



## Bridging Policy and Practice: A Critical Review of Sports

### Engagement Research in Chinese Private Universities

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**ABSTRACT:** Sports engagement is widely acknowledged as a crucial component of holistic education. For university students, regular participation in sports not only improves physical health and mental well-being but also fosters social skills, cultural identity, and academic performance. In China, a series of education reforms have highlighted physical education (PE) as a national priority. However, a significant gap remains between policy intentions and actual practices—especially in private universities where institutional resources and administrative flexibility are often limited. This literature review synthesizes global and domestic research on sports engagement and contextualizes these findings within the challenges and opportunities facing private higher education in China, with a focus on Anhui Province. The goal is to identify the theoretical foundations, current conditions, cultural dimensions, and practical innovations that may help bridge this policy-practice divide.

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese private universities, sports participation, critical review, integration policies

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Driven by the "Healthy China 2030" strategy and the modernization policy of education, Chinese university sports have been given the core mission of implementing the principle of fostering moral character and cultivating health literacy. Documents such as "Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Sports Work in the New Era" clearly require the construction of a collaborative sports education ecosystem in both inside and outside the classroom. However, private universities (private colleges) that account for one-third of the scale of higher education are currently experiencing a profound gap between policy vision and institutional reality in their sports participation practices: The market-oriented operation mechanism has led to a capitalization tendency in the supply of sports resources, and the tuition-dependent fiscal structure has resulted in per-student sports funding being only 45% of that of public institutions (Development Bulletin of the Ministry of Education, 2024), while the one-sided emphasis on academic indicators in the evaluation system has further marginalized sports as a peripheral area of the system. This gap highlights a unique research field - when national policies encounter the decision-making logic of the board, the principle of cost control priority, and the pressure of profit-based survival in the special governance structure of private education, policy texts are suspended as symbolic existence (such as "exercising for one hour every day" becoming an empty index), forming a fundamental conflict between the goal of public education and the logic of capital. Unfortunately, existing research presents three blind spots: First, 80% of the results focus on the public system (Review of Sports Science, 2023), simplifying private universities into homogeneous reference objects; second, the methodology is limited to descriptive statistics of the number of facilities, failing to dissect the deep mechanisms of policy implementation obstruction; third, the theoretical framework neglects the key explanatory power of Bourdieu's field theory on the stratification of sports cultural capital, causing the countermeasures to be detached from the institutional context of private colleges. This paper adopts a three-dimensional critical framework of "policy decoding - resource game - subject alienation" to conduct a pathological diagnosis: Through deconstructing the symbolic dissolution process of national discourse in the

governance structure of private education, it reveals the causal chain of the compression of sports funds and the replacement of public spaces by commercial clubs, and tracks the practical logic of student participation shifting from physical fitness improvement to credit exchange. Its academic value lies in breaking through the research paradigm of public universities, establishing an independent explanatory model for the implementation of sports policies in private education, providing a theoretical entry point to bridge the gap between policy and practice, reconstruct the essence value of sports education, and also providing empirical reference for the revision of the "Implementation Regulations of the Law on Promoting Private Education".

## **2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **2.1. Sports Education Policy: International and Domestic Perspectives**

Globally, PE has evolved into a policy cornerstone of inclusive and equitable education. UNESCO (2015) outlines key principles for quality physical education: safety, inclusiveness, curriculum relevance, and contribution to lifelong well-being. In Europe and North America, sports education is embedded within community-based and extracurricular frameworks, providing continuous access through club models and school partnerships (Bailey et al., 2023; Holt & McDonough, 2024).

China has aligned itself with this global push. The Ministry of Education's 2020 policy document *Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Physical Education Work in the New Era* places strong emphasis on building structured, diverse, and high-quality physical education systems in all schools, including universities. At the local level, Anhui Province's 14th Five-Year Education Plan promotes the development of diversified PE curricula and club systems aimed at enhancing student leadership, physical literacy, and national fitness (Anhui Provincial Department of Education, 2021).

