

Evaluating the Development Dynamics, Challenges, and Strategic Enhancements of Private Undergraduate Colleges

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Abstract:- This study examined the development effects, existing challenges, and potential improvement strategies for private undergraduate colleges in Guangdong Province, China, over the past 40 years. Since establishing the first private higher education institution in 1993, the sector has expanded significantly, with private colleges now accounting for a substantial portion of the province's higher education landscape. The analysis highlights the effectiveness of these institutions in aligning with national educational goals and regional economic needs, as well as their contributions to talent cultivation. However, the study also identifies critical issues, including the quality of talent training, internal governance deficiencies, and the need for enhanced faculty development. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of strengthening party building and ideological education within these institutions. The paper proposed comprehensive strategies to address these challenges to improve governance structures, optimize educational quality, and foster a high-quality teaching workforce. Ultimately, this research aims to provide insights that can guide the development of private undergraduate colleges in Guangdong Province, ensuring they contribute effectively to the region's economic and social advancement.

Keywords:- Guangdong Province; Undergraduate Universities; Internal Governance; Connotation Construction; Private Higher Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out in the report of the 20th Party Congress that "high-quality development is the primary task of building a socialist modernized country in an all-round way"^[19]. The key to realizing high-quality economic development lies in talent and the foundation lies in education, without high-quality development of education, economic development will lose the strong support of talents and knowledge. High quality is the core theme of China's education reform and development at all levels and for some

time in the future. Private education, as a part of the development of education, is an important growth point for the innovative development of education and an important force for educational reform. Entering the new stage of development, private education is facing the new tasks of transformation and automation including Cloud University^[2], improving quality and efficiency, and moving towards high-quality development is its inevitable requirement.

Over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, private higher education in Guangdong Province has made great progress. Since 1993, when the private South China College of Commerce and Industry became the first private general higher education college with qualification for enrollment of academic education in Guangdong Province, as of December 30, 2021, there have been 51 private colleges and universities, which accounted for 31.9% of the total number of general colleges and universities in the province, of which there are 23 general undergraduate colleges, 2 vocational undergraduate colleges and universities and 26 higher vocational colleges and universities; the enrollment of general colleges and universities is 20.41 million, accounting for 27.1% of the total number of general undergraduate enrollment in the province; 780,500 students, accounting for 30.7% of the total number of general undergraduate enrollment in the province; 193,100 graduates, accounting for 33.6% of the total number of graduates in the province; and 34,600 full-time teachers, accounting for 26.9% of the total number of full-time teachers in the province's general this program^[5]. The private undergraduate colleges studied in this paper temporarily excluded the two (2) vocational undergraduate universities.

Private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province attach importance to professional construction, focusing on the economic and social and industrial development needs of the country and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, continuously optimizing the professional structure, promoting the transformation and upgrading of traditional

majors, and actively laying out the "four new" majors. During the "13th Five-Year Plan" period, the province's private undergraduate colleges and universities added 209 new majors, including 91 new science and technology majors. [8][9][10]. As of October 2022, the province's private undergraduate colleges and universities have 16 first-class undergraduate majors at the national level and 115 first-class undergraduate majors at the provincial level.[4][16][25] 1 first-class undergraduate course at the national level and 148 first-class undergraduate courses at the provincial level.[1] [15][8] 8 private undergraduate colleges and universities have been approved as the construction units for the project of granting master's degrees in Guangdong Province.

This study addressed critical aspects that directly impact the development and effectiveness of private undergraduate colleges in Guangdong Province. Understanding the specific challenges faced by these institutions, such as governance deficiencies, talent training issues, and resource limitations, is fundamental to diagnosing the problems that hinder their growth. Identifying these challenges is crucial for comprehending how they negatively influence institutional performance and academic quality, both of which are vital for producing competent graduates and maintaining educational standards.

➤ *Importance of the Problem*

The goal of the study is to enhance educational quality through targeted interventions like faculty development, internal governance reforms, and infrastructure investments.

