

Educational Quality of Independent Colleges in China

The Perceptions of Students and Teachers

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IV

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the educational quality of the independent colleges – the newest higher education institutions in China. In order to investigate this issue, the study explored motivations of students for choosing independent colleges, the experiences of their learning processes, as well as their perceptions of learning environment.

Motivation theory, social cognitive theory and its processes consisting to the research questions were applied in this study. A qualitative research strategy using principles of case study was utilized for the research. Individual semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 5 groups of students, teachers and staff in College X. Data collected during the interviews was analyzed according to the themes identified in theoretical framework.

The research findings indicated that both of the students and teachers generally had high-level satisfaction with respect to students' learning experiences and environments. This could be interpreted as an indication of relatively high educational quality of independent colleges. However, there were also some additional findings highlighting the difficulties the students experienced. The implications for students, teachers and school managers were discussed with the aim to establish a better learning environment for students, as well as to improve the educational quality of independent colleges.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Quality assurance of higher education in China

As one of the three major targets of growing public discontent, the quality issue of higher education in China has become an important topic at present (the other two are health care and housing) (Hartmann, 2006). An internet poll of the general public reported a remarkable 68.9% dissatisfaction rate and only 4.3% high satisfaction rate concerning the quality of higher education. One of the most important reasons for this high dissatisfaction rate was “decline in quality” (21st Century Education Development Research Institute, 2005).

Chinese higher education evaluation began in 1985. The first regulation on higher education evaluation – “the Interim Regulation of Higher Education Institution Evaluation” was issued in 1990. In 2004, the Ministry of Education established the Higher Education Evaluation Center (HEEC), and the main responsibility of HEEC is to organize and implement the evaluation of teaching in institutions of higher education (Yu, Andrea, Liu & Chen, 2010).

Prior to 2008, the center completed one round of evaluations. The evaluation procedures and standards were based on the Scheme for Evaluating Undergraduate Teaching at Higher Education Institutions... The center organized by educational experts to the institutions, and evaluated the institutions based on their teaching philosophy, faculty quality, provision of facilities, teaching administration and education outcomes” (Yu et al., 2010, p.48).

The quality assurance process of the center organizes site visit by educational experts to the institutions; evaluate the institutions based on their teaching philosophy, faculty quality, provision of facilities, teaching administrations, and education outcomes; use assigning grades “excellent, good, qualified, and unqualified” to evaluate the institutions. In 2008, 589 institutions had been evaluated, and a high quality assurance result showed that 433 institutions were rated as “excellent”, 135 as “good”, 21 as “qualified”, while no institutions failed or were rated as “unqualified” (Yu et al., 2010). However, in contrast with the extremely high dissatisfaction rate of public’ opinions, the “real” educational quality situation in China is still not clear, thus the relevant research is quite necessary.

This discrepancy also attracts great attentions of research and media in China. According to Yu et al. (2010), although there are official measures to assure quality in higher education and a high evaluation result had been reported, the public is still not convinced of and satisfied with the quality situation of higher education in China. Taking Peking University – one of the highest ranked Asian institution for instance: the public in China viewed Peking University’s highly placed position in the ranking quite negatively in fact, with many people suspecting that the university received the position through bribes and even regarding this as a “shame” of the country (Xinhua net, 2005). Unlike institutions in other countries usually publicizing their high-ranking positions, Peking University kept a very low profile on this matter and did not comment on or even mention this ranking publicly (Yu et al., 2010).

There are also several rankings of Chinese higher education institutions, for example, the popular rankings include those compiled by Wu Shulian of Chinese Academy of Management Sciences, Netbig.com, and the China University Alumni Association Network, etc. However, none of these rankings receives the recognition of official government or sponsorship (Yu et al., 2010).

As De Weert (1990) indicates, quality in higher education is multifaceted, requires judgment by people with experience, and can not simply be equated with “excellence” (as cited in Malcolm, 1992). “If the word ‘university’ replaces ‘enterprise’ throughout this paragraph, then a university which take quality assurance seriously emerges as a self-critical community of students, teachers, support staff and senior managers each contributing to and striving for continued improvement” (Malcolm, 1992, p.11).

Malcolm (1992) indicates that quality assurance in higher education should be comprehensive and examine *inputs, processes* and *outputs* as follows:

Inputs include factors relating to the students (qualifications, experiences and aspirations), factors relating to the teaching staff (professional experience, qualifications, staff development on teaching, etc.), factors relating to the administrative and technical staff, and factors relating to the physical facilities. *Processes* of teaching and learning are essential areas for self-evaluation. An effective course team will be constantly monitoring how the course is proceeding, the difficulties and successes of the students, and logistical and pedagogic problems. *Outputs* include examination results, comparison with national data, employers’ views

of graduates, graduate destinations, graduates' views after experiencing employment for some time (one year and five years), etc. (p.21).

According to the references above, the quality assurance issue of higher education in China has become a growing concern area with various problems: first, the official evaluation is simple and not comprehensive. The HEEC only uses very simply words to evaluate the quality issue and mostly focuses on the inputs (teaching quality, facilities, administration, etc.) to rank the institutions, while the processes and outputs are normally ignored. Second, the official evaluation can hardly reflect the public's real satisfaction situation on higher education institutions. Third, other kinds of authoritative evaluations and credible rankings are lacking in China.

Accordingly, a study going beyond the above evaluation and rankings, which pays attention to the real quality of higher education in China, is quite necessary. Meanwhile, as the newest higher education institutions, independent colleges were chosen and examined in this study because concerned studies of quality issue were extremely lacking. Due to the above reasons, the present study formulated a research of quality assurance, with the aim to examine the educational quality of independent colleges, which would directly benefit the students, teachers, and the college organizations, as well as to improve the educational quality of this type of institutions.

1.2 Institutional background of the study

In 1978, the “reform and opening up policy” began because that the Chinese government intended to change the old perspective in order to meet the challenge of modernization. The year of 1978 was significant for China opening the door to the outside world and education opening to modernization since then (Schell & Shambaugh, 1999).

In this era, the government showed its intent to reduce state control of higher education: “existing institutions were allowed some degrees of independent governance and non-state-run higher education institutions re-emerged” (Chan & Mok, 2001, as cited in Yu et al., 2010, p.20-21). Because of these policies, both the numbers of institutions and enrollment increased rapidly – the number of institutions rose double from 598 in 1978 to 1016 in 1985, and the number of enrollment increased from 0.4 million to 0.6 million during this period (China

Statistical Year Book, 2005). This reform established the Chinese higher education system that exists today.

In the late 1990s, the government began the merger of specialized higher education institutions with the aim to form larger multi-disciplinary universities and colleges. “There had been a trend to transfer institutions administered previously by central ministries to provincial administration of the Ministry of Education and a few specialized institutions under the administration of relevant ministries” (Yu et al., 2010, p.21).

In 1999, the government began to massively increase the population of university enrollment. The higher education institution expansion intended to achieve the goal of increasing the percentage of participating in higher education from 9% to 15% by 2010. Due to unprecedented growth rates, this goal was achieved in 2002, which was eight years ahead of schedule (Ministry of Education, 1999, as cited in Yu, et al., p.21).

According to Yu et al. (2010), the Chinese system of higher education had experienced unprecedented expansion and undergone dramatic change in the past decade (p.22), while some landmark actions were made during this era (Bai, 1998). The country experienced an “impressive shift from ‘elite’ to ‘mass’ higher education” during this period, and established an unprecedented expansion of opportunities for the people participating in higher education. China is the world’s largest provider of higher education now (Trow, 1973, as cited in Yu et al., 2010, p.22).

In summary, the most recent reform of higher education in China began in 1978. Both the “reform and opening up policy” and education expansion have contributed the rising of institutions and participant numbers in higher education. Since 1990s, the educational system has been revolutionized to adapt the dynamic demands of a market-oriented economy. In addition, “Chinese parents had always been willing to spend a large portion of their income on their children’s education, thus the educational spending had great potential to increase consumer demand and domestic spending” (Yu et al., 2010, p.22).

All of the above social conditions contributed the new Chinese higher education system existing today: first, the enrollment number of higher education in China has grown almost ten-fold in the last ten years. Since the education expansion began in 1998, there were 3.2 million students studying in higher education institutions, and the number rose to more than

30 million in 2008. Second, as the most important higher education institutions, the number of public institutions increased rapidly, from 1022 in 1998 to more than 2000 in 2008. Third, for the continuous growing demands in educational market, the establishment of private institutions was encouraged by the Chinese government in 1992, then a special type of private institutions called independent colleges were also established in 2000. The number of private institutions has grown rapidly, and they developed into a significant provider of higher education. One in six students studying for undergraduate education in China is attending a private institution now (Yu et al., 2010) (Educational Statistics Year book of China, 1998-2008). The introductions of the above institutions were mentioned in Chapter 2.

1.3 Research questions

The main research interest guiding this study is to explore educational quality of independent colleges through the eyes of students and teachers in China. Hence, three research questions were formulated:

- What are the motivations of students for choosing independent colleges?
- What are the students' experiences of their learning processes in independent colleges?
- What are students' perceptions of the learning environment in independent colleges?

The present study is a case study with telephone interview. Student participants are as the general interview group, and their perceptions are the main objective. Furthermore, although "teachers" are not included in the research questions, their perceptions about the same issues were also explored. Asking about how teachers perceived students' choices and behaviors, added depth to the research questions above.

1.4 Limitations of this study

There are several limitations of this study as follows:

First, according to Malcolm (1992), a comprehensive quality assurance process of a higher education institution should examine the factors relating to inputs, processes, and outputs. However, because of the limited time, the outputs (including comparison with national data,

employers' view of graduates, graduates' views after experiencing employment for one and five years, etc.) could hardly be examined in this study. Accordingly, this research focused on the factors relating to inputs and processes of independent colleges, which was not comprehensive enough in some levels.

Second, as unique research method in this study, telephone interview has some limitations. For example, "motivation to participant may be lower than for a face to face interview; respondents may not wish it to spend a long time on the telephone, so telephone interviews tend to be briefer than other forms of interview; some respondents feel that telephone interviews afford less opportunity for them to question or rebut the points made by the interviewer" (Louis, et al., 2007, p. 380). Hence, the individuals' points of view might be not whole or true reflections, and they might miss or conceal some important information of their experiences. All of these invisible issues may affect the data collection even the final results of this study. In addition, since the sample size of this study was rather a small number of individuals from one selected college, it would hardly be convincing to generalize the restricted scope of findings for other independent colleges which had different education characteristics, management structures, even locations.

Third, the interview questions were first sent to three department assistants in College X (see Chapter 4), then the interviewees, at last the interviews began after several days when the above process finished. The selected samples were based on the ready availability of participants who had prepared for most part of the interview questions, thus the answers may not be their very first impressions.

Finally, as the current research is a case study of a single college, it is not possible to generalize from its findings to the general population. However, as the study is explorative, the findings will hopefully inspire other researchers to undertake similar studies which could provide a more comprehensive picture of the quality of independent colleges in China.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

The thesis has seven chapters. As the background of this study, Chapter 1 took short briefs on the quality assurance issues of Chinese higher education, the significant policies of "reform and opening up", and "education expansion". Chapter 2 gave an overall review of the general education management, teacher resources, and study programs of independent colleges in

China. Chapter 3 presented the theoretical framework based on motivation theory, social cognitive theory and its processes. Chapter 4 argued the research methodology undertaken for the study and details the whole process of data collection and analysis. Chapter 5 presented the data findings from the interviews. Chapter 6 discussed the research questions and explored additional findings of this study. In Chapter 7, the conclusions of the study were presented.

2 Independent College Context

As mentioned in Chapter 1, factors relating to administration and teaching staff are included in inputs of quality assurance and should be examined (Malcolm, 1992). Hence, in this chapter, the general teaching system and school administration of independent colleges were illustrated as the background of this study. In Section 2.1, to make a clear description, the general governance system of private institutions was introduced by comparing with that of public institutions. Then as a special type of private institutions, some unique characteristics of independent colleges were presented in Section 2.2.

2.1 Public versus private

Higher education in China is defined as “education that is carried out after the completion of senior secondary education”. The higher education institutions can be “classified by the qualifications they provide and by their governance structures, and therefore can be classified as a university, college, vocational or regular institution, public or private” (Higher Education Law, 1998) (Yu et al., 2010, p.24-25).

According to Yu et al. (2010), in modern China, higher education institutions enrolling undergraduate students can be categorized into two groups: public and private (including independent). In the public category, there are both universities and colleges, in contrast, college is the only institutional type classified in the private category (p.49).

From the first higher education institution established in 1895 to more than 2000 ones nowadays, the public institution has always been the main type of higher education sector, even was the only type during a long time in China. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the “reform and opening up” policy and education expansion made the necessary conditions for emergence of the Chinese private education institutions, therefore, in 1992 the establishment of private institutions was encouraged by the Chinese government, and a framework of both the public and private sectors providing higher education has been gradually established since then.

The number of private higher education institutions increased rapidly, which counted 13% of the country’s total number of higher education institutions (Ministry of Education, 1978-2009), and become one of the most important institutions in Chinese higher education system.

In this section, the differences between public and private higher education institutions in *administrations, financing and enrollment quotas* were discussed in the following parts.

2.1.1 Differences in administrations

There are several different levels of education system governance in China. Generally speaking, higher education is administered by both the central and provincial-level governments:

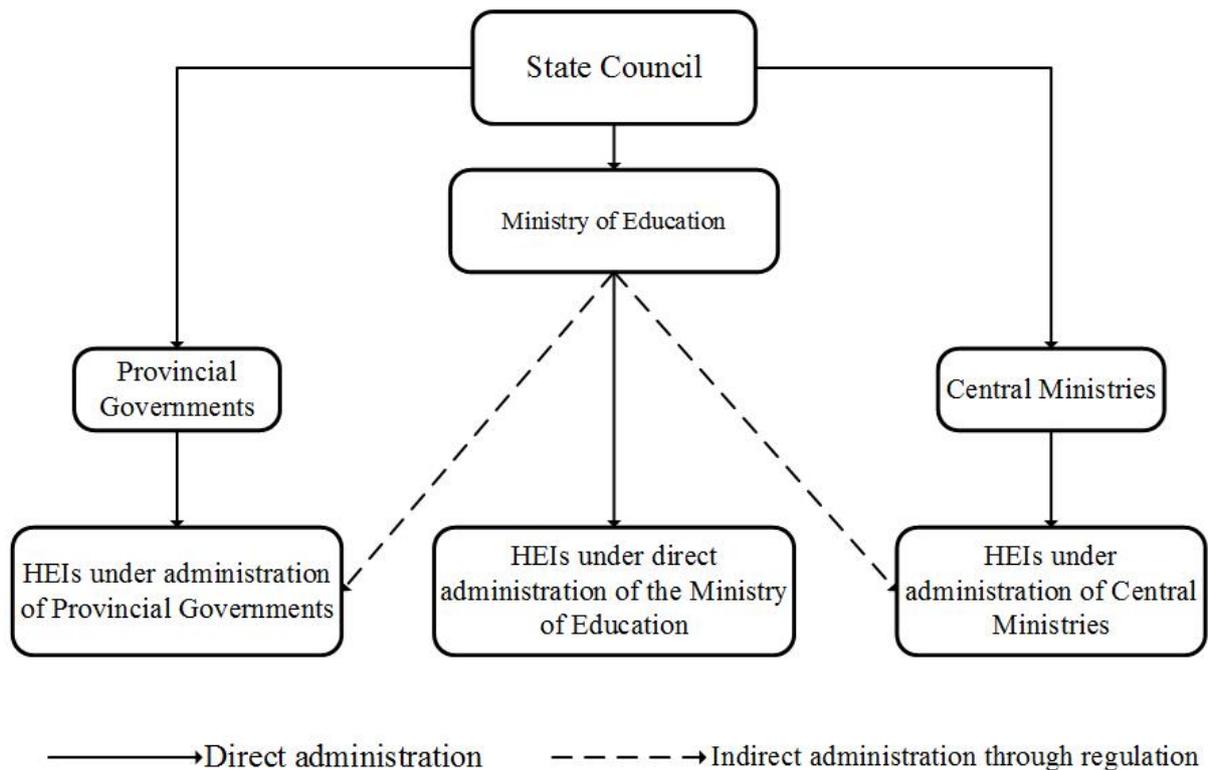
At the central government level, the State Council and the Ministry of Education are responsible for the overall administration and guidance of the governments and relevant central ministries, the Council establishes the national principles of education and its related policies, funding and planning (Yu et al., 2010, p.36).

