

Differentiated Pathways for Private Universities to Participate in Developing the “Study in Liaoning” Brand

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Abstract: Under the background of Liaoning’s participation in building the brand of Study in China and expanding its educational international influence, the construction of Study in Liaoning is facing problems such as insufficient recognition, homogenization of models, and low participation of private universities. By analyzing the strengths and obstacles of private universities, this paper tries to build differentiated pathways from four directions: target market, training model, supply-demand matching, and cultural immersion, and proposes policy, resource, and quality assurance measures to enhance the core competitiveness of the Study in Liaoning brand and advance the internationalized development of private universities.

Keywords: Private universities; Study in Liaoning; Differentiated path

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1. Introduction

Liaoning sits at the core of the Northeast Asian economic circle and acts as a key gateway to the region. Over the past few years, Liaoning has taken the opportunity of the construction of the new highland of “opening up to the north” to continuously improve the management level of international student education and strive to build the Liaoning brand of Study in China. However, the current brand building still faces problems such as homogenization of training models, weak identification of regional characteristics, and insufficient coordination between public and private universities. All these hold back the brand’s competitiveness^[1].

As an important part of the higher education system, private universities play an important role in the construction of regional international education brands. They are flexible and deeply involved with local industries, so they could play a unique role in building a regional study brand. However, at present, the depth and breadth of their participation in brand building are still insufficient, and their comparative advantages have not been fully released. Therefore, systematic exploration of differentiated pathways for private universities is not only the internal demand of their high-quality development, but also the key measure to

strengthen the unique value of “Study in Liaoning” brand and improve the level of education opening in Liaoning.

2. Strengths and obstacles for private universities in building the Study in Liaoning brand

2.1. Current development context

In recent years, Liaoning has actively participated in the brand building strategy of Study in China. Through the introduction of a series of policy documents, it has built a solid institutional foundation from three aspects: quality assessment, communication channels and service guarantee ^[2]. Study in China work is now part of the higher education quality assessment system. Platforms for youth exchanges have been promoted, the “Study in Liaoning, Understand China” activities rolled out, and international student services improved. On this basis, Liaoning Provincial Department of Education further clarified four clear directions: “Understanding Liaoning,” “Studying in Liaoning,” “Integrating into Liaoning” and “Staying in Liaoning,” and set a clear main line for brand building. Subsequently, a seminar on the high-quality development of inbound international student education in China was held, and the work deployment was refined from ten links such as enrollment selection, training system, management service, cultural exchange and security guarantee, and a coordinated development pattern of “policy guidance + platform support + system promotion+ university linkage” was gradually formed.

As a result, the brand construction of Study in Liaoning has achieved phased results. The number of international students in Liaoning has steadily expanded, with international students mainly coming from the “Belt and Road” countries and neighbors such as Russia and Mongolia. A total of 54 universities in Liaoning are qualified to recruit international students, and key public universities including Dalian University of Technology and Liaoning University undertake the main enrollment scale. The continuous optimization of service guarantee, the opening of the information management platform for international students in China, and the promotion of the reform of payment facilitation have provided efficient and convenient support for international teachers and students to study and live in Liaoning.

At the same time, the brand building of Study in Liaoning still faces multiple obstacles. First, the distribution area of students is concentrated, and the student source structure remains unbalanced. Secondly, the homogenization of the training mode does not effectively reflect the strengths of the integration of production and education, and the collaborative pattern between public and private universities has not yet been formed. Third, the brand connotation is weak, lacking any real connection to Liaoning’s local culture and industrial strengths, and the brand recognition and core competitiveness are not strong ^[3]. Fourth, cross-cultural support is weak, professional teachers are highly mobile, and the individual needs of international students in language, psychology, and future planning have not been fully met.

2.2. Private universities’ strengths

In the process of brand building of Study in Liaoning, private universities have the following strengths compared with public universities.

2.2.1. Rapid policy response

Private universities have higher autonomy in running universities and less approval at complex levels. They

can quickly transform policy guidance into specific practices and promote the actual implementation and effectiveness of policies.

2.2.2. Flexible target market choices

Private universities have strong market orientation, which can accurately match the market demand to cultivate high-quality applied talents. Compared with the centralized layout of public universities on the academic student track, private universities can adjust the target market layout and enrollment strategy of students in time according to the changes in the international situation and the fluctuation of regional student demand, so as to form differentiated competitive strengths.