Addressing barriers systematically ensures that private undergraduate colleges can meet the demands of modern education and produce high-caliber graduates. This ensures that institutions not only address immediate challenges but also build on their progress to achieve sustained improvements in academic outcomes, governance, and social contributions, which are crucial for aligning with the region's economic and social needs in the long run.

➤ *Statement of the Problem*

The study intended to answer the following questions;

- What specific challenges are currently faced by private undergraduate colleges in Guangdong Province, and how do they impact institutional performance and academic quality?
- What strategies and interventions can these institutions implement to overcome these challenges and enhance their educational quality?
- What are the primary barriers to improving educational effectiveness in these institutions, and how do they hinder the achievement of academic excellence?
- How can private undergraduate colleges in Guangdong leverage existing progress to sustain long-term improvements in institutional performance and educational outcomes?

➤ *Conceptual Framework*

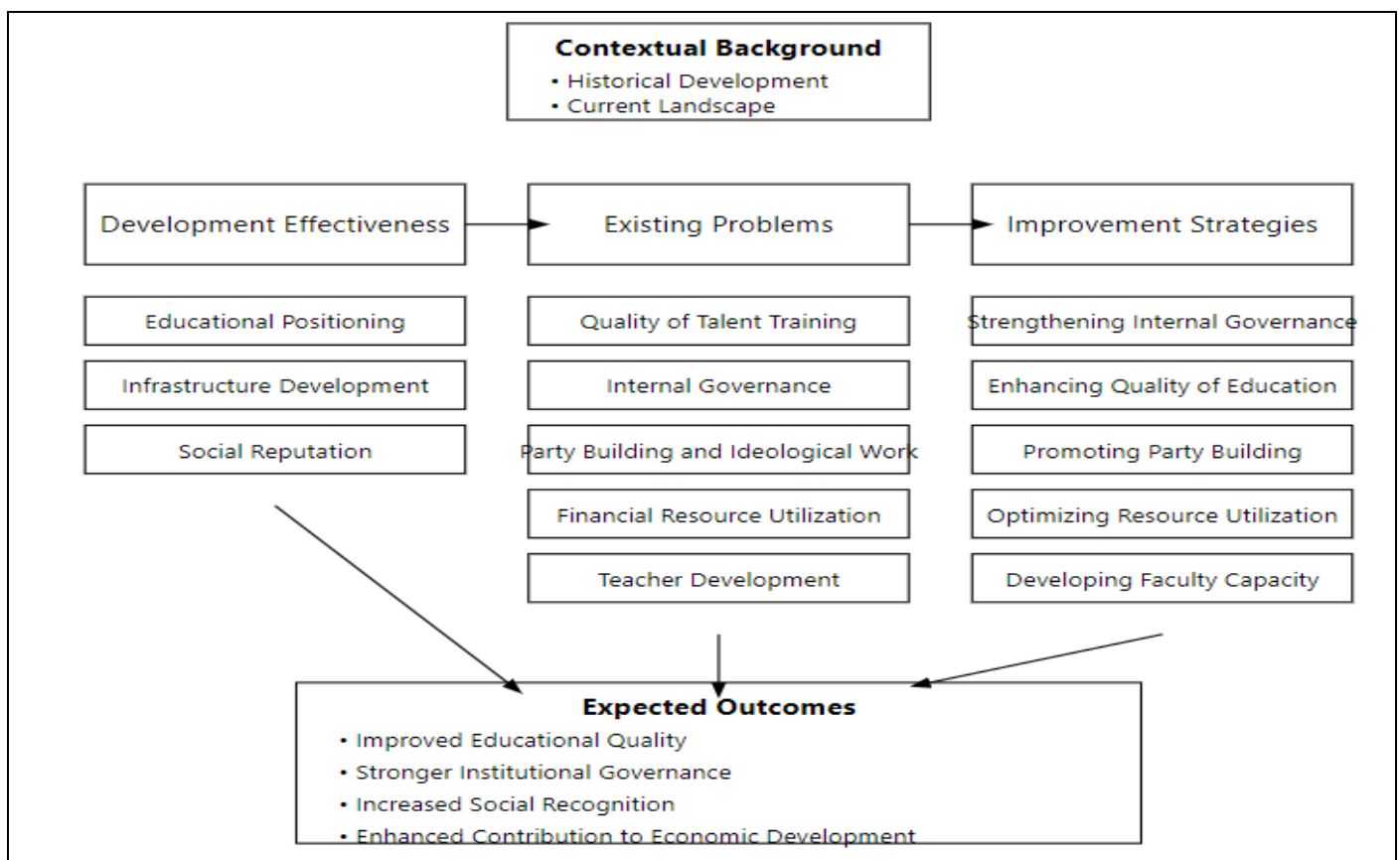


Fig 1 Conceptual Framework

This framework presents the development and improvement of Private Undergraduate Colleges in Guangdong Province. Grounded in the historical evolution and current landscape of private higher education in the region, the framework comprises three core components: Development Effectiveness, Existing Problems, and Improvement Strategies. Development Effectiveness focuses on educational positioning, infrastructure development, and social reputation. Existing Problems encompass issues such as the quality of talent training, internal governance, party building and ideological work, financial resource utilization, and teacher development. Improvement Strategies include strengthening internal governance, enhancing education quality, promoting party building, optimizing resource utilization, and developing faculty capacity. These components are interconnected and mutually influential, with the analysis of effectiveness informing problem identification, and shaping improvement strategies. The framework aims to achieve outcomes including improved educational quality, stronger institutional governance, increased social recognition, and enhanced contribution to economic development. Rooted in organizational development theories, educational quality improvement, and the unique characteristics of private higher education in China, this framework recognizes the complex interplay between internal institutional factors and external influences. This serves as a valuable tool for researchers, policymakers, and institutional leaders to analyze, understand, and improve the development of private undergraduate colleges in Guangdong Province, providing a structured approach to identifying challenges, formulating strategies, and working toward desired outcomes in the context of private higher education.