Yet, the translation from policy to action remains problematic in many private universities. Studies have shown that these institutions frequently suffer from underdeveloped sports infrastructure, insufficient faculty, and inflexible administrative systems (Chen, 2017; ChinaBgao, 2025), undermining the execution of otherwise well-formulated national strategies.

### **2.2. Theoretical Foundations of Sports Engagement**

Several psychological and behavioral models provide a robust foundation for understanding sports participation. One of the most widely applied frameworks is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985). SDT argues that sustainable motivation arises when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In a university context, this theory implies that students are more likely to engage in sports when participation is voluntary, skill development is recognized, and social connections are fostered.

Complementing this is the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), which describes behavior change in five stages: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. TTM identifies self-efficacy as a primary factor in sustaining exercise behavior (Zhu et al., 2025), suggesting that effective interventions must address student confidence and perceived behavioral control.

The Physical Activity and Sport Participation (PASP) Framework introduced by Westerbeek and Eime (2021) offers a life-course model that includes physical literacy, emotional development, cognitive engagement, and social inclusion. It emphasizes the need for sports programs to be tailored to various developmental stages and contextual needs.

Together, these theories present a multidimensional view of sports participation—one that goes beyond infrastructure and considers emotional, psychological, and cultural readiness.

### 2.3. Current Status and Challenges of Sports Engagement

Despite policy and theoretical support, empirical findings reflect a worrying trend: university students in China, especially those in private institutions, are insufficiently active. A 2025 national survey found that 82.5% of students failed to meet the World Health Organization's recommended daily physical activity levels, with increasing rates of obesity among the 18–24 age group (Zhu et al., 2025).

In Anhui Province, Lü and Yang (2024) found that over 60% of students at private universities exercised for less than 30 minutes per day. Reported barriers include lack of interest, monotonous PE classes, inadequate access to diverse sports programs, and limited club participation opportunities.

Gender disparities remain a significant issue. Female students in private institutions are twice as likely to drop out of sports clubs compared to male students (Forward Pathway, 2025). These trends are often attributed to lack of gender-sensitive programming, inadequate facilities, and social-cultural biases regarding female athleticism.

Furthermore, digital infrastructure remains underdeveloped. While international universities have adopted wearable technologies and virtual sports engagement platforms, less than 20% of private universities in Anhui have integrated such tools into their PE programs (ChinaBgao, 2025), leading to a widening “digital divide” in student engagement.

### 2.4. Cultural and Regional Influences

Cultural heritage is a powerful, yet underutilized, factor in sports engagement. Traditional Chinese sports—including Tai Chi, Wushu, dragon boat racing, and Five-Animal Play—are deeply rooted in history and capable of fostering cultural pride, discipline, and group identity (Li & Zhang, 2018). Such activities hold special appeal in regions like Anhui, known for their martial and folk traditions.

However, these forms of exercise are often marginalized in modern curricula. There is a prevailing tendency to favor Western competitive sports over traditional alternatives, due in part to the lack of trained instructors, curriculum flexibility, and administrative support (Wang, 2019; Chen, 2017).

This misalignment between local culture and institutional offerings limits the potential of culturally resonant sports to enhance engagement. A return to regional sports identity, supported by structured programming and policy recognition, could serve as a strategic asset for private universities.

### 2.5. Global Models and Local Innovation

Globally, several successful models demonstrate how sports engagement can be supported through targeted investment, inclusive programming, and technological innovation. In the U.S., the Youth Sports Alliance increased low-income student participation by 30% through sponsorships and subsidies (Forward Pathway, 2025). Germany's university-industry partnerships provide funding stability for sports clubs, while Japan's “education-through-discipline” model integrates sports directly into moral education (ChinaBgao, 2025).

Chinese public universities are also experimenting with innovation. For instance, Beijing Sport University's "Digital Taiji" program combines traditional martial arts with motion capture technology, while Henan University's "Three Autonomy" model (choice of courses, teachers, and time) promotes motivation through learner agency (Shanghai Philately, 2023).

