



## Quality Assurance in Private Higher Education in China

Osman Ozturgut  
University of the Incarnate Word

The economic modernization drive of the 21st century has not only fostered the growth of a market economy [in the People's Republic of China] but has also created the need for a structural change in education (Zha, 2006). Mok (2009) explained that when the Chinese government realized that the state alone could not keep up with the increasing demand for higher education, it allowed non-governmental institutions to get involved. However, with the fast expansion of the private higher education system, maintaining educational quality and integrity has not been a priority. Administrators have been rather incompetent in hiring qualified faculty and staff. They have minimum or no experience in curriculum and program development. Laboratory facilities and technological services are insufficient while living and learning conditions for students, staff, and faculty are far from satisfactory. China's private higher education needs a major overhaul even from the start.

*Keywords:* Chinese education, quality assurance, private higher education.

*Although the growth of the private sector has been important in supporting the overall expansion in higher education, there is increasing anxiety about the ability of the sector to deliver appropriate quality in the light of problems in attracting suitably qualified teachers and students. (Lin, 2005)*

The economic modernization drive of the 21st century has not only fostered the growth of a market economy [in the People's Republic of China] but has also created the need for a structural change in education (Zha, 2006). Traditionally, China's higher education sector had been relatively disengaged from the international arena and the appropriate forms of quality assurance methods. However, with the entrance into World Trade Organization (WTO) and the increasing need for the higher education services within the country, the need for developing quality assurance methods gained urgency. This study looks at the current situation of the private higher education in China and highlights the challenges to initiate a discussion on quality assurance strategies.

Mok (2009) explained that when the Chinese government realized that the state alone could not keep up

with the increasing demand for higher education, it allowed non-governmental institutions to get involved. This occurred not only because of the demands of the rapidly globalizing economy and interdependency among nations, but also because of the conventional governmental institutions' lack of structural, political, and financial ability to provide the much needed education for the growing population. From the opening up in 1978, China's private higher education has had several phases:

- 1978-1991: The 11th Communist Party Committee allowed the establishment of private higher education institutions.
- 1992-1996: With Deng Xiaoping's travel to Southern China, diploma programs have been created.
- 1997-2003: The regulations for Private Higher

- Education Institutions were formulated, which led to a faster growth for private higher education institutions.
- 2003-2020: With the Law on Private Education Promotion, private higher education institutions receives recognition from the Central Government.
- 2020-beyond: This is the period when private education in China will reach its maturity with quality assurance systems in place with recognition from the higher education field abroad.

China's intent in establishing Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) was to give more responsibility to its own entrepreneurs to help develop the education system in China. For a genuine development, local initiatives had to be supported as these would focus on the problems of the communities surrounding these initiatives. It was not simply an attempt to increase the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) to close the gap within the system but also to give more responsibility and accountability to these institutions with multidimensional development model to improve the social, political, educational, and economic quality of life. With all the good intentions to provide access to the masses, it still remains to be seen how effective these PHEIs are and will be for the development of the country. It is imperative that a method be developed to assure the quality of such institutions before the privatization of higher education gets out of control.

#### **Theoretical Framework: Human Capital Theory**

With China already a key player in the world market, officials as part of their economic development plan placed emphasis on human capital. Human capital theory explains that a large gradation in earning by level of education reflects to returns to individuals' investment in education (Becker, 1993; Mincer, 1974). Human capital theorists view humans as economic resources. For them, the idea of education is a form of "capital" and the notion of education, a form of "human capital" (Little, 2000, p. 287). For any given economic enterprise, regardless of what is being produced and of where, how and under what conditions it is being produced, "more educated workers will always be more productive than their less educated counterparts" (Baptiste, 2001, p. 189). Baptiste further explained the pedagogical implication by claiming that "human capital theorists treat people as homo economica: radically isolated, pleasure-seeking materialists who are born free of social constraints or responsibility, who possess no intrinsic sociability, and who are driven, ultimately, by the desire for material happiness and bodily security" (p. 195).

