CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

China's economic development is in a critical period of transformation from high-speed development to high-quality development. Higher education should serve the national development strategy, focus on the urgent needs of national strategies and key industries, strive to cultivate top innovative talents, and strengthen the cultivation of top innovative talents in strategic shortages and emerging cross-cutting fields. As an important part of China's education system, private higher education plays a key role in economic and social development. Private higher education undergraduate education (hereinafter referred to as "private undergraduate education") is not only an important part of higher education, but also the key to comprehensively promoting the integration and commonality of applied education, vocational education, and general education. Improving the learning outcomes of private higher education undergraduate students (hereinafter referred to as "private undergraduate students") is the key to the high-quality development of applied education and the core of the reform of the applied talent training system. Learning engagement is an important dimension to measure students' learning outcomes, and promoting students' learning engagement is an important way to improve students' learning outcomes

Hubei Enshi College was chosen as the empirical study site because of its availability as an appropriate empirical context for studying undergraduate students' learning engagement in the private higher education sector in China. Both the contextual relevance and the features of private undergraduate universities in China were used to determine the selection of the items.

Private universities, particularly those offering undergraduate programs, are an integral part of China's higher education system that have gained significance in recent decades, broadening access to tertiary education, meeting the growing demand for higher education, and offering a variety of educational routes. Private universities providing undergraduate education sometimes have unique characteristics, such as higher minority representation among students, a greater focus on development for teaching, and a constant effort to enhance the quality of education, student support systems, and institutional competitiveness. The above features make the problem of student engagement a significant research problem in private higher education.

Hubei Enshi College exhibits some typical traits of Chinese private undergraduate colleges. Firstly, being a private undergraduate college, it hosts a wide range of students who have a variety of academic skill levels, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic

experiences. This diversity offers a suitable setting to explore how individual and environmental factors interact to affect learning engagement. Second, like many private universities, the college attaches great importance to the quality of teaching, the development of student services, and the creation of an enabling learning environment. The institutional characteristics are very similar to the factors studied in this research, such as student factors, teacher factors, peer relationships, school environment, family support, and social environment.

In addition, Hubei Enshi College is situated in the province of Hubei, which is a part of the highly developed urban areas as well as the less-developed regional communities. The geographical context offers a chance to study student engagement in a context of diversity in social and educational settings, where family resources, social support, and institutional conditions might intersect in affecting learning experiences. Thus, the chosen research site offers a compelling context for the study of ecological mechanisms of undergraduate student engagement.

Besides, under the Chinese education reforms policy under the Reform and Opening-up Policy, privately-owned universities have grown fast, yet they have been experiencing constant problems in terms of quality of education, student interaction, and effectiveness in developing talents. Research has been recommended in existing literature to provide more context-specific and empirically based research to have a better understanding of how engagement works in these institutions. Nevertheless, the abundance of empirical data paying special attention to undergraduate students in the context of a private university is still lacking, especially those studies that can combine various influencing factors and investigate their overall impact on the various aspects of learning engagement.

Thus, this research fills these gaps by examining the learning experiences of undergraduate learners in private universities using an analytical framework that takes into account the individual, teacher, peer, institutional, family, and social variables. In this way, the research does not only add the available literature with context-specific evidence but can also be useful in its practical implications to enhance student learning outcomes and the high-quality evolution of private higher education.

Researching learning engagement and its influencing factors is of great significance to improving students' learning outcomes and improving the quality of applied talent training.

Private higher education is an important part of the education industry

With the development and changes in the era of the mobile Internet, exchanges and

cooperation between countries are becoming more and more extensive, which also means that competition between countries in the world is becoming increasingly fierce. In the era of the mobile Internet, knowledge and talents are increasingly becoming the core competitiveness of countries' comprehensive national strength competition. Since China implemented the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, private colleges and universities have made great progress. Since the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up Policy in 1978, private colleges and universities in China have experienced substantial growth and transformation. As of 2023, there are 2,759 general higher education institutions nationwide, with private institutions comprising approximately 40% of the total. Among the 1,270 undergraduate institutions, 413 are privately operated, representing 32.52% of all undergraduate universities. Furthermore, private universities enroll around 6 million students, accounting for 35% of total higher education enrollment in the country. These figures clearly indicate that private universities are playing an increasingly significant role in expanding access to higher education in China, not only by absorbing a large proportion of student demand but also by alleviating the enrollment pressure traditionally borne by public institutions.

Besides enhancing access, the creation of diversity and modernization of higher education in China have been made by the private universities. They have been highly responsive to the changing market needs and technological shift, and about 15 percent of them have online and hybrid forms of learning, which provide flexibility, accessibility, and lifelong learning for non-traditional and working students. Meanwhile, approximately one-fifth of the private institutions have also launched innovative, industry-focused courses in fields like artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and network security, and are making their curricula highly responsive to the new domains of the digital economy.

