making a valuable contribution to the broader discourse on internationalization in the Chinese higher education phenomenon.

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