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Research on barriers in Chinese education reveals several challenges. In public schools, obstacles to developing professional learning communities include insufficient collaborative time, ineffective leadership, and unfavorable accountability policies (Zhang et al., 2017). Inclusive education faces barriers such as lack of teacher training, limited community involvement, large class sizes, and corporal punishment (Tan, 2021). State ownership significantly influences participation in high-barrier industries for private enterprises, while personal political connections become less important (Yao et al., 2018). In urban areas, educational inequality is evident between public schools for legal residents and private schools for migrant workers' children. These private schools, operating on a cost-reduction model, often compromise educational quality and teacher-student relationships (Wang & Jang, 2016). These barriers highlight the complex interplay of social, economic, and institutional factors shaping China's educational landscape and the challenges both public and private schools face.

Private education in China has experienced a resurgence since economic reforms, serving as a valuable supplement to public schools and promoting educational system reform (Tiehua, 1996). However, private institutions face significant challenges, including perceived low quality, fierce competition, and student recruitment difficulties (Lei, 2012). Despite these obstacles, transformational leadership has shown promise in Chinese K12 private schools, positively impacting school development and adapting to educational reforms (Hou et al., 2024). The private education sector has tried to improve teaching quality and promote students' holistic development (Hou et al., 2024). Appropriate measures should be taken to ensure the sound development of private schools (Tiehua, 1996), including stable education policies involving multiple stakeholders and substantive government support (Lei, 2012). Further research is needed to develop leadership frameworks tailored to the Chinese private K12 school environment and address specific challenges (Hou et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2018).

III. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to evaluate the development dynamics, challenges, and strategic enhancements of private undergraduate colleges in Guangdong Province, China. Quantitative data on student enrollment, faculty composition, and institutional infrastructure were gathered from official government reports and academic databases spanning from 2016 to 2021. This dataset included key metrics such as enrollment growth, faculty qualifications, and infrastructure development, all of which were analyzed to identify trends and institutional progress. Descriptive statistics were utilized to outline changes in enrollment, which grew at an average annual rate of 4.2% during the study period.

