

Policy Dilemma and Countermeasure Analysis of Independent Colleges Transferring to Vocational Undergraduate Program

Yihan Li

School of economics, Zhejiang University of Technology, Hang Zhou, 310014, China

Corresponding author. Email: 1169849300@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Independent colleges are a new model of higher education reform and development in China. In recent years, some Chinese provinces have implemented policies that attempt to convert independent colleges into vocational and technical universities. However, this policy is widely opposed by students and parents, and policy implementation is in trouble. The study conducted in-depth interviews with current students and their parents and found that they oppose the policy for a variety of reasons. Finally, the study analyzed the rationality of the policy and made recommendations to facilitate its implementation.

Keywords: *Independent college, Policy problems, Vocational education, The credential society*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

At present, China is promoting comprehensive and deepening reform in the field of higher education. In the process of this reform, the survival, transfer and development of independent colleges and universities have a significant representation. Independent colleges are a new model of higher education reform and development in China. They are usually run by public undergraduate institutions of higher education in cooperation with social organizations or individuals, making full use of non-state financial resources to run schools[1]. With the continuous development of higher education in China, the mode of operation of independent colleges no longer meets the requirements of the new era, and the government has begun to implement a transfer policy for independent colleges. In September 2006, the Ministry of Education issued the "Opinions on the establishment of institutions of Higher Learning during the Eleventh Five-Year Plan", which for the first time introduced the "transfer" for independent colleges. In May 2020, the Ministry of Education issued the "Implementation Plan on Accelerating the Transfer of Independent Colleges", which once again clarified the determination to accelerate the transfer of independent colleges in each region.

At present, the state has in fact proposed three options for independent colleges: "transfer", "merge" and "withdraw". "Transfer" includes transferring to private and public institutions, that is transferring to independent private undergraduate universities or public undergraduate universities. "Merging" means merging with a higher vocational school and finally becoming a vocational technical university. "Withdraw" means to terminate the operation of the university and withdraw the establishment.

However, as the transfer of independent colleges continues to advance, new policy dilemma and real-life contradictions have gradually emerged, with the most controversial being the path of merging and transferring to vocational undergraduate programs. For example, in 2020, Zhejiang Province began promoting the transfer of independent colleges, a move that sparked a high level of dissatisfaction among students and their parents, and as public opinions continued to fester, the government had to suspend the transfer process altogether.

The conversion of independent colleges is the first task of China's higher education reform, which concerns the future fate of the majority of students and determines the success or failure of the optimization of the labor market structure.

Based on the above problems and their importance, this study starts from the theories of credential society [2]

and mass higher education theory [3], and takes the case of Zhejiang independent colleges transferring to Vocational and Technical Universities (VUTU) as a case study. Universities (VUTU) in Zhejiang Province as a case study, a qualitative research method is used to explore the policy dilemmas in the process of transferring independent colleges in China through in-depth interviews with several teachers and students' parents, as well as textual analysis of relevant policy documents, and to analyze the intrinsic reasons and put forward corresponding policy recommendations.

1.2. Literature Review

In recent years, independent colleges have become a research hotspot in China, receiving widespread attention from all sectors of society. The research conducted by QUE Ming-kun found that the overall proportion of transformed independent colleges is low; the regional distribution of transformed independent colleges is uneven; the transformed independent colleges generally maintain stable development[4]. Another research conducted by WU Jin put up forward that one of the primary causes leading to the problems of transfer implementation of independent colleges is the internal structural features of the policy: the crossover of policy problems, the diversity of target group and the policy conflict and ambiguity[5]. Analysis of the existing literature reveals that current research focuses on macro issues at the level of higher education system reform, and there are fewer empirical studies on students enrolled in independent colleges. Therefore, this study's research objective is to analyze the main reasons why it is difficult to implement the transfer policy of independent colleges through an empirical study from the perspective of students.

1.3. Methodology

In this study, qualitative research was used to understand the personal feelings and opinions of the student group as a stakeholder in the process of transferring to an independent college in Zhejiang Province through in-depth interviews with seven students and their parents[6]. After collecting the data, the study transcribed the interview transcripts, numbered the seven participants as S1 to S7, and used category analysis to distill and summarize the core concept and coding. Based on the different categories, the study presents the reasons why students choose independent colleges, their understanding of independent colleges, their views on the transfer policy, and their coping strategies, and finally makes suggestions for policy implementation.

2. RESULTS

2.1. Reasons for choosing an independent college

Based on the interview results, the reasons why students and parents choose independent colleges can be divided into two categories.