When today's students reach adulthood, their children will gain by virtue of the informal education received at home. Much learning takes place at home, where the child's attitude towards school is also largely

shaped. Better educated parents are more likely to raise children who recognize the value of education, in terms of job opportunities, as well as in terms of cultural opportunities (Weisbrod, 1971). Properly conceived, education produces a labor force that is more skilled, more adaptable to the needs of a changing economy, and more likely to develop the imaginative ideas, techniques, and products which are critical to the process of economic expansion and social adaptation to change. "By doing so—by contributing to worker productivity—the education process qualifies handsomely as a process of investment in human capital" (Weisbrod, 1971, p. 74).

If one pursues education because knowledge is desired for its own sake, or if one considers that education can enrich one's life through increasing the variety and depth of intellectual pursuits, then educational services can be treated as consumption good. In this sense, education is an end itself. However, if one obtains educational services solely because of their impact upon future occupational choices and earnings, then educational services can be treated as an investment good (Hu, Lee, & Stromsdorfer, 1971). Education is, after all, much more than a means of raising productivity or otherwise bringing financial returns. China currently spends about 2.5% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on investment in education. At the same time, roughly 30% of its GDP is devoted to physical capital investment. In comparison, the figures for the United States are 5.4% and 17% respectively. In South Korea, they are 3.7% and 30% (Heckman, 2003). China is below average among comparable countries in expenditure on investment in people. Heckman (2003) further argued that education and skills are important determinants of economic growth and investment in education and this is part of the solution for China's development. First of all, human capital is productive because of its immediate effect on raising the skills levels of workers. That is to say, if a mechanic is trained to repair cars, the mechanic will be more productive in repairing cars. Investment in human capital, through investing in education in this case, has direct effects to the growth of the economy.

Ruth Hayhoe, an expert on Chinese education, argued against the position that most scholars are trying to explain the present changes and transformation of the Chinese higher education through dependency and modernization theory. Little (2000) claimed that "theories of economic and social modernization became central frameworks for the analysis of economic growth and societal development, and became influential also in determining national economic and social policy and policy implementations" (p. 286). Kang (2004) further confirmed that, "modernization means that Chinese higher education should remain at the forefront of contemporary development of sciences (including natural sciences, social sciences and humanities) and technology in both ideas and practice" (p. 149). Hayhoe (1996) further argued that the theory of modernization presented an optimistic model for

development of those societies that were not yet modern and industrialized.

However, the transformation in Chinese higher education cannot be explained by means of a single scientific concept. Even though Hayhoe (1989) suggested that dependency theory and world systems theory have been valuable in raising the question of why modernization has not worked in China, she leaves out human capital theory in the justification of her argument. Hayhoe (1989) argued that, for modernization, “knowledge interaction is conceived as a technical contribution to progress along a defined economic continuum involving the rationalization of educational provision to create as efficiently as possible the types and levels of manpower needed for rapid economic growth” (p. 17). For dependency, international educational relations appear to consolidate pressures to conform to the political-economic interests of the capitalist world by “co-opting a compliant elite and reinforcing educational structures that favor capitalist development strategies” (p. 165). Dependency theory as suggested by Little is that “poor countries are conditioned by their economic relationships with rich economies to occupy a subordinate and dependent role that inhibits development by expropriating investible surplus” (p. 287). Even though China’s emphasis on developing human capital is not the single explanation why the private higher education institutions were allowed in China, it is still a significant reason.

**Private Higher Education in China**

Throughout the late Ming period, private learning academies had been in abundance (Ding & Liu, 1992). Chen (1981) reported that there were about 12 hundred

private learning academies in the Ming era (1368-1644). From the end of the Opium Wars in the mid-1880s to the formation the People’s Republic in the early 1950s, private higher learning institutions were an integral part of society. Following the footsteps of the Soviet model, all private institutions of higher education were transformed into public ones by the year 1952. With this, the long history of private education in China had closed its first part (Borthwick, 1983; Zhu, 1994; Lin, 1994; Mok, 1997).

Since then, there have been attempts to privatize higher education in China—though markedly inefficient and ineffective. Since the late 1990s, the number of private HEIs in China has been increasing steadily. Zhou and Xie (2007) reported that in 1996 there were 1,219 private higher education institutions (including vocational colleges). Most of them had enrollments of hundreds of students and a few with over a thousand. Hua (2009) reported that “the total number of private schools of all levels and categories increased 52%, from 61,200 in 2002 to 93,200 in 2006, and the corresponding number of students in these schools also rose, from 11.16 million in 2002 to 23.13 million in 2006, a 107% increase” (p. 40).