The Ministry of Education is “the State Council’s executive body for education and it carries out strategic planning, rule and regulation drafting. Supervises and manages policies directly relevant to the administration of higher education, the practice of teaching and research, teacher, staff and student affairs” (Ministry of Education, 2009, as cited in Yu et al., 2010, p.36).

Therefore, public and private institutions have the same management system in governance level, and both types of institutions have to respect the rules and orders drawn up by these organizations. However, according to Yu et al. (2010), private colleges are not owned by the provincial governments. They are higher education institutions owned by private entities (maybe individuals or corporations), and it is one of the most important differences from public universities in administration part.

A main special feature of private institutions, especially for independent institutions, is the Board of Directors. Board of Directors is a unique institution only existing in private sectors, and most of them consist of the investors, school leaders and part of staff. Their decisions have the absolute power for the system organization and rule management. This is another most important difference in administration system between public and private higher education institutions in China.

Figure 2.1: Chinese higher education administrative system



Source: Adapted from Zhou (2006).

2.1.2 Differences in financing

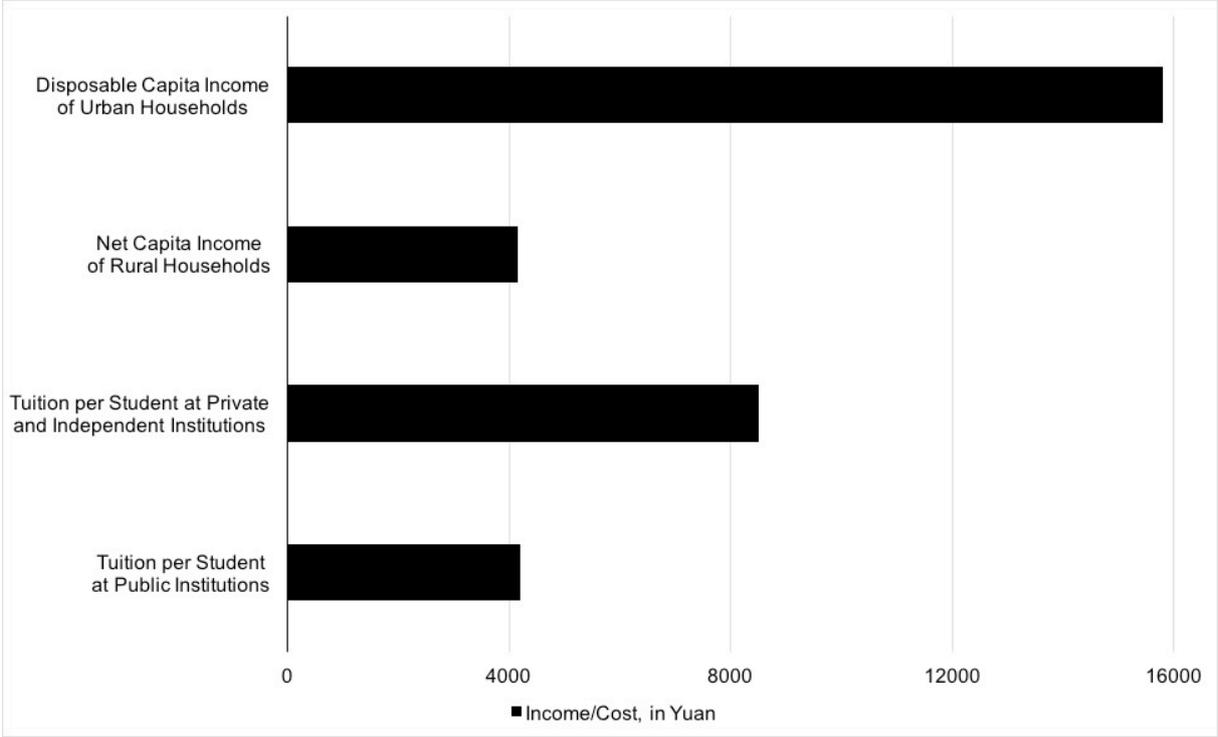
In modern era, the financing of higher education in public sector has changed dramatically: a total government-funding finished in 1980s, and the government’s contribution reduced rapidly from 72.32% to 43.77% in the period 1944 to 2005 (Kang & Shen, 2008). “The public institution is now much more dependent on the funds raised by the institutions themselves” (Yu et al., 2010, p.32).

At the beginning of the tuition fee reform in 1990s, only very small part of students had to pay a nominal fee, however, all of them have to pay tuition fee in the public sectors since 1997. Furthermore, the costs of tuitions are various from “region to region, from school to school, even from one field of study to another”. In summary, the government contributes around 44% of total higher education financing (the fees determined directly by the central government and provincial authority), while tuition and miscellaneous fees contribute 34% at present (Yu et al., 2010, p.32-33). Hence, the government funding and tuition fees are two

main sources of public higher education institutions' financing, and the government funding plays the most important role.

Yu et al. (2010) indicate a main difference between public and non-public (private and independent) institutions is that “public institutions receive general funding from the government while non-public institutions mostly rely on tuition fees as income”. For public institutions, fee levels are determined directly by the central government or provincial authority and different institutions have virtually no influences. In contrast with the public institutions, tuition fees are the most important funding for private higher education institutions. The private institutions are free to set their own fees but need reports to the educational and price control bureaus, and sometimes need approvals from the authorities (Yu et al., 2010, p.34).

Figure 2.2: Tuition fees compared to median income, 2008



Source: adopted from Yu et al. (2010, p.74).

Since it is the most important funding, the tuition fee in private higher education institutions is usually two or three times as much as that in public universities. For instance, in the public universities, the tuition fees are at range from 3,000 to 6,000 yuan per year in the subject such as Agriculture; are at range from 4,500 to 8,000 yuan per year in Arts. By contrast, in private

institutions, the fees range from 8,000 to 20,000 yuan per year depending on subjects and institutions with an average of around 12,000 yuan per year (CUAA, 2008). In contrast with the Chinese families' disposable income (see Figure 2.2), tuition fees are important issues for numbers of students whose families could not afford.

2.1.3 Differences in enrollment quotas

In China, before the students apply higher education institutions, the government determines the supply and assigns a quota to each institution. Each institution may suggest the number it would like to enroll, but the government makes the final decision. The quota is applicable to all undergraduate program admission process, and it is generally not possible for institutions to admit more students without the approvals of the authorities (Yu et al., 2010, p.41).

The National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) is intended for students who seek to attend a higher education institution immediately upon leaving secondary school. It is nationally conducted on the same day every year, and the result of the NCEE is the only standard for entering higher education. Because not all exams are identical and comparing test results across all provinces is impossible, each higher education institution sets separate enrollment standards according to provinces (Yu et al., 2010, p.41-44). Since the NCEE score is almost the only standard for higher education enrollment, there is a trend that the universities/colleges with higher reputation generally set higher entrance scores, and the students with higher scores normally enroll in better higher education institutions than the ones with lower scores.

In contrast with public universities, the enrollment quotas of private institutions are also included in the government's control but with greater flexibility. Private institutions normally have much lower admission standards, and the enrollment numbers are also much more than that of public universities. For example, according to the webpages of the two institutions, in 2012, the enrollment number of Xiamen University (a public university) was 60 in Jilin province, and the enrollment scores were in the range of 594-614; the enrollment number of Jilin Huaqiao University of Foreign Languages (a private college) was 942, and the enrollment scores were in the range of 435-525 in the same province of the same year.

In summary, as important factors of inputs, the introduction of governance structure in private institutions, including administrations, financings and enrollment quotas, helped to examine

the quality issue in this study, and some unique characteristics of independent colleges were presented in the next section.

2.2 Unique characteristics of independent colleges

Generally speaking, an independent college is a new type of private higher education institutions, “which is a college set up by a public university with the contribution of a private investor” (Yu et al., 2010, p.50). It has all characteristics of private institutions, which includes the administration systems, the main financing sources (tuition fees) and flexible enrollment quotas, but with some unique characteristics.

Independent colleges were introduced in 2000 as a means to quickly increase the supply of higher education institutions. Within only seven years (2000 to 2006), 318 independent colleges were established (Ministry of Education, 1978-2009). According to Yu et al. (2010), in contrast with the normal private sector, independent colleges are unique because they “while being non-public, are strongly affiliated with a public institution” – every college is established under the name of a prestigious maternal university or a (public) parent institution, but with private management and funding (p.52).

There are both bachelor and tertiary vocational study programs in most independent colleges, while bachelor program is the only part to be explored in this study. Private institutions must develop for many years before they can be approved to open undergraduate courses and confer degrees, in contrast, independent colleges usually become degree-granting institutions quickly after, or upon establishment in some cases (Lai & Wu, 2003).

Previous independent colleges were allowed to confer certificates in the name of their maternal universities. However, in 2003, the Ministry of Education placed many new restrictions about independent colleges. A crucial one is that, in order to reduce the dependency, from that year on, newly enrolled independent colleges’ degrees would be conferred by the independent colleges themselves rather than by their maternal universities. Nevertheless, newly enrolled independent colleges still use part of their affiliated maternal universities’ names to share the better reputation. For example, there are two independent colleges named Zhejiang University City College and the Applied Technology College of Suzhou University, corresponding to the public maternal universities named Zhejiang University and Suzhou University (the Economist, 2006).

The most important difference between independent colleges and other higher education institutions (including public and traditional private institutions) is the unique education management system, which can be reflected from *teaching resources* and *study programs*.

Teaching resources

Cooperation management is applied by the education system of most independent colleges in China. There are two general kinds of teaching resources: one is the teachers from independent colleges' maternal universities or other public universities. In order to enhance the independent colleges' academic competence, maternal universities may share their teachers and facilities, and independent colleges also may employ some teachers from other public universities. This type of teachers often signs part-time contracts with independent colleges. The other one is own staff of independent colleges with full-time contracts. These two kinds are managed by the same organization but enjoy different treatments depending on detailed regulations of different colleges.

Study programs

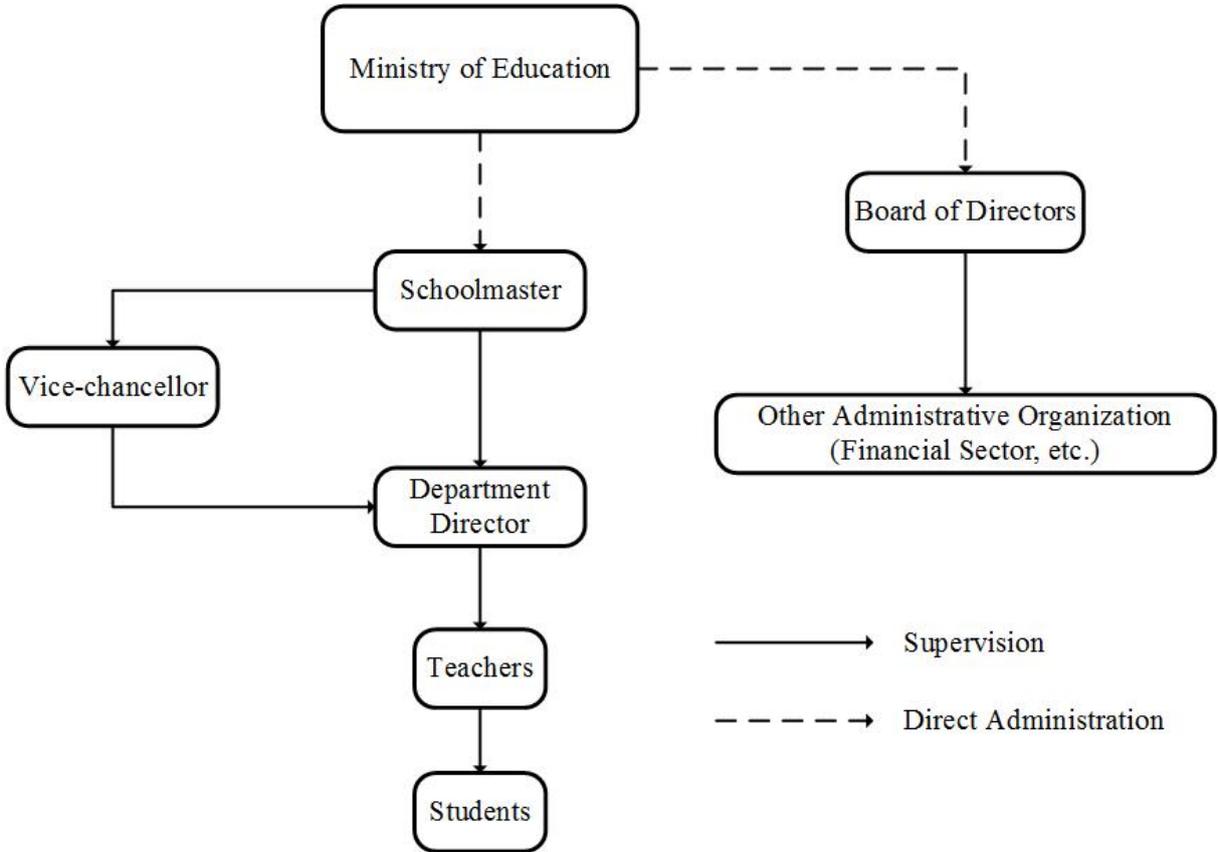
Due to the unique education management system, in contrast with other types of institutions, independent colleges have more flexibility on formulating study programs. Generally speaking, it has two characteristics:

First, the curricula of independent colleges are formulated more flexibly than those of other institutions. An independent college can completely determine the course contents and directions. Thus, in contrast with focusing on general theoretical curricula, most of independent colleges normally formulate their curricula focusing on the work-related skills to help students facing competitions in their career selections. Second, by contrast with one uniform academic program in one program of other institutions, independent colleges normally make classifications in different employment directions for each program. Because of the two above characteristics, most of independent colleges declare that their students can achieve more guidance and opportunities on selection of careers, and get more working skills during their learning processes.