In addition to curriculum innovation, the structure of governance and management is more flexible in private universities than in public institutions, which facilitates quicker program development, interdisciplinary programs, and collaboration with industry. Most institutions are actively partnering with enterprises to co-create courses, create pipelines of internship opportunities, and encourage applied research, so that graduate employability and relevance of skills are reinforced. Moreover, modern teaching facilities, such as smart classrooms, digital platforms, and simulation labs, are prevalent investments in many private universities to facilitate technology-enhanced learning environments.

This is a proactive, responsive strategy that is indicative of the broader reform agenda that was launched under the Reform and Opening-up Policy, which placed the role of the

private universities as central to the experimentation of the educational system and the institutional diversity. All these events underscore their growing importance as complementary sources of higher education and as dynamic forces of innovation, adaptability, and systemic change in the higher education system in China.

In terms of promoting reform and innovation in education and teaching, private colleges and universities have actively responded to market demand. About 15% of private colleges and universities provide online courses and hybrid learning modes, and about 20% of private colleges and universities have introduced cutting-edge courses such as artificial intelligence, big data analysis, and network security. In 2023, the number of graduates from private undergraduate colleges in China will reach 11.58 million, 10.76 million in 2022, and 9.09 million in 2021. It can be seen that private colleges and universities in China play an important role in the higher education system. They have made significant contributions to the diversification and accessibility of China's higher education by expanding educational resources, promoting educational innovation, improving educational quality, promoting regional balanced development, and enriching educational choices. At the same time, graduates from private colleges and universities are also an important talent support for the country's economic and social development. The quality of their education is related to the overall level of China's higher education. Therefore, improving the quality of talent training in private colleges and universities is also an important goal of higher education development.

Compared with Western countries, the development of private higher education in China has been relatively recent and remains less mature in terms of scale, reputation, and global influence. In contrast, private higher education institutions in many Western developed countries have long played a central and influential role within the higher education system. Since the 1950s, higher education systems worldwide have expanded rapidly under strong government support, with Western countries achieving massification and, in some cases, universal access to higher education (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). In this expansion process, private higher education has been a critical contributor, often developing alongside public institutions in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner.

Globally, many of the world's leading universities are private institutions, such as Harvard University and Stanford University, which have played pioneering roles in research, innovation, and talent cultivation. These examples highlight the significant potential of private higher education to contribute to academic excellence and national competitiveness. By comparison, although private higher education in China has grown rapidly since the

implementation of the Reform and Opening-up Policy, there remains a substantial gap in terms of institutional quality, research capacity, and international recognition (Ministry of Education of China, 2023; Mok, 2016).

Therefore, there is still considerable room for the development of private higher education in China. If China's higher education system is to enhance its global competitiveness and stand out internationally, greater attention must be given to the high-quality development of private institutions. Strengthening private higher education will not only support the diversification and resilience of the higher education system but also contribute to the cultivation of innovative talent required for national development in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy.

With China's public higher education, the scale of private higher education has been increasing year by year in recent years, but the education level still has a lot of room for improvement, which requires more attention from the government and society. At the same time, in China 's current social environment, if private higher education institutions want to compete with public higher education institutions, they must pay more attention to their own high-quality development. It can be seen that the current level of development of private higher education cannot meet the growing social needs, nor can it meet the competition requirements of international private higher education. There is still a lot of room for improvement. It is reasonable and necessary to develop China's private higher education with high quality.

The quality of private higher education is the focus of social attention

American scholar Fraser believes that the quality of higher education in any country or region first refers to the quality of student development. Over the past 40 years since China's reform and opening up, with the strong support of the government, China's higher education has developed rapidly, especially since the expansion of enrollment in 1999, the scale of higher education institutions and the number of students have grown simultaneously. According to Martin Trow 's three-stage theory of education, it can be seen that China's higher education has entered the stage of popularization from the mass stage. The popularization of higher education means that higher education provides more and more talents and technical guarantees for society, but the increase in quantity does not mean the development of quality. In the era of popularization of higher education, the contradiction between "quantity" and "quality" has become increasingly prominent, and it has also triggered criticism and dissatisfaction from the public about the decline in the quality of education and teaching, the excessive instrumentalization of higher education institutions, and the difficulty of undergraduate

students finding employment. Scholars such as Chen Pingyuan, Chen Daxing, and Tang Ankui believe that the credibility of Chinese universities is being threatened by the above problems, which will pose a greater challenge to the quality of talent training in Chinese higher education institutions. This also requires us to solve the problem of higher education quality at the root. In 2007, the Ministry of Education of China issued the "Several Regulations on the Management of Private Higher Education Institutions," and the regular inspection system for private higher education institutions once a year was officially launched. However, the annual inspection content cannot fully reflect the quality of undergraduate education in private colleges and universities. Currently, There is no unified standard to measure and evaluate the quality of undergraduate education. The Chinese government's National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020) clearly emphasizes that, in the stage of mass higher education, improving the quality of talent cultivation and comprehensively enhancing the overall quality of higher education should be regarded as central priorities. Within this framework, particular importance is attached to strengthening the quality of undergraduate education in colleges and universities, as it forms the foundation for cultivating high-level human capital and supporting national development strategies (Ministry of Education of China, 2010; OECD, 2019).