In order to respond to the needs of the public for more higher education accessibility, but to also limit the establishment of private educational institutions, the Ministry of Education established a more controlled alternative. Public universities were give permission to establish second-tier colleges that used their names and credentials. These second-tier affiliated colleges are self-funded institutions and are considered a more reputable substitute to non-public-university-affiliated private universities.

Table 1

*The number of private/Minban institutions in China*

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2004
<i>Minban</i> Vocational Colleges	950	999	1040	1085	1633
<i>Minban</i> Higher Education Institutions	37	43	89	133	228

Adapted from Mok, K. H. (2009). The growing importance of the privateness in education: Challenges for higher education governance in China. *Compare*. 39(1), 35-49.

**Initial Steps for Privatization of Higher Education in China**

Article 19th of the National Constitution stipulates that “the state encourages the collective economic organizations, state enterprises and other social forces to set up educational institutions of various types in accordance with the law” (Article 19). This was the first official step towards privatization of higher education in modern China. Later in 1993, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) issued Guidelines for the Reform and Development of Education in China, it acknowledged that the central government could not alone cope with the increasing demand for higher education. It provided information regarding how different educational structures and funding models were needed in order to meet the needs of higher education (CCPCC, 1993). This policy report outlined a formal private education development plan and the overall structure of governance for such institutions. In 1997, Chinese government released its first official regulatory plans and in 2002, passed a law on Promotion of Private

Higher Education in China, updating the regulations. By then, there were 133 non-governmental institutions granting diplomas per CCP regulations.

2003 was a significant year for private higher education in China. The Law on the Promotion of Nongovernmental Education and Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (MOE, 2003) was finally approved. The State began to move away from the financing and provision of higher education towards the role of “regulator, enabler, and facilitator” (Mok, 2005, p. 236).

Driven by the desire to modernize higher education, to build a strong science and technology base as well as to learn from the more advanced educational systems in the West, Chinese higher education underwent a major reform process which introduced a stronger market based element into its management and delivery (Cai, 2004). The reform process has been characterized by four key components:

Table 2

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*Key components of the reform process*

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Commercialization	Education introduced a co-funding model in which students (and/or parents) shared its cost with the State. (Wu & Zheng, 2008):
Decentralization	Focusing investment in higher education in the areas where the impact was likely to be greatest, this approach also helped the government to control some of the costs associated with the expansion of the sector. (Cai, 2004)
Expansion	Demand for higher education in China increased rapidly as the economy developed, driven by both the demand from individuals and the economy’s need for a skilled and educated workforce. (Ennew & Fujia, 2009)
Marketization	An equally important part of the process was the increased involvement of non-state sectors in higher education. This constitutes the fourth strand in the reform process, namely marketization and the development of private (non-state) institutions (usually described as <i>minban</i> ). These <i>minban</i> institutions are typically of three types, Private Universities, Private Colleges and other Private Institutes. (Ennew & Fujia, 2009)

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The central government intended to distribute its responsibility of providing education resources and opportunities for citizens to local governments and any individual or group who was capable of running schools and universities, including foreign investments (Yang & Gale, 2004). Unfortunately, there has been increasing anxiety about the ability of the sector to deliver appropriate quality in the light of problems in attracting suitably qualified teachers and students (Lin, Gao, & Liu, 2005). Because of the speedy and somewhat unregulated system, there has been a lack of stability in this market. Ding (2008) argued that “it remains to be seen whether profit motives can be aligned with improving educational standards, or whether these universities can attract enough able and qualified teachers to deliver a decent education to their growing number of students” (p. 1). According to a 2001 survey conducted by Private Higher Education Committee of China nearly half of the 1,134 private HEIs set up had shut down their operations. Overall, there were only forty private higher education institutions in the survey that were operating without major concerns (Zhou & Xie, 2007).

