

Advantages of Operational Mechanism of Application-Oriented Private Colleges—Taking Nantong Institute of Technology as an Example

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ABSTRACT

As the foundation of internal operation systems of application-oriented private colleges and the main channel of interaction between private colleges and society, the operational mechanism of privately-run colleges effectively guarantees its sustainable development. This paper firstly expounds on the connotation and advantages of operational mechanisms in non-governmental colleges. Then, taking the practice of Nantong Institute of Technology as an example, this paper elaborates its roles in five aspects, including major setup, team building, college-enterprise cooperation, teaching reform and second classroom education. Thus, this paper draws a conclusion that private colleges should not only keep reforming and tap into the potential of their operational mechanism, but also should make the best use of the advantages of its flexibility and closely integrate with the market to develop better.

Keywords: application-oriented colleges, private colleges, operational mechanism, college management

1. INTRODUCTION

Private education has gone through the embryonic period (1978-1991), exploratory period (1992-1996) and the current standard period (1997-present) [1] over the past 40 years of reform and opening up. In 2018, there were 419 private colleges in China, with a total of 318,965 faculty members [2]. Private education has become an increasingly important force in the school-running system of China. *Several Opinions on Encouraging Social Forces to Launch Education and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education*, issued by the State Council in 2017, aims at improving the quality of private education and promoting its healthy and sustainable development. With the implementation of *Law of the People's Republic of China on Promotion of Privately-Run Schools*, which were newly revised in 2018, obstacles restricting private colleges from exerting the advantages of their mechanisms have been further cleared. The birth of West Lake University and the upgrading of Jilin International Studies University (renamed from Jilin Huaqiao Foreign Languages Institute) symbolized the vigorous vitality of China's private colleges and its determination to pursue excellence. Nantong Institute of Technology (NIT) was upgraded to an undergraduate college in 2014. In the process of construction and development, NIT makes full use of the advantages of its flexible mechanism, striving to build a first-class application-oriented college.

2. CONNOTATION OF MARKET-ORIENTED MECHANISM

The running mechanism of colleges at home and abroad can be divided into two types: planning-oriented mechanism and market-oriented mechanism [3]. The latter is the inherent mechanism of private colleges and universities, which allocates educational resources and elements through the market [4]. The market-oriented mechanism is the main channel of interaction between private colleges and society, the inner core of the internal operation system and the important guarantee of sustainable development. It plays a significant role in raising resources needed for running schools and establishing a dynamic independent school running system.

3. MAIN FEATURES OF THE ADVANTAGES OF FLEXIBLE OPERATIONAL MECHANISM OF PRIVATE COLLEGES

3.1. Greater Autonomy in Running Schools

Most of private colleges in China were founded in the middle or late 1990s. In the beginning, private colleges received little attention from the government, and the government hardly gave any financial support to private

colleges. The running funds of private colleges are self-raised and do not depend on public finances. Therefore, compared with public colleges, private colleges have more flexible running autonomy.

3.1.1 More autonomy in using funds

Private colleges are different from public colleges in the use of fund, as the ownership and control of property belongs to private colleges. They can break the restrictions of rules and regulations, attract high-quality teachers by high salaries, allocate high-quality education and teaching conditions, and provide differentiated services for students.

3.1.2 More autonomy in personnel employment and income distribution

Private colleges are more independent and efficient than public colleges in terms of personnel employment and income distribution. On the one hand, although it is difficult for private colleges to attract top talents, the biggest advantage is that there is no so-called “iron rice bowl”—a job with regular salary until retirement—in private colleges, and the school can dismiss teachers who are unpopular with students or whose teaching quality is poor. On the other hand, private colleges can hire part-time teachers according to their needs, and pay them differently according to the scarcity degree. Those with engineering experiences play a significant role in promoting the cultivation of application-oriented talents. Private colleges are relatively flexible in the income distribution. They can break the obsolete distribution system of so-called “eating from the same big pot”—getting the same salary—and distribute according to teachers’ contribution.

3.1.3 More autonomy in major setup

Law of the People’s Republic of China on Promotion of Privately-Run Schools and its implementation regulations explicitly stipulates that private colleges enjoy the same enrollment rights as public universities; private colleges can set up relevant majors according to their school-running tenets and training objectives; qualified private colleges can obtain the right to confer degrees, etc [5]. The inherent market-oriented nature of private colleges makes it closer to the market and social needs in terms of major setting. For the purpose of survival and sustainable development, private colleges are more cautious in the specialty setup. They usually conduct full research before starting a new major, and cut off majors that are not popular in the market.

