

**THE ELEMENTS AND IMPACT OF EXTERNAL  
QUALITY ASSURANCE ON PRIVATE  
UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGES IN YUNNAN  
PROVINCE, CHINA**

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QUALITY ASSURANCE ON PRIVATE  
UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGES IN YUNNAN  
PROVINCE, CHINA**

by

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APQN	Asia Pacific Quality Network
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CEEAA	China Engineering Education Accreditation Association
CHEA	Council for Higher Education Accreditation
CHEA	European Assurance in Higher Education
CPC	Communist Party of China
DWC	Double World Class
EQA	External Quality Assurance
EQNA	Council for Higher Education Accreditation
EU	European Union
HEEC	Higher Education Evaluation Centre
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
MOST	Ministry of Science and Technology
NGO	Non-profit Government Organization
OBE	Outcome Based Education
PeO	Programme Objectives
PHEIs	Private Higher Education Institutions
PO	Programme Outcomes
PRC	People's Republic of China
PUCs	Private Undergraduate Universities
QA	Quality Assurance
QAANZ	Quality Assurance Authority of New Zealand
QAUE	Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education

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# **ELEMEN DAN IMPAK JAMINAN KUALITI LUARAN TERHADAP KOLEJ PRASISWAZAH SWASTA DI WILAYAH YUNNAN, CHINA**

## **ABSTRAK**

Pengiktirafan kualiti luaran telah menjadi isu penting dalam bidang pendidikan tinggi di China, kerana kepentingan terhadap kualiti pendidikan tinggi semakin meningkat di China, yang berkait rapat dengan kemakmuran ekonomi dan kestabilan sosial. Pengiktirafan ini berkembang dengan lambat dan masih belum matang di China, terutamanya di kalangan kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana, dan kajian yang berkaitan adalah terhad. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti elemen-elemen pengiktirafan kualiti luaran di kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana, untuk meneroka perubahan yang berlaku dalam pengiktirafan kualiti luaran bagi kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana, untuk mengenal pasti cabaran yang dihadapi oleh pengiktirafan kualiti luaran bagi kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana, dan untuk memahami harapan daripada pihak-pihak berkepentingan terhadap pengiktirafan kualiti luaran dan kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana. Penyelidik menggunakan teori pihak berkepentingan dan teori pentadbiran sebagai panduan untuk tesis ini. Berkenaan dengan metodologi, penyelidik merangka penyelidikan ini dengan menggunakan pendekatan kajian kes secara kualitatif dengan bimbingan epistemologi dan orientasi sosial konstruktif, dan analisis temubual digunakan sebagai instrumen penyelidikan. Saiz sampel adalah 17, dengan enam responden daripada pakar dalam bidang pengiktirafan kualiti luaran di sebuah pusat penilaian, dan sebelas pemimpin peringkat pertengahan daripada pejabat hal ehwal akademik dan jabatan pekerjaan di enam kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana. Kaedah ini juga melibatkan triangulasi, prosedur pengumpulan data, prosedur analisis data, dan pertimbangan etika. Data dianalisis menggunakan perisian Nvivo versi 1.71 untuk platform Mac mengikut soalan kajian dan sub-soalan. Dapati bahawa dalam soalan pertama, terdapat pelbagai pihak berkepentingan dalam pengiktirafan kualiti luaran, terutamanya dalam konteks pasaran, termasuk agensi pihak ketiga, persatuan, ibu bapa, pelajar, orang ramai, industri, kolej-kolej rakan sebaya, media, universiti awam, guru, dan pasaran

antarabangsa. Walau bagaimanapun, hampir semua pihak berkepentingan tidak dapat melibatkan diri dalam proses tersebut, kecuali kerajaan, yang bertindak sebagai pengurus, pengendali, dan penilai bagi kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana. Ini disebabkan oleh sistem pemerintahan yang terpusat, di mana kerajaan menggunakan kuasa dengan mengeluarkan arahan yang tegas kepada agensi pihak ketiga dan kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana. Ini selaras dengan teori yang dibincangkan dalam bab kedua, iaitu teori pentadbiran dan teori pihak berkepentingan. Memang, kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana mengalami perubahan dalam pengurusan, pengajaran, dan pekerjaan. Perubahan dalam pengurusan termasuk hubungan yang lebih rapat dengan kerajaan, peningkatan pelaburan, kesedaran kualiti yang lebih tinggi, dan perubahan dalam cara pengurusan dijalankan. Perubahan dalam pengajaran pula menekankan lebih kepada pelajar, staf pengajaran, dan urusan pengajaran. Di sisi pekerjaan, kolej-kolej kini memberi keutamaan kepada pekerjaan, peperiksaan perkhidmatan awam, dan latihan untuk meningkatkan kebolehpasaran. Walau bagaimanapun, cabaran yang dihadapi oleh pengiktirafan kualiti luaran melebihi perubahan yang berlaku bagi kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana. Dalam pengurusan, terdapat peralihan kepada standardisasi dan homogenisasi, menyebabkan kekurangan autonomi, yang menjadi tumpuan utama untuk hanya mencapai kelangsungan hidup. Dalam pengajaran, cabaran yang dihadapi melibatkan staf pengajaran dan urusan pengajaran. Jelas bahawa cabaran dalam pekerjaan terutamanya datang daripada kerajaan, pasaran, dan kolej-kolej persendirian itu sendiri. Secara keseluruhannya, perubahan utama dipengaruhi oleh penilaian kerajaan, manakala cabaran yang dihadapi datang daripada pelbagai pihak berkepentingan, termasuk kerajaan, pasaran, dan kolej-kolej sendiri. Perubahan dalam pengiktirafan kualiti luaran utamanya dipacu oleh penilaian kerajaan, yang mendorong kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana untuk melakukan penambahbaikan. Walau bagaimanapun, masalah yang dipengaruhi oleh pasaran sering diabaikan oleh kolej-kolej persendirian, yang menganggapnya sebagai proses formal yang dituntut oleh kerajaan, membolehkan mereka memberi tumpuan kepada kepentingan peribadi. Tambahan pula, responden menyuarakan harapan yang ikhlas terhadap kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana, kerajaan, dan agensi pihak ketiga. Terdapat permintaan yang kuat kepada kerajaan untuk memberi autonomi kepada kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah

sarjana bagi menyesuaikan diri dengan pasaran, menubuhkan kerangka kerja jaminan kualiti yang bersesuaian dengan ciri-ciri unik mereka, menetapkan tanggungjawab yang berterusan, dan mengurangkan stereotaip media dan orang awam terhadap kolej-kolej persendirian, dan. Demikian juga, harapan kepada agensi pihak ketiga melibatkan pemberian autonomi, transformasi kepada agensi yang berorientasikan perkhidmatan, dan menubuhkan mekanisme akauntabiliti. Bagi kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana sendiri, usaha yang diambil haruslah melibatkan pengurusan, pengajaran, dan pekerjaan, termasuk usaha dalaman bagi pembangunan mampan, dan pembangunan ke arah orientasi pasaran. Dalam pengajaran, terdapat harapan untuk meningkatkan kesejahteraan dan peluang staf pengajaran, menyelaraskan pengajaran dan pekerjaan dengan keperluan pasaran, dan memupuk inovasi, serta mengenai pelajar. Pekerjaan haruslah memberi keutamaan kepada keperluan guru, pelajar, dan latihan berorientasikan pasaran. Kajian ini mempunyai implikasi yang signifikan dari segi pertimbangan dasar, signifikansi penyelidikan, dan pandangan teori. Berdasarkan temuan ini, penyelidik mencadangkan beberapa cadangan untuk badan-badan kerajaan, kolej-kolej persendirian yang menawarkan program ijazah sarjana, dan agensi pihak ketiga. Walau bagaimanapun, adalah penting untuk mengakui bahawa penyelidikan ini terutamanya memberi tumpuan kepada kajian kes kualitatif, dengan itu membataskan kapasitinya untuk sepenuhnya menggambarkan konteks yang lebih luas di China. Usaha penyelidikan pada masa depan haruslah bertujuan untuk melibatkan pelbagai pihak berkepentingan dari pelbagai jenis institusi pengajian tinggi dan entiti yang berkaitan dalam pengiktirafan kualiti luaran, dengan menggunakan pelbagai kaedah penyelidikan.

**THE ELEMENTS AND IMPACT OF EXTERNAL QUALITY  
ASSURANCE ON PRIVATE UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGES IN YUNNAN  
PROVINCE, CHINA**

**ABSTRACT**

External quality assurance has become a pivotal aspect of Chinese higher education, as the subject of quality in higher education has gained prominence in China since it is highly related to the prosperity of the economy and the stability of society. It developed very late and is also immature in China, particularly for private undergraduate colleges; the related research is limited. This study is to identify the elements of external quality assurance in private undergraduate colleges, to explore the changes in external quality assurance in private undergraduate colleges, to identify the challenges of external quality assurance in private undergraduate colleges, and to understand the expectations from stakeholders in external quality assurance and private undergraduate colleges. The researcher employed stakeholder theory and governance theories to guide this thesis. With regard to the methodology, the researcher designed the research through a qualitative case study with the guidance of epistemology and social constructive orientation. The interview analysis was utilised as the research instrument. The sample size was 17, six respondents from external quality assurance experts in one evaluation centre, and 11 middle-level leaders from academic affairs offices and employment departments in six private undergraduate colleges. The method also involves triangulation, data collection, data analysis procedures, and ethical consideration. The data was analysed by Nvivo 1.71 Mac version according to the research questions and sub-questions. It is found that in the first question, there should be various stakeholders in external quality assurance, particularly within the market, which includes third-party agencies, associations, parents, students, the masses, industries, peer colleges, media, public universities, teachers, and international markets. However, almost all stakeholders cannot participate in it except the government, which acts as the manager, operator, and evaluator in private undergraduate colleges. This is due to the centralization system, where the government exercises its power by issuing strong directives to third-party

agencies and private undergraduate colleges. This aligns with the theories proposed in the second chapter, namely governance theories and stakeholder theory. Indeed, private undergraduate colleges undergo changes in management, teaching, and employment. Regarding management, these changes involve a closer relationship with the government, increased investment, heightened quality awareness, and shifts in management modes. As for teaching, there's a greater emphasis on students, teaching staff, and teaching affairs. In terms of employment, colleges now prioritise employment, civil service exams, and employability training. However, the challenges of external quality assurance outweigh the changes for private undergraduate colleges. In management, there's a move towards standardisation and homogenization, leading to a lack of autonomy, merely for survival. In teaching, challenges encompass teaching staff and teaching affairs. It's evident that the challenges in employment mainly stem from the government, the market, and private colleges themselves. In summary, the primary changes result from government evaluation, while the challenges arise from various stakeholders, including the government, the market, and the colleges themselves. The changes in external quality assurance are largely driven by government evaluations, prompting private undergraduate colleges to improve. However, the problems influenced by the market are often overlooked by private colleges, as they perceive them as mere formalities mandated by the government, allowing them to focus on self-benefit. Additionally, respondents express sincere expectations for private undergraduate colleges, the government, and third-party agencies. There is a strong demand for the government to empower the autonomy of private undergraduate colleges towards marketization, establish a quality assurance framework tailored to their unique characteristics, institute lifelong accountability, and reduce media and public stereotypes against private colleges. Similarly, expectations for third-party agencies involve autonomy, empowerment, transforming into service-oriented agencies, and establishing accountability mechanisms. As for private undergraduate colleges themselves, initiatives should encompass management, teaching, and employment, including internal efforts for sustainable development and development towards market orientation. In teaching, there is an expectation to improve teaching staff welfare and opportunities, align teaching and employment with market needs, foster innovation, and concern students. Employment should prioritise the needs of teachers, students, and market-oriented training. This study holds significant implications in terms of policy considerations, research significance, and