Taking the study programs in College of Humanities and Sciences of Northeast Normal University (CHSNENU) (an independent college) and Jilin University (JLU) (a public university) for instance: according to the information on both institutions' webpages, in

academic direction, CHSNENU formulates it as that education should be geared to the needs of modernization, ensures the students are prepared to have a high sense of work-related skills, and the final goal is preparing qualified students who will have attained a broad range of general knowledge along with a strong ability to compete in the job market. In contrast with the independent college, JLU sets its study program to help their students systematically master the basic theories, knowledge, and skills, in order to guarantee the students have innovation spirits, practical abilities and highly qualified professional knowledge. In curriculum formulations of “Chinese Language and Literature” program, JLU simply sets it as teaching basic theories and related professional knowledge. In contrast, CHSNENU classifies the curricula into three directions (office automation, language education, journalism & communication) from the sophomore year. Hence, students can get lots of guidance before choosing their preferable study learning directions, which will directly influence their career selections (College of Humanities & Sciences of Northeast Normal University, 2014) (Jilin University, 2013).

Figure 2.3: Administrative system of independent colleges in China



Source: Setting and management practices of independent college, 2008

In summary, as a special kind of private institutions of Chinese higher education system, independent colleges are the newest institutions with unique and private managements on various factors. The privileges in degree-granting, special teacher resources and flexible education management of study programs are the main differences from normal private higher education institutions. In addition, as the newest institutions, the relevant research and studies of independent colleges are extremely lacking. Some questions, for example, “why students choose independent colleges, what their motivations of applying are, how learning takes place inside, what students’ experiences are and what the ‘real’ quality situation is in this institution” attract great attentions for public. Accordingly, in order to answer the above questions, a study with the aim to explore the quality issue in independent colleges is quite necessary.

3 Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlined the theoretical framework for analyzing the educational quality of independent colleges in China. Motivation theory, social cognitive theory and its process were applied with the aim to explore the motivations of students for choosing independent colleges, the students' perceptions of their experiences, as well as the environment of their learning processes.

3.1 Research on educational quality

Previous research and studies of educational quality have adopted abundant theories. For example, Seymour's book (1992) presents college and university education as a quality-oriented service of students, and describes how the management philosophy and tools can help promote quality. Eric and Ludger (2007) focus on the role of educational quality, and conclude that there is strong evidence that the cognitive skills of the population are powerfully related to individual earnings. Although the quality issue and cognitive skills of population have been discussed, the above research and studies mostly focus on organization administration and academic administrators that are quite different from the main research objective of this study.

Ronald's book (1992) is one important research focusing on individual's perceptions. By examining the quality of higher education in inputs and outputs, it presents that the quality of higher education is understood in terms of its "performance" as captured in performance indicators, then discusses issues concerning quality of higher education, for example, performance indicator, fitness of purpose, value added, peer review, total quality management, and academic audit, etc. It addresses improving the quality of the educational process and grapples with the "student experiences" and other related factors. The educative process can be described as "the powers of the mind", and motivational learning and performance is discussed inside. In John's research (2007), the multiple functions of quality evaluation have been discussed. He indicates that the threads and rewards inherent in quality assessment provide motivation for all. The motivational "effects of quality assessment using methods of performance indicators, student surveys and like provide one of the arguments for using these particular methods" (p.24). Similarly, Lynley and Tierra (2004) present student's sense of belonging in their classes and schools, a large body of social relations and

interactions in students' motivation has been discussed. They indicate that "students' interpersonal relationships and interactions with peers and teachers, their social goals with school, and their perceptions of general social climate of their classes have all been shown to be associated with a range of motivational and learning outcomes" (p.27).

Since the main research purpose of the present study is exploring the educational quality issue of one specific higher education institution (independent colleges) and students' perceptions of their classes and college are important research objectives, which is consistent with the three above research and studies. As an assumption, the theories using in the above research might be appropriate of this study, thus motivation theory of learning and performance were discussed in the following part.

3.2 Motivation theory

According to Paul and Dale (1996), "motivation theory is an important quality that affects all classroom activities because it can influence what, when and how we learn and can affect both learning of new behaviors and performance of previously learned behaviors" (p. 21).

Schunk (1991) presents many research show that "students' perceptions of their capabilities relate positively to motivation, students who feel self-confident about learning and performing well in school normally seek challenges, expend effort to learn new material, and persist at difficult tasks" (as cited in Paul & Dale, 1996, p.7). Moreover, Bernard (1984) discusses that "the construction of a theory of student motivation creates some special problems and requires departure form prior theories of motivation", it is unlikely that much of classroom behavior is governed by the sexual and aggressive instinct (p.15).

As Winne and Marx (1989) note:

A complete theory of motivation in the context of instruction is traditionally viewed as having to account for why students behave in classrooms as they do. This explanation of student behavior has three facets: (1) what students elect to do, (2) the temperament with which they act, and (3) their persistence in the presence of obstacles or alternatives. (p.253)

Understood with the definition and facets, the present research is consistent with motivation theory for several reasons: firstly, the research purpose of this study is examining students'

experiences through what, when and how they learn, in order to explore the real quality in independent colleges. Furthermore, concerning the research questions, unlike other classroom behavior focusing on sexual and aggressive instinct, students' learning and performance are core research objectives in this study. In addition, the students' willing, their attitudes and their persistence can help to answer the other two research questions, including students' motivation of choosing independent colleges and their experiences in the classroom. Accordingly, motivation theory was adopted in this framework to explore the students' perceptions of motivational learning and performance, guided data collection and analysis in this study.

3.3 Social cognitive theory

3.3.1 Relevance with motivation theory

Various theories have relevance to motivation in education research. For instances, conditioning theories, emphasize the association of stimuli with responses as the mechanism responsible for behavior change; drive theories, focus on overt behavior but explain it in terms of inner needs; and arousal theories, deal with behavior in nature, and other internal mechanisms. However, unlike other theories considering motivation to be a performance variable, social cognitive theory postulating that motivational processes influence both learning and performance (Schunk, 1989), is most incorporated with motivation research (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.31-49).

Maehr (1984) also indicates that most current research on the association between student motivation and aspects of their classroom has focused on student perceptions. This is because cognitive theories assume that students ascribe personal meaning to their situation, influenced in part by their achievement histories, previous experiences, belief systems and individual characteristics (as cited in Helen, 2004, p.246-247). Therefore, social cognitive theory relating to motivation theory, which highlights students' experiences in the class and focuses the importance of social influences on behavior, was adopted in this study.

3.3.2 Definition and theory model

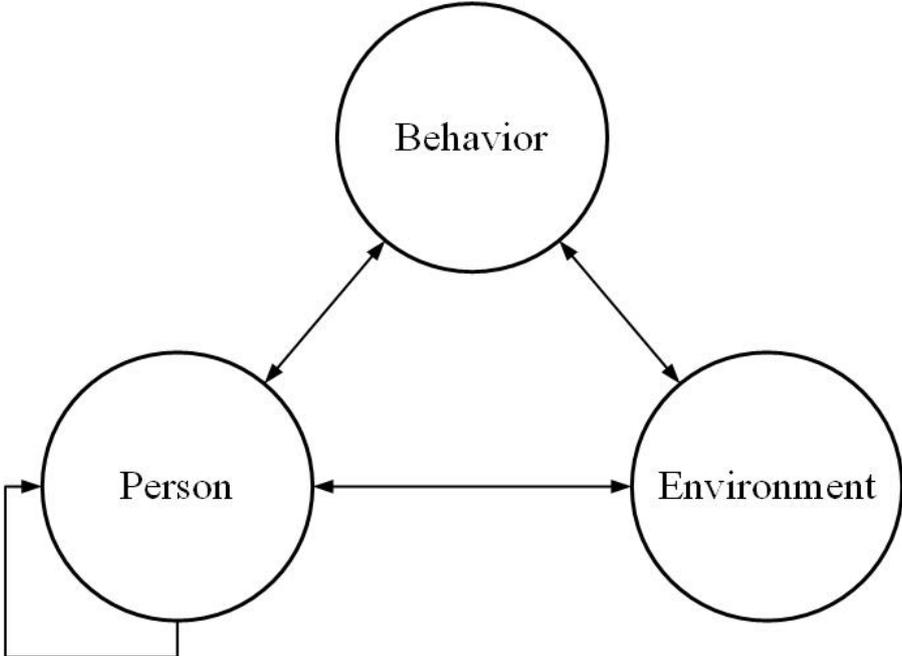
Social cognitive theory is “contends that individuals act based on their thoughts concerning their goals, beliefs and values” (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.155). Bandura (1986) helps to establish this theory’s conceptual foundation: he indicates that social cognitive theory distinguishes learning from performance of previously learned actions, the example of this performance is people learn skills and strategies that they may not demonstrate at the time of learning but rather later when they believe it would be appropriate and motivated to act accordingly (as cited in Paul & Dale, 1996, p.156).

“Bandura (1986)’s theory is based on several key assumptions: (a) the reciprocal nature of influence among personal, behavioral and environmental factors; (b) the relation of learning to motivation; (c) the enactive and vicarious sources of behavioral change” (as cited in Paul & Dale, p.160).

He also indicates social cognitive theory’s framework of triadic reciprocity as follows (see Figure 3.1):

In the social cognitive view people are neither driven by inner forces nor automatically shaped and controlled by external stimuli. Rather, human functioning is explained in terms of a model of triadic reciprocity in which behavior, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants of each other. (p.18)

Figure 3.1: Model of triadic reciprocity



Source: as cited in Dale and Paul, 1996, p.161

Understood with definition and this model, social cognitive theory is appropriate of this study. For one reason, as mentioned above, social cognitive theory has relevance with motivation theory because it focuses on students' perceptions of their learning and performance, which is consistent with this study. For another, as important factors related to inputs and processes of quality assurance, students' perceptions of their learning environment are also core objective to be explored in this study. In addition, with respect to behaviors and performances, students' experiences and perceptions of environment would be considered together for evaluating the quality issue as a result of this study, which also corresponds to the assumptions of Bandura's social cognitive theory.

3.3.3 Social cognitive processes

As suggested in Bandura's social cognitive theory, there are some types of social cognitive processes to detail the use of the theory. According to Schunk (1989), unlike other theories that consider motivation to be a performance variable, social cognitive theory postulates that motivational processes influence both learning and performance. Bandura (1986) expands social cognitive theory's scope to encompass learning and performance of cognitive, social and motor skills, strategies, and behaviors. He integrates motivational processes with learning and self-regulation (as cited in Paul & Dale, 1996, p.156). Therefore, in terms of motivation theory and the main research purpose of this study, motivational process was adopted to guide the research.

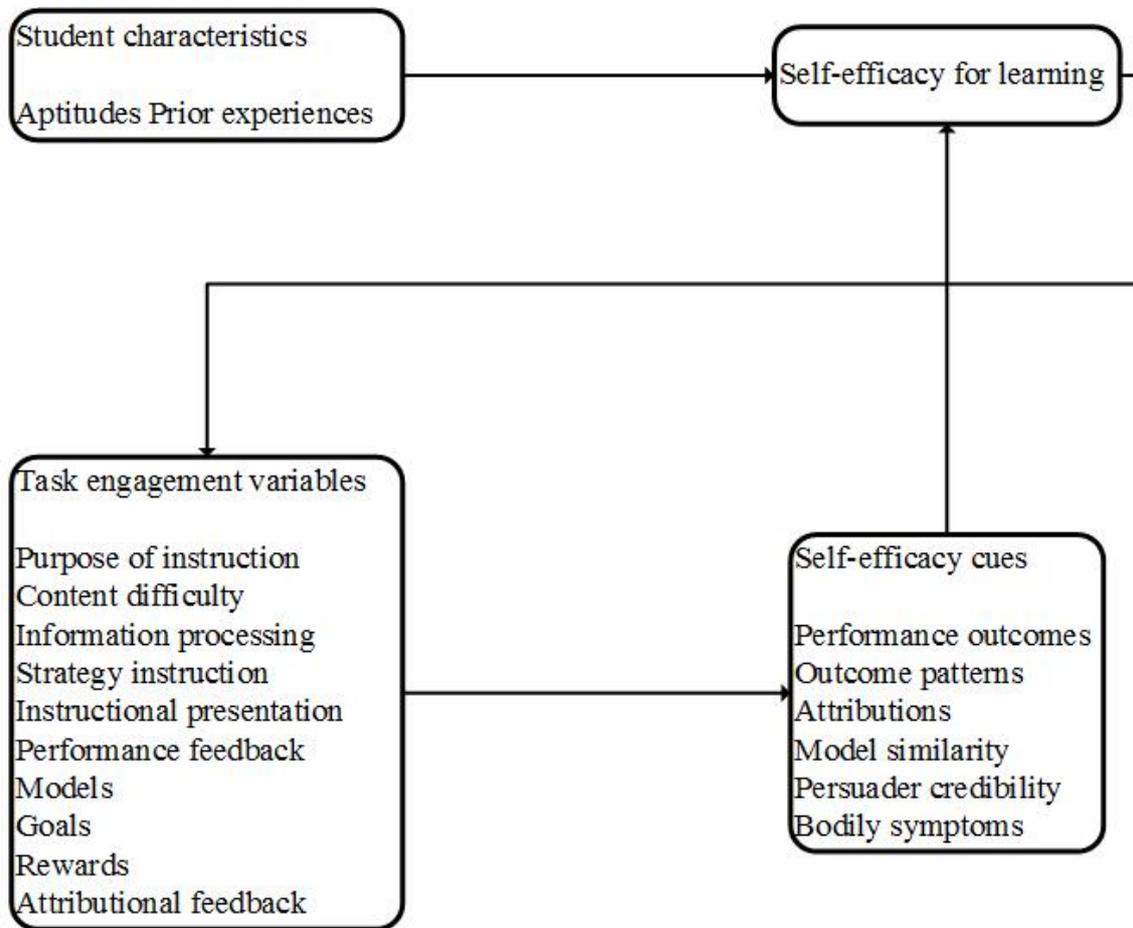
As a motivated process, motivated learning is motivation to acquire skills and strategies rather than to perform task (Corno & Maninach, 1983), and it postulates strong links between motivational and learning processes (Paul & Dale, 1996).

Schunk (1989) presents a model of motivated learning (see Figure 3.2):

At the start of a learning activity, students differ in their self-efficacy to acquire the knowledge and skills. Self-efficacy varies as a function of aptitudes (e.g. Abilities, attitudes) and prior experiences. Task management variables comprising personal factors (e.g., goal setting, information processing) and environment mental factors (e.g., classroom rewards, teacher feedback) affect students while they are working.

These factors make salient various efficacy cues, which signal to students how well they are learning and which students use to appraise their self-efficacy for continued learning (Schunk, 1989, as cited in Paul & Dale, 1996, p.177).