First, the pursuit of better teaching quality. However, with the support of established public universities and social and local government capital behind them, independent colleges are able to provide candidates with relatively low entrance examination scores with better quality higher education resources through the exchange of senior faculty and the sharing of hardware and software educational resources. This makes the teaching quality of independent colleges higher than that of other public universities in the same score range to a certain extent. Some participants (S1, S2 and S3) tend to choose to study in independent colleges where they can acquire better professional knowledge and job skills for this reason, so as to enhance their core competitiveness in the job market and gain brighter prospects for themselves in the future.

Another group of people choose independent colleges for other reasons. Randall Collins, in his book "The credential society" states, "Modern society needs a diploma not because it measures one's knowledge, but because of its social function." [2]. Therefore, the social function of the diploma of independent colleges is the real reason why some students choose independent colleges. Signaling theory suggests that a diploma does not represent a person's real technical competence, but conveys to society in a market-recognized form the degree of recognition of his previous studies and the ability to be expected enough to work. Influenced by this notion, some participants (S1, S2, and S3) believed that their ultimate goal was to obtain a diploma from an independent college "titled" by a prestigious university, rather than the professional knowledge and technical skills taught by the school. The "brand name effect" of independent colleges provides students with "hard currency" in the job market and is therefore preferred by students and parents.

2.2. Level of knowledge about independent colleges

The study analyzed the level of knowledge of seven participants about the transfer of independent colleges. The results showed that only one participant (S1) fully understood the process, purpose, and end result of independent college transfer; two participants (S5, S7) basically understood the policy of independent college transfer; three participants (S2, S3, S4) indicated that they did not know much about the transfer policy and only stayed at the conceptual level; and one participant

(S6) did not understand the transfer policy at all. In conclusion, a considerable number of participants were aware of the transfer policy of independent colleges, but only a very small number of participants fully understood the process, motivation, and final result of the transfer of independent colleges. Most of the understanding was not high and mostly stayed at the conceptual level.

At the same time, the study investigated the channels through which students learned about the transfer of independent colleges. The results showed that three participants (S1, S2, S7) learned about the transfer of independent colleges through social media, one participant got the information about the transfer of independent colleges through the official education department (S3), one participant (S5) learned about the transfer of independent colleges through school leaders and teachers, and two participants (S4, S6) got the news about the transfer of independent colleges through their close student friends. In conclusion, the channels through which students learned about the policy of transferring to independent colleges varied widely.

As mentioned above, students have a low level of understanding of the policy of transferring independent colleges to vocational undergraduate programs, which is obviously not conducive to the transfer of independent colleges. In the process of transfer, the government and schools do not provide students and their parents with the necessary policy explanation and corresponding publicity, which is an important reason why the transfer of independent colleges is in trouble.

2.3. Attitude towards policy

Current attitudes regarding the transfer policy among student groups can be broadly divided into two categories: strongly opposed and open-minded. There are six participants (S1-S6) who are strongly opposed to the policy for two main reasons. The first is the damage to material interests. S2 noted, "If say two identical people apply for the same job and everyone has a bachelor's degree, one is a general bachelor's degree and the other is a vocational bachelor's degree, it will definitely be for the vocational bachelor's degree will be perceived." Other participants expressed similar concerns - the decrease in the gold value of their education after the transfer would cause them to suffer discrimination when entering the labor market and applying for graduate school. Second, the impairment of moral benefits. Some participants (S4) believed that merging with higher education institutions would make the good learning atmosphere be damaged and good faculty would be lost.

A small number of participants (S7) were open to the idea of conversion. They support the national higher education reform, and believe that whether the qualification is less valuable in this regard still needs to be judged by society and the job market. They believe

that the change of part of higher education to a vocational track will, to some extent, reduce the pressure of choosing a career after graduation, because they no longer need to compete directly with students receiving general education.

2.4. Response strategy to the transfer policy

The introduction of the transfer policy has had a significant impact on the students involved. In order to cope with the possible impact of transferring, participants adopted different coping strategies. Some participants (S2, S6) chose to pursue further education to compensate for the "devaluation" of their education. For example, S2 indicated that she decided to pursue graduate school after completing her undergraduate degree; S6 originally did not intend to pursue graduate school, but in view of the transfer policy, she decided to study abroad as an important option after completing her undergraduate degree; S1 and S5 would stay on the sidelines and continue to evaluate the impact of the policy on their education and future employment. Some participants (S1 and S4) chose to express their opinions on the Internet, suggesting ideas to the authorities and trying to change the policy itself. These participants were resistant to the transfer policy itself, for example, S1 suggested that he would like to "make comments through the letter system or the principal's mailbox or the mayor's mailbox", while S4 wanted to communicate with the school leaders or government departments in person.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1. Policy rationality analysis

There is a rationale for merging independent colleges and vocational schools to create vocational undergraduate programs. At the strategic level, the problem of structural fault in China's job market has been highlighted, especially in the post-epidemic era, when the problem of "graduation equals unemployment" has come back to the forefront. At the macro level, it is urgent for the state to regulate the scale of higher education development and the job market, and the conversion of independent colleges to vocational undergraduate programs is an important part of the deepening reform of higher education in China.