Traditional evaluation methods focus on the evaluation of external influencing factors, such as engagement resources and social reputation, which weakens the emphasis and evaluation of students. Based on the change of evaluation concepts, scholars began to pay attention to students' learning experience. The "learning engagement" theory proposed by scholars represented by Kuhn in the United States: "It emphasizes student-centeredness, pays attention to the evaluation of students' learning experience, and designs a higher education quality evaluation method based on survey tools as a standard. It has made useful attempts and achieved success in the process of improving the quality of higher education in the United States."This also shows that the academic development level of undergraduate students determines and presents the educational quality of higher education institutions to a certain extent, and the learning engagement of undergraduate students affects their academic development level. Therefore, from the source, what private higher education institutions urgently need to do is to improve the level of students' learning engagement. At the same time, the study of undergraduate students' learning engagement can provide a new perspective and scientific evaluation tools for the connotation-based and high-quality development of private higher education (Ministry of Education of China, 2023; OECD, 2022).

For a long time, Chinese higher education institutions have not paid enough attention to learners as the main body of higher education in terms of acquiring knowledge, skill growth, emotional cognition, and behavioral patterns. With the deepening of education reform, the higher education quality evaluation system has gradually improved, and people have begun to pay more attention to students' learning outcomes and growth process. In China, as a whole, private higher education institutions are still in a weak position. If they want to take advantage of the school-running mechanism to achieve overtaking, they must devote their energy to the core proposition of students ' learning outcomes and adopt a scientific evaluation system to respond to the outside world's concerns about education quality and maintain their own continuous improvement. Therefore, studying the learning engagement of students in private higher education institutions will help to improve the higher education quality evaluation system and promote the continuous improvement of education quality.

At present, higher education in China is undergoing a critical transformation, shifting from a focus on rapid expansion in scale to an emphasis on improving quality and effectiveness. This transition reflects the broader national goal of moving from being a “large” education system to becoming a “strong” education system characterized by excellence, innovation, and global competitiveness. In this context, the mission of higher education institutions has evolved from primarily supporting economic growth and cultural transmission to a more focused role in cultivating high-quality, innovative, and application-oriented talents who can meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy (Ministry of Education of China, 2019; OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2020).

Undergraduate students have become a new force in the development and progress of China's education. At the same time, China's private higher education is also undergoing a historic change. Under the guidance of the classified management policy, private higher education institutions will implement differentiated support and management for profit and non-profit private higher education institutions in the future. This is both an opportunity and a challenge for private higher education institutions. Under the general situation of economic transformation, society will have higher requirements for the talent training of private higher education. Therefore, in the context of the new era, "student-centered" requires higher education institutions to provide students with diverse and personalized high-quality education services in order to meet the different development needs of students and promote students' active learning and all-round development, which has become an important orientation for deepening the reform of talent training models in the field of student work in higher

education institutions. This requires private higher education institutions to not only highlight the dominant position of students in the process of education and teaching, but also to strengthen the dominant position of students in the humanistic care of daily management, integrate the " student-centered" concept into students' daily learning and life, awaken students' sense of ownership, and encourage students to give full play to their own initiative and creativity.

Learning engagement has become an important evaluation indicator of higher education quality

As an important concept in the field of educational psychology and pedagogy, learning engagement has attracted widespread attention from Chinese and Western scholars in recent years. The learning engagement theory was proposed by George Ku, a professor of education at Indiana University in the United States, based on previous research on the relationship between students' learning engagement and academic achievement. The theory emphasizes the important influence of the energy and time invested by students in the learning process on their academic achievement. With the wide dissemination and application of the theory internationally, more and more scholars have begun to pay attention to the issue of students' learning engagement. In China, Qinghua University introduced the "National Survey of Undergraduate Learning Engagement" (NSSE) to China in 2008, and modified it according to China's educational and teaching characteristics to form the "China Undergraduate Learning and Development Tracking Study" (CCSS). The implementation of this survey project provides an important reference and reference for the study of learning engagement of students in private undergraduate colleges and universities.

With the continuous improvement of education quality and the growing emphasis on personalized learning, learning engagement has become a key indicator for evaluating students' learning outcomes and overall educational quality. In higher education, learning engagement plays a crucial role in shaping students' academic success and personal development. Foundational research by Alexander Astin (1984) highlights that the amount of physical and psychological energy students invest in learning activities directly determines their development outcomes. Similarly, George D. Kuh (2001) emphasizes that student engagement is closely associated with effective educational practices and institutional quality.

