

PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES AS A SECOND CHOICE AMONG CHINESE STUDENTS

Happiness Onesmo Lukoko

Beijing Normal University

Faculty of Education

happinessonesmo@gmail.com

Abstract: Higher education institution plays an increasingly important role as the major driving force of development in the nation and world at large. This is due to their capacity of doing research and producing skilled people who are very important in the nation in areas such as technology and socioeconomic development. Chinese government has been doing its best to reform higher education sector and the educational system at large. As a result, private education has developed in China and hundreds of private colleges and universities have been opened in response to covering the increasing demand for higher education in the world's most populous nation. Despite the rapid establishment of these private universities, most Chinese students prefer to be enrolled in the government assisted universities. Using secondary data, this paper discusses the background and development of private universities in China, specifically explaining the reason why most of Chinese students do not prefer private universities. The paper suggests that private universities are important as public universities because they all aim at providing education to students for the betterment of the nation, and therefore recommends the government to offer assistance to private university education in order to offer enough opportunities for Chinese students.

Keywords: Higher Education; Private Universities; Public Universities, China.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education like any other institutions is responsible for providing the services that meet the standards of student's needs. Higher education is facing worldwide challenges due to an increase in competition, demand and the need for greater efficiency in development. The development of private higher education in China is an important area of policy concern and for research purpose especially in this era of globalization. Globalization is the integration of national economies through trade, investment, capital flow, labor migration and technology (Merriam-Webster, 2018). Private higher education or private university is simply a university whose funding comes from tuition, investments and private donors, not from taxpayers (Grove, 2018). Private higher education now plays an important role in the system of higher education in the world.

In China, those who opt for private higher education are young people who have completed secondary education together with some of the students who have been excluded to join public higher education due to different reasons. One among the reasons is due to average score or low score of the National Higher Education Entrance Examination commonly known as the Gaokao. The college entrance examination system is referred to as the examination and enrollment system of regular higher education institutions and it is the general college enrollment system based on candidates results of the unified national college entrance examination (Guiren, 2015). The reason for explaining about college entrance examination is that makes most students in China to opt for private universities.

Since the end of Cultural Revolution, the education system in China has experienced multiple reforms and geared towards modernization. The Cultural Revolution was a sociopolitical movement in China from 1966 until 1976. Launched by Mao Zedong, the chairperson of the communist party of China (CPC), its stated goal was to preserve communist party of China style communism by purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society, and to re-impose Mao Zedong thought as the dominant ideology within the party. The movement paralyzed China politically and negatively

affected both the economy and society of the country to a significant degree (Wikipedia, 2018). The government has invested much on education and has focused on higher education, which has resulted in a massive development of educational facilities. The ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE) is the government authority for all matters pertaining to education and language. The ministry of education notes that higher education in China has played a significant part in economic growth, scientific progress and social development in the country by bringing up large scale of advanced talents and experts for the construction of socialist modernization (MOE, 2007). The distribution of private higher education institutions is concentrated in the major cities especially in eastern China; Shanghai, Beijing, Shanxi, Shandong, and Henan are the five provinces in which most private colleges and universities are located (Yan, 2004). China population is equivalent to 18.54% of the total world population (Worldometers, 2018), therefore, China has the responsibility of running the largest higher education system on earth.

In the early 1980s, the government allowed the establishment of the private higher learning institutions, increasing the number of undergraduates and people who hold doctoral degrees fivefold (China's book in higher education, 2005). In spite of the expanded capacity of higher education institutions, the demand for tertiary education has continued to respond to this demand. Private universities are typically not operated by government, although may receive tax breaks, public students loans and grants. Since 2003, partnership has been established in the People's Republic of China (MOE, 2007). Unfortunately, the rapid expansion of private universities has not received adequate amount of support from the government. This is because private universities receive little financial support from the government and they find it tough to compete with the public universities in different areas of education such as faculty recruitment.