Martin Trow explains in his theory of higher education massification that the gross enrollment rate of higher education below 15% is the elite education stage, the gross enrollment rate greater than 15% and less than 50% is the massification stage, and the gross enrollment rate greater than 50% is the universalization stage. According to the statistics, in 2020, the total scale of various forms of higher education in China will be 41.83 million, and the gross enrollment rate of higher education will reach 54.4%. This indicates that China has entered

the era of universalization of higher education. In the interview, S-2 said, "Raising the overall level of education is a big trend, and it is something that China will probably have to accomplish in the future." In the era of universal access to higher education, rigid academic standards can lead to a "top-heavy" dilemma in higher education development, so that the so-called "academic standards" cannot be a barrier to expansion. Martin Trow believes that all levels of higher education have different missions but equal status.

In fact, most of the independent colleges are similar to higher vocational colleges in terms of training objectives, and after the merger and transfer, the independent colleges have completed the "disembarkation" from the public famous universities and gained more autonomy in school operation. "This will help to optimize the structure and layout of higher education and achieve a win-win situation for independent colleges and higher vocational institutions, so that they can focus on training new era applied technical skills talents for the job market at the undergraduate level. Participant S7 also expressed his concern in the interview about the current situation of more general education courses at different levels of higher education: "I think it should still be mostly or should be more vocational-oriented training". After the merger of independent colleges and higher education institutions to transform into vocational and technical universities, by adhering to the market-oriented orientation, the attributes and characteristics of vocational education can be highlighted and can focus on cultivating the technical talents needed for social development.

The merger of independent colleges and higher vocational institutions into vocational and technical universities is a brand new attempt in China. Most of the existing vocational and technical universities are upgraded from private higher vocational institutions, and students and parents generally believe that there is a gap between their graduates and those of ordinary undergraduate universities in terms of employment, graduate studies and public service examinations, and are still influenced by the ancient concept of "learning is superior", and generally oppose the merger of independent colleges and higher vocational institutions to become vocational and technical universities. S6 expressed the need to provide "buffer time" for continuous improvement in the process of policy implementation, which is also more conducive to taking care of more stakeholders, and four other participants (S2, S3, S5, S7) expressed similar views. The other four participants (S2, S3, S5, S7) also expressed similar views that the merger was too hasty and there was a strong resistance to it. As a result, the government was forced to press the pause button on the merger transfer.

3.2. Policy Recommendations

At present, the national independent college transfer work has entered the attack stage, the study will be from the policy implementation before, during and after the implementation of the three time periods on the independent college joint higher education institutions merged into vocational undergraduate policy to make comments and suggestions.

First, before the policy is implemented, the government should clarify the development direction of vocational undergraduate programs. The government should avoid unqualified conversions and indiscriminate conversions, but should clarify the institutional construction of vocational undergraduate programs and the development direction of schools after conversions.

Second, in the policy implementation, the government should expand the pilot transfer and look for outstanding problems. The government should expand the pilot project of merging independent colleges and higher education institutions to establish vocational undergraduate programs, and the pilot institutions should cover all types of independent colleges and higher education institutions, and focus on the significant problems revealed in the pilot project, so as to provide reference for the promotion of the policy.

Third, after the implementation of the policy, the government should adhere to the people-oriented approach and actively respond to the opinions of students' parents. Facing the dissatisfaction and opposition of students and parents in the process of transfer, it should respond to the negative voices in a positive way, adhere to the kernel of people-oriented work, actively carry out the emotional appeasement of the corresponding policy explanation in the process of policy implementation, and do a good job of home-school communication. Fourth, after the implementation of the policy, but also to strengthen policy support for independent colleges. After transforming into a vocational university, it is necessary to strengthen school-enterprise cooperation and give full play to the new advantages of vocationalized education at the level of undergraduate education.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The study aimed to explore the reasons for the difficulties encountered in transferring to a vocational undergraduate degree in the context of the difficulties encountered by independent colleges in transferring to a vocational undergraduate degree, taking into account the special significance of diplomas in Chinese society. Due to various factors such as the epidemic, only seven eligible students were interviewed in this study, and the study sample was small. Future research in this area can be conducted from a more macroscopic perspective, with more students studied, to achieve better research results.

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