By investing more time and effort in academic activities, students can achieve a deeper understanding of knowledge, develop essential skills, and improve their academic performance. Learning engagement also fosters autonomous learning and innovative thinking,

as students actively participate in problem-solving and critical reflection processes (Fredricks et al., 2004). Moreover, engagement contributes to the development of self-efficacy, confidence, and a sense of accomplishment, which are essential for students' holistic growth (Skinner et al., 2009). As an important observable indicator of the learning process and a strong predictor of academic achievement, learning engagement has gained increasing attention in higher education research.

In the international context, learning engagement is widely regarded as a central measure of university education quality. Large-scale assessment tools such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) have been extensively used to evaluate institutional effectiveness and monitor academic quality (Kuh, 2009). Consequently, learning engagement surveys have become essential instruments for higher education quality assurance and continuous improvement, reinforcing the importance of engagement as both a process indicator and an outcome predictor in contemporary higher education systems.

The Chinese government's "Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010 – 2020)" clearly states: " The fundamental purpose of the reform is to focus on the development concept of " education-oriented," take students as the main body, effectively give play to students' subjective initiative, so as to ensure students' growth and further development.

In the process of educational reform, it is essential to respect the laws of students' physical and psychological development as well as their individual differences, so as to promote active, positive, and holistic growth. This perspective aligns with student-centered educational theories, which emphasize that learning effectiveness depends on the extent to which students actively participate in and take ownership of their learning processes (Alexander Astin, 1984; John Dewey, 1938). In other words, by measuring and evaluating the learning engagement of undergraduate students, it is possible to assess whether students have fully exercised their subjective initiative in their university studies and campus life, and whether they have made sustained efforts toward their personal development and future career preparation.

Specifically, the assessment of undergraduate students' learning engagement adopts a student-centered approach to evaluate their learning experiences, participation levels, and developmental outcomes. Such evaluation not only reflects students' academic behaviors but also provides insights into their cognitive investment and emotional attachment to learning (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner et al., 2009). Moreover, large-scale engagement surveys, such

as those advocated by George D. Kuh, have demonstrated that engagement data can serve as a valuable tool for understanding institutional effectiveness and improving educational quality (Kuh, 2009).

Through systematic evaluation of learning engagement, universities—particularly private institutions—can better understand students' learning conditions, identify gaps in educational practices, and assess the extent of student development. This enables institutional leaders and administrators to diagnose key issues in the student growth process and formulate targeted improvement strategies aligned with their institutional characteristics (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Consequently, learning engagement assessment not only serves as a diagnostic tool for student development but also provides an evidence-based foundation for enhancing teaching quality, optimizing institutional management, and promoting continuous improvement in higher education.

This will not only improve the learning outcomes and comprehensive quality of undergraduate students in private higher education institutions, but also enable managers to master more scientific and humane management methods, providing a new way to diagnose and improve the education quality of China's private higher education institutions

The learning engagement of students at Hubei Enshi College is generally low

Although Hubei Enshi College has actively promoted education and teaching reforms in recent years, worked hard to build a "student-centered" teaching concept, and improved the curriculum system and teaching model, the overall level of student learning engagement is still insufficient, which has become an important bottleneck restricting the improvement of the school's talent training quality.

According to the on-campus survey and feedback from teacher and student interviews, some students are often late for class and leave early, lack the awareness of active participation in the learning process, have a loose learning rhythm, and have insufficient time for independent learning after class. Some students use learning places such as libraries and study rooms less frequently, have not yet formed extracurricular reading and extended learning habits, and their learning behaviors show "coping" and "passive" characteristics. Many students lack the ability to think deeply when facing complex academic tasks, have a single learning strategy, and lack metacognitive regulation and planning management awareness. Faced with the in-depth content of professional courses, students generally rely on teachers' lectures, lack critical thinking, interdisciplinary connections, and problem-solving abilities, and have obviously insufficient deep-level learning engagement. In terms of learning attitude, some

students are not very interested in their majors and lack academic curiosity and desire to explore. Learning goals are vague, achievement motivation is low, and there is a lack of emotional regulation and persistence when facing academic pressure. Some students show negative emotional experiences such as learning burnout, negative coping, and academic anxiety, and emotional engagement is difficult to sustain.

The above problems are closely related to the geographical location of Hubei Enshi College, the source structure of private colleges and universities, students' basic abilities, and family support. As a private undergraduate college located in the underdeveloped area of western Hubei, Hubei Enshi College's students are mainly from counties, rural areas, and ethnic minority students. The overall foundation of students' admission is not high. Some students lack confidence in learning, have unclear career goals, and have relatively weak social support resources. These factors have weakened students' learning enthusiasm and willingness to invest to varying degrees. In addition, the school still has room for improvement in the construction of learning support systems, innovation of teaching models, and creation of campus learning culture. In summary, the research problem addressed by this study is that, despite Hubei Enshi College's ongoing teaching reforms, undergraduate learning engagement remains persistently low across its behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, and the specific configuration of individual, institutional, and family-related factors driving this shortfall within a private, applied-focused university has not been systematically identified or empirically tested. The low learning engagement of students at Hubei Enshi College is not only a problem of individual learning behavior and ability, but also reflects the synergy of multiple structural factors such as environmental construction and resource supply. This reality urgently needs to be deeply analyzed through systematic empirical research to identify the key variables that affect students' learning engagement and provide a scientific basis for schools to implement precise policies and effectively improve students' learning engagement and the quality of talent training.