theoretical insights. Building upon these findings, the researcher proposes recommendations for governmental bodies, private undergraduate colleges, and third-party agencies. However, it's essential to acknowledge that this research is primarily focused on qualitative case studies, thereby restricting its capacity to fully depict the broader context in China. Future research endeavours should aim to engage a broader range of stakeholders from various types of higher education institutions and other relevant entities in external quality assurance, utilising diverse research methodologies. Keywords: External quality assurance, private undergraduate college, government, market, China

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

Quality assurance (QA) is undoubtedly one of the most key mechanisms for the quality of higher education (Barnabas, 2007) . Until now, there is still some evidence from academics, particularly in institutional quality and accountability concerning the programme review, evaluation, and assessment from the Middle Ages. Quality assurance involves a deliberate and organised assessment of an institution or programme to ascertain whether acceptable levels of education, scholarly activities, and infrastructure are being achieved, sustained, and improved (Banji, 2011). One of the main ideas supporting quality assurance in higher education is continuous improvement. It recognises that quality is a continuous process rather than a static concept (Kayyali, 2023).

External accountability formally originated in the U.S. (Barnabas, 2007) , primarily aimed at a large number of private higher education providers in the 1990s (Bernhard, 2012; Lemaitre & Karakhanyan, 2020) and has become the discourse of global higher education as modern external quality assurance (EQA) mechanisms regardless of public or private sectors (Ewell, 2010; Liu et al., 2015) . The term "external quality assurance" describes the process by which a third party, such as a quality assurance agency or another entity separate from the institution, evaluates the programme or operation to see if it satisfies the agreed-upon standards (Banji, 2011). EQA has become a pivotal aspect of Chinese higher education as the subject of quality in higher education has gained prominence in China, since higher education is

highly related to the prosperity of the economy and the stability of society in each country (Yuan, 2017). However, the modern private undergraduate colleges (PUCs) were relatively late to develop in China in 2002, China had four PUCs in 2002 and has been developing very rapidly since 2008, there are 390 private undergraduate colleges according to the recent statistics (MOE, 2021b). As the private higher education system grows rapidly, its focus on the quality and integrity of education has declined rapidly (Ozturgut, 2011). College administrators have been somewhat ineffective at recruiting quality staff or employees, and those staff lack any training in programme or curriculum building (Ozturgut, 2011); administrative regulations and skills for expansion and diversification of the student body have not been updated (Liu, 2016); the living and learning circumstances for students and employees are far from ideal, laboratory facilities and technology services are inadequate (Ozturgut, 2011). PUCs do not been sufficiently supported to accomplish more, academic staff cannot meet the requirements of students; due to the rising workload, teachers have not enough time to commit themselves to teaching (Liu, 2016). The private undergraduate higher education in China needs a complete makeover right from the outset via external quality assurance mechanisms before it get out of control (Ozturgut, 2011).

The EQA system is complex and different, which faces a lot of challenges in different stages and countries (Stensaker, 2018). It developed very late and is also immature in China, particularly for PUCs in Yunnan, the related research is limited (Cao & Li, 2014), it needs to be explored further.

Therefore, this study is to identify the elements of external quality assurance on private undergraduate colleges, to explore the changes of external quality assurance

to private undergraduate colleges, to identify the challenges of external quality assurance to private undergraduate colleges, and to understand the expectation from stakeholders to external quality assurance and private undergraduate colleges.

## **1.2 Background of the Study**

Higher education has developed rapidly in the 21st century in the background of globalization, regionalization, and localization. The social and economic progress of nations relies significantly on the educational achievements of their people and the calibre of their higher education establishments (Mense et al., 2018) . Meanwhile, private higher education has exerted great influence on the development of the world; the percentage of enrolment held a third (32.9%) of the world's total higher education; there were 56.7 million students; and higher education in Asia and Latin America were the twin giants; the number of enrolments accounts for 48.8% and 42.1% in both regions, respectively; and the percentage of enrolment in private higher education in the U.S. is 27.5% (Bothwell, 2021). Such a large scale of the private higher education sector cannot survive without quality assurance, regardless of EQA and internal quality assurance (IQA).

QA originated from the Mediaeval Century, even though the term did not appear at that time (Charles & Arch, 2007; Misha, 2007), but it became a formal and significant initiative in the 1960s in the USA and then popularized into European countries in higher education arena (Misha, 2007), it includes IQA and EQA.

EQA is a notion utilised to show a wide range of undertaken at the institutional and/or program level by organisations external to higher education institutions (Stensaker, 2018). It primarily originated in the USA, which aimed at the accreditation

of private tertiary education, it has more than 100 year of history, and it was introduced to other countries in the mid-1980s, and thereafter evolved in many other countries (Liu & Li, 2015; Stensaker, 2018).