Figure 3.2: Model of motivated learning



Source: Paul and Dale, 1996, p.178

The dimensions of motivated learning in Figure 3.2 are described as follows:

1) Student characteristics

According to Cronbach and Snow (1977), “students enter tasks with differing aptitudes and prior experiences that influence their initial sense of self-efficacy for learning... aptitudes include general abilities, task-specific skills, interests, attitudes and personality characteristics” (as cited in Paul & Dale, 1996, p.177). Students differ in their prior education experiences, for example, school attended, number and types of teachers and amount of time spent on various subjects (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.177).

2) Self-efficacy for learning

Bandura (1977) explains that self-efficacy can have diverse effects on behavior, for one, it can affect choice or activities; for another, it also affects effort expenditure and persistence. “One’s own performances offer quite reliable guides for assessing self-efficacy, in general, successes raise self-efficacy and failures lower it, although once a strong sense of efficacy is developed, an occasional failure is not apt to have much effect”(Dale, 1989, p.15), students with higher self-efficacy solves more problems correctly and choose to rework more problems they missed (Paul & Dale, 1996). As mentioned before, aptitude and prior experiences affect students’ self-efficacy for learning.

3) Task engagement Variables

Task engagement variables include the factors “that come into play during instruction and while students are engaged in academic activities”, some important aspects are the purpose of “instruction, content difficulty, information processing, strategy instruction, instructional presentation, performance feedback, models, goals, rewards and attributional feedback”(Paul & Dale, 1996, p.179).

4) Self-efficacy cues

According to Paul and Dale (1996), efficacy cues are “derived from task engagement variables, some important cues are performance outcomes (success, failures), outcome patterns, attributions, model similarity, persuader credibility and bodily symptoms” (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.180).

“Successes could raise self-efficacy and failures lower it, success attributed to great effort generally should raise efficacy less that if minimal effort is required, because the former implies that skills are not well developed” (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.180). Observing similar peers improving their skills conveys that students can learn as well; observed failures cast doubt on students’ capability to succeed, model similarity can be based on perceived competence or personal attributes, such as age, gender, ethnic background, even when the attributes have little bearing on the modeled behaviors (Rosenthal & Bandura, 1978).

The current study adopted this model as a theoretical framework. Besides the reasons mentioned above, the formulation of study programs in independent colleges normally

focuses on learning work skills rather than to perform task which corresponds to motivated learning, thus motivated learning is appropriate to this research. However, independent colleges are special education institutions because most of the students are adults inside, and the administrations are unique in the mentioned aspects, thus some factors of Schunk's model are not suitable for them, and some factors which are not closely related to this study also should be removed, for example, persuader credibility and bodily symptoms. In summary, students personal factors including prior experiences, self-efficacy for learning, performance in the class, goal setting, and environmental factors including teacher feedbacks and classroom rewards were examined in this study to help answer the research questions and explore the main objective.

3.4 Other relevant environmental factors

Anderman (1999) presents that students' interpersonal relationships and interactions with peers and teachers, their social goals with school, and their perceptions of the general social climate of their classes have all be shown to be associated with a range of motivational and learning outcomes, as well as with more affective indicators of adjustment (as cited in Lynley & Tierra, 2004, p.27). Freeman and Anderman (2003) also indicate that students' perceptions of their social acceptance among peers in school and their satisfaction with the quality of their peer relationships in school have been associated with the sense of belonging for college students, and this study also reports positive effects for students' perceptions of their teachers' competence, commitment, and respect (as cited in Lynley & Tierra, 2004, p.41). Since independent colleges are new higher education institutions with special study programs and organizations, the examining of classroom planning and school factors are important and should be considered in this study. As supplements, some important factors related to environment were discussed in this section, including teacher and classroom influences, school culture and organization.

1) Teacher and classroom influences

Paul and Dale (1996) indicate that teacher does has potential motivational impact on students, "this includes not only the more obvious ways that teachers attempt to influence student motivation, but also teacher activities typically associated with instruction management and

methods for minimizing and dealing with disciplinary problems” (p.328). *Teacher planning and decision making*, and *classroom climate* were two factors adopted in this study.

Teacher planning and decision making

Clark and Yinger (1979) indicate that teacher planning are prescriptive and spell out what teacher should do to foster student learning, they include the steps as specifying learning objectives, selecting teacher and student activities, organizing activities and delineating evaluation methods (as cited in Paul & Dale, 1996, p.329). Teachers’ planning is also strongly influenced by the characteristics of their students, for example, needs, abilities and motivation (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Many previous study of teaching effectiveness assumed that teacher’s planning and instructional activities affect student cognitions and learning, and in turn, teachers’ thoughts and behaviors are influenced by how students react to classroom activities, (as cited in Paul & Dale, 1996, p.328-329). This point brings to mind Bandura’s (1986) emphasis on reciprocal interactions among cognitions, behaviors and environmental factors in Section 3.2.

Classroom climate

Dunkin and Biddle (1979) indicate that classroom climate refers to the atmosphere of classroom, including its social, psychological, and emotional characteristics. According to Paul and Dale (1996), the importance of classroom climate as it relates to motivation derives from the notion that teaching is leadership intended to affect classroom behavior. It is often described using such terms as warm, cold, permissive, democratic, autocratic and learner-centered (p.341)

2) School Culture and organization

According to Paul and Dale (1996), factors “under the school culture and organization component represent various features of schools that can have an influence on teacher and student outcomes” (p.372). First, *school norms, values and shared beliefs*; second, *school atmosphere*; and third, *task and work structures*, are more directly observable for exploring school culture and organization (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.372).

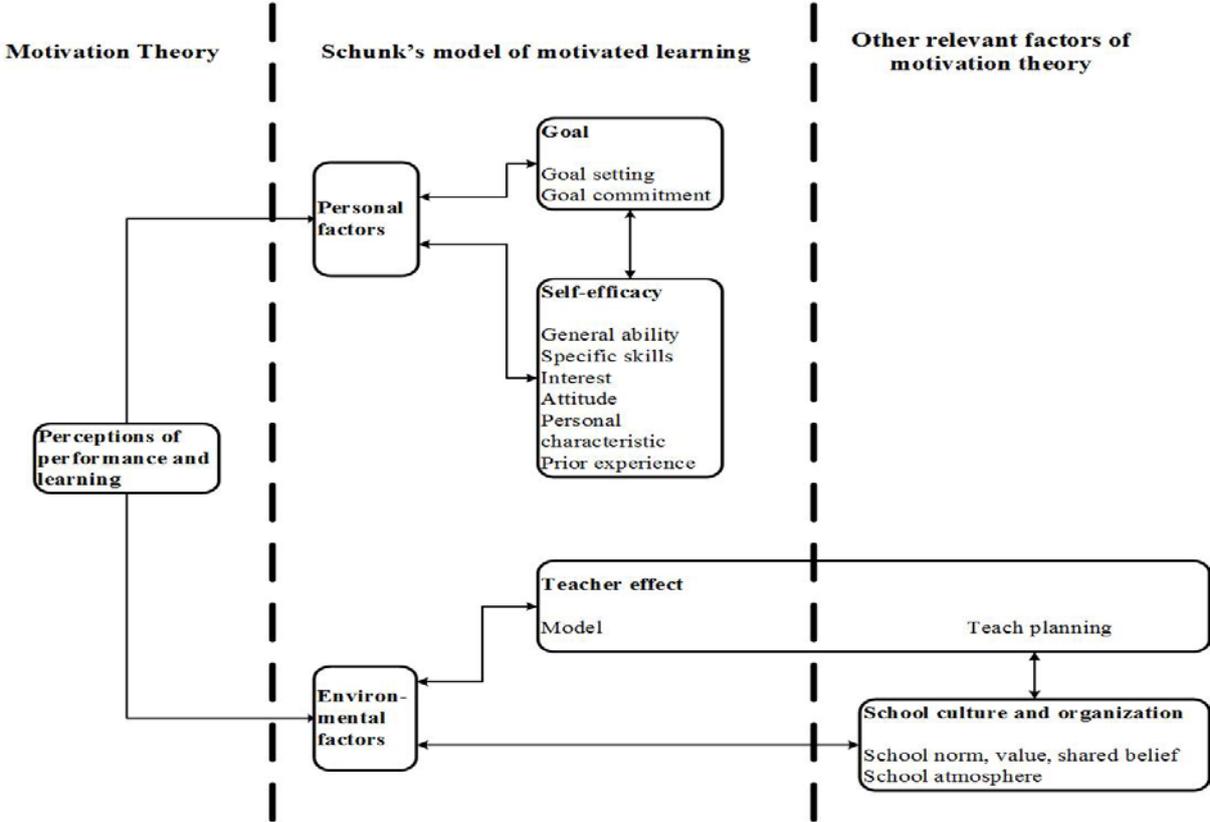
School culture is that individuals in the school building will share some common values and core beliefs about the organization, it is like the school goals, or reflect on the daily performance that guide teacher and students’ behavior (Paul & Dale, 2002). The climate of

school can influence on teacher and students outcomes: it includes individuals' feelings that they belong to the group or organization, and they can committee to the organization goals', and they can also feel personal safety and security (Paul & Dale, 2002, p.362-364). The task and work structures can refer to the "nature of the activities" and curriculum that students and teachers engage in as they enact the school curriculums in classroom", and also refer to how the school is organized in terms of "teachers' work and role differentiation" (Paul & Dale, 2002, p.364).

3.5 Conclusion

The present study adopted motivation theory to lead the main research direction, and Schunk's model of motivated learning was the main theoretical framework to guide data collection and analysis. As mentioned above, Schunk' model covers a wide range of dimensions, while some of them should be removed to make the framework closely related to the research purpose of this study. In addition, other environmental factors mentioned in Section 3.4 also would be added as supplements.

Figure 3.3: Model of theory framework in this study



The theoretical framework of this study was formulated covering various dimensions to guide the process of data collection and analysis. As can be seen in Figure 3.3, students' perception of performance and learning covers two general components: personal and environmental factors. Personal factors are influenced by goal and self-efficacy, while environmental factors are influenced by teacher effect, school culture and organization. The arrows show the links and reactions between dimensions, and the domains separated by dashed lines show the dimensions' relevant theories. In addition, as an exploration, it should be notice that this framework is a new way of systematizing the theories above. Besides, the shortcomings of this framework can not be ignored, for example, some of probable links between variables had not been taken into account in this study

The dimensions categorized in personal and environmental parts under investigation in this study can briefly be illustrated as follows:

1) Personal factors

In personal factors part, *goal theory* of task engagement variables and *self-efficacy* (general abilities, task-specific skills, interests, attitudes, personal characteristics and prior experiences) are researched as the internal factors to evaluate the students' experiences of learning processes in independent colleges.

Goals:

Goals are when students set them, they are apt to experience a sense of efficacy for goal progress, in addition, a more difficult goal can build high efficacy because they can offer more information about learning capabilities than easier ones (Paul & Dale, 1996);

Goal setting: Locke and Latham's definition (1990) of goals represents a social cognitive perspective that defines a goal as something the individual is consciously trying to attain, but the thing being sought is outside the individual, goal related constructs such as needs, drives, motives and goals in perspective (p.7), they indicate that a goal-setting theory has two important aspects of goals are goal choice and goal commitment. Bandura (1986) also finds that goal level and goal commitment can influence the personal factors.

Goal choice "refers to the actual goal that individual are trying to obtain and the level at which they are trying to attain it"; goal commitment represents "how strongly individuals are

attached to the goal, how enthusiastic they are about the goal, or how determined they are to achieve it” (Paul & Dale, 2002, p.165-166).

Self-efficacy:

General abilities, task-specific skills, interests, attitudes and personal characteristics, and prior experiences affect students’ self-efficacy for learning (Cronbach & Snow, 1977), these are the factors of another internal factors researching in this study. “Student also differ in their prior educational experiences, such as school attended, number and types of teachers and amount time spend on various subjects” (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.177).

2) Environmental factors

In the environmental factors part, *teacher effect, classroom climate, school culture and organization* are selected as the external conditions to evaluate the students’ learning environment of independent colleges.

Teacher’s effects:

According to Paul and Dale (1996), teachers can affect student motivation in many ways. As mentioned above, Clark and Yinger (1979) find that many models of teacher’s planning are “prescriptive and spell out” what teachers should do to foster student learning, it is strongly influenced by the characteristics of their students, such as needs, ability, motivation, types of grouping structures are competitive, cooperative, and individualistic” (p.346), and are also influenced by the students’ performance and reaction in the class. The test plans of teachers, which are the ways to estimate the strength of the effect for individuals (Hill & Sarason, 1966).

Another important influence on student motivation by a teacher is the use of models. Models are when students attend to and emulate teachers despite being dissimilar in attributes and competence, observation of successful peers may exert stronger effects on efficacy, especially among learners who doubt they can attain the teacher’s level of competence (Schunk, 1989c); in addition, “the latter students may not efficacious about learning after observing a flawless teacher model, but seeing similar peers master the task may make them feel more capable and motivate them to attempt to learn” (Paul & Dale, 2002, p.171). Therefore, to consist with Schunk’s model, the concept of model in this study means exploring peer model used by students and teachers particularly.

Classroom climate:

Classroom climate refers to the atmosphere of the classroom and its social, psychological and emotional characteristics (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974). According to Paul and Dale (1996), the importance of classroom climate as it relates to motivation derives from the notion that “teaching is leadership intended to affect classroom behavior, classroom climate is often described using such terms as warm, cold, permissive, democratic, autocratic and learner-centered” (p.341).

School culture and organization:

As mentioned above, first, school norms, values and shared beliefs; second, school atmosphere; and third, task and work structures are more directly observable for exploring school culture and organization (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.372).

4 Research Methodology

According to Louis, Lawrence, and Keith (2007), research design is governed by the notion of fitness of purpose, while the purpose of the research determines the methodology, and design of the research (p.78). Bryman (2008) also explains that the research design provides “a framework for the collection and analysis of data” (p.698). This chapter attempted to present the structure that guided the “implementation of research methods and the analysis of the gathered data” (Bryman, 2008, p.30). Qualitative research method and case study approach were used in this study.

4.1 Qualitative research strategy

According to Bryman (2008), there are two dominant research strategies in social research: the quantitative and the qualitative strategy.

Quantitative research focuses on the collection of numerical data which represents a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research with emphasis on the testing of theories (Bryman, 2008, p.22). It refers to counts and measures of things and relies chiefly on numbers (Bruce, 2004). Therefore, quantitative research embodies an objectivist view of reality as external to social actors as objective and value-free as possible (Bryman, 2004).

Qualitative research refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things. it provides a means of accessing unquantifiable facts about the actual people researchers observe and talk to people represented by their personal traces, as a result, allows researchers to share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives (Bruce, 2004, p.4-7).

In contrast with quantitative research, qualitative research focuses on naturally emerging languages and the meanings individuals assign to experience, life-worlds, which include emotions, motivations, symbols and their meanings, and other subjective aspects associated with naturally evolving lives of individuals and groups (Bruce, 2004). In addition, the issues of qualitative research are in depth and detail, which produces rich data and detailed information about a smaller number of people and cases, without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis (Patton, 2002, p.14). According to these important

characteristics, since this study attempts to answer the research questions by gaining detailed information from the experiences told by several small groups of interviewees and aims to explore the phenomenon in learning processes, qualitative research is more appropriate.