Furthermore, there were 13 PHEIs in Beijing, of which only two survived in early 1990s. By 2004, only 35 of the PHEIs were allowed to admit students. In Henan, out of 118 PHEIs, only ten of them had survived as of 2004. By 2005, there were only 50 PHEIs operating of the total 280 in late 1980s (See Jiang, 2005; Peng, 2004; Guo, 2002; Zhou & Xie, 2007). Zhuoda Tourism Career College was the first PHEI in Hainan province. It was established by Zhuoda Corporation in 2001, a Hebei Province based real estate company, and began recruitment in the same year. In the first year, Zhuoda recruited about 300 students. These students arrived on campus only to find that the infrastructure was only being constructed. They gradually left the school, leaving only 190 students. In 2003, Zhuoda was only able to recruit 26 students for the associate’s degree program. In 2004, they invested 40 million Chinese Yuan to transform a holiday village into a temporary campus. The students, therefore, finally were able to have an official site for class meetings. Zhuoda welcomed its largest class freshmen in 2005—600 incoming students. However, because of the lack of facilities, poor management, and lack of teachers, Zhuoda had to merge with Guangzhou Chaoshan Vocational College (Zheng, 2006).

#### **Existing Frame work for Quality Assurance in Higher Education**

*Physical facilities in China are simple and backward compared to the United States, but what constitutes adequate educational facilities is a matter of subjective definition. Expectations in China are low. Even in a public school, a chalkboard, a desk and a chair for each student, and a roof over their heads often have sufficed. (Kwong, 1997, p. 250)*

Higher education can be viewed as a service industry, and as such, it needs to provide the same service quality as any other type of service provider (Ruben, 1995). In order to provide quality service, organizations must put customers first and evaluate how well the needs and expectations of their customers are being met. They must also identify what improvements are needed and make progress towards those goals. Ruben explained that “an emphasis on quality in academics, management, and interpersonal relationships accompanies corporate concerns with competitiveness, operational efficiency, productivity, service orientation, and cost effectiveness” (p. 7).

In the context of higher education in China, with the understanding that higher education is a service industry, there is minimal concern in identifying and meeting the educational and service expectations/needs of the students, parents, faculty, administrators, and staff. This disregard paired with inefficiency and strong cultural emphasis in bureaucracy that controls the public arena has fostered a private higher education system that is not necessarily promoting a “quality” education. As Mok (1997) put it, “the flourishing of private education on the mainland has challenged traditional approaches to education in terms of its quality, relevance and applicability to contemporary society” (p. 56).

To resolve the old and new problems and to pursue the goal of legislation, the Private Education Law established four general criteria as a framework for national policy on private education (Pan & Law, 2006). However, the Implementing Regulation discourages investors by establishing four criteria to determine what constitutes a ‘reasonable return’ (Fan, 2004; Wang, 2004), including:

1. Making Profit: the school makes a profit in that year and is found not to have issued any misleading advertisements, cheated the students out of any money or used the school’s money for anything other than education.
2. Rate of Return with Poor Quality: if a school charges high fees but shows poor input into educational activities and school facilities and is found to provide a poor quality of education in comparison with other private schools the investors cannot claim a higher return than other similar private schools.
3. Transparency: the school demonstrates transparency relating to its quality of education and accounting before the investor can claim a return.
4. Compliance with Minban: investors must follow the Law for the Promotion of Private (Minban) Education or face confiscation of the return, an end to student admissions, annulment of the school’s operating permit or even prosecution. (Articles 45\_47 & 49, p. 277)

“Law is used by the state as a new social game rule intended to govern original intent of the law” (Pan &

Law, 2006, p. 278). For example, one intention of the law was to increase incentives to put more money into private education by allowing them to realize a reasonable return on their investment.

### **Legislation of Private Education: Issues and Resolutions**

The 1997 Regulation on Schools Run by Social Forces issued by the Ministry of Education (MoE) tightened the state's governance over private education. To rectify these irregularities the 1997 Regulation adopted a policy of "active encouragement, vigorous support, right guidance, and strengthening governance" of private education" (p. 275). The 1997 Regulation marks a tightening of the state's control over private education as a means of rectifying irregularities generated by the private sector in education reform. The Law for the Promotion of Private Education was enacted by the National People's Congress (NPC) with the intent of using legislation to achieve four main goals:

1. to provide a common legal framework for the regulation of both new private education practices and government's administration over private education;
2. to recognize and protect the legal rights and benefits of private schools, their teachers and students;
3. to protect private education providers' legal rights and freedom to own and use their private property as private schools;
4. to increase investor interest in putting more capital into education. (Lu, 2003; Ye, 2003)