Ensuring quality assurance in higher education is vital for fostering an internal culture of excellence (Internal quality assurance (IQA)), which can either facilitate or hinder institutional transformation. Consequently, finding a delicate equilibrium between enhancing educational standards and maintaining accountability is of utmost importance (Harvey & William, 2010; Stensaker, 2018). According to the findings of recent studies, which have often disputed the necessity or value of these new external quality assurance measures, people have come to the conclusion that the traditional method of assuring academic quality, which was internal to universities, is less effective and outdated (Liu et al., 2015) . Nonetheless, through several cycles of external evaluation, the institutions felt “evaluation fatigue,” particularly after the economic crisis, it has heightened the sector's, government's, and general public's sensitivity to reducing bureaucratic burden and rationalizing resources, leading to the suppression or merging of quality assurance bodies in a number of nations (Chaparro & Victor, 2018). Moreover, the influence and impact of EQA can attach importance to institutional levels and systems in higher education arena (Stensaker, 2011), such as the transformation of governance in tertiary education, and the process of diversification of HEIs (Stensaker, 2008) . And EQA can also lead to Moreover, the influence and impact of EQA can attach importance to institutional levels and systems in the higher education arena (Stensaker, 2011) such as the transformation of governance in tertiary education and the process of diversifying HEIs (Stensaker, 2008). And EQA can also lead to centralization, professionalisation, and stakeholder

involvement centralization, professionalization, and stakeholder involvement (Stensaker, 2018).

The QA of PUCs consists of three main subjects in China, namely, the government, society (market), and PUCs themselves. That is to say, the government and market are two main external quality assurance subjects (Wu, 2014). Whereas, in China, due the governance of autocracy and centralization predominate over autonomy, the power of market participation has an extremely limited impact (Wu, 2014) . Furthermore, all colleges must be examined using the same government-established evaluation indicators; nevertheless, a number of universities, particularly those that are not comprehensive, have opposed being rated using the same external criteria (Huang et al., 2014) . And even though the PUCs are also different, like the Independent College and Minban College, they have different backgrounds and histories of university running, different geographical locations, different missions, and so on. Under the same criteria of university running, it would bring more challenges. Moreover, as governmental assessment organisations have been involved in practically almost all types of higher education evaluation, these non-governmental evaluation agencies (third-party evaluation agencies) have had few possibilities to work independently or participate in any official evaluation schemes (Yun, 2016).

The private undergraduate college in China has developed as a significant part of higher education during short period development, and there were 764 PUCs among 1238 undergraduate universities, which were 61.7% in all HEIs (MOE, 2021b). The number of full-time undergraduate enrolments was 4, 736, 848 in all 18,931,044 students, which was 25% of all the full-time undergraduate enrolment

students, whilst the full-time academic staff in private undergraduate universities is 369, 605 (29%) among all full-time academic staff and 1, 272, 996 in all HEIs (MOE, 2021b).

However, due to the lag in the in the development of PUCs and the lag in quality assurance (QA), PUCs have confronted the majority of challenges (Song, 2014) , especially the funding, quality, employment, teaching, and administrative competence compared with public HEIs (Li & Morgan, 2008; Ozturgut, 2009). For example, from the perspective of the undergraduate college themselves, they had a strong desire to increase tuition costs under huge financial stress. However, in terms of long-term development, there was very little room for tuition price increases, and when tuition revenue exceeds a certain threshold beyond the affordability of residents, tuition fee increases may result in a decrease in enrolment. As a result, relying solely on the rolling accumulation of tuition fees to expand the scale and improve the quality of private undergraduate education is exceedingly impractical (Zhang et al., 2014). In terms of employment, the majority of private undergraduate students were dissatisfied with their occupations, and there was discrimination against them; their salaries were lower than those of public undergraduate students (Zhang, 2019) . The expansion of private undergraduate institutions was hampered by the government's sole evaluation body, whose evaluation content neglected students as subjects and whose ideas of quality and talent were limited to the conventional level (Kang, 2020). Meanwhile, a critical scarcity of teaching staff in PUCs has emerged as a major issue that cannot be overlooked; colleges were experiencing brain drain, which was obviously not conducive to the growth of private undergraduate colleges (Deng, 2019).

Moreover, PUCs are full of students with lower Chinese University Entrance Examination scores (Ozturgut, 2009) , the quality of talent cultivation is not like that of elite-education universities, and it has declined rapidly (Wang, 2017) , including teaching quality, academic staff competence, graduate quality etc. Morgan (2015) notes many of PHEIs were labelled diploma mills, they lag behind in quality and in sources of student recruitment compared to the public undergraduate institutions (Li & Morgan, 2008).

Yunnan, located in the southwestern part of China, is a province characterized by its diverse ethnic minorities and its position as a borderland. It shares borders with Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Guizhou Province to the east, Sichuan Province to the north, and Tibet Autonomous Region to the northwest. To the west, it shares a border with Myanmar, while Laos lies to its south and Vietnam to its southeast (Yunnan Provincial Government, 2014), Due to the reasons of history and geography, the development of higher education lags behind the others, and it is one of the least developed provinces in China (Yang et al., 2021) . Additionally, the southern region of Yunnan Province is characterized by intricate terrain and steep valleys, leading to significantly higher investment costs for higher education compared to other provinces. In such neighbouring border areas, robust border trade and a strong demand for labour diminish the local residents' inclination towards pursuing higher education, ultimately contributing to subpar educational outcomes (Han et al., 2023).

There are two main kinds of private undergraduate colleges: one is Minban Undergraduate College (literally translated as 'peoples-run-university' referring to its

sponsorship by non-governmental finance), and the other is Independent College, which is affiliated with its public parent university but without public funding (Liu, 2020).