4.2 Case study research design

4.2.1 Why case study?

This study utilizes a case study design, which explores the learning process of students in independent college X. A case study is “a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle. It provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enables readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles” (Nisbet & Watt, 1984, p.72-74). “The single instance is of a bounded system, for example, a child, a clique, a class, a school and a community” (Louis et al., 2001, p.181)

The reasons why case study is suitable for this study are: first, the aim of case study is to describe the phenomenon in its context or a complex social phenomenon (Yin, 1989). A qualitative case study is “characterized by the researchers spending time on providing background for the case(s) studied in addition to the data collected. The researchers have the opportunity of reflecting on what is going on, the investigators have little control over events and the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context” (Yin, 2009, p.2). Therefore, the quality of independent college students’ learning experience is indeed a serious issue in real life, and the aim of this study also conforms to the definition of a case study.

Second, Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) consider that a case study focuses on individual actors or unit of actors (for example a child, a clique, a class, a school or a community) and seeks to understand their perceptions of events (p.317), and one of the strengths of case study is that it observes “effects in real contexts, recognizing that context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects” (Louis, Lawrence & Keith, 2001, p.181). Therefore, a case study is suitable for this research because the purpose and research unit have the characteristics above.

Finally, as mentioned in Chapter 2, there are 318 independent colleges in China. This large number means it impractical to conduct research at national level, thus case study research design is preferable.

4.2.2 Independent College X context

There is some general information of College X as follows, and all of the data was collected from its official webpage.

As mentioned before, this study took College X, located in a capital city belonging to a northeast province of China, as a case for detailed research. It is a private college providing undergraduate education with official certification approved by the Ministry of Education in February 2004.

In 2012, there were 10800 full-time students, 12 schools/departments with 42 undergraduate programs in College X. At present, the programs in College X involve various fields which cover economic, management, education science, literature, and science, etc. Cooperation teaching source is composed of 33 part-time teachers hired from public universities (including its maternal university) and 640 full-time teachers. The general funding of College X is from student tuition fee, secondary colleges and affiliated companies.

The reason for choosing College X is that many research and studies had been conducted to the independent colleges in capital city (Beijing) and first level cities (Shanghai, etc.). As a contrast, very little attention had been paid to the ones in other level cities, in spite of the fact that the number of independent colleges within other provinces is considerable, occupying 97% of the total number in China (Map of College in China, 2009). As an official independent college located in a second level city in China, College X has general, formal and representative characteristics, thus it is suitable for this study.

4.2.3 Participants

There are two main methods of sampling: random and purposive sample (Cohen and Holliday, 1979). The difference between them is: in a random sample, the chances of members of the wider population being selected for the sample are known; in a purposive sample, the chances of members of wider population being selected for the sample are unknown. In the latter type the researchers deliberately-purposely select a particular section of the wider population to include in or exclude from the sample (Louis, et al., 2007, p.110), rather than on a random basis, the research participants are usually sampled at different levels or classifications in order to have a variety in the sample (Bryman, 2008,p.415).

Louis et al. (2001) point out that, there is no clear-cut answer for the correct sample size. It depends on the purpose of the study and the natures of the population under scrutiny. One way to determine sample size is “the researcher exercising prudence and ensuring that the sample represents the wider features of the population with the minimum number of cases” (p.93).

Accordingly, in the present study, to ensure the selected sample size was wide enough for all the features of the case college, the purposive sample was used to collect data. This study selected interviewees in Department I and II from total 12 departments. To make sure the reliability of the research, the units of analysis included students as the main interview object group, teachers as secondary group, and school staff as supplement group. The perceptions of three groups were considered together for the finding result.

The two criteria of the department selection are: first, both of the two departments were established in the year when College X was founded. After 9 years’ development, they were two oldest ones with complete management systems and predominant characteristics among all major programs. Second, in order to ensure that the sample size is large enough, they were also two biggest departments of College X with more than 2000 students.

Table 4.1: Participants in the study

	Category	Group Number	Participant Number	Total
Student	Department I	A	6	12
	Department II	B	6	
Teacher	Full-time	C	3	6
	Part-time	D	3	
Staff	---	E	3	3

According to Monique et al. (2011), gatekeepers “are people who have a prominent and recognized role in local community. They can typically have knowledge about the characteristics of community members and are sufficiently influential to encourage community members to participate in a study”, and they can be a local service provider (e.g. health or education) (p.92-93).

As can be seen in Table 4.1, in this study, six students of each department were selected, named those from Department I as Group A and those from Department II as Group B. 3 full-time teachers named Group C, 3 part-time ones named as Group D, and 3 staff named Group E were also selected from Department I and II. All selections were conducted by the help of the department assistants (gatekeepers). Since the sample size was rather small in this study, to ensure the variety, the interviewees covered different backgrounds, for example, family backgrounds, learning performances, professional experiences and qualifications.

4.3 Research methods

As Bera (2009) indicates, interviews, observations, and documentary analysis are typically data collection associated in qualitative case study research. According to Bryman (2008), the interview is “probably the most widely employed method in qualitative research” (p.436). In this study, semi-structure telephone interview was adopted to collect the data, and an in-depth interview was the general method during the data collection process and guided the questionnaires formulation.

As Louis et al. (2007) argue, the use of telephone interview has long been recognized as an important method of data collection and is a common practice in survey research (p.379). The most important advantage of telephone interview is “its cost-efficiency and speed of data collection” (James & Sabine, 1995, p.4). There are also several attractions of telephone interview when it being used, such as “it is sometimes cheaper and quicker than face-to-face interviewing; it enables researchers to select respondents from a much more dispersed population than if they have to travel to meet the interviewees; travel costs are omitted; there is greater interviewer control of interview,” (Shaughnessy et al., 2003). According to the above advantages, the author was in Norway while the interviewees were in China when the interviews took place, thus telephone was chosen in the interviews.

An in-depth interview is “a one to one method of data collection that involves an interviewer and an interviewee discussing specific topic in depth”, and the researcher’s purpose is to “gain insight into certain issues using a semi-structure interview guide” (Monique, Inge, & Ajay, 2001, p.109), It is typically used “when seeking information on individual, personal experiences from people about a specific issue or topic (for example, how people make decisions, people’s own beliefs and perceptions, the motivation for certain behaviors, etc.),

asking questions in an open, empathic way” (Monique et al., 2011, p.109). Therefore, in-depth interview is appropriate to the purpose and research method of this study.

Furthermore, as Yin (1994) indicates, when preparing for data collection in a case study, the typical skills for the case study investigator are question-asking, listening, adaptiveness and flexibility. In this study, before interviewing, most of the interview questions were formulated open-ended. In order to facilitate a deeper investigation of the general research questions, every questionnaire with different questions for each interviewee group (total three questionnaires) was designed in advance (Appendix II, III, IX). The formulation of questions covered various ways, for example, the rating scale, which is “very useful device for sensitivity and differentiation of response whilst still generating numbers” (Oppenheim, 1992). During the listening process, some interview questions were reworded or rearranged.

4.4 The procedure of data collection and data analysis

The telephone interview was conducted during 21 September to 26 September 2013. Interview guide with a cover letter (see Appendix I) was sent to all the interviewees of College X with the help of three department assistants (Ms. Li, Ms. Yang and Mr. Liu) before the end of August 2013. The materials were first sent to the department assistants by email, and finally on September 4th 2013, they handed the materials out to the student, teacher and staff participants of the selected groups. The first step of data collection was to interview the student Group A and B, then the second step for teacher Group C and D, and the last step for staff Group E. The time schedule is shown in Table 4.2.

Kvale (1996) suggests that the “researcher is the research instrument, the effective interviewer is not only knowledgeable about the subject matter but is also an expert in interaction and communication; the interviewer will need to establish an appropriate atmosphere such as the participant can feel secure to talk freely” (p.125). Accordingly, most of the interviews took place from 18:00 to 21:00 in Chinese local time which were free and available hours for interviewees. Voice of Internet Phone was adopted and Mandarin Chinese (the interviewees’ mother language) was the language used during the telephone interviews. In a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere, all the interviewees were highly corporative during the conversations.

Table 4.2: The organization of the interviews

Time	Category of Data Collection
21-23 September	Interview the students (Group A & B)
24-25 September	Interview the teachers (Group C & D)
26 September	Interview the staff (Group E)

The data collected for the telephone interviews began on October 2nd 2013. The first step was translating all the information from the interviewees' conversations into English. In this process, there were difficulties to find appropriate translations of some interviewees' words. Then the answers from participants were first coded by extracting notes from translation of initial transcripts after reviewing several times, at last the result was categorized and analyzed.

Besides, all the interview questions were formulated according to the research questions and the theoretical framework in this study. For example, in Appendix II, the questionnaire for student group was composed of sixteen questions. The first part was used to ask the demographic information to interviewees; the second part was designed to examine the general situations of the students' study experiences (goals, interests, attitudes, prior experiences, and models); the third part attempted to investigate the students' learning environments (teachers' plans, classroom climate, school atmosphere); and the last part was the evaluation of students' learning experiences. In the analysis process, similar answers of each question in different groups were extracted and categorized. The descriptions of findings were explored in Chapter 5.

4.5 Reliability and validity of the data

Reliability and validity are two prominent criteria for the evaluation of social research (Bryman, 2008). According to Bryman (2008), reliability is concerned with the issue of whether the results of a study can be repeated (p.31); validity is concerned with the "integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research" (p. 32).

In qualitative research, reliability can be regarded as "a fit between what researcher's record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched" (Bogdan &

Biklen, 1992, p.48). Therefore, as mentioned in Section 4.2, three types of interview groups were selected to make sure the reliability of the collected data. Furthermore, through and after the interview processes, the interviewees were often checked if the questions were clear and whether the author understood their answers correctly, in addition, free atmospheres were tried to establish to make them feel secure to talk.

In interview process, inferences about validity are made too often on the basis of facing validity, that is whether the questions are asked as if they are measuring what they claim to measure (Cannell and Kahn, 1986). Louis et al. (2007) point out that the most practical way of achieving greater validity is to minimize the amount of bias as much as possible. “A skilled interviewer should structure the interview well, so that each stage of the interview is clear to the participant” (Kvale, 1996, p.154). Therefore, much attention had been paid to the design of interview process, such as in the interview questions and the selection of participants – the interview questions were formulated carefully, which were important and influence the interview data directly. In addition, as mentioned before, since the sample size in this study was small, the gatekeepers were used to make sure the participant selection was widely enough and more representative.

4.6 Ethical consideration

A social science study has an ethical obligation to the study population and the large society from such excursions into private social lives, various policies, practices, and even laws may result, thus researchers must ensure the rights, privacy, and welfare of the people and communities that form the focus of their studies (Bruce, 2004, p.43). Punch (1994) also indicates, a large extent concerns about research ethics revolve around various issues of harm, consent, privacy, and the confidentiality of data.

According to Monique et al. (2001), during a qualitative research, the ethical issues include: first, before the interview, the participants are able to consider whether they are willing to participate in and the potential harm from the method in the study; second, during the data collection, research must ensure that the participants are “provided with sufficient information about the study and the procedures during the interview or discussion”, while the participants should be aware of any potential harm that may arise during data collection; third, it is important to “anonymize the transcripts by removing any information that may identify a

participant”; forth, the researcher perhaps can send the participants a copy of the result if the thesis has benefits for the study population themselves, or for the participants’ needs; fifth, always pay attention to the justice issue, never try to “smooth out information or tamper with the quotes” in every field. (p. 68-77).

Accordingly, in this study, there were some processes to protect the interviewees’ privacy and avoid harms. Firstly, the cover letter with a brief of this study and my email address were sent to all interviewees by Ms. Li (one of the gatekeepers) to determine if they had any requirement or problem before the interview processes. Furthermore, to ensure no harms, it is important to debrief the research purpose and possible questions, thus all interviewees were clearly informed about their responsibilities from the cover letter. Secondly, the interviews of this study got the acceptance from one vice-president of College X. Thirdly, to help protect the privacy, the detailed location of the college was not shown during the whole research process, and anonymity was used for all interviewees in this study. In addition, all original data was destroyed after finishing the research. After the thesis finishes, all relevant people, including the college managers and interview participants, would receive a result by email if they need.

5 Data Analysis

In this chapter, the data collected from the interviews was analyzed by categorizing responses. The findings were presented in the sequence of student, teacher, and staff groups respectively. The anonymity was used for all participants to help protect their privacy.

5.1 The students' perceptions

This study included twelve randomly selected students, who were in different grades of College X. They were two freshmen, three sophomores, five juniors and two seniors from Department I and II.

5.1.1 Why choose College X?

The reasons for students choosing College X were in four types:

The first reason for students choosing College X was the “good location”. As mentioned in Chapter 4, College X is located in a capital city of a northeast province. Taking the freshman Wang for instance, Wang’s uncle went to this province for work almost ten years ago. For his own experience, her uncle gave advices to Wang that it was a potential province and Wang can easily found a good job after her college life. “My uncle is here so he can help me a lot on my daily life. Besides, I believe his judgment about the city potential and less competitive than some big ones (such as the capital city, Beijing), so I choose College X which could benefit for my further life selection”, Wang explained.

The second reason was because of the attractive school value. Two students said that their parents investigated this college and were attracted by the special norm and education structure, then gave them the advices. Lily was the only one student who choosing the college herself. She said that, “this is a very careful decision. I spent a lot of time on the college selection until when I read the school value of College X”. Lily also took some investigations, such as calling the school office for more information, finding data on college’s webpage. “It is like my whole life’s direction so I must pay more attention to the choice”, she said.

The third reason was “capability constraint” for some students. Learning in public universities were their dreams. However, because of unsuccessful college entrance exams, independent colleges with lower admissions became their only choices.

The remaining one student named Mo had a unique experience with college selection. She chose College X because she thought it had been a public university. “I didn’t know what independent colleges were at that time, and I also thought that College X was a part of its maternal university”. Therefore, Mo made a totally wrong selection and felt regretful for a long time.

Besides, when being asked the reasons why they chose College X, all of the students indicated that the great prestige of College X’s maternal university was an important additional, even dominant (Mo’s selection) reason for their choices. Although it was a new institution and they knew little about its education management structure, however, because of its maternal university, they chose to believe College X’s value and further development capacity.

5.1.2 How is your learning experience?

1) Perceptions of goal and goal setting

When asking “what is your goal and how strong it is (using point 1-10 to show the strong level), the student participants’ perceptions could be roughly divided into four categories:

In the first category, six students indicated that their goal was “master’s degree”, and the main reason for choosing this goal was “needs of better education background”. They explained that an undergraduate education level, especially got from an independent college, was not enough for their career selections. They might face more difficulties and more harsh employment conditions but with lower payments and worse working environments, thus a higher education level might reduce these difficulties. Furthermore, the learning chance in a public university was what they wanted. In this category, five participants were juniors/seniors, and only one of them was freshman. All of the students circled high points (8-10) when being asked “how strong the goal is”.