For this paper document analysis, was used to review documents and existing literature. Document analysis is the systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents both printed and electronic (computer-based and internet-transmitted) material (Bowen, 2009). Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In summary, document analysis is a way of collecting data by reviewing and evaluating existing documents. The paper focuses on assessing the reason why private universities in China are the second choices for most students and are not preferred as compared to public universities.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF PRIVATE EDUCATION IN CHINA

Chinese higher education as understood in its modern sense originated in the late 19th century (Guiren, 2015). China, a country with long history of civilization, has a long-standing tradition of private schools. Around 2,400 years ago, Confucius and many other scholars set up a number of private schools in China (Guiren, 2015). Confucius (551-479 B.C.) is commonly credited to be the originator of the first private institution of learning (Deng, 1998; Min, 2004). The emergence and development of private higher education is closely linked in the economic and social transformations that China experienced in the post-cultural revolution era. There were no private universities or colleges before 1980s, but by 1999s there were 43 private degrees granting (Guiren, 2015). Private education has had a long history since the ancient times in China. Since the Chinese communist party took over the regime in 1949, almost the entire private sector was decimated until the late 1970s when the market economy was introduced (Lin, 1999). The number of private universities grew quickly, especially those established by Chinese nationals; many well-known universities today, such as Fudan university in Shanghai, Nankai university in Tianjin and Xiamen university in Xiamen (Lin, 1999).

As one of the unintended consequences of the remarkable economic growth and marketization, private higher education re-emerged and developed substantially in 1980s and 1990s. The growth of private higher education in China showed a global trend of private higher education development. Private higher education in China degree granting institutions and non-degree granting ones, experienced extraordinary development as a supplement to public higher education (Cao, 2008). In February 1994, for the first time, the former State Education Commission accepted and approved the applications of six private universities for running teaching programs that granted academic degrees (Guiren, 2015). These included the Yellow River Science and Technology College and Shanghai College (Guiren, 2015). In China, the rapid economic growth has caused increasingly higher education demand on serving higher education institution for both career and personal development. However, public colleges and universities had not been able to sufficiently utilize and accommodate the rapidly growing demand. Therefore, this situation has opened up a room and opportunity for the establishment of private higher education in China to fill in the gap of the unmet need (Bing, 2009; Ozturgut, 2011). Hundreds of private colleges and universities have been established in China in the past decade in response to soaring

demand for higher education in the world's most populous nation (Butrymowicz, 2012).

Frost and Sullivan (2012) asserted that total revenue of the Chinese private higher education industry has been increasing steadily from CNY69.6 billion (US\$10 billion) in 2012 to CNY 95.4 billion (US\$13.9 billion) in 2016 and is expected to further increase to CNY139 billion (US\$20.2 billion) in 2021. The total number of students enrolled in private higher education in China increased from 5.3 million in 2012 to 6.3 million in 2016 and is expected to further increase to eight million in 2021. Currently, about 22% of students in higher education are studying at private institutions. Chinese government has been doing its best to reform the educational system to provide strong support to and manage private education in accordance with law (Guiren, 2015). As a result, private education in China has rapidly developed and it is now an important area of educational policy and reform. A new system for the running of education has been primarily formed, one in which the government takes the lead, all lifestyles play an active role, and public and private schools develop side-by-side (Guiren, 2015). Governments at all levels must regard developing private education as a major task, encourage and administer private education according to law and speed up the formation of a development model that allows public and private schools to grow simultaneously. This will provide more opportunities of all students in China to join higher education and hence speed up development in the nation. There are currently more than 740 private higher education institution in China, and thousands of private vocational and technical schools, most of which are founded, sponsored and operated by individuals. There is much room for improvement in efficiency and instructional quality at many of these institutions.

3. AFFIRMING THE LEGAL AND POLITICAL STATUS OF PRIVATE EDUCATION IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Article 19 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, adopted in 1982, stipulates that "the state encourages collective economic organizations, state-owned enterprises, public institutions, and other social forces to set up educational institutions of various types according to law". This defines, for the first time, the legal status of private education in China (Constitution of the People's Republic of China). In 1987, the Ministry of Education issued its interim Regulations on Running Educational Institutions with Social Resources, for the first time specifying relatively complete provision for the concept, status and establishment of private education (Guiren, 2015). It subsequently became the first specialized regulation on private education and laid the foundation for the recovery and development of private schools (Guiren, 2015).

4. IMPROVING THE LEGISLATION FOR PRIVATE EDUCATION

At the beginning of the 21st century, several regulations and policies on private education were issued by the Chinese government. These included the Ministry of Education's suggestions about the Enrollment of Private Higher Education Institutions (2002), the Ministry of Education's notice on issuing the suggestions about regulating and encouraging regular Higher Education Institutions for the trial run of independent colleges in new mechanism and mode (2003), the Ministry of Education's notice on the inspection, revocation, and reapplication of independent colleges approved by relevant authorities for trial run (2003) and the regulations for the implementations of the law on the promotion of privately run schools (2004) (Guiren, 2015). Others include the general office of the Ministry of Education notice on completing the work of sorting and filling undergraduate majors of independent colleges (2004), the regulations on the management for running Private Higher Education Institutions (2007), the measures on establishing and managing independent colleges (2008) and the notice on approving and issuing licenses for running private undergraduates universities and Junior colleges (2008). These regulations and policies provided legal safeguards for the adequate and orderly development of private education (Guiren, 2015).