There are nine PUCs in Yunnan; seven independent colleges were built between 2000 and 2004, and the other two private universities were upgraded into PUCs from vocational higher education colleges in 2011 and 2014, respectively. That is to say, there were two private undergraduate colleges and seven independent undergraduate colleges before 2020, but four independent colleges transformed into Minban Undergraduate Colleges in 2020<sup>1</sup> (Education Department of Yunnan Province, 2020), and Another one was transformed into Minban Undergraduate College in 2021, so there are now two independent undergraduate colleges in Yunnan Province (Education Department of Yunnan Province, 2021).

PUCs in Yunnan have also met unprecedented problems in QA, including EQA and IQA. In aspects of EQA, Yunnan's higher education has its own characteristics but still lags behind the eastern regions since most of the infrastructure was invested in the economically advanced regions (Chen, 2016) , While the same framework and standards of EQA are utilised in HEIs in Yunnan, most of PUCs' IQA is rather weak as well, like the serious shortage of academic staff, the low-level teaching quality, and the lack of legal protection for the academic staff (Chen, 2016). At the same time, the quality of students was lower than their public counterparts, the PUCs lacked the mechanisms of teacher training, and the construction of infrastructure for PUCs was insufficient (Qiao, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> One independent college called Yunnan University Dianchi college has not transformed into Minban college successfully even though the government listed the name of colleges which transformed successfully, so there were four transformed colleges actually.

Based on that, it is noteworthy that higher education in whole China is facing the same challenges in EQA since there is a unified standard and mechanisms for all undergraduate universities, regardless of whether they are public or private HEIs, in spite of whether they are research universities or applied-based universities. Most EQA studies focus on the problems of public HEIs; limited documents can be found that are related to EQA in PUCs in China, particularly in Yunnan(Zhang & Liu, 2015).

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

In the early years of the twenty-first century, higher education in China experienced rapid growth, transitioning from elite education to popularization education. Throughout this period, the Chinese government undertook a restructuring of the higher education system to align with regional economic needs, industry structure, and cultural development (Wang, 2017) . Meanwhile, the assessment of undergraduate teaching has emerged as a central component within China's university EQA system due to its widely recognized authority and applicability. Guided by the policy framework that encourages development through assessment, improved management through assessment, and fostering change through assessment, EQA has significantly influenced higher education institutions in China (Zhou, 2019). While the government has been heavily involved in evaluating institutions of higher education, non-governmental accreditation agencies, including third-party agencies, and other stakeholders have had limited options to operate independently or take part in official evaluation schemes (Liu, 2016).

With regard to the EQA of PUCs in China, there exist numerous problems (Liu, 2016) . For instance, the government lacks a clear understanding of the meaning of

applied-oriented undergraduate education within the framework of EQA. The existing top-level system design falls short in terms of reforming talent cultivation methods (Wang, 2017). Moreover, the external and internal talent cultivation mechanisms in the integration of industry, teaching, and research are still incomplete (Wang, 2017). Despite the types of undergraduate institutions, including private and public, all undergraduate institutions employ the same standards and framework for quality assurance (Chen, 2020). The framework of QA can't match the practical needs of PUCs; the teaching, management, and employment of PUCs are, to a large extent, different from their public counterparts, while they have to employ the same evaluation system since the management of PUCs hasn't really attached importance to EQA but to get a certificate of evaluation to enrol more students from EQA (Lu & Wang, 2018). In addition to the government's compulsory requirement that all PUCs must use the same QA framework, all PUCs have to develop toward public ones. Wang (2019) points out that Most private undergraduate colleges were upgraded from vocational higher education; their internal teaching quality monitoring and guarantee mechanisms mostly follow the previous mechanism, which leads to weak teaching, outdated management, poor research ability, and a lower ratio of employment (Huang, 2022). This is far from the requirement of running undergraduate institutions. Likewise, the market, like the professional evaluation agency, industry, or academic association, is striving to participate in the development of private universities, but their role and mission in managing PUCs are unclear, and the force of other external elements except the government is weak (Li, 2013a).

Nonetheless, there are few studies on the EQA of private undergraduate institutions in China and Yunnan according to the search of key databases, including

CNKI (the largest Chinese database), Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Most of the literature focused on the problems of PUCs (Ozturgut, 2015) , the teaching, the management, and employment of undergraduate education (Duan, 2017; Qi, 2014) , or the quality assurance of Chinese higher education, but the research on EQA of PUCs in Yunnan Province is limited (Liu, 2016; Ozturgut, 2011; Yuan, 2017; Yun, 2016).

What external elements and how the different external elements exert their influence on PUCs are obscure (Rao, 2009a), What changes of EQA to PUCs are not clear, including the changes in teaching, management, and employment; what challenges of EQA to PUCs are blurry; and how stakeholders expectations of EQA and PUCs need to be further explored.

Additionally, there are other problems, including data analysis, approaches, theoretical usage, and empirical study. In total, most of the studies focus on the qualitative approach by document analysis instrument; qualitative case studies by interview are limited (Jie & Wenxin, 2023; M. Li, 2020) ; most of the studies adopt stakeholder theory in EQA (Bourne & Peterkin, 2017; Pandey, 2004; Parry, 2013; Zhao, 2021) , while the empirical study employed stakeholder theory and governance theory is rare. Similarly, most of the study scarcely utilize software, like Nvivo, to analyse the data (Jiang, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

#### **1.4 Objectives**

According to the research above, objectives of the study are proposed as follows:

- (i) To identify external elements (stakeholders) influencing PUCs;

- (ii) To understand the changes of EQA to PUCs;
- (iii) To identify the challenges of EQA to PUCs;
- (iv) To explore the expectations of the stakeholders on the implementation of EQA in the context of PUCs.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

- (i) What and how the elements of EQA influence PUCs?
- (ii) What are the changes of EQA to PUCs?
- (iii) What are the challenges of EQA to PUCs?
- (v) How're the expectations of the stakeholders on the implementation of EQA in the context of PUCs?