1.2 Problem Identification

Through the above background examination, it has been observed that learning engagement among undergraduate students of the privately operated universities has become a very important bottleneck limiting the shift towards connotation-based and high-quality growth, especially within the twin pressures of breakneck growth and quality improvement in China. Although the private higher education has played an important role in access expansion, the current research shows that the differences in student readiness, institutional capacity, and

the quality of teaching still impact student engagement and learning outcomes (Ministry of Education of China, 2023; OECD, 2022). Meanwhile, there is a significant body of literature that has acknowledged the use of learning engagement as a fundamental predictor of academic achievement and institutional performance with a special focus on its behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects (Alexander Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2009; Fredricks et al., 2004). Nevertheless, even with these developments, a number of significant research gaps exist. First, the available empirical evidence on learning engagement has focused largely on public or research-intensive universities, but has had little attention on private undergraduate institutions, which vary in terms of the governance structure, student composition, and educational mission (Zepke & Leach, 2010; Cai, 2017). Second, previous research tends to focus on single variables (motivation, teaching quality, or institutional environment) without putting several variables in a holistic research system, thus restricting the overall comprehension of the engagement mechanisms (Kahu, 2013). Third, the literature on the impact of individual and contextual factors on student achievement remains a debated topic, with some studies focusing on the internal student factor and others emphasizing institutional and environmental factors (Skinner et al., 2009; Kuh, 2009). Such a gap in opinion suggests that integrative, context-sensitive studies are necessary. Moreover, the literature has recommended further empirical research, which integrates both quantitative and qualitative research to better understand the nature of student engagement, which is dynamic and complex, especially in fast-changing higher education systems (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Such extensive evidence is still rare in the context of private universities in China, particularly those that have concurrently studied individual, instructional, peer, institutional, family, and social impacts on various aspects of engagement.

Thus, the investigation and resolution of the problem of learning engagement among private undergraduate students are of theoretical and practical importance. It does not only play a role in bridging the outlined gaps in the literature but also offers practical information on how to enhance the quality of talent development in the context of the privately-based higher education. Following this, the current research, which is based on the practical challenges, as well as the extant literature, involves a systematic and in-depth research on the learning engagement of undergraduates both theoretically and empirically, and outlines the following critical research concerns.

1.2.1 Private college undergraduate students' learning engagement is generally at a low level

Although private universities have made significant contributions to expanding the supply of higher education resources, a large number of empirical observations and preliminary studies have shown that private higher education generally faces challenges such as faculty strength and funding sources. Compared with undergraduate students in public universities, there is a significant gap in the overall learning engagement of undergraduate students in private universities. The classroom concentration and interactive participation are relatively low, and the time invested in extracurricular independent learning and in-depth reading is less. The internal driving force for critical thinking, active knowledge construction, and seeking deep understanding of learning content is weak. The learning interest, thirst for knowledge, and academic curiosity are relatively insufficient. This low level of learning engagement directly restricts the academic achievement, ability development, and ultimate education quality of undergraduate students in private universities, and becomes a significant obstacle for private universities to achieve the goal of cultivating "high-quality applied talents". To this end, this study hopes to sort out the learning engagement of students in private undergraduate universities in order to identify the problems existing in private undergraduate education and promote private undergraduate colleges to find solutions.

1.2.2 The learning engagement of undergraduate students in private universities is affected by complex and diverse factors

The learning engagement of undergraduate students in private universities does not exist in isolation, but is shaped by a multi-level, interactive system of influencing factors. In the current relatively open learning environment, students need to use different learning methods in different learning situations and carry out various learning activities. Compared with public universities, private universities face more severe challenges in many aspects, such as admission basis, learning motivation, academic self-efficacy, clarity of future career expectations, time management ability, family economic background, parental education expectations and support, accessibility and quality of learning resources, and creation of a learning atmosphere. This makes the factors affecting their students' learning engagement more complex and urgently needs to be systematically sorted out and analyzed. This study will fully analyze the factors that affect learning engagement based on the structural dimensions of learning engagement, and grasp the core key factors from them, which is of great value for formulating effective interventions and improving students' learning outcomes.