The second category students indicated that their goal was “getting more certificates in their study fields”, and they circled 3-5 for this goal, which showed weaker setting perceptions.

“Actually, I don’t know what I should do next in recent time, so I am trying to participate in additional exams for more certificates. Of course most of them are suitable for my learning field. I feel safe when I get more certificates and I think they may be better for my career selection later,” Xu (a sophomore) explained, “it is not a strong goal, so I will change it if I get a better idea”.

The third category students indicated that their goal was “finishing the final thesis”. It was a stronger goal that both of them circled 8-9 for their goal settings. Taking Lily’s (a junior) answer for instance, she said that “it is the final task, so I have to finish it perfectly which will give a better ending of my college life. As a senior, I don’t want to set a far goal and the task in my hand is the most important thing now”.

At last category, as a junior, Zhao gave a special answer of all interview students. Her goal was not as specific as the others’ – “a better life and more knowledge” were what she wanted in recent time. “I have much free time in the third year of the college life, which is convenient for me to make some wonderful plans now, and I also need more knowledge not only in my subject. Anyway, I am trying to make my college life better and promote my personal abilities”. As giving a medium point (6), Zhao explained, “I will persist this goal if I think it is correct, but it will change as soon as possible if it doesn’t really benefit my life style or I find something more important”.

2) Self-efficacy

Interests and attitudes:

There were three types of answers for the question “do you like your major program and do you think it is suitable for you”: six students said “Yes, I like it, and it is very suitable for me”. The reasons were related with some prior experiences of them. For example, some of them had been interested in their study fields since they were young; some of them had special/prior skills of their major programs. All study attitudes of them were positive, such as “study carefully”, “learn easily”. Five student gave the answer “No, I don’t like it, and it is not suitable for me”. The reasons why they chose their subjects were “parents’ or teachers’ advices”, and they normally had little prior experiences and most of their study attitudes were not positive, even negative, such as “limitation of study time”, “no interest but work hard”. One special answer of the participants was “hard to say”. The answer-given student explained that she might like the major program she learned, because she had been good at courses in

this field since her high school, and it was also the reason why she chose the subject. However, she always confused if she liked it or not because she had interests but not so many.

Perceptions of teaching plan:

Seven student participants indicated that the teaching plans of their study programs was very good and suitable for them. The reasons were generally similar, such as “a good arrangement”, “focus on practical applications”, “suitable for the future career”. Three students gave evaluations as “basically OK”. Taking Zhao for instance, she explained that “most of the courses seem useful, especially the courses on basic theories, thus I learned so much knowledge. But there are many elective courses and I feel confused when I have to choose them every semester”. Two students said they did not satisfy the teaching plan of their major programs, and the reasons were “not suitable for the career selection”, “less social practices” and “so many theories”.

Perceptions of task management:

Eight students indicated that they were satisfied with the task managements and most of the tests could reflect their learning situations. The answers were “good, not very difficult”, “most of them are open-booked”, “good time schedule”, etc. Four students indicated that the test managements in their major programs were “not all satisfied” or “not very rational”. The reasons included “so many subjective parts, cost so much time on reading but may be not good for understanding the knowledge”, “focusing on theory part was just used for preparing for the exam, not really learning the knowledge”, “should add more practical applications”.

Models:

There were two types of answers when interviewees being asked “do you have a peer model in your class”: half of the twelve students said they did not have any models, and half of them said “yes”. The models of six students with answer “yes” were unexpectedly similar – they did not have learning models but life ones, and the classmates who had perfect orders in daily life or with mature personality became the models of them. Besides, most of them indicated that “he/she does influence me, but not a lot”.

5.1.3 How do you evaluate the environment?

1) Perceptions of the class

When being asked “do you like your class”, seven students said “yes, very much” for the reasons that their classes were in good climates and the classmates were friendly. Other five students said “just OK”. For example, Zhao said that the classmates were nice, but there were no close friendships among them. All the participants gave various words when describing their classroom climate, and Table 5.1 shows these words in three levels which are distinguished by the mentioning times (the words in level 1 were mentioned three times or more, those in level 2 were mentioned twice and those in level 3 were mentioned once).

Table 5.1: Descriptions of the class climate

Level	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Evaluation of students	Warm	Cold	Economic-centered
	Little join force	Peace	Permissive
	Individualism	Happy	Good relationship
	Selfish	Democratic	Gaps
	Equality	Less learning atmosphere	Actively

2) Perceptions of the college

Atmosphere of the college:

When describing the atmosphere of the college, the student participants used much less words than the class climate question, which showed comparatively uniform perceptions. Almost all of them used “good environment” and “good facilities”. Others’ answers were “open”, “free”, and “less academic atmosphere”, which also occupied a large percentage of all words. Some words were mentioned only once, such as “many development potentials”, “modernization”, and “professional”.

Value of the college:

Seven students gave answers “no” when being asked whether you knew the college value, they indicated that the college value seemed no influence of them. They had no clear impressions in this field, and maybe because the history of College X was not long enough. Four students indicated that they had vague impressions but gave incorrect answers. Only one

student knew the correct college value and could quote it completely – Lily, who chose College X because of the attractive value. She also explained that she easily found the value on the homepage of College X when she checked the relevant information.

Management Structure:

All the students indicated that they knew nothing about the college administration system, and three of them directly said they had no interest about it.

5.1.4 How do you evaluate your college life?

1) Troubles/ difficulties

Eight students indicated that they had troubles/difficulties in various aspects: some of them had troubles in the relationship with their roommates or classmates; some of them said that the tasks cost them lots of time. In addition, most of the students faced various troubles/difficulties in learning processes, financing, and relationships during their college life. As an example, Zhang (a junior) said “I did not know how to manage living expenses because it was the very first time for me, and there were some conflicts with my roommates, while I also did not know how to study. Fortunately, all these are resolved now.”

2) Evaluation of the study life

All the student participants circled at least point 6 and eight of them circled 8 or more when evaluating their study experiences using point 0-10, which meant high satisfaction of their study life. Taking Mo circling 6 for instance, she indicated “although College X was not my dreamy selection, I do learn a lot of knowledge and theories. However, I don’t know how to use the knowledge for my career and this is why I am always worried”. Lee (a senior) who circled a high point (8) said, “ I have grown up a lot during these years because of my college life, but the general learning atmosphere are not enough, while I also desire stronger teaching resources”. Meantime other students also showed their opinions, which could be summarized that they generally were satisfied with their learning experiences and the environment in College X, but the insufficient of study atmosphere was also important problems.

5.2 The teachers’ perceptions

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the participants included six teachers in College X. Liu, Mandy, and Lee were full-time teacher; Lin, Zhang, and Wang were part-time teachers and they are all full-time teachers in public universities (including the maternal university of College X).

5.2.1 Working experiences

1) Why choose College X?

Better working conditions than in public universities was the general reason for all full-time teacher participants. “Public universities mainly have higher employment requests but lower salaries and worse education facilities, so these factors attracted me, although College X was not famous,” Liu mentioned. The three part-time teachers working in famous public universities and they all had high reputations in their research fields, thus they mentioned that the reason why they chose part-time work here was that College X employed them with much higher salaries and other attractive conditions. Therefore, the higher payment and better working conditions were the main reasons for the part-time teachers.

2) Education management

The full-time teacher participants were from two different major programs, however, they indicated similar course and exam management structures: the college made a general education direction, and the teachers in the same program managed the course together. There were meetings for discussing the managements. The teachers in the same program also made the task/exam questions together. In this process, they discussed the directions in the meetings, and each teacher was responsible for one part of the exam. All of the three full-time teachers indicated that they were satisfied with this type of arrangement and they thought the course managements were suitable for their students. Taking Liu for instance, she taught a required course which must be learned during three years for some students. The course focused on basic knowledge in the first and second year, and the professional and practical education from the third year. Liu thought the course plan was suitable for the students, that they could learn more knowledge and useful practical applications in appropriate time during their learning processes.

The part-time teacher participants also followed the above education management structures when teaching in College X. They explained the general difference between independent

colleges and public universities was that there was freer of the education management in independent colleges. They had very little formulation rights for course arrangements and exam plans in their public universities while the university or department offices were responsible for these. Two of the part-time teachers said they preferred the flexible education management structures in College X, and the other one indicated both of the arrangements were “basically OK”.

3) Additional advices/ideas

Five teacher participants indicated that they were satisfied with the education management of College X, and they did not have any advice. Taking Lin’s answer (a part-time teacher) for instance, he explained that “because of the freer course management, better teaching and facility resources, the education management is better than its maternal university in some levels”. One part-time teacher, Wang gave an advice that College X should improve its admission condition in the future. “It is hard to do this at present because of the higher tuition fee, shorter history and less reputation of College X, most of the students with higher qualifications will choose other famous public universities, but there should be a trend in the future that better student source is one important condition of a qualified college.”

5.2.2 Perceptions to the students

1) Feedbacks

When being asked “have you ever adopted the feedbacks from your students and were there any reflections to your teaching plans or decisions”, all teacher participants said “yes” and they all thought the students’ feedbacks influenced them a lot. They explained the general education evaluation system in College X as follows: it was held every semester, the students would give the feedbacks about the education situation, advices for courses and evaluations of the teachers’ work. The College leaders would make changes for comments, then would arrange meetings with the teachers to have more discussions. Occasionally there were also random interviews for students executed by school leaders so that the leaders could get advices directly. As a young teacher who had only one year teaching experience in College X, Mandy mentioned that she got lots of complaints from the students in the first semester. She presented that, “I didn’t have any teaching experience at the beginning, although the students’

advices gave me lots of pressures but also showed me a clear direction. I am improving fast so I think it is a useful way”.

Two teachers indicated that they also got direct feedbacks from their students, for example, from the students’ performances in the class. They would change the class contents, even the teaching directions if it was necessary.

2) Classroom climate

When evaluating the classroom climate in their courses, the teacher participants mentioned several words. They were “warm”, “friendly”, “less leaning atmosphere”, “work hard”, “less competition” and “good relationship”. Some additional opinions from part-time teachers were “worse learning ability”, “good friends with teachers”. For example, Zhang explained, “I have been teaching in both public university and independent college for more than five years, and I think the classroom climate in College X is warmer than that of its maternal university because the students in College X like to make friends with me. In addition, the relationships among the classmates are harmony because of less competition in learning area. But due to the lower admission conditions (lower scores of entrance exam than that in the public universities), I must say their learning abilities are worse than the students in the maternal university, and the leaning atmosphere is not strong enough.”

3) Models

Two teachers indicated that they never used peer models during their teaching processes, and they indicated that the college students were adults and they had the abilities to choose suitable learning ways. As another reason, the teamwork was important and the peer models might affect the join force of units. Other four teachers said that instead of peer models, they preferred to introduce some useful learning methods or give advices for students. “For example, some freshmen did not know how to arrange their learning time, and also had no idea of learning in the very first year of their college life, so it is my responsibility to give some guidance to them,” Lee explained, “and most of the students do have more improvements, so I think it is an useful way for them”

4) Evaluation of the students’ learning experiences

Six teacher participants circled 5-7 points when evaluating the students’ learning experiences (in the ten-point scale), which showed basic satisfaction. Lin circled 5, and he said “the learning ability and knowledge basis of the students here were not as good as the students in public universities, however, most of them are studying hard”, while the biggest problem of them was that “a lot of students feel unconfident”, so they “should focus more on the learning area rather than their career so early”. Liu circled the highest sources among the teacher participants and she explained that “following a free and more practical education process, most of my students are growing fast, and their general abilities are improved. I am sure that their learning experiences will be better and better, and they will improve a lot during four years’ learning experiences”.

5.3 The staff’s perceptions

Three staff in College X participated in the interviews and their information was demonstrated as follows in Table 5.2:

Table 5.2: Profiles of the staff participants

Participant	Position	Length of work in College X
Li	Department counselor	7
Chou	Department counselor	3
Xu	Department Assistant	5

1) Perceptions of college value

All staff indicated that the college value on staff part was “the student is everything”, and “students’ benefits are the standard for everything”. They all thought that College X did well on this value. Li explained that, “the rules and regulations are all formulated according to this value, and I must say that College X did a lot on this part more than the students thought.”

2) Perceptions of education management

When being asked “how about the education management”, the staff participants indicated that it was generally good, and each of them gave additional advices: Li said the education

management was rational and democratic in her working department, so it was absolutely beneficial for the students. For example, the graduate admission rate was high (21%) in her working department last year (2012), and it had been higher than that in same department of the maternal university in the same year. Chou said that he had some advices for the course and exam managements, “some of the contents focus much on the old theories, so they may not suit practical applications and the students’ career selection”. Xu mentioned that the management should have been much better if it was stricter on some areas. “I do agree with the college value and I think the students are most important, but the rules are too indulgent for the students which will lead to an opposite result sometimes”, she said.

3) Perceptions to the students

All staff participants indicated that the students’ experiences were good in College X in their opinions, and they were full of hopes for the students’ future. For instance, Xu said “most of the students had poor knowledge basis but they are growing up fast”. The two department counselors listed some difficulties of their students that they observed during their work. “There are at least 1/3 students have different types of difficulties. For example, the financing problems, some of them always pay the tuition fees very late. I think maybe the high tuition fees give troubles to their families. Some of them have problems on the relationships with their classmates or roommates, and some did not pass exams and they told me that the courses were too difficult for them.”

5.4 Conclusion

In general, the reasons for students choosing College X were “good location”, “attractive school value”, “capability constraint” and its’ maternal university’s guarantee. The maternal university was an important condition affecting most of their choices. Concerning the student participants’ perceptions, there was a trend that almost all of the juniors and seniors had stronger and more practical goals, while the goals of freshmen and sophomores were weaker. The students with prior experiences in their subjects usually had better attitudes and high interests than the ones without experiences. Most of the participants were satisfied with the education management in College X, and only two of them were not. The highest concerned area was whether the management suited their future careers. Some participants had peer models that could influence their lifestyles, but not so much.

Most of the student participants liked their classes and also gave evaluations as “good” for the college atmosphere. However, only one of them knew the college value and none of them knew the management structure of College X. The environment affected the students more or less and they gave different levels of evaluations on it.

All student participants showed high satisfaction on their learning experiences because they circled high points on evaluations. However, most of the students presented different types of difficulties/ troubles of financing, learning, and relationships with others during their college life.

For the teachers’ part, better working conditions and higher payment was the main reason for teacher participants to choose College X. All of the full-time teachers were satisfied with the education management in College X. The part-time teachers explained the differences between public universities and independent colleges, and they all preferred the latter than the former. Improving the admission conditions in further work was one advice of a part-time teacher.

Feedback was an important way to improve the teacher’s plan in College X. It influenced them a lot, and the students also could get benefits from it. The classroom climate was generally warm, friendly, but with less learning atmosphere than that in public universities. All teachers never used peer models and some of them preferred to introduce useful learning methods to their students. All participants had high satisfaction of the students’ learning experiences, and they mentioned that the most important problem of the students was that “their knowledge bases were not as good as the ones in public universities”, but most of them were working hard and growing up quickly.