3.2. A Stronger Sense of Crisis from the Founder and Its Core Team

The chancellor or the Party Secretary of a public college is appointed by its superior department or Party Committee, and his or her tenure is limited. This mechanism for the generation of heads of public colleges leads them to be responsible to their superiors, focusing on their work during their tenure, and generally lacking consideration of the long-term development of colleges. Because public colleges have financial support, the college’s survival pressure is relatively small. However, the living environment of private colleges is much more difficult. Many private colleges are faced with a series of problems, such as difficulties in funding, social trust, shortage of teachers and insufficient high-quality students. As for the sponsors of private colleges and universities, as long as their physical conditions permit and they meet the legal requirements, they can always hold the position. Therefore, the school-running plan of most private colleges can be considered in the long run. Adhering to the system that the chancellor, under the leadership of the board of directors, is in charge of the operations of the institution, the core team of private colleges puts priority on achievements of school-running. Therefore, there is no internal opportunity to sacrifice the long-term interests of the school for short-term performance.

3.3. The Inherently High Efficiency of the Operational Mechanism of Private Colleges

The efficiency of the operational mechanism of private colleges is mainly reflected in the sensitivity and efficiency of adaptation to the external environment and the efficient internal management and operation of private colleges and universities.

3.3.1. High adaptability to the market

China’s private colleges are products of market demand. Due to the fact that private colleges do not rely on the help of government funds, they are relatively independent in relation to the government. At the same time, private colleges are instinctively market-oriented in the process of school-running. Because private colleges want to obtain as many resources as possible from the society, just as many private enterprises do, the operation of private colleges needs to satisfy the society as much as possible, provide higher education services in a timely manner to the market, and withstand the test of the market.

3.3.2. Lean and efficient internal management

The fewer the levels of management are, the more efficient the decision-making will be. This is an important characteristic of private college’s internal management.

Private colleges are economical of hiring staff and they pay great attention to the versatility of managers. In recent years, the number of private colleges has increased and the quality of them has improved. In part, due to the fewer management levels of private universities, there are fewer intermediate links from decision-making to implementation, and administrative efficiency is relatively high.

4. NIT'S PRACTICE IN UTILIZING THE FLEXIBLE OPERATIONAL MECHANISM OF PRIVATE COLLEGES

NIT was founded in 2000. Since its establishment, adhering to the school philosophy of "running NIT with sincerity and educating NIT students with conscience" and aiming at "serving the local economy and society and training first-class application-oriented talents", NIT has been giving full play to the advantages of the mechanisms of private colleges, carrying out reform and innovation, and striving to build a local application-oriented college.

4.1. Setting Majors According to Market Demand

The cultivation of talents is determined by the society and the market, so private colleges set up majors according to market demand and promote the reform of system, mechanism, and teaching by improving the quality of students' employment. The college actively conducts in-depth market research, and sets up related majors scientifically and accurately. Nantong has a long coastline and is rich in wind resources, but lacks the wind power talents. Having invested in the acquisition of social wind power enterprises, NIT made full use of the technology and resources of the enterprises, and took the lead in setting up the undergraduate major of wind power in China. As the construction of 3D printing industrial park in Gangzha District of Nantong City has a great demand for related talents, NIT conducts teacher training and professional elective courses before the Ministry of Education has announced the 3D major, and the students of 3D printing cultivated by NIT are in short supply. Up to now, NIT has set up 31 application-oriented undergraduate majors, such as machinery, automobile, architecture, electrical engineering and energy, big data, etc., in response to the needs of local industry enterprises. The employment rate of graduates is over 98%.

4.2. Integrating Internal and External Resources to Build a Professional Team

Disciplinary leaders and course leaders are the key points and difficulties in the building of teacher teams in private colleges. NIT takes advantage of the operational mechanism of private colleges and mainly adopts four

approaches: establishing a talent introduction team composed of school leaders, the chief of HR department and the heads of secondary colleges; hiring experts and professors with different backgrounds as the college's special experts and development consultants; hiring company engineers as part-time teachers in colleges; strengthening the training of young teachers. These measures effectively help the construction of the college's teaching staff. Teaching requirements are the same to both full-time and part-time teachers, evaluated by the feedback from peers and students. By widening the grade gap in the salary structure, the college supports teachers of great achievements to increase income. The college has promulgated teacher assessment methods, which put assessment focuses on actual performance. The college also introduced an option reward policy to support the construction of the teacher team.

4.3. Deep Integration between College and Enterprises

NIT gives full play to the advantages of the operational mechanism of private colleges, deepens the integration between college and enterprises, and trains students with the business norms of enterprises and the requirements for the professional quality of employees. In order to promote in-depth cooperation with first-class enterprises, the college established an industry-education-research cooperation committee with the main leaders of the municipal government as its chairman. College-enterprise cooperation is regarded as a key project of the school, and a teacher with strong outreach ability is appointed as a matchmaker for school-enterprise cooperation. The college has proposed the work goal of school-enterprise cooperation to the secondary colleges, and set up corresponding evaluation and incentive mechanisms. The college allocates special funds to support the teaching of order classes and the construction of school-enterprise cooperation laboratories. It hires excellent engineers from cooperative enterprises to undertake teaching tasks, and hires senior management personnel from cooperative enterprises to serve in the secondary college. For example, the Secondary College of Computer and Science Engineering cooperates with companies such as ChinaSoft, Neusoft and Beijing Zhongguancun Software Park, which send engineers to teach professional courses, build laboratories in the school, arrange students to participate in project practices, and jointly develop courses and write teaching materials. The enterprise's requirements for abilities of engineering certification are also embedded in the existing curriculum system. The school combines students' graduation project selection with enterprise R&D needs, thus, students can complete their graduation projects during their internship. The college's logistics major and architecture major have made in-depth cooperation with enterprises, including Jingdong, Suning, Zhongnan Construction, Suzhong Construction and other excellent enterprises. Through in-depth school-enterprise