2.2.3. Well-developed industry-education integration

Private universities practice the educational concept and training mode of integration of production and education, which can also be effectively applied to the education of international students in China. By constructing a closed-loop training model of “language + professional skills + targeted employment placement,” such a model helps match regional demand for international talents, enhance the employment competitiveness of international students, and promote the benign interaction between brand building and regional industrial development.

2.3. Private universities’ obstacles

Although private universities possess institutional advantages for international student education, they still face multiple obstacles in policy support, market competition, and resource endowment. These challenges mainly stem from the differentiated positioning between public and private universities and the insufficient global reputation of private higher education.

First, the policy support is weak and tends to public universities. In terms of scholarship allocation and international networking, public universities rely on stable government funds and CSC projects. Private universities are often ineligible for such support or lack targeted special policies, so the actual benefits are not much, and the international promotion efforts are not satisfactory.

Second, the overlap of target markets leads to the homogenization of enrollment. Most private universities have similar overseas market positioning and lack the opportunity to differentiate or share resources. With limited funds and low popularity, they depend heavily on agents, online advertising, and the reputation of current students. The enrollment channels are narrow, and student numbers and quality are uneven. Worse, private and public universities in Liaoning pursue the same pools of students, which only worsens the over-concentration problem.

Third, low global awareness is not conducive to brand building. Private universities lack the long academic history and academic influence of public universities. Their international reputation is much lower, so few overseas students hear about them. The Study in China brand has long been tied up with public universities. Without independent brand recognition and mature overseas promotion channels, private universities struggle to expand in international education markets.

Fourth, the shortage of resources and weak faculty development. Private universities mainly rely on tuition fees. But enrollment promotion, platform building, expert hiring, and career guidance all require a lot of financial resources, and resources remain consistently insufficient. In addition, excellent teachers tend to flow to public universities. This makes it difficult for private universities to build high-quality multilingual

projects and continuous international student education due to the lack of senior talents and high turnover rate.

3. Building differentiated pathways for private universities in the Study in Liaoning brand

The core idea is for private universities to use their own strengths and signature programs to create a unique brand identity, different from public universities. By coordinating four areas—target student markets, training models, supply-side demand matching, and cultural immersion—an “application + region” learning brand that complements rather than competes with public universities can be developed.

3.1. Differentiated target student markets

Pursuing different markets. The promotion of Liaoning’s “opening to the north” has brought more students from Russia, Mongolia, and Belarus. Private universities can seize this strategic opportunity. With the approach of the “China-Russia Education Year” in 2026, private universities can turn their attention to neighboring countries such as Central Asia and avoid competition with public universities. Private universities also target middle-income families and students with a strong interest in applied skills to strengthen their regional advantages.

Segment the audience. Private universities can focus on the talent shortage of Liaoning’s trillion-yuan industrial bases and 22 key industrial clusters. They recruit in-service practitioners and vocational college graduates from source countries to build a distinctive “industry + academic training” featured orientation, realizing effective alignment between learners’ development goals and local industrial talent demands.

Build deep enrollment channels. Private universities can establish stable enrollment cooperation with overseas vocational colleges, industrial associations, and Chinese multinational enterprises.

3.2. Differentiated training modes

Matching industry demand. Relying on the existing strong disciplines of private colleges and universities, focus on key industries in Liaoning. Develop projects suitable for these needs and create a brand positioning: “Liaoning Learning + Strong Industry + Skill Application.” Design “language + skills + practice” courses, use real projects from the international market and industry frontiers, and embed industry standards into teaching. This makes the course more practical and relevant.

Innovative training methods. Take advantage of the industry-education integration advantages of private colleges. In cooperation with local and overseas Chinese-funded enterprises in the “Going Out + Education” program, private universities can build an integrated training system of “Teaching-Internship-Employment” order training model to provide high-quality applied talents for overseas Chinese-funded enterprises. Private universities also adopt the double-track mode of “degree + skill certification” to enhance students’ professional advantages and cultivate local talents who are familiar with local industries and have solid skills for foreign-invested companies in China.

3.3. Differentiated supply-demand matching

Customized service. Create a personal profile for each student from the moment of enrollment. According to their background, plans, and life needs, a collaborative service system covering learning, daily life, and

career development is constructed. In daily life, provide one-to-one support, multilingual help, legal and medical advice, psychological counseling, etc., to establish a sense of belonging. In terms of employment, private universities can connect with Liaoning enterprises' international departments to organize exclusive job fairs, and build a bridge for cross-border employment. Focus on areas where public universities lack support for corporate internships and job placement.