5. REASONS WHY PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN CHINA IS THE SECOND OPTION AMONG STUDENTS

- **Quality education based on the narrow focus on practical and vocational skills**

The quality of education is limited because of their narrow focus on practical and vocational skills. Viewed as a service industry, higher education needs to provide quality service as any other types of sectors in this industry, in order to be competitive and survive in the education world market especially for private universities whose generation of funds depends much on the number of students who pay tuition fees (Ruben, 1995). The curriculum merely focuses on the most

popular and marketable subjects so as to attract many students to the institution. In that way, private universities are only focused on providing marketable subjects in order to attract many students. Due to limited facilities, low cost classes that readily provide employment are preferred over those in the basic sciences and humanities (Ross & Lou, 2005). As a result their focus on the provision of education is limited, most popular or marketable subjects are such as business management and administration, finance and commerce, computer training, English and international studies.

(Kwong, 1997) noted that their clients perceive education as a way to improve their personal chances of success rather than serve the country. With this kind of situation, it serves as a reason for most students in China to choose for public universities where they can have plenty of opportunities in choosing the course they want to pursue. Provision of quality education is an important factor when selecting the universities for studies. Unfortunately they cannot find it in private universities, as there are extreme cases which include dishonest operators making promises of diplomas while they are not qualified to issue, collecting money and disappearing (Kwong, 1997). The perception of low quality of private universities continues to be regarded as low, even the students from this universities professed they have received low quality education. Given the fact that private universities in China receive students who score poorly on the national entrance exam, it limits the chance for most students in China to enroll in private universities.

- **Financial availability**

Private higher education institutions (HEIs) receive no public funding. Personal savings, fees collected from students, funds from business operations, or a combination of state funding and donations and collections from other sources are the main source of funding for a large number of private universities” (Lin, 1999); therefore, the costs of running private universities are higher. Unfortunately, the rapid expansion of private universities in China has not yet received adequate support from the government. In 2011, of the \$114 billion that the central government spent on higher education, only 0.44% went to private universities, primarily for destitute-student stipends. Because private universities receive almost no financial support from the government, they find it difficult to compete with public universities in areas such as faculty recruitment and infrastructure. Only public universities can enjoy government direct and indirect subsidies for mandatory laboratory equipment for example. Any private institution of learning that cannot obtain government funding for research will never obtain international prestige. As a result, students find it hard to opt for private universities, because obtaining international prestige shows that the university has developed worldwide. In addition, research is an opportunity to make difference, new knowledge, and ideas for education development.

- **Recruitment and retention of teaching staff**

Teacher qualification is a decisive factor regarding the survival of a particular private university. The top management of the private universities is largely people from the business world with aggressive marketing experiences (Ozturgut, 2011). Vice presidents may change three or four times during an academic year. Lower-level managers also frequently undergo shifts of positions or transferred to different departments. Retired professors, even in-service professors and lecturers are also serving in these private universities. In Su’s (2004) case study, one private university’s full-time faculty members were mainly made up of experienced professors and researchers retired from prestigious public university. Attracting high status professors in the absence of research funds or projects put private universities in a bad position when competing with public universities. Private universities have difficult in recruiting and having teaching staff of their own or permanent staff. Lin (1999) noted that a survey of two hundred private higher education institutions found only 20% of teachers is long-term, while the rest are temporary. The instructors usually stay at these institutions for only one or two semesters before moving on their real jobs at public universities (Ozturgut, 2011). Having temporary faculty members puts private universities at a high risk of enrolling students as a result students prefer public universities.