1.2.3 The factors affecting the learning engagement of undergraduate students in private universities need to be solved urgently

Although the importance of private universities and their students' learning engagement is becoming increasingly prominent, and they are generally facing the dilemma of insufficient engagement, there is still a significant gap in systematic, localized, and refined research on the factors affecting their learning engagement. Existing higher education research focuses more on public universities or macro policies, and lacks sufficient in-depth discussion based on large-sample empirical data on the micro-learning process within private universities, especially the key factors affecting students' learning engagement and their mechanism of action. Private universities are significantly different from public universities in terms of school-running mechanisms, student source characteristics, resource endowments, and social positioning. It is difficult to directly apply the research conclusions of public universities to private universities. It is urgent to identify the unique combination of influencing factors and action paths for the unique context of private universities. When seeking quality improvement and character development, private universities themselves urgently need to implement precise policies based on the core influencing factors identified by empirical research, improve teaching management, optimize academic support systems, and create a positive learning culture. Improvement measures without a scientific basis often get half the result with twice the effort. Therefore, scientifically, systematically, and deeply identifying and clarifying the core factors and internal mechanisms that affect the learning engagement of undergraduate students in private universities has become a key breakthrough and a core proposition that needs to be studied urgently to break the current bottleneck of private undergraduate education quality and promote its high-quality development in connotation. This study will be committed to filling this research gap and providing a practical theoretical basis and practical guidance for private universities to improve students' learning engagement and thus improve the quality of talent training.

1.3 Limitations of the Problem

Although this study focuses on the key issue of undergraduate students' learning engagement and its influencing factors in private universities, and is committed to providing empirical evidence and practical paths for improving the quality of private higher education, we must be aware of the inherent limitations and challenges of this study. These limitations are mainly reflected in the scope of the research object and the complexity of the influencing factors themselves, which together constitute the boundaries that this study needs to face and explain.

1.3.1 Institutional Limitations

The study employs as its research subjects the undergraduate students of the private universities, and this imposes some institutional constraints. Though a representative case was selected (Hubei Enshi College), it is hard to fully reflect the diversity of the country in terms of the number of private higher education institutions. The system of private higher education in China is very heterogeneous and includes a variety of institutions with various orientations, such as applied undergraduate, vocational and technical, and emerging research-oriented types of institutions. Moreover, in the case of the private universities, they vary in their governance model with both for-profit and non-profit models existing.

The issue of geographical differences also makes representativeness complex. The institutions in the eastern coastal areas tend to be more economically supported, have superior infrastructure, and have a higher quality of student intake than those in the central and west. Because of this, this study might be more relevant to other institutions with comparable contextual and institutional factors, and one should be careful in extrapolating results to the whole sector of private higher education.

First, there is huge heterogeneity within "private colleges and universities." China's private higher education system itself has significant diversity, covering a variety of school-running orientations such as applied undergraduate, vocational and technical, and research-oriented (embryo). At the same time, it also covers different natures of for-profit and non-profit. In terms of geographical distribution, private colleges and universities in China's eastern coastal developed areas, central regions, and underdeveloped western regions vary greatly in resource endowment, student quality, and development level. Although this study strives to select a typical case, Hubei Enshi College, it is still difficult to fully cover and accurately represent private undergraduate colleges of all types, levels, and regions across the country. Therefore, the research conclusions should be cautious when generalizing to the entire group of private colleges and universities, emphasizing their contextual applicability and avoiding over-generalization. Specific conclusions may be more applicable to private colleges and universities with similar characteristics to the research object.

Secondly, the “undergraduate student” group is complex. Private undergraduate students themselves are not a homogeneous group. They have significant individual differences in terms of admission basis, motivation for major selection, family background, and learning goals. These differences themselves may have a profound impact on their learning engagement. Although this study can explore the engagement differences between different groups, such as different grades, different majors, and different academic backgrounds, it is limited by the

research design and focus, and the in-depth analysis of the heterogeneity within the group and its specific impact on the learning engagement model may not be sufficient.

1.3.2 Students' heterogeneity

Another important limitation lies in the heterogeneity of the student population within private universities. Students enrolled in private institutions often come from diverse academic, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds. Variations in prior academic preparation, motivation levels, digital literacy, and access to learning resources can significantly influence learning engagement. For example, some students may choose private universities due to limited access to public institutions, while others may be attracted by specific programs or flexible learning opportunities. These differences lead to varied learning behaviors, expectations, and outcomes, making it challenging to draw uniform conclusions about student engagement. Consequently, the results of this study should be interpreted with an understanding that student engagement is not homogeneous but shaped by individual differences and contextual factors.

First, multi-level factors are intertwined and nested. As mentioned in the research background, learning engagement is affected by the joint action and interaction of multi-level factors such as individuals, micro-environment, meso-environment, and macro-environment. These levels do not exist independently, but are nested and dynamically intertwined. For example, school policies affect teacher behavior, which in turn affects classroom atmosphere and student experience. Although this study attempts to construct a comprehensive analytical framework, it is often difficult to accurately capture all the details of all levels and their complex interactive effects at the same time in actual operations. There is a tension between simplified models and complex reality.

Secondly, there is a certain ambiguity in the causal relationship between factors. The relationship between learning engagement and its influencing factors is often not a simple one-way causal relationship, but there is a possibility of two-way influence or even mutual causality. For example, high engagement may enhance self-efficacy, while high self-efficacy promotes engagement. At the same time, many factors, such as the learning atmosphere itself, are both the result of other factors and the cause of the impact on learning engagement. This complex network of causal relationships is particularly difficult to clearly identify and verify in cross-sectional studies, which places high demands on research design and statistical methods.