In terms of the staff’s perceptions, they gave high evaluations on the school value of College X. All of them were satisfied with the education management and gave additional explanations or advices. They also mentioned that the students’ learning experiences were good. Although there were various difficulties/troubles through their observations, they were all full of hopes for the students’ future.

6 Discussion

In this chapter, the findings of this study were discussed. The first section answered three research questions, then the second section explored the underlying difficulties of students, and the third section argued some implications for teachers and college managers. All research findings were related to the theory framework and collected data in this study.

6.1 Re-visiting the research questions

As a recap, the research questions in this study are: what are the motivations of the students for choosing independent colleges, what are the students' experiences of their learning processes, and what are students' perceptions of the learning environment in independent colleges. The discussions of each question are as follows.

6.1.1 What are the motivations of students for choosing independent colleges?

In terms of the collected data in Chapter 5, there were four reasons for students to choose independent colleges: good location, school value, capability constraint and wrong understanding. Besides, some external influences for students' choices also could be found from their presentations, for example, parents' or families' advices and teachers' introductions.

The reasons for choosing College X could be categorized into expected and passive selections: in the aspect of expected selection, some factors of College X, for example, the location, the school value, and development perspective attracted the students or their parents to make such selection. In the aspect of passive selection, although College X was not the students' first choice, however, for various reasons, such as personal ability or wrong understanding, they made the decision eventually. All the students indicated, as a guarantee, the maternal university was an important additional condition to choose College X, but it was also a confused definition for some of them. A majority of the students made expected selections when choosing independent colleges, while only a small part of them made decisions passively. In addition, all of their selections aimed at achieving better careers or life styles.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, “the idea of movement is reflected in such commonsense ideas about motivation as something that gets us going, keeps us moving, and helps us get jobs done” (Paul & Dale, 1996). Accordingly, the main motivation of students for choosing independent colleges was better career selection. Other conditions, such as advices from others, were the external forces that push them to make the final selections.

6.1.2 What are the students’ experiences of their learning processes?

In terms of the collected data and theoretical framework in this study, students’ experiences could be explored in four factors, which included *goals, self-efficacy for learning, study programs* and *evaluations*.

1) Goal

Locke and Latham (1990) propose that there are several important relations between goal level and performance: firstly, the relationship between goal difficulty and performance is basically a positive linear function with more difficult goals leading to better performance; secondly, specific and difficult goals lead to higher levels of performance than vague and global goals (such as doing one’s best or no assigned goals) (p.27).

As Table 6.1 shows, because of the same educational environment, student participants had relatively similar goal choices in four general aspects above. Most of the students had specific goals (master’ degree, certificate, and final thesis), while only one student’s goal was vague (better college life). There was a trend that most of the juniors and seniors had strong level goal setting (8-10 points), while the freshmen and sophomores were usually in weak level (3-8 points) by contrast.

In summary, all the student participants had positive goals in College X. Most of them showed high level of goal setting – they normally had difficult and special goal choices, and the goal commitments of them were strong. In addition, the students in higher grades generally had better goal settings than the ones in lower grades. All these findings were important conditions that the students might have better performances and higher quality learning experiences.

Table 6.1: Goal settings of the student participants

Goal	Participant number (Total: 12 students)	Point
Master degree	6 (5 junior/senior, 1 freshman)	8-10
Certificate	3 (1 freshman, 2 sophomore)	3-5
Final thesis	2 (1 junior, 1 senior)	8-9
Better college life	1 (1 sophomore)	6

2) Self-efficacy for learning

According to Paul and Dale (1996), students with higher self-efficacy solved more problems correctly and chose to rework more problems they missed (p.178). As mentioned before, prior experiences, interests and attitudes are three factors of self-efficacy discussed in this study.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, Students choosing expected major programs indicated high interests in their learning processes. They normally had some types of prior experiences, such as interests in the study fields and special skills in their learning areas, and usually possessed positive attitudes for their selected programs. In contrast, the students choosing their subjects passively (following their parents'/teachers' advices) had low interests in their learning processes – they usually did not have any kinds of prior experiences, and showed negative attitudes. Except a neutral answer (hard to say), number of the expected selections was a little more than that of the passive selections.

In summary, most of the student participants chose their major programs with interests. Their prior experiences were important underlying factors as positive influence on their interests and attitudes. This result showed general self-efficacy situations affecting learning performances of the student participants in College X.

3) Perceptions of study programs

The study programs in College X could be explored in factors of *education management*, *models* and *feedbacks* as follows:

Education management

The teacher participants explained the structures of course and exam management systems. Some of the part-teachers made comparisons of these structures with public universities, and indicated the most important difference between them was that the teachers in independent colleges had more powers and more participation rights on education management than the ones in public universities. Most of the teacher participants preferred the new and flexible structure in College X.

In the student groups, most of them showed high level of satisfaction, and the reasons of dissatisfaction on the education management systems were mainly the lack of practicality (for example, not suitable for the career selection, less social practices, etc.). Many students were confused on how useful the knowledge they learned were, especially the theory parts, thus they expected more social practices and practical guidance to resolve their doubts.

In contrast with the other groups, the staff group used different angles to present the education management structure in College X. According to staff's answers, the new structure was suitable for students because it benefited them in many areas, especially on improving their educational quality. The most convincing evidence was that the rate of graduate admission in one staff's working department was higher than the same department in its maternal university.

Models:

Instead of using peer models, in teachers' opinions, introducing some useful strategies in students' learning processes was general model styles in College X. All of them thought that peer models might result in excessive competitions and had little use on raising students' competences. The teachers' opinions might influence the students because all of the student participants did not have peer models in their learning fields, and half of the total twelve students had models in daily life but also presented that the model had very few effects of them.

Feedbacks:

The feedback mode in College X was most likely a data collection process: a large size of samples was selected to answer the questionnaire formulated by the college managers, and the random conversation was another way to get data. All the students' feedbacks collected from

the two ways would be discussed by the leaders in meetings, then the general issues would be argued and some solutions would be decided. It was a useful mode that teachers could get students' feedbacks more intensively and extensively. The advices from students and the college would influence their teaching plans, and benefit the students' learning processes. Meanwhile, the pressures of the teachers existed as well. Besides, only very few numbers of the teachers presented that they had direct feedbacks among students in the class.

4) Evaluations of students, teachers and staff

The evaluations of the students indicated high satisfaction in their experiences of learning processes in College X. The general comments of them were "best conditions" but with "less study atmosphere", and they desired much stronger teaching resources. This evaluation result generally could verify the students' answers in other factors.

In the teacher and staff groups, all of them mentioned that the students had basically good learning experiences in College X. The teacher participants thought that the students in College X were weaker in learning ability at first than the ones in public universities, but the "free and practical" study program setting and their hardworking made the students "grow fast". Both of the teacher and staff participants indicated that they were confident about the students' achievements and experiences in College X.

To sum up, students in College X normally had specific and strong goal setting. Their high quality self-efficacy was one condition for better learning performance. The special study programs in College X acquired high evaluations from student, teacher and staff participants, together with some confusions and advices as well. In most of the participants' opinions, students generally had high satisfaction of learning processes in College X. Their personal characteristics normally could benefit their study fields, and their learning processes could acquire useful guidance. Besides, the mentioned problems also should not be ignored.

6.1.3 What are students' perceptions of their learning environment?

Students' perceptions of classroom climate, school culture and organization, college value were adopted to answer this question. Teacher and staff's opinions were also argued as supplements in this part.

1) Perceptions of classroom climate

Most of the student participants were satisfied with their classroom climates. In their opinions, although most of the classmates were “individualistic”, “selfish”, they were normally friendly, and the climate was “peaceful”, “equal”. Besides, some of them used words “gap”, “little joint force” and “happy” to describe the whole atmosphere in the class.

The teachers had relatively similar opinions of the classroom climate of the students. “Warm”, “friendly” and “less learning atmosphere” were the most frequently using words in descriptions of both teacher and student groups. Concerning teachers’ perceptions, the classroom climate and the relationship between students in College X were normally good, however, the learning atmosphere was less and study ability was worse in comparison with public universities. Although “less competitions in learning area” was one important reason that the students’ relationships could keep “harmony” in someone’s opinion, it also became an anxious issue in both teacher and student groups.

2) Perceptions of School culture and organization

The atmosphere and the value/norm of the College X were two factors to be examined in this part.

Perceptions of College atmosphere

The “good environment” attracted most of the students and gave them deep impressions. Although Student participants felt “free” and “open” in College X, however, “less academic atmosphere” was a realistic problem that should not be ignored.

The better working conditions, including better working environment and higher salaries in contrast with public universities, was the most important reasons for teachers choosing College X. It was also an important guarantee that College X could own good teaching resources.

Perceptions of college value

A majority of the student participants did not know the college value or just had indistinct impressions, and only one student participant knew the value clearly. As mentioned before, there were a lot of ways that people could obtain the value of College X clearly (the college’s webpage, enrollment guide, etc.), thus the insufficient awareness of the student participants was a crucial issue, and the students attributed the situation to short history and low reputation

of such a new institution. In addition, all student participants indicated that they had no idea of the college management structure and some of them even did not have any interest at all. The management structure is important information for students, because it generally explains the reasons of how and why the college rules/regulations are formulated in such way, however, there was no certain way for students to obtain the relevant information of these fields in College X.

The answers of staff participants indicated quite different opinions from the students'. Because of the working responsibilities, they knew the college value clearly. All staff participants indicated that they agreed with the college value and "all rules and regulations were formulated according to this value", and they also thought that College X did well in its value and tried to benefit the students when formulating regulations. Even one opinion indicated the college rules were "too indulgent to the students" and might lead to an opposite result. In staff participants' presentations, the only problem of college value was the lack of awareness and trust of the students.

In summary, students normally had high satisfaction of learning environment in College X. In their perceptions, the warm class climate and advanced education facilities contributed good school atmosphere. The teacher and staff participants also indicated similar perceptions in these parts. In contrast, lower study ability, insufficient learning atmosphere and the lack of reputation were the main problems that had been mentioned several times by all of the participants. Furthermore, students had very little awareness of the college value and organization system, while the staff indicated totally opposite perceptions.

6.2 Difficulties in students' learning experiences

According to Chapter 5, student, teacher and staff participants indicated several difficulties that students were encountered during their learning experiences in College X:

1) Difficulties in academic learning

Some of the students in College X had difficulties that they did not have correct learning strategies at the beginning, or even in a long time during their study processes. They felt hard and had much pressure, even failed in the exam during the learning experiences. According to

the teacher and staff participants' answers, one of the most important reasons for such difficulties may be students' "poor knowledge basis" in learning fields.

2) Difficulties in financing

Some students indicated that it was hard for them to manage much money (living expenses) in daily life when they were freshmen. Furthermore, although the students did not present, the staff participants presented that the much higher tuition fee in College X than that in public universities might bring difficulties for students' families because some of them always paid the tuition fee very late.

3) Difficulties in relationships

Although the classroom climates were generally "warm" and "friendly", some of students still had problems in the relationships of their classmates or roommates.

6.3 Additional findings and implications.

In this part, some additional findings and implications of this study were discussed, with the aim to reduce or resolve underlying difficulties that the students experienced. All the discussions were relevant to the collected data from College X, therefore, may not suitable for all independent colleges in China.

6.3.1 Importance of improving the quality of study programs

As mentioned in Chapter 3, self-efficacy affects choice of activities, effort, and persistence. When accomplishing a task, there is a trend that people holding low self-efficacy may avoid it while those who believe they are capable are likely to participate; efficacious students work harder and persist longer than those with doubts (Paul & Dale, 2002).

In terms of the collected data in this study, there were some difficulties of students during their learning experiences. The implications and some additional findings for teachers and college were discussed to improve the formulation of study programs, which helped to reduce students' difficulties and directly benefited educational quality.

1) Improving students' interests

According to Renninger (1992), even fairly young preschool children have relatively stable personal interests and that these interests are related to their choice of activities and their learning, in contrast, “adults often have to engage in tasks that they do not really interest them and they have no choice over these tasks, such as tasks in school, job related, in these situations, interest may have more differential effects, depending on the task and content area” (Paul & Dale, 2002, p.296). In this case, there was a trend that the students with high interests in their learning fields normally had high educational achievements – they usually worked hard and had positive attitudes on the learning process. Thus improving the students’ interests is an important task for teachers during their working process.

According to Paul and Dale (2002), the general idea is that teacher should try to create situational interest in their course, with the hope that this situational interest will help students to develop more personal interest in the content or topic of the course (p.296). As an advice, for the college classroom setting, “the long term development of interest over time is to serve better by the use of meaningful tasks and students involvement in active learning, than by a bells and whistles” approach to make the class interesting and stimulating (Paul & Dale, 2002, p.297). Hence, teachers should attempt to formulate the study programs in the above way which can directly contribute their students’ learning achievements and performances.

2) Reducing students’ confusions

According to the data collected in Chapter 5, students felt confused in some aspects during their learning processes. The general issues were why they learned such kinds of knowledge, whether the knowledge was useful or not, and why the exam/task setting was like this. There are some advices to resolve the above problems as follows:

Problems on how useful the knowledge – “point out how the learning will be useful in students’ lives” (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.181).

To resolve this problem, teachers should make clear explanations on how useful the knowledge is, especially the difficult basic theories. This is an easy and positive way which can reduce students’ doubts, and improve their learning interests, even may benefit their whole learning processes.

Furthermore, instead of peer models, some teachers in College X preferred to introduce strategies to guide their students’ learning, and it is an effective way which is necessary for all

teachers to refer it. Teachers should guide students (especially the freshmen) learning strategies and show them “how their performances have improved as a result of strategy use” (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.181), that could help their students to reduce the unnecessary difficulties, in addition, help them to enjoy the learning processes.

Problem on students’ doubts of exams/task – keep exams and tasks at a relatively difficult level.

According to Paul and Dale (1996), “students’ perceptions of competence develop not just from accurate feedback from the teacher, but through actual success on challenging academic tasks”. Accordingly, it is necessary for the teachers to keep the tasks and exams at a “relatively challenging but reasonable level of difficulty” (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.100). Although an easy task/exam can help the students to establish confidence on their competence, they also need to be challenged by tasks/exams to “actually learn new skills”, thus tasks/exams should be set at a level of difficulty that most students in the class can master them with some effort (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.100-101). In addition, besides the difficulty level, the content of tasks/exams is also very important. Teachers should improve the traditional topics, and try to add more practical applications on the learning of knowledge. It will be a functional guidance on students’ understanding of their learning fields.

3) Importance of teacher’s feedbacks

Teacher’s feedback is a major teaching function (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986). There are several types of teacher’s feedbacks, for example, performance feedback, motivational feedback, attributional feedback, and strategy feedback, etc. Performance feedback is feedback on the accuracy of work and may include corrective information. Teachers give performance feedback in four types of student responses: (1) a correct answer given quickly and firmly, (2) a correct answer given hesitantly, (3) an incorrect answer reflecting a careless error, (4) an incorrect answer suggesting lack of knowledge of facts or a process (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986, as cited in Paul & Dale, p. 319); motivational feedback provides social comparative information about capabilities of other students; attributional feedback links student performance that teacher may train students to attribute their difficulties instead to controllable factors; strategy feedback informs learners about how well they are applying a strategy and how strategy use improves their performance (Paul & Dale, 2002, p.319-321)

According to Paul and Dale (1996), one implication of motivated learning for teachers is to “provide feedback on progress in learning and link rewards with progress” (p.182). Concerning teachers’ presentations, there was a complete feedback structure in College X. However, the lack of feedbacks during teaching progresses was an invisible problem. Therefore, college managers should emphasize the importance of the four types of feedbacks listed above and linking the feedbacks on the teaching progress. It is more direct and effective way because teachers can quickly receive useful information from students’ performances.