- **Enrollment of students based on the results of College Entrance Examination (Gaokao)**

The unified college admission practice, contingent on the College Entrance Examination, along with the advantage of job placement in the public sector channel the best students into the public universities. The current challenge is that private universities serve as the only option for students who fail to find a spot in a public universities or one of their subsidiary campuses (Lin, 1999). This is because public universities accept students who got first tier and second tier in the College Entrance Examination results. As for private universities, they accept students who got lower score. Lin (1999) described the enrollment policy of private universities as easy admission and strict graduation. Because students can easily be admitted to the universities and after graduating, find a job becomes difficult for them as the cause of studying at a private

university. This is a different case for those who have studied at the public university because it appears that they have scored higher in the Gaokao and that makes easier to find a job in the public sector. Majority of high school graduates opt for public universities if their examination scores allows them for the admission. They opt for private universities only after they have fail to enter a public university, as a result private university continues to be regarded as the second option and a lower status in China higher education. Private universities tend to compete with other private universities and public ones in recruiting students as well as employability of their graduates. Success in the job market increase enrollment numbers of the student in an institution; as a result, private universities spend their resources and efforts on finding job for their students in order to boost their employment rate. On the contrary, public university students do not undergo such hardship due to their credibility and trust of studying at the public university. This shows that private and public universities students are not treated equally.

- **High tuition fee in private universities**

Tuition fee is different for public and private universities in the sense that public universities are less expensive than private ones because public universities are subsidized by the government. Public funding has remained the most important source of finance for public higher education institution in China (Wang, 2009). Public universities in China are funded and maintained by national and local government. Private universities are not administered by local state or national governments but managed by people or non-governmental organization. Therefore, they select their students and are funded in whole or in part by charging their students tuition rather than relying on government funding. Research shows that the cost of higher education is a significant concern for those from economically poorer backgrounds (Van Dyke & Callender, 2005). Therefore, for students who have scored poorly in Gaokao and are from poor economic background, their option is for private university where they find high tuition fee, which makes them difficult to join higher education. Financial cost is thus one key dimension of the highly complex processes of decision making selection choice and accessibility connected to higher education participation (Burke, 2012). Tuition fee in private university which is twice public university contribute much for students to choose the public ones. For example, the tuition fee of Coastline University which is a private university is set about 12,000 Yuan, which is more than twice that of a public university.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Though the Chinese government has invested greatly in improving access and quality higher educational especially in public universities, there is still a need of improvement for more affordable and quality education services offered by reliable private education providers. The government could start by treating both public and private universities equally. China's private universities can help in opening new opportunities for social and economic development. This can be done by granting research fund to private universities same as for public universities in order to enable them establish many educational programs to compete with public universities. By obtaining government funding, private universities will be able to obtain international prestige and this will make China's universities gain a position among world class universities. It will also improve private university faculty recruitment and their infrastructure. Providing government funding will also ensure trust to individuals who doubt about private universities, because being recognized by the government will at least made an assurance hence it will increase enrollment. Moreover the government of China should support the poorest people in taking charge of students wither payable grants from the earliest years of work as is done in other countries such as Canada (Quebec, 2017). Also, it would encourage private initiative in a formal and regulatory framework by providing graduates repayable funds.

Regarding employment opportunities, government should equally treat students who studied in public and private universities. Private universities just like public universities also provide education to millions of student, thus the onus lies on the Chinese government to provide employment opportunities for the students to utilize all the skills and knowledge for the betterment of the nation and avoid social problems. For private universities, there is still the need to improving quality education and affordable tuition fee in order to provide access of higher education to all students. In order to stand out, private universities need to reinforce their reputation by focusing on providing much courses and career education on their institution as in public universities. This will provide an opportunity for students to join private universities as the costs will be affordable.

It is time for Chinese government to provide an equal chance and trust to private universities as their counterpart public ones; the government should provide adequate support by providing research funds for research activities. By treating these universities equally, it will boost reputation to private universities, and as a way students will not regard private

universities as the second choice; those students with higher score in Gaokao results will be eager to join private universities. It is therefore necessary to strengthen the modernization of the higher education system through adequate funding, effective administration and autonomy of both public and private university to meet Chinese needs as well responding to global trends and demand. There is a need to develop a dynamic mechanism of educational cooperation between universities, research institutes, industry and business to prepare students for the socio-professional life. China should learn from other countries such as United States of America where both public and private universities are given equal opportunities and are doing well in education.

7. CONCLUSION

Faced with new socio-economic issues that require globalization, China should invest more in its education system to make it more productive and meet the ever-growing needs of its population. The education programs must take account of ethnic minorities and migrants and give them the same educational opportunities as other groups. Higher education sector is an important sector for the development of a nation. In China there are public and private universities which both aims at providing education for social and economic development, therefore they are all important in the nation. It is time for Chinese government to loosens the restrictions and provide a chance to private universities in order to strengthen higher education sector. Private universities should also stand out and improve the quality services in order to gain trust from the government and the people.

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