### **1.6 Conceptual Framework**

“The systems of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform your research” is what a conceptual framework is (Collins & Stockton, 2018).

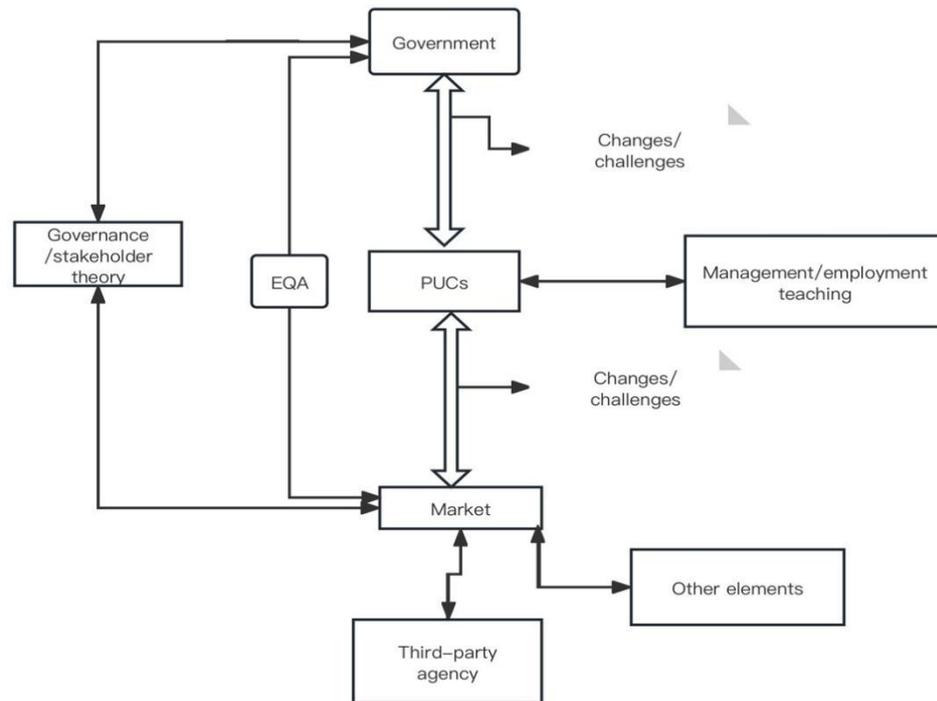


Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the thesis in Figure 1.1 applies governance theories and stakeholder theory to the research. Both theories are employed to illustrate what elements of EQA, including government and the market, particularly the third-party agency, influence PUCs, what changes EQA makes to PUCs, including changes in management, employment, and teaching, and what challenges EQA faces to PUCs, including management, employment, and teaching, and what the stakeholders expectations are for EQA and PUCs. Moreover, this thesis utilised qualitative case study by interview. There were 17 respondents who participated in the thesis; they were from the PUCs and the evaluation centre.

### 1.7 Significance of the Study

The significance of a study underscores its importance, providing researchers with an opportunity to demonstrate its impact on their respective fields of research, the

novel knowledge it generates, and the beneficiaries it serves (Fabula, 2021) . Furthermore, the purpose of emphasising the study's significance is to allow researchers to articulate to readers precisely how their research contributes to the existing literature in their field of study. This is where researchers justify the worthiness of their study and highlight its significance to the community, individuals, and various institutions (Fabula, 2021).

First of all, this study is to generate new knowledge, particularly in the China context. Currently, the research related to the EQA of private undergraduate education is limited. This research will enrich the existing knowledge system and provide a profound and comprehensive view about the quality assurance of PUCs in the background of China, especially the least developed and most concerned province in China. To some extent, it can also mirror external elements and how these elements influence PUCs, and it can also reflect the changes and challenges of EQA for PUCs, including management, teaching, and employment, how's the expectation from the stakeholders for EQA and PUCs in China?

On the other hand, the development of evidence that can be utilised for EQA policymaking and reforms. Due to the obscure nature of external forces, the changes and challenges of EQA to PUCs are blurry. However, the government can find evidence of the changes and challenges of EQA to PUCs via comprehensive research; the government can understand the expectations of stakeholders for PUCs and EQA; and thus, it assists policymakers in making policy and reforming the current higher education system; and it can also promote researchers towards further research. More significantly, thanks to the unique geographical features of Yunnan, PUCs can

enhance international collaboration with neighbouring countries through the implementation of an improved EQA system.

In a nutshell, it can enhance understanding of the impact of EQA on private colleges and its key stakeholders, particularly the influence of different stakeholders from aspects of government, the market, particularly third-party agency, and PUCs, understand the changes and challenges of EQA in the context of PUCs.

## **1.8 Operation Definition**

### **1.8.1 Quality Assurance**

Quality assurance, involving both internal and external assessments of the effectiveness and performance of colleges and universities, has long been pivotal in preserving and enhancing the excellence of higher education. It aims to uphold the foundational principles of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and social responsibility, thus shaping a future built upon the best practices of the past (Eaton, 2021). Quality assurance encompasses several crucial dimensions in higher education. Firstly, it emphasizes the centrality of processes, aiming to demonstrate to both internal and external stakeholders that an institution maintains processes yielding high-quality outcomes. Secondly, it underscores the importance of explicit accountability for quality across different levels of an institution (Wilger, 1997).