In addition to the descriptive analysis, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships between faculty qualifications, student-teacher ratios, and educational outcomes, such as performance in national competitions. This allowed the researchers to assess whether improvements in faculty composition had a measurable impact on academic quality. Furthermore, paired t-tests were conducted to determine the statistical significance of changes in institutional resources, revealing notable shifts in infrastructure investment, teaching resources, and research capacity from 2016 to 2021. Qualitative data, collected through in-depth interviews with university administrators, faculty members, and education policy experts, were analyzed thematically. Recurring themes included governance challenges, gaps in talent training, and the need for enhanced faculty development. These qualitative insights were cross-referenced with quantitative findings, enriching the analysis and helping to formulate strategic recommendations for improving the educational quality and governance structures of private undergraduate colleges in Guangdong Province. This mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the development of these institutions.

Table 1 Distribution of Private Undergraduate Colleges and Universities in Guangdong Province by Enrollment and Growth Rate, 2016-2021

Year	Number of Students Enrolled	Growth Rate (%)
2016	371,400	4.9%
2017	399,460	7.5%
2018	414,640	3.8%
2019	425,097	2.5%
2020	439,204	3.3%
2021	450,100	2.5%

In recent years, the enrollment scale of private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province has risen steadily, with the number of enrolled students at 371,400 in 2016, increasing to 450,100 in 2021, a net increase of 78,700 in four years, with an average annual growth of 4.2%, as shown in Table 1. In the 2017-2021 list (top 100) of college student competitions of newly built undergraduate colleges and universities nationwide released by the Research Working Group on College Competition Evaluation and Management System of the Chinese Society of Higher Education, a total of 11 undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province have been shortlisted, of which 6 are private undergraduate colleges and universities.^[24] It can be seen that private undergraduate colleges and

universities in Guangdong Province have shifted from focusing on scale to coordinated development of scale and quality. However, the employment quality of graduates from private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province is not high, and they mainly flow to private enterprises. The monthly salary of graduates' initial employment is not high, and the overall rate of further study is low. Take Zhuhai College of Science and Technology as an example, the number of graduates of the school in the class of 2021 is 8116, and the main type of flow unit is other enterprises (mainly private enterprises), accounting for 83.48%; the rate of graduates pursuing further studies at home and abroad is 6.84%.^[23]

Table 2 Awards Won by Private Undergraduate Colleges in Guangdong Province Across National Competitions, 2016-2020

Competition	Private Undergraduate Colleges (Awards)	Undergraduate Colleges Across the Province (Awards)
China "Internet+" College Students' Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition	12	165
"Challenge Cup" National College Students' Extracurricular Academic and Technological Works Competition	2	154
National College Students Mathematical Contest in Modeling	43	472
"FLTRP Cup" National English Competition for College Students	3	70
National College Students Electronic Design Competition	5	57
National College Students Advertising Art Competition	141	349
National College Students Energy Conservation and Emission Reduction Social Practice and Science Competition	26	161
China College Students Computer Design Competition	242	728

Although the social reputation of private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province has been steadily improving, and several private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province head the minimum scores of arts and science subjects admitted to the province exceed the minimum scores of some public undergraduate colleges and universities in the province, on the whole, there is still a large room for improvement in the quality of their talent training. Specifically, the number and

ranking of awards won by students of private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province in the China Internet+ College Students' Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition and the Challenge Cup National College Students' Extracurricular Academic and Technological Works Competition, which are nationally recognized competitions with high gold content, wide coverage and great influence, are not very satisfactory, as shown in Table 2.