Flexible service model. Private universities can set up overseas enrollment offices in key source countries for targeted enrollment and pre-exit counseling. Develop a multilingual online platform for personalized application guidance. Establish a one-stop service center to handle everything from visas and housing to language training and daily adaptation to improve response speed.

3.4. Differentiated cultural immersion

Local characteristic cultural resources, including Liaohe River culture, industrial heritage, and Hongshan culture, serve as the core featured elements of the Study in Liaoning brand. Intangible cultural heritage such as traditional paper-cutting, Errenzhuan folk opera and Manchu folk customs, together with industrial tourism and ice-snow cultural resources, are integrated into curriculum design and extracurricular activities to strengthen international students' recognition of Liaoning's local culture.

Immersive contextual learning can be realized by organizing field investigations, volunteer services and folk experience activities in rural villages, urban communities and industrial parks. The university also offers featured local culture courses to help international students perceive Liaoning's daily customs and industrial vitality, laying a solid foundation for their future career settlement in Liaoning.

In terms of innovative cross-cultural exchanges, universities can hold campus cultural festivals and vocational skill competitions for both Chinese and international students. Relying on the global alumni network to promote word-of-mouth communication, private universities can build a distinctive Study in Liaoning brand image featured by practicality, affinity, regional characteristics and international attractiveness.

4. Safeguard measures

In order to make these differentiated paths work, it is necessary to guarantee them in terms of policy, resources, quality, and so on.

4.1. Policy

Special policies. Relevant departments should introduce policies for private colleges and universities to participate in the Study in Liaoning brand initiative. Provide support in key areas such as project design, scholarship allocation, industry-education bases, and international teacher development. Develop differentiated measures for private universities to join provincial exchange projects and joint brand activities to solve the current policy imbalance.

Quality certification. Relying on educational evaluation institutions, an international education quality standard suitable for the application-oriented positioning of private colleges and universities should be established. It covers the core links of enrollment, teaching and service. Give official support to certified private universities to enhance their international credibility and student appeal.

4.2. Resources

Multiple funding streams. With government subsidies, corporate investment, and social donations pooled together, local authorities can set up a special development fund for private universities participating in the Study in Liaoning initiative. It is used for overseas promotion, training platforms, international curriculum development, and other key projects to ease the financial pressure. It can rely on overseas Chinese-funded enterprises and industrial associations to build international cooperation platforms, and organize regular matchmaking and cooperative seminars to help private universities expand their global layout.

Faculty development. Provide targeted international training programs for private university teachers, provide overseas learning and bilingual teaching workshops, and provide subsidies to increase retention rates. Encourage hiring high-level international experts to improve the internationalization level of teachers.

4.3. Quality

Full-chain monitoring. Establish a monitoring system covering the whole process from student enrollment, through Liaoning training, to graduation. Standardize the key steps such as syllabus design, practice assessment, and graduation assessment. Provide academic warnings and personalized support to ensure quality.

External evaluation and improvement. Bring in third-party evaluators to regularly assess core indicators: student satisfaction, training quality, employability, and cross-cultural adaptation. Establish a feedback loop to help private universities continuously improve their projects and services.

5. Conclusion

Private universities constitute key participants in developing the Study in Liaoning brand. Differentiated development enables them to avoid homogeneous competition, expand international student enrollment channels and lift their global competitiveness. Through targeted practices covering market positioning, training system design, supporting services and cultural immersion—namely refined student source segmentation, industry-aligned training construction, customized high-quality services and diversified cultural experience programs—private universities can give full play to their comparative strengths and achieve complementary development alongside public counterparts.

Putting these differentiated paths into practice will help to form a pattern in which public universities lead academic-oriented international education, while private universities dominate application-oriented talent training. This will enrich the Study in Liaoning brand initiative and enhance the international competitiveness of private universities. However, to sustain the effective operation of these differentiated pathways, policy support, resource integration, and quality control are also needed. With the improvement of the level of public-private collaboration, the Study in Liaoning brand initiative can evolve into a high-quality ecosystem with complementary advantages, attracting and cultivating more international talents in line with the needs of Liaoning's comprehensive revitalization of the industry.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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