In addition, factors are dynamic and have certain contextual dependence. Students'

learning engagement and its influencing factors are not static, but will change dynamically with grade changes, specific learning situations, and external environments. This study mainly focuses on the engagement status and influencing factors of a specific academic stage, which makes it difficult to fully capture this dynamic evolution process and contextual dependence.

Recognizing the limitations of the representativeness of the research subjects and the complexity of the influencing factors does not weaken the value of the research, but is to more clearly define the boundaries of the research and enhance the scientificity and rigor of the research conclusions. This study will fully consider and try to avoid or explain these limitations in the design, data collection, and analysis process. At the same time, these limitations also point out the direction for future research, such as conducting larger-scale and more representative sampling studies, conducting follow-up studies to capture dynamic changes, developing measurement tools that are more suitable for local contexts, and using more complex statistical models to explore the interaction mechanism of multi-level factors.

1.3.3 Complexity of influence factors

The third limitation relates to the convolutedness of the factors that drive undergraduate learning engagement. Learning engagement is a multidimensional construct influenced by a combination of the institutional, instructional, psychological, and environmental factors. Although this research highlights the major factors, including institutional support, teaching practices, and student factors, not all the possible factors can be fully treated. There are external factors, including family background, peer interaction, regional economic conditions, and wider educational policies conditioned by the Reform and Opening-up Policy, which also have a great impact on student engagement. In addition, the pace and changing aspect of higher education, such as the incorporation of digital technologies and market-based reforms, also introduce more complexity.

Hence, although the study offers useful information, its explanatory ability is limited in nature. The study ought to be more comprehensive and longitudinal in the future so that the dynamic relationship between various factors affecting people can be captured and the strength of the study can be enhanced.

1.4 Research Question

Based on the systematic description of the quality bottleneck of private higher education, the importance of learning engagement as a core evaluation indicator, and the potential limitations of this study, this study focuses on Hubei Enshi College, a typical applied private undergraduate college, and aims to deeply explore the current situation of its

undergraduate students' learning engagement and its differentiated impact mechanism in different dimensions. The core research questions are specifically broken down as follows:

RQ1. What are the current levels and distribution patterns of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement among undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College?

RQ2. To what extent do individual student factors influence the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement of undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College?

RQ3. To what extent do teacher factors influence the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement of undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College?

RQ4. To what extent do peer factors influence the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement of undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College?

RQ5. To what extent do school environmental factors influence the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement of undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College?

RQ6. To what extent do family environment factors influence the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement of undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College?

RQ7. To what extent do social environmental factors influence the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement of undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College?

RQ8. Does empirical evidence support the proposed theoretical model explaining the relationships between influencing factors and students' learning engagement?

1.5 Research Objectives

This study uses Hubei Enshi College as an empirical field, focusing on the core issues of learning engagement of students in private applied undergraduate colleges, and aims to achieve the following hierarchical objectives through systematic research:

RO1. To identify and describe the current levels and distribution patterns of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement among undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College.

RO2. To determine the extent to which individual student factors influence behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement among undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College.

RO3. To examine the influence of teacher-related factors on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement among undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College.

RO4. To investigate the influence of peer factors on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement among undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College.

RO5. To analyze the influence of school environmental factors on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement among undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College.

RO6. To assess the influence of family environment factors on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement among undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College.

RO7. To evaluate the influence of social environmental factors on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional learning engagement among undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College.

RO8. To empirically test and validate the proposed theoretical model, examining the relationships between the identified influencing factors and students' learning engagement.

1.6 Research Significance

1.6.1 Theoretical significance

Through the search of existing literature, it is found that most of the current research on undergraduate students' learning engagement in China is concentrated in ordinary universities or normal universities, and only a very small number of scholars have studied the current situation of undergraduate students' learning engagement in private universities and its impact on learning outcomes. However, the role and status of private higher education in China's higher education are becoming increasingly important, and the evaluation and research of the education quality and student engagement of undergraduate students in private universities cannot be ignored. This study takes undergraduate students in a private universities in China as the research subjects, conducts a survey on them, introduces the learning engagement theory, and studies the current situation and influencing factors of undergraduate students' learning engagement, which is conducive to enriching the learning engagement theory and expanding the application field of learning engagement research tools. At the same time, it provides new ideas for the study of undergraduate teaching quality evaluation in private universities in China.

At the same time, it provides new ideas for the study of undergraduate teaching quality evaluation in private universities in China.