Table 3 Faculty Composition and Teaching Resource Metrics for Private Undergraduate Colleges in Guangdong Province (2016-2021)

Faculty Profile	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of full-time teachers (persons)	17846	18721	19560	21477	24080	20036
Percentage of full-time faculty in undergraduate institutions in the province (%)	27.5	27.8	27.9	28.4	30.0	34.7
Percentage of full-time faculty with graduate degrees (%)	69.9	72.7	74.6	74.3	75.5	76.5
Percentage of full-time teachers with senior titles (%)	30.3	30.1	31.8	31.5	30.3	29.8
student-teacher ratio	20.3:1	20.3:1	20.2:1	19.6:1	19.9:1	19.8:1

Private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province attach importance to the construction of faculty and set up special funds for the introduction and cultivation of talents. During the "13th Five-Year Plan" period, the number of full-time teachers in private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province will increase from 17,800 in 2016 to 20,000 in 2021, with a net increase of 0.22 million, or 12.4%; the proportion of full-time teachers with postgraduate

qualifications will increase by 6.6%; the proportion of full-time teachers with senior titles will remain at 30%; the student-teacher ratio will decrease. The proportion of full-time teachers with postgraduate qualifications increased by 6.6 percentage points; the proportion of full-time teachers with senior titles remained at 30%; the student-teacher ratio decreased, as shown in Table 3. It can be seen that the level of private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province has steadily improved.

Table 4 Infrastructure and Resource Development Metrics for Private Undergraduate Colleges in Guangdong Province, 2016-2021

Campus Area	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Campus area (10,000 m ²)	2451.6	2427.2	2569.7	2676.5	2692.9	1846.5
Floor space of school buildings (10,000 m ²)	909.3	990.9	1029.9	1164.1	1223.9	1109.6
Teaching and administrative space (10,000 m ²)	484.1	486.9	511.2	602.2	703.0	600.4
Books (10,000)	2905.5	3091.5	3284.5	3804.2	4262.7	3626.7
Value of instrumentation (million yuan)	199953.5	203359.1	230976.4	281130.1	309783.7	250588.0

Private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province have increased their investment in school operations, and all major school operation indicators have been significantly improved. During the "13th Five-Year Plan" period, the campus area of private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province decreased from 24,516,000m² in 2016 to 18,465,000 in 2021, with a net decrease of 6,051,000m², or 24.7%; the floor area of school buildings increased from 9,093,000m in 2016 to 11,096,000m, or 22.0%. The increase is 22.0%; compared with 2016, in 2021, the net increase in the area of teaching and administrative premises is 1.163 million m², an increase

of 24.0%, the net increase in books is 7.212 million volumes, an increase of 24.8%, and the net increase in the value of instruments and equipment is 506.345 million yuan, an increase of 25.3%; in 2021, the five indicators of private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province for the per capita operation of students have been close to the ordinary undergraduate colleges and universities. The details are shown in Table 4. It can be seen that the conditions of private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province have been improved to a large extent.

Table 5 Scientific Research Capacity and Innovation Metrics for Private Undergraduate Colleges in Guangdong Province (2018-2021)

Research Capacity	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of scientific human resources with senior titles (persons)	2647	3473	2406	5415
Number of scientific human resources with doctoral degrees (persons)	1800	1544	2439	2909
Number of research institutions at all levels (number)	74	96	116	139
Number of new scientific research projects in the year (items)	1612	2045	2338	3213
Number of research funds invested in the current year (in billions of dollars)	5.90	7.71	8.39	10.39
Number of papers included in the three major indexes (articles)	661	783	955	2186
Number of patent applications for inventions (pieces)	348	469	538	358
Number of invention patents authorized (pieces)	54	79	79	199
Number of awards for provincial and ministerial achievements in the field of science and technology (items)	1	1	-	-
Number of technology transfer contracts (items)	18	23	21	34
Actual income from technology transfer in the year (\$ million)	135.9	149.3	145.4	2381.7

Influenced by the short history of running schools, the late start of scientific research, and insufficient investment of resources, the scientific research capacity of private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province is weak as a whole. This is reflected in the following: firstly, the number of researchers with senior titles and doctoral degrees is small; secondly, the number of provincial-level and above scientific research platforms established for construction is limited; thirdly, the number of

newly established scientific research projects and scientific research funds are small; fourthly, the number of high-level scientific research papers is insufficient. In addition, there are deficiencies in the ability of private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province to buttress the demand for scientific and technological innovation in regional industries and industries. Their radiation to society is limited, as shown in Table 4.