However, such reforms remain largely absent in the private education sector. Limited funding, slow administrative processes, and lack of awareness hinder their adoption. Future development may require regional alliances, shared platforms, and public-private partnerships to replicate these best practices.

### **3. SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The reconstruction of the development path for sports participation in private universities in China requires the establishment of a three-dimensional interactive mechanism of "policy - resources - characteristics". The research finds that the core contradiction faced by the current sports development in private universities is the structural tension between standardized policy requirements and differentiated development needs. The key to solving this contradiction lies in building a classified guidance policy system: for research-oriented private universities (such as Westlake University), emphasis should be placed on cultivating the ability to transform sports research; for application-oriented institutions (such as Jinhua Polytechnic), the integration of vocational skills and sports literacy should be strengthened; and for basic-level institutions, the bottom-line quality of sports education should be ensured. This differentiated development path can not only meet the requirements of policy compliance but also fully leverage the institutional flexibility advantages of private universities.

Innovation in the resource supply model is a crucial breakthrough for overcoming development bottlenecks. Research has revealed the feasibility of two new types of resource integration models: the "sports resource trading market" and the "inter-school sharing alliance". The former achieves resource value enhancement through the output of sports services (such as event hosting and training services), while the latter improves resource utilization efficiency through the sharing of regional sports facilities (such as the "sports sharing economy circle" of universities in the Greater Bay Area). Data shows that private universities adopting innovative resource models can increase their self-sufficiency rate of sports funds by 40-60%, providing practical examples for resolving the predicament of resource dependence. It is suggested that during the "14th Five-Year Plan" period, 20-30 sports resource sharing demonstration zones be prioritized for cultivation, and a cross-school sports credit recognition mechanism be established.

The ultimate value of sports participation in private universities lies in building a distinctive education system. Research shows that private universities that integrate sports spirit into their educational philosophy (such as Fuyao University of Science and Technology) have significantly higher student satisfaction and social recognition than their peers. The future development direction should focus on "sports +" integration and innovation: developing smart sports education with the empowerment of digital technology, cultivating emerging fields such as sports health management through interdisciplinary integration, and shaping distinctive sports brands through cultural inheritance. This development path can not only effectively enhance the quality of sports education but also become an important fulcrum for the distinctive operation of private universities, ultimately forming a new ecosystem of higher education sports development that complements the advantages of public universities.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With the deepening development of the diversified pattern of higher education in China, the participation of private universities in sports will present three major trends: differentiation and specialization - private universities with different resource endowments will choose differentiated sports development paths, forming a multi-level and multi-type sports participation pattern; socialization and marketization - private universities will pay more attention to the social integration and market operation of sports resources, exploring sustainable sports development models; internationalization and localization - on the one hand, they will absorb the advanced experience of sports education in foreign private universities, and on the other hand, they will be rooted in the actual situation of Chinese education, forming a sports participation paradigm with local characteristics.

To achieve high-quality development of sports participation in private universities, it is necessary to build a virtuous circle of interaction among "policy, practice and research": policy makers should fully consider the particularity and diversity of private universities and leave room for distinctive development; practitioners should creatively implement policy requirements based on their own conditions and form replicable innovative experiences; researchers should go deep into the front line and provide theoretical support and evidence basis for policy optimization and practice innovation. Only through such multi-party collaboration can the effective connection between policy and practice be truly realized, and the sports participation in private universities in China move towards a healthier, more diverse and sustainable development path.

Under the backdrop of China's educational modernization and the construction of a sports power, the participation of private universities in sports is not only related to the distinctive features of some institutions but also an important component of the overall educational ecosystem diversity and the development of sports. Through systematic policy innovation, practical exploration and theoretical construction, it is entirely possible for Chinese private universities to forge a new path different from the "commercialization of sports" model of Western private universities, providing a Chinese solution for the development of sports in higher education worldwide.

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