Benchmarking is a pivotal concept in quality assurance, facilitating institutions of evaluating their performance against established standards and best practices. It entails the collection and analysis of data from comparable institutions to pinpoint areas for enhancement and establish quality benchmarks (Kayyali, 2023). Quality assurance in higher education primarily aims to uphold quality through a blend of accreditation,

assessment, and audit processes (Ryan, 2011) . Meanwhile, quality assurance processes that include recommendations for action or necessitate a subsequent action plan should have a predetermined follow-up procedure, consistently implemented (Misha, 2007)

### **1.8.2 External Quality Assurance**

There are differing perspectives on the definition of EQA. Iwinska (2016) expresses EQA means regulations, policies, and practices are implemented at the national level to safeguard the quality of higher education programmes and institutions, Liu (2020) believes EQA is a quality regulation mechanism from the outside of higher education that not only pays attention to the responsibility, improvement, and information transparency of higher education but also focuses on promoting the consistency and continuity of higher education management by establishing quality standards. However, in some contexts, like India, the concept of EQA in academia sparks significant debate, particularly due to the autonomous nature of universities, which are established by legislative bodies and granted the authority to confer degrees. External monitoring is frequently perceived as encroaching upon the autonomy and academic liberty of these educational institutions (Misha, 2007).

### **1.8.3 Private Undergraduate College**

Private undergraduate institutions refer to higher education institutions that offer a bachelor's degree or higher (Yuan & Wang, 2021) . Therefore, there are two main kinds of full-time private undergraduate colleges (PUCs) in China, namely, the Independent College (IC) and Minban College (people-run college; “Min” means “people” in Chinese). To avoid the term of privatisation in communist China, in a

socialist country, the term "Minban" is commonly used and preferred to differentiate these types of higher education institutions from their public counterparts (Lo, 2014).

#### **1.8.4 Independently College**

For the Independent college, Wang and Yan (2018) argue that the independent college was a kind of public and private product; the name is normally combined with a public and private university name, such as Yunnan University Dianchi College. It is different from the pure Minban undergraduate college and the public undergraduate college. The researchers believe that it was a new, formalised form of higher education organisation with some independent social identity, in which Chinese public universities nominally or substantially cooperated with social forces and made use of market mechanisms to run the university (Cao, 2006; Tong, 2012).

Dong (1999) opines that the independent colleges are like the second-tier type of college; they were established by or affiliated with public universities and have institutional innovations (including the system of running the college, management system, funding system, etc.) and new operational mechanisms. This kind of second-tier college is different from the specialised second-tier schools (such as faculties of arts, science, engineering, and medicine) within the universities at present. In other words, it is not restricted by academic disciplines and is different from the traditional specialised second-tier colleges in the university in terms of operation, management, funding system, etc. (Cao, 2006; Zhou, 2005). MOE (2003) pressed a Notice of Several Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Standardizing and Strengthening the Management of Independent Colleges (ICs) and Universities by New Mechanism and Mode, it stated:

Independent colleges are undergraduate-level institutions established under a new mechanism and model by regular public universities, operating as second-tier colleges. Eligibility for admission to an independent college is open to individuals who are enrolled in a general public undergraduate university. The partner of an IC can be an enterprise, an institution, a social group, an individual, or any other institution that has the capacity to cooperate with a public undergraduate university. The partner or private mechanisms are responsible for funding the construction and development of the independent college, as well as covering other associated expenses. The pilot independent colleges should adopt a new operational model. Independent colleges are expected to possess their own campuses and necessary infrastructure, establish a relatively independent structure for teaching, organisation, and management, autonomously admit students, issue academic certificates, manage financial accounting independently, and possess legal autonomy while being accountable for civil liabilities. (MOE, 2003).

Moreover, MOE (2003) releases a policy called the Setting and Management for Independent Colleges, it revised that independent colleges are public undergraduate universities that collaborate with social organizations or individuals outside of state institutions. They rely on non-state financial resources to deliver undergraduate education.

### **1.8.5 Minban Undergraduate College**

The Minban undergraduate college (MUC) is a new mode of undergraduate education in China's higher education system, as opposed to public undergraduate institutions, which are funded by non-state financial resources and are open to the public and based on market mechanisms. The main source of funding is self-funding,

and the college operates on a "self-sustaining" basis, compensating for the cost of education mainly through the tuition fees paid by students (He & Ye, 2016). In 2004, the Chinese State Council released Regulations on the Implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of Private Education, which were revised in 2021. The law regulates that MUCs enjoy equal rights with their public counterparts in terms of admission into higher education, employment, social treatment, and participation in merit awards, which is a kind of non-profit organisation (The State of Council, 2021) . Compared with the ICs, Minban undergraduate institutions also run without funding from their public counterparts or the government.

#### **1.8.6 Market in Higher Education**

The term "market" can be defined as follows: (1) a human need is a perceived condition of deprivation; (2) a market comprises both current and potential customers of a product; and (3) marketing is collaborating with markets to facilitate transactions that satisfy human wants and needs (Williams et al., 1997) . A market is a socially coordinated system in economic theory that uses pricing to balance supply and demand for a product or service. The perceived adequacy of the available alternatives is the deciding factor for consumers when making their choices (price, quality, and availability) (Brown, 2011) . In terms of educational opportunities, a "pure" market would look like this: In these institutions, which are not governed by any external authority, there is a great deal of competition from both public and private entities that offer services in this market (Brown, 2011). Neither the number of students enrolled, nor the prices charged are regulated, so the cost of instruction is covered by fees, which are close to average costs. The users, who are the students and their families, contribute financially to cover these fees. Taxpayer subsidies would end, and students

would be free to choose their own courses, institutions, and instructors based on effective (valid, dependable, and easily available) data regarding the cost, quality, and availability of pertinent courses, programmes, and instructors (Brown, 2011). Higher education is becoming more marketization, which means there is more competition for students with the financial means to pay for "tailored" academic programmes (Gupta, 2018). However, many facets of university and college life have historically been "controlled" by the government, and governments have historically intervened heavily in higher education marketplaces. Degrees, financing, accessibility, quality, institutional administration, personnel issues, and a host of other topics have been heavily regulated by governments, which have also shouldered the bulk of the cost of education (Jongbloed, 2003).