Table 6 Growth and Resource Allocation Metrics for Private Undergraduate Colleges in Guangdong Province (2016-2021)

Category	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of Enrolled Students	371,400	399,460	414,640	425,097	439,204	450,100
Annual Growth Rate in Enrollment (%)	4.9%	7.5%	3.8%	2.5%	3.3%	2.5%
Number of Full-Time Teachers	17,846	18,721	19,560	21,477	24,080	20,036
% Full-Time Teachers with Graduate Degrees	69.9%	72.7%	74.6%	74.3%	75.5%	76.5%
% Full-time teachers with Senior Titles	30.3%	30.1%	31.8%	31.5%	30.3%	29.8%
Student-Teacher Ratio	20.3:1	20.3:1	20.2:1	19.6:1	19.9:1	19.8:1
Campus Area (10,000 m ²)	2451.6	2427.2	2569.7	2676.5	2692.9	1846.5
Floor Area of School Buildings (10,000 m ²)	909.3	990.9	1029.9	1164.1	1223.9	1109.6
Number of Books (10,000 volumes)	2905.5	3091.5	3284.5	3804.2	4262.7	3626.7
Value of Instrumentation (Million Yuan)	199953.5	203359.1	230976.4	281130.1	309783.7	250588.0

This educational institution has shown significant growth and development from 2016 to 2021, with student enrollment steadily increasing by 21% over the six years. Despite this growth, the annual enrollment rate has been fluctuating, peaking at 7.5% in 2017 and declining to 2.5% by 2021, suggesting a slowdown in expansion. The number of full-time teachers generally increased until 2020 but saw an unexpected drop in 2021. Notably, the percentage of teachers with graduate degrees consistently rose from 69.9% to 76.5%, indicating a focus on staff qualifications. The student-teacher ratio remained relatively stable, hovering around 20:1, which suggests efforts to maintain educational quality despite growing enrollment. Campus infrastructure expanded until 2020, with increases in campus area, building floor space, and book volumes, but 2021 saw unexpected decreases in these areas. The value of instrumentation grew significantly until 2020 before declining in 2021. These trends, particularly the shifts observed in 2021, could be attributed to various factors such as budget adjustments, policy changes, or external influences like the COVID-19 pandemic. The data paints a picture of an institution that experienced substantial growth and investment in resources and quality up to 2020, followed by a period of adjustment or potential challenges in 2021.

➤ *The Current Status of the Private Undergraduate Colleges in Guangdong Province*

- Private undergraduate colleges have made significant progress in various areas, including school-running positioning, internal governance, and the construction of educational resources. The overall infrastructure, such as campus area and teaching space, has improved over the years.
- The social reputation of private colleges has been steadily improving, with some institutions achieving admission scores that exceed certain public colleges. This indicates a growing recognition of the quality of education provided by these private institutions.
- Despite improvements in reputation, the quality of talent training remains a concern. The performance of students in prestigious national competitions is not satisfactory, indicating that there is still a significant gap in the educational outcomes of private colleges compared to their public counterparts.

- The report highlights that while there has been some development in party building and ideological work, there is still a need for comprehensive strengthening of these areas to align with the requirements of new educational policies.
- Many private colleges lack a complete and standardized system of internal governance, which affects decision-making processes and the overall management of the institutions. This includes insufficient democratic management and oversight mechanisms.
- The scholarship funds available at some institutions are not being fully utilized for student support, leading to low expenditure rates and missed opportunities for financial assistance.
- There is a pressing need for the construction of high-level teacher teams and improved support for faculty, which is crucial for enhancing the quality of education and research capabilities within these colleges.