1.6.2 Practical significance

This study uses undergraduate students from four private universities in China as the research subjects and conducts empirical research. The research focuses on the process of student learning, that is, adhering to the "student-centered" education concept. Through data analysis on several indicators of undergraduate students' learning engagement and research on influencing factors, from the perspective of students, the deficiencies in the education and teaching links of private universities in China, as well as the problems that students themselves have in learning, are analyzed. This will help private universities in China to improve their teaching deficiencies and improve their own teaching quality in a targeted manner based on the results of the survey and analysis, while helping students to improve themselves. The survey results are more in line with the actual situation of universities themselves and students. From the research on the influencing factors of undergraduate students' learning engagement, new ideas and suggestions are provided for improving the learning engagement of undergraduate students in private universities in China.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

In order to clarify the core concept boundaries of this study and avoid terminological ambiguity, the following key concepts are operationally defined:

1.7.1 Private colleges and universities

In this study, it specifically refers to colleges and universities that are run by social organizations or individuals outside of state institutions and provide undergraduate education for the public with non-state fiscal funds. The nature of their operation is a public welfare undertaking (Article 3 of the "Law on the Promotion of Private Education"), and some colleges and universities are registered as for-profit schools (based on the 2016 "Implementation Rules for Classification Registration of Private Schools"). The core feature that distinguishes them from public universities is that their funding sources are non-fiscal and mainly rely on tuition, social donations, operating income, etc. The private colleges and universities in this study specifically refer to Hubei Enshi College, a representative private applied undergraduate college. The generalization of its conclusions needs to take into account the heterogeneity within private colleges and universities.

1.7.2 Undergraduate Students

In this study, undergraduate students refer to those who are formally registered in

private colleges and receive full-time undergraduate education. They are in the middle stage of higher education, and the length of study is usually 4 years, and some majors are 5 years. After completing their studies, they can obtain a bachelor's degree. Hubei Enshi College has both undergraduate students and junior college students. This study focuses on undergraduate students in Hubei Enshi College, covering groups of different grades and professional backgrounds.

1.7.3 Learning engagement

Regarding learning engagement, this study adopts a three-dimensional integrated definition, referring to Fredricks et al. (2004) and the CCSS framework. Learning engagement mainly includes three dimensions: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement is observable and directly reflects the degree of students' participation in learning activities, including students' performance in class, such as actively participating in discussions, actively asking questions, and completing homework carefully, as well as their involvement in extracurricular learning, such as participating in study groups and reading relevant materials independently. Emotional engagement is deep-level, involving students' emotional experience and value identification, and is students' positive emotional response to academic tasks or others (such as teachers and classmates) and their sense of belonging to the school. Cognitive engagement is highly complex and deep-level, requiring students to have high thinking ability and autonomous learning ability, including how students use learning strategies to solve problems, how to think critically about problems, and how to reflect on their own learning process .

1.8 Novelty

The possible innovations of this study are mainly reflected in three aspects :

1.8.1 Innovation in research content

Although the academic community has relatively mature research on learning engagement, there is very little research on private colleges and universities and their students. This study expands the application field of CCSS to the undergraduate student group of private colleges and universities in China. It is highly representative in terms of the regional culture, educational environment background, regional economy, and professional coverage of schools and students, and has enriched the research content of the application field of this tool.

1.8.2 Innovation in research methods

Previous studies on the learning situation and development of undergraduate students in private universities in China lacked the support of empirical research. This study adopted

questionnaire survey and interview methods, obtained a large amount of first-hand data, and conducted empirical analysis of the data to study the current status of undergraduate learning engagement and its influencing factors in private universities in China .

1.8.3 Innovation in Research Perspective

In the past, traditional evaluation methods for private colleges and universities in China were mostly based on the analysis and research of the schools themselves, including resource engagement, social attention, etc., lacking evaluation from a "student-centered" perspective. This study investigated students' own learning engagement from their perspective, and through the use of mature scales, questionnaires, investigations, and analysis, deeply explored the current situation and problems of undergraduate students' learning engagement in private colleges and universities in China, and then proposed more operational and targeted improvement strategies and suggestions .

This chapter gave the introduction to the study of learning engagement and its influencing factors of undergraduate students at Hubei Enshi College. It emphasized the role of learning engagement in achieving academic success in higher education, especially in private universities, where learners may encounter various academic, social, and environmental difficulties. The study highlights three important components of learning engagement, namely behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement, reflecting the involvement of students, their learning process, and the emotional experience of learning activities, respectively. The chapter presented a research background that highlighted the increased concern regarding a range of student engagement in higher education and the importance of understanding the factors that impact engagement. It also pointed out a research gap in Chinese private universities, as there are few empirical studies exploring the influences of individual, teacher, peer, school environment, family, and social factors on student engagement. The study raised seven research questions, and the objectives derived from these questions were to systematically explore the current level of learning engagement and the effects that multiple contextual factors have. The chapter also explained the importance of the study for educational theory, educational practice, and policy development to achieve better student learning outcomes.

In general, the problem definition, research scope, research objectives, and the importance of the research in Chapter 1 create firm foundations for research in the following methodological and analytical chapters.