In 2002, the Task Group of the Study on Development Strategies for Non-governmental Tertiary Education in China found that the continued establishment of private HEIs is unnecessary. The issue is not whether to have more private HEIs or to legislate on the operations, but the key to advancing the higher education in China is to have more efficient admissions and operation system for public HEIs. Furthermore, the current job market in China makes it difficult for public HEI graduates to find employment and it is even more difficult for private HEI graduates to secure employment. The task group further stated that the private HEIs are motivated by profits therefore are not inclined to improve the quality of teaching and management.

### **Discussion**

Regulations tightened government control over private institutions. With this, government had the power to audit institutions in regards to their internal administration, including financing and teaching, and external relations, such as recruitment of students and competition with other schools (Pan & Law, 2006). To develop healthy private higher education:

1. A correct understanding and awareness of private higher education should be set up among

proprietors,

2. Teaching facilities and campus infrastructure construction should be timely upgraded and educational quality should be focused at any time,
3. Proprietors of private HEIs need to avoid family business management and seek a sensible mechanism,
4. Educational specialties ought to be highlighted at their own level. (p. 116)

Further, Pan and Law explained that the private higher education institution must establish a base of full-time and part-time instructors with necessary qualifications and professionalism. Administration must be selected among the qualified candidates who could be held accountable for the academic and administrative success of these institutions. This can be achieved through a proper system of personal responsibility that will allow greater standardization and systematization. Further, an academically sound in-service training needs to be provided to the instructors.

Incomplete law and ineffective implementation, cultural barriers (meritocracy and minban) and improper coordination among institutions has hindered the delivery of quality education. Private schools driven more by commercial motives than academics violated Chinese consumer law (Chaocheng, 2009). For policy implementation to be successful, it must involve the collaborative effects of political will, adequate resources, institutionalized structures, adequate time and minimal stages and strategy (Yang & Gale, 2004). In addition, inadequate internal governance system with international associate schools fosters unquestionable disparities and contradictions (Chaocheng, 2009).

There are certain core values of higher education which may, in certain circumstances, be assisted by the market yet cannot totally rely on it. These include a certain degree of job stability and security, necessary to accumulate research and teaching experience and develop long-term, basic research (this is threatened, for example, by an excessive reliance on short-term contracts or too much pressure to generate revenue from applied research). Teachers are very mobile; and the teacher base is unstable.

Market forces do not necessarily produce positive results. They may be for better or for worse. How to ensure a wholesome development of market forces, how to maximize their positive effects while minimizing their accompanying hazards, is perhaps the greatest challenge that Chinese higher education faces today. There is great urgency in facilitating an expansion of access to higher education in China, both to sustain the growth in the economy, and to support the extension of economic opportunity and social mobility. Therefore, it is urgent to establish and maintain a quality assurance system, which the Chinese education system needs desperately.

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**Article Citation**

Özturgut, O. (2011). Quality assurance in private higher education in China. *Current Issues in Education*, 14(3). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/731>

**Author Notes**

Osman Özturgut, Ph.D.  
University of the Incarnate Word  
4301 Broadway CPO #293  
San Antonio, Texas 78209  
[ozturgut@uiwtx.edu](mailto:ozturgut@uiwtx.edu)

Dr. Osman Özturgut is currently an Assistant Professor of Education in the PhD program at UIW. Dr. Özturgut has worked in the field of international and comparative education for over a decade. He has been an administrator and faculty member in various higher education institutions in Turkey, China, and the United States. He has conducted research in China, South Korea, Japan, Norway, Singapore, Turkey, South Africa, and the US. He is an expert in international and comparative higher education and leadership studies and has numerous publications and presentations in these areas. His current research interests include international students in the U.S., internationalization of higher education, multicultural education, Sino-U.S. Joint-Venture Campuses, and private higher education in China



**Current Issues in Education**

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University  
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

Manuscript received: 1/22/2011  
Revisions received: 9/22/2011  
Accepted: 9/22/2011



## **Current Issues in Education**

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University  
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

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Volume 14, Number 3

October 4, 2011

ISSN 1099-839X

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