cooperation, the connotation construction of related majors has been significantly improved, and the quality of graduates has also been strengthened.

4.4. Student-Centered Teaching Model Reform

Teaching activities are the main link of school-running and talent-cultivation in colleges. It is through teachers' teaching and students' learning to achieve the purpose of teachers' teaching knowledge and students' mastering skills. With the rise of 5G, big data, cloud computing and other technologies, the promotion of student-centered teaching model reform has received strong technical support. NIT relies on modern technology to vigorously implement the reform of the student-centered teaching model. It requires students to be participants in the teaching activities, not passive observers, and requires the students' learning process to be set in a real situation. In this process, students interact with teachers and classmates to learn knowledge from practice. In this regard, NIT has invested special funds to transform traditional classrooms into smart classrooms, building recording and broadcasting classrooms, purchasing desks for seminar settings, bought many online courses like iCourses and Yuketang, and other teaching resources. At the same time, the introduction of incentive policies to encourage teachers to reform classroom teaching, more small-class teaching, interactive and seminar-styled teaching, and layered teaching according to the characteristics of students are conducted. On the whole, despite the high cost of small student-centered teaching, the teaching effect is good and it is generally welcomed by students. Due to the early exploration of online teaching and the accumulation of teaching resources, during the prevention and control of the COVID-19 in 2020, teachers teach online, students study online at home, and teacher-student interaction complements each other. NIT's Quality Control Section conducted online surveys to find whether or not the students have really mastered the relevant knowledge and skills, the possible room for improvement in the online teaching activities so as to ensure the achievement of teaching purposes.

4.5. Promotion of Application-Oriented Research

As a private college with talent training as its main goal, it should take application-oriented research as its top priority. The achievements of application-oriented research are also mainly used to solve practical problems in enterprises and help to improve teaching in return, so as to realize the mutual promotion of scientific research and teaching. NIT has therefore established a science and technology park of more than 7,000 square meters on campus, attracting more than 20 technology-based small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) related to the majors established, which has created good conditions for teachers and

students to participate in application research. The science and technology park has also been recognized as Jiangsu Provincial Hi-tech Entrepreneurship Service Center. NIT has introduced management incentives for teachers to undertake application-oriented projects, set up research funding to support teaching projects, carried out scientific research and served local advanced collectives and advanced individuals, and encouraged teachers to take the initiative to undertake relevant application-based research projects. NIT has also implemented a parallel model of applied research and applied teaching personnel training, so that excellent professional teachers can get full training in scientific research and teaching positions. These measures have achieved desirable results.

4.6. Exploitation of the Second Classroom to Improve Students' Comprehensive Quality

The second classroom is an important supplement to curriculum learning, the main channel for application-oriented colleges to improve students' engineering quality and application ability, and an effective way to cultivate practical experience for college students as well. NIT fully recognizes the important role of the second classroom in the cultivation of application-oriented talents, and optimizes the teaching content and teaching methods of the second classroom. The college strengthens the cultivation of students' entrepreneurial ability, employment skills and comprehensive qualities to promote students' all-round development. The college has carried out the second classroom education of career planning, innovation and entrepreneurship. In addition to requiring professional teachers of the school to actively participate in the second classroom teaching activities, it has also hired corporate personnel and experts from outside the school to teach in the school. The second classroom teaching activities are included in the overall teaching activity planning, the activity funds are fully guaranteed, and the credits of the second classroom are included in the students' training program and students are required to obtain corresponding credits so as to pass the graduation qualification review.

5. CONCLUSION

Compared with the operational mechanism of public universities, that of private colleges is advantageous. Hence, private colleges should actively use this advantage in the process of running schools. The colleges should actively and flexibly set up various majors for economic and industrial development needs in response to market demands; adopt a variety of tenancy cooperation incentive mechanisms to build a private college management team and teacher team; promote in-depth cooperation with first-class companies, and improve the quality of student training through school-enterprise cooperation; encourage application-oriented research projects and promote the

commercialization of scientific and technological research findings; open up the second classroom to improve students' comprehensive quality. Only by releasing the potential of flexible mechanism of private colleges, being market- and future-oriented, striving for survival and development with quality, can the vitality and competitiveness of private colleges be guaranteed.

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