➤ *The Challenges that Need to Be Addressed to Improve Their Overall Effectiveness and Quality of Education*

- Despite improvements, there is still a significant gap in the quality of talent training. The document notes that the overall performance of students in national competitions is unsatisfactory, indicating that the educational programs may not be adequately preparing students for real-world challenges.
- The document highlights that many private colleges face limitations in resources, which can hinder their ability to provide high-quality education. This includes a lack of funding for infrastructure, teaching materials, and faculty development.
- There is a noted shortage of high-level and experienced faculty members in private colleges, which affects the quality of instruction and mentorship available to students. This challenge needs to be addressed to enhance the educational experience.
- The internal governance structures in some colleges are still weak, with issues such as incomplete implementation of party building responsibilities and insufficient participation of faculty and students in decision-making processes. This can lead to inefficiencies and a lack of accountability within the institutions.

- The document suggests that curriculum development needs to be more aligned with industry needs and the evolving job market. There is a need for continuous improvement and adaptation of curricula to ensure that students acquire relevant skills and knowledge.
- There is a challenge in providing students with sufficient opportunities for practical experience, such as internships and hands-on training. The establishment of practice teaching bases and partnerships with industries is essential but may not be fully realized in all institutions.
- The emphasis on increasing enrollment numbers over educational quality can compromise the learning environment. Colleges need to balance growth with maintaining high standards of education.

➤ *The Strategies for Improving the Development of Private Undergraduate Colleges in Guangdong Province.*

- Enhance the level of professional construction by developing first-class undergraduate majors and creating distinctive brand majors.
- Innovate the talent training mode by focusing on moral character cultivation, integrating industry and education, and promoting a "four-in-one" talent cultivation model that includes ideal belief education, knowledge learning, ability cultivation, and quality cultivation.
- Raise awareness of party building and ideological work, ensuring that these are integral to the governance of the colleges.
- Implement a comprehensive party construction strategy, including revising statutes to incorporate party leadership and responsibilities.
- Implement a "talent" strategy to attract and retain high-level faculty members, focusing on the development of a specialized and innovative talent team.
- Establish an integrated system for talent management that includes recruitment, training, evaluation, and retention of faculty.
- Improve the governance structures by establishing clear rules and regulations, ensuring democratic management, and enhancing the participation of faculty and students in decision-making processes.
- Invest in the development of teaching resources, including physical infrastructure, educational materials, and technological tools to support effective teaching and learning.
- Establish partnerships with industries to create more opportunities for students to gain practical experience through internships and hands-on training.
- Promote the construction and reform of core and special courses, integrating theory and practice, and ensuring that the curriculum aligns with national standards and industry needs.
- Develop a multi-dimensional evaluation system for teaching and learning that includes assessment and accreditation to strengthen the overall quality of education and enhance the international recognition of qualifications.

IV. CONCLUSION

Over the past 40 years, private undergraduate colleges in Guangdong have achieved notable advancements in various aspects, including educational positioning, internal governance, and the development of teaching resources. These institutions have become an integral part of the higher education landscape in the province. Despite these achievements, there are persistent challenges that need to be addressed. Issues such as the quality of talent training, inadequate internal governance, and the need for stronger party building and ideological work remain significant barriers to further development. The study stressed the importance of focusing on the connotation construction of private colleges, which involves enhancing the quality of education, improving teacher training, and ensuring effective management practices. This is essential for aligning with the broader goals of high-quality development in education as outlined by national policies. The report presented the critical role that private undergraduate colleges play in supporting the economic construction and social development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. By cultivating students with high-quality talents, these institutions contribute to the region's innovation and growth. The implementation of the presented strategies addresses the identified challenges. This includes strengthening internal governance, enhancing party building, improving the quality of talent training, and ensuring the effective utilization of financial resources. The conclusion reinforces the idea that while private undergraduate colleges in Guangdong Province have made significant strides, a concerted effort is needed to overcome existing challenges and enhance the overall quality and effectiveness of education in these institutions.

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