6.3.2 Establishment of appropriate educational environment for students

According to Paul and Dale (2002), “sociocultural influences from peers, families, cultures and communities play an important role in students’ development, achievement and motivation. Many of these factors operate outside of formal schooling, although they impact various aspects of learning and motivation in school” (p.400). In this case, besides teachers’ effect, the influences of *peer networks* and *families* on students should not be ignored.

Peer networks are large group of peers with whom students associate, students in networks tend to be similar in many respects. It can influence members’ academic motivation in several ways (Paul & Dale, 2002, p.400-401). Ryan (2000) also indicates that peer networks can heavily influence member’s motivation. They will observe others (for example, their friends) in the group and become more similar to others, make similar choices of activities (Berndt & Keefe, 1992).

Families are rich in effect on students’ academic motivation. For example, “the extent that families encourage school involvement in their children is predictive of motivation”, while the home environment, mothers’ beliefs and skills and fathers’ involvement also play an important role on their children’s education motivation (Paul & Dale, 2002, p.389).

In this study, peer networks and families had positive influences of students’ learning experiences, such as students in the same learning environment generally had similar strong and specific goal settings. However, some negative influences also should not be ignored. For example, because of the effects from their classmates and learning environment, some of the students felt unconfident of their learning capacity in advance, and most of the them showed anxious attitudes for their career selection; some choosing College X without any interests

followed their families' advices; a majority of the them had similar learning strategies, such as the choices of their peer models. All of these situations are invisible issues of sociocultural influences.

As implications, the education of independent college is a mass higher education system applying to adult students, thus establishing a flexible and free educational environment is very important for students' developments. Teachers should try to guide their students find their own characteristics, and encourage them formulate the very suitable learning strategies and further goals. To reduce students' anxiety, the college should provide enough official information to explain the real situations of students' future, for example, more information about the employment issue. Meanwhile, the families also should respect their children's opinions and give them advices instead of making decisions directly.

7 Conclusions

In order to explore the educational quality of independent colleges, this study particularly focused on the perceptions of students and teachers. In this chapter, the exploration of educational quality in College X, the theoretical and policy implications were concluded in the following.

7.1 The educational quality in College X

As a recap, the present study aims at exploring the educational quality of independent colleges. It examined the factors related to inputs and processes of a comprehensive quality assurance process. As mentioned in Chapter 1, inputs include factors related to the students (experiences and aspirations), teaching staff (professional experience, qualifications, staff development on teaching), administrative, and physical facilities. Processes include self-evaluations of teaching and learning, how the course is proceeding, the difficulties and successes of the students, students' feedback and review meetings by staff (Malcolm, 1992).

In this study, concerning inputs, firstly, students normally showed high satisfaction of the experiences in their learning processes. Their goal settings and self-efficacy had positive influences on their learning attitudes. Furthermore, the strong teacher resource and superior education facilities were prominent characteristics of College X. Most of the students and teachers feel satisfaction of the free and open administration and special study program. Concerning processes, firstly, a mature and comprehensive feedback system, including students' feedbacks and regular meetings for teachers and staff were held every semester. All staff and college managers tried to establish an appropriate environment for their students. The climate in the classes and college were normally warm and friendly. In addition, a large portion of the teachers and staff felt promising for their students, and most of the students had more or less improvement after learning a while. In summary, all of the students, teachers and staff gave high evaluations for students' experiences and environment of their learning processes.

Besides, the difficulties that the students encountered during their learning experiences were general in three aspects: academic learning, finances, and relationships. Additional findings indicated some underlying issues in College X: (1) A large number of students in College X

showed low confidence in their knowledge basis, learning ability, even their further developments; (2) the teachers' influences in some aspects of class were often ignored, for example, direct feedback from the students; (3) the students' awareness of their college was lacking, which was the most crucial reason why the students felt doubtful and unconfident about the college.

In conclusion, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the quality of higher education has become a critical issue in China. The official quality assurance center claimed a remarkable high quality of higher education institutions had been evaluated, however, the public normally show negative perceptions of the official evaluations and rankings. In this case, students' and teachers' perceptions indicated high satisfaction of quality issue in College X, which was opposite of public's opinions. Accordingly, although the difficulties and additional invisible issues should not be ignored, a relatively high education quality of College X could be examined in some levels based on the factors related to inputs and processes mentioned above. In addition, it would be interesting to upscale this study to check whether the result for this case study holds also concerning the whole sectors in further research.

7.2 Theoretical implications

The present study adopted motivation theory, Schunk's model, and other relevant factors. Since this theoretical framework was found to be applicable for examining the educational quality of College X, it might also be adopted for exploring the same issues of other independent colleges with similar setting in China.

However, some differences between the research findings and the adopted theories should be noticed. Firstly, although students in the case college generally had strong and specific goal setting which was an important evidence for high qualification of their learning processes, no relevance showed that the students who had vague and weaker goal setting and commitment had worse performances than formers during their learning processes. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 6, although "peer networks" influenced students' experiences in various fields, no evidence showed that "peer model" had relevance of students' learning and performance from the collected data, which is another difference from Schunk's model in this study.

In addition, as mentioned in Chapter 3, previous research and studies simply indicate that the school common values and core beliefs are like the school goals, and will influence students' motivations in learning and performances. In this case, although the college atmosphere was open and free in their perceptions, because of the unawareness of the college value and norm, students felt doubtful of the study programs and other administrations, which even led to their negative attitudes during the learning processes. Therefore, an extension for the previous research is that students' unawareness of "school value and norm" might have negative effect on their learning experiences, which specify the relevance between school culture and student's motivation.

Finally, the generalizability of the above findings was limited by various conditions, for example, the sample size, the case college site, unique research method, and various factors related to the college in case. Although it made a research of educational quality in College X, other researchers intending to use the results of this study for similar institutions should take holistic considerations before reference. Furthermore, in further research of this issue, a larger number of samples should be used to investigate the relationship between each dimension of the theoretical framework and the educational quality.

7.3 Policy implications

In this section, the policy implications for college and Chinese education authorities were concluded as follows:

1) Importance of a transparent governance system

To recap, "the individuals in the school building will share some common values and core beliefs about the organization, its function, its students, its teaching and learning practices, etc." These core beliefs and values are "constructed by the individuals and can be consciously held, as in the case of school goals or implicit beliefs that are reflected in the daily practices that guide teacher and student behavior" (Paul & Dale, 2002, p.358). In school atmosphere, colleges "work better when the personal relations among staff and students reflect a mutual trust and concern for the school community", and this type of climate is difficult to create in any college (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.391).

As mentioned in Chapter 5, one of the most crucial issues of College X was the student's unawareness of the college value. It was an important reason that most of the students feel confused about some roles and regulations of their college. Meanwhile, the trust of students on college managers was also not enough (for example, in education management). Concerning students' perceptions, the low reputation of College X was the root cause of above issues, thus it is necessary for the college managers and staff to keep working on these parts.

Generally speaking, although the process of establishing a successful value and norm is "difficult and time-consuming", there must be opportunities for teachers and staff to work tighter to collaborate and to develop a shared vision for their school". In addition, it is also important to "develop a school atmosphere of good collegial and personal relations" (Paul & Dale, 1996, p.390-391). Accordingly, the college in this case already had the right directions on value establishment, the only thing its managers should do is just to persist.

As an advice, college managers should pay attention to establish trust among the students. Setting a transparent governance system, to be specific, making the college rule/regulations establishment processes clearly and adding more pathways for students to understand how regulations concerning themselves, is an important task for college managers because it can increase students' awareness of their college. It is also one of the most useful and direct ways to reduce their doubts and make better connections among students, teachers and college, as well as to create a more conducive educational environment.

2) Reference for other higher education institutions

In this study, the educational quality of the case independent college had been explored, and "high satisfaction" had been evaluated through students' and teacher' perceptions. Although the management structure was not one main objective in this study, there were some additional findings in this field from participants' presentations, which might be important reasons rooting the above result of quality issue in College X: (1) a wide teaching resource – part-time and full-time combination; (2) a special study program – practical and functional program with more teacher participation and work-oriented setting. In addition, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the special characteristic – autonomous and flexible administration of independent colleges is also non-ignorable.

As an advice for Chinese educational authorities, in some levels, the successful governance of College X is worth making an attempt in other higher education institutions, especially some of the characteristics might be referred as a possibility to improve the quality issue of public institutions after in-depth investigations and measurements.

3) Importance of quality assurance

As a research of educational quality in independent colleges, this study and its theoretical framework could inspire institutional quality assurance. Through the perceptions of individuals, the real quality in College X, including the satisfactions, difficulties, and other invisible issues, had been explored. This result can be used to benefit students, teachers, and college managers inside.

Quality assurance is a fundamental process that plays an important role in completing higher education quality. Especially in China, with simple, less comprehensive and extremely lacking official evaluations, the real quality situations and public's opinions can hardly be reflected, and the invisible problems also can not be discovered. Accordingly, the formulation of quality assurance process is significant for Chinese authorities. Generally speaking, the government should complete and optimize the current official quality evaluation process, and encourage the formulation of more authorized evaluations and rankings, which will help to improve the educational quality directly and efficiently.

As outlined in this part, the independent colleges and Chinese government should consider at least three areas: first, a transparent governance system should be noticed by the independent college manager. Second, it is worth to attempt the specific governance system of independent colleges in other higher education institutions in China. Last and foremost, optimizing the current quality assurance process, which could help to promote the quality issue, is a significant task for Chinese government.

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Appendix I: Cover Letter

Dear all,

Greetings!

I am writing to invite you to participate in an interview for exploring the educational quality of Independent College X. I am a Chinese student in the Masters Program of Higher Education at University of Oslo. I am doing my Master's thesis focusing on the educational quality of Chinese independent colleges. The information you provide will be very helpful, which will be used to examine the real quality issue in independent colleges.

The information of this interview is as follows: first, anonymity will be used in this study, so no individual's personal information will be identified. Second, your answers will be described and analyzed to form general conclusions about the students' learning experiences in independent colleges. Third, in this study, 12 students, 6 teachers and 3 staff in College X are intended to be interviewed. The interview questions are in the next page. It should be noticed that, there may be some changes during the interview. Finally, this process will cost you around 30 minutes.

If you would like to participate in this interview, please send me your contact information to my e-mail: yidanz@student.uv.uio.no, then we can have a chat about your available time. Feel free to contact me if you have any problems. Your cooperation will be very much appreciated.

Best regards,

Zhang Yidan

大家好，

我是就读于奥斯陆大学高等教育专业的一名硕士研究生，在我学习生涯的最后一学期，我开始进行论文写作。我把论文写作目的拟定为对于独立学院学生学习状态的研究。论文旨在研究中国独立学院学生的学习现状，从而对学生个人，教师以及学校管理给予建议。因此您提供的信息对于改进学校对于学生的支持体系将会有很大的帮助。

论文计划采访12名在校学生，6名教师以及3名在校员工。采访会用中文进行。出于对于个人隐私的保护，我通过李老师的帮助把这封信和采访问题发给您，我将不会知道您任何信息和联系方式。如果您对于我的研究课题以及采访感兴趣，请发邮件到 yidanz@student.uv.uio.no，我们可以商讨预约时间，然后进行电话采访。整个采访将占用您大约30分钟。

感谢您！期待您的回复和参与。

祝好！

张译丹

Appendix 2: Interview Questions for Students

Demographic information: age, current year of undergraduate study.

1. Why do you choose to study in College X?
2. What is (are) your goal(s) of your current study?
3. Why do you formulate the goal(s)? Would you choose a number from 1 to 10 to evaluate how strong the goal (s) is (are) in your mind? (1-it is not strong at all, I can change it any time; 10- it is the final goal and will go through my college life)
4. Do you like the major program that you are studying? Do you think that it is suitable for you?
5. How do you treat your study, or may I know your attitude of your study?
6. Do you have any prior experience or specific skill in your learning area?
7. How are the teachers' teaching plans in your department? Do you think they are suitable for you and why?
8. Do you have peer model (s) in the class? How do (es) he/she/they influence you?
9. Do you like your class?
10. Would you describe your classroom climate? You can use the given words or any other ones in your opinion, please give as many as you want. (Warm, cold, permissive, democratic, autocratic, learner-centered).
11. Do you know the school norms of your college? Do you think it reflects the college value? Why?

12. How is the college climate? You can describe it using your own words or the given ones in question 10.
13. Do you know the college management structure? How about it?
14. How do you think the task managements of your study? Do you think whether they reflect your courses/education situation or not?
15. Do you have any troubles/dissatisfactions in your study life?
16. Would you please evaluate your study life using number 1 to 10? (1- it is real bad study experience, I do not like it at all, I learned nothing here; 10- it is perfect study experience, I like it very much and I learned so many things here.)

Appendix 3: Interview Questions for Teachers

1. Are you a full-time or part-time teacher in College X?
2. Why do you choose College X?
3. How long have you worked here?
4. Have you ever taught in public universities? If yes, please answer question 5.
5. Are there any differences of the course management between College X and the public school you work(ed)? Which one do you prefer? Why?
6. Are the course and task managed by yourself or the school?
 - A. If by yourself, why do you manage them like this? What do you focus on?
 - B. If by the school, how do you think about them? What do they focus on in your opinion?
7. Do you think the course(s) you are teaching suit (s) your students?
8. Have you ever adopted the feedbacks from your students? Is there any reflection to your teaching plan or decision?
9. Have you ever used peer models during your teaching process?
10. If yes, do you think it is useful for your students' learning processes?
11. How about the atmosphere of the class you teach? Would you describe it using simple words? (Warm, cold, permissive, democratic, autocratic, learner-centered). You can use the given words or some other ones in your opinion, please give as many as you want.
12. How about the education situation for your students? Would you evaluate it using number

1 to 10 (1- their education situations are very bad and they learned nothing at all; 10- their education situations are quiet well and they learned so many things here.)?

Appendix 4: Interview Questions for Staff

1. How long have you worked in College X?
2. What is your general responsibility? Does your work benefit the students in any way?
3. Do you know the school norm of College X? Do you think whether it conforms to the real school value or not?
4. How about the school atmosphere of College X? (Warm, cold, permissive, democratic, autocratic, learner-centered). You can use the given words or some other ones in your opinion, please give as many as you want.
5. How do you think the school management on education part? Do you think it benefits the students?
6. Do you think the task management suits for the students?
7. Are there any difficulties that the students meet in their school life or during your work process?
8. Do you have any dissatisfactions of the school management on education part? As contributing the students, would you use number 1 to 10 to evaluate the management structure (1- it is not suit for the student at all; 10- it totally suit for the students)?