#### **1.8.7 The Third-party Agency**

There are different opinions about the definition of third-party agency evaluation in higher education. Firstly, from the point of view of the relationship of interest, the emphasis is on "disinterestedness"; secondly, from the point of view of the point of view of the organisational relationship, "non-administrative affiliation" is emphasised; thirdly, from the point of view of the legal relationship, it is clear that it is an "independent legal person"; fourthly, from the quality of higher education, it is still important to pay attention to the "professionalism of evaluation." (Liu, 2023).

Zhao (2021) deems that Higher education third-party evaluation agencies, i.e., institutions that independently carry out activities related to higher education evaluation, are typical social institutions representing the governance transformation in China and are an important carrier of external guarantees for the quality of higher education (Zhao, 2021). The most important features of third-party agencies for higher

education are independence and professionalism, which are mainly reflected in their independence in carrying out evaluation business, and their professionalism is mainly reflected in the fact that they are engaged in evaluation activities by professional evaluators in accordance with certain evaluation standards and evaluation procedures (Zhao, 2021).

Pen (2021) agrees that the third-party evaluation of higher education generally refers to the evaluation activities of education quality organised by social institutions that are relatively independent of higher education institutions and the government. These institutions primarily consist of social organisations, enterprises, private non-enterprise units, institutions, and so on.

Therefore, as a third-party agency in higher education, it should be a professional, independent, legal, and objective evaluation agency that has legal status in China.

### **1.8.8 Governance in Higher Education in China**

China is clearly a centralised unitary state, as stated in both the party constitution and the state constitution. The supreme command in Beijing is entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining national unity. The regional party and state institutions must faithfully obey all instructions issued by Beijing. The central powers possess effective tools to assert their authority and punish unwilling regional leaders (Heilmann, 2017, p. 83). It is reasonable to assume that the PRC, in accordance with its official principles, has a hierarchical command structure that permits the central political leadership to impose its will on lower-level administrative units without limitation. Nevertheless, party and state constitutions do not fully capture the complexities of actual political practise (Heilmann, 2017, p. 83).

The governance system is an essential part of the so-called China development model, and yet somewhat less frequently discussed than the other aspects of this model, and when it is discussed in the general literature on comparative governance, the emphasis outside China has been more on the simplistic authoritarianism-democracy distinction (Bardhan, 2020). At one level, China is a one-party state that has been ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since 1949 (Dumbaugh & Martin, 2009).

Chinese politics also involves provincial and municipal officials, a burgeoning network of official and quasi-official policy research groups and think tanks that contribute ideas to policymaking, a slew of state-sector, multinational, and even private sector business interests that influence policy decisions, a robust academic and university community, a diverse media landscape that shapes public opinion, and a more educated and vocal populace that is demanding greater openness and responsibility from the government (Dumbaugh & Martin, 2009).

Other elements, however, add even more complexity to Chinese politics. Individual affiliation can influence political decision-making in the lack of a more structured institutional framework, making an already hazy process much more so. Furthermore, there may be a lack of discipline between the various tiers of the party and the government, which can result in the inefficient execution of policies and, in extreme circumstances, problematic corruption (Dumbaugh & Martin, 2009).

Due to the market economy's gradual devolution of economic and social power away from the state and into the realm of social governance, the administration of China's universities has experienced a fundamental shift from a singular focus on governance to a more multi-faceted approach (Wang, 2022). The faculty aspect of

governance has been formalised since the 1980s. However, the academic section does not have much power when it comes to decisions on finances, resources, and priorities, as these are limited by the administrative and Party sections (Wen & Marginson, 2024).

Therefore, in China's higher education system, the power in higher education belongs to the central government, provincial government, or municipal government. The Party exerts the largest influence on higher education, regardless of private or public HEIs.

## **1.9 Limitation**

Price and Murnan (2004) believe The limitations of the study are that the results or conclusions of the findings may be affected or influenced by the characteristics of the design or methodology. But without the limitation, we cannot ascertain whether authors have genuinely taken into account possible areas of exclusion or bias that could impact the results they present (Greener, 2018). Hence, acknowledging the limitations of research can make suggestions for further research and also help the researchers themselves evaluate the impact of research (USC Libraries, 2021)

This study has a broad scope. In terms of respondents, the stakeholders involve a lot, such as governors, evaluation experts, staff and students, employers, parents, industries, HIEs, and so on. It is not realistic to investigate all the stakeholders, and the number of interviewees is limited. While the sample size only focuses on six private undergraduate institutions, it cannot reflect the landscape of research problems and the status quo in this area. There is no means of determining the likelihood that

the data is representative of a larger population (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001) . Furthermore, because the study involves some sensitive data and information, it may be challenging to interview the key stakeholders, such as the top manager of the private university. Similarly, the further limitation of the case study involves the issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability; it cannot be generalised from the limited samples of the case study; subjectivity may be present, allowing for a significant degree of the researcher's personal interpretations, thereby casting doubt on the validity of case studies. Consequently, case studies may not provide dependable information regarding the broader landscape (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001; Reis, 2009)