

Equity in Higher Education Opportunities in China

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Abstract: Higher education has been developing rapidly since China implemented reforms and opening up policy. However, limitation of the government's financial resources investment, regional development, and other factors has resulted in unfair higher education opportunities. Therefore, this study uses archival research method to analyze and study the general situation of higher education, college entrance examination system, and equity of higher education opportunities other issues in China. This study explains the connotation of equity of education and higher education opportunities, and conducts in-depth analysis of equity of higher education opportunities in starting point, process, and results. It focuses on analyzing the factors that influence the equity of higher education opportunities in China. It also analyzes the status quo and problems of equity of higher education opportunities in China. Aiming at solving these problems, this study proposes recommendations from four aspects.

Keywords: Higher education; Educational opportunity; Educational equity; College entrance; Examination system

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1. Research issues and background

After reform and opening up in China, higher education has developed rapidly. China's economic system has shifted from a planned economy to a market economy, and allows certain people to get rich first. In addition, economic development has also promoted the demand for higher education. On the one hand, the demand of government and society for all kinds of talents has expanded, and on the other hand, more people want to have opportunities to access higher education, or even better for a higher-level and higher-quality education. Especially, since the large-scale expansion of higher education in 1999, the pace of development has been even faster, and from the perspective of the average gross enrollment rate of higher education, China has rapidly achieved the world level of popularization of higher education.

In the new era, China's higher education has reached the world level of popularization and are even in the process of universalization. However, while the gross enrollment grows rapidly, access to higher education has not been truly equitable due to the widening income gap between individual households and regions^[1]. On the contrary, the phenomenon of injustice is gradually expanded and amplified. In the past, research on equity of access in higher education largely focused on developing countries, research in developing countries rarely addressed. Whether in the general context of "profound change rarely seen in a century" or the tide of the era in which the concept of global education governance prevails, China needs new theoretical achievements to promote the unique role of higher education equity in the construction of China's soft power and the framework of global education governance concepts.

2. Research methods

This study focuses on document analysis methods and literature discussion, and extensively collects various books, periodical, journals, news, academic papers, government archives, electronic website information, and newspaper-related reports and discussions on higher education in China. We personally visited cultural and educational institutions, academic exchanges, conferences, symposiums, and other activities in various parts of China, and also used the actual experience of field investigation, interview, and observation as a basis to analyze and study China's education system, college entrance examination system, and other issues, and to explore the fairness of higher education opportunities.

3. Factors affecting the equity of higher education opportunities in China

The current educational disparities in China are mainly caused by the unbalanced economic, social, and cultural development between urban and rural areas and regions formed by history. Due to the limitations of the level of economic and social development, there are still some problems in the equality of higher education admission opportunities in China's higher education, which has just entered the stage of popularization [2].

3.1. Regional factors

From the perspective of social equity, the right to education is one of the fundamental rights of citizens. At present, there is still a huge gap between urban and rural education in China, which shows that there are still great problems in social equity. From 2006 to 2015, the research and analysis of the proportion of urban and rural students enrolled in national colleges and universities, and the admission rate of urban and rural candidates enrolled in national colleges and universities analyzed the fairness of higher education based on urban and rural enrollment opportunities.

Table 1. 2006-2015 national college entrance examination urban and rural candidates' registration, admission number and rural population (10,000 people)

Year	City registration	Rural registration	City admission	Rural admission	Total registration	Total admission	Rural population	Total population ratio
2015	393.85	482.96	269.27	303.81	876.81	573.08	74,471	57.01
2014	334.6	396.87	246.64	273.04	731.47	519.68	75,705	58.24
2013	295.73	324.56	214.4	213.99	620.29	428.39	76,852	59.47
2012	263.41	267.35	181.9	168.14	530.76	350.04	78,241	60.91
2011	230.59	227.4	150.55	133.76	457.99	284.31	79,563	62.34
2010	193	196	116	106	389	222	80,837	63.78
2009	157.02	180.3	84.47	74.4	337.32	158.87	82,038	65.22
2008	142.22	173.79	59.82	55.77	316.01	115.59	83,153	66.65
2007	123.64	157.05	53.15	52.66	280.69	105.81	84,177	68.09
2006	111.75	152.48	52.03	50.75	264.23	102.78	85,085	69.52

Source: Based on a summary of the Ministry of Education Bulletin 2006–2015

Table 1 [3] shows that the number of urban and rural candidates increased every year. With the implementation of China's urbanization policy and the advancement of urbanization, the urban population has increased yearly and the rural population also has decreased yearly. By 2015, the rural population still accounted for the majority, with nearly 745 million people. According to the analysis of the changes in the

number of urban and rural candidates in the college entrance examination and the number of admissions, both the registration and the number of admissions, the annual growth of rural candidates exceeds the urban candidates, indicating that the scale of rural candidates is growing faster than urban candidates, and their opportunities for college entrance examination admission are more active than urban candidates.

Next, the proportion of rural students in the admission of new students to Chinese universities has been rising from 49% in 2006 to about 50% in 2013. In 2015, the proportion exceeded the proportion of cities reaching 53% ^[2], which is a prominent achievement of China's higher education in changing the gap between urban and rural areas. After 2013, more than half of the new students entering higher education are from rural China, and the gap between the proportion of rural students and urban students has gradually narrowed, which also reflects the development of rural high school education and the improvement of educational standards.

Table 2. National college admissions urban and rural candidates' admission rate (unit: %)

Annual	City candidates	Rural candidates	Total admission
2005	68.4	62.9	65.4
2004	77.3	68.8	71
2003	72.5	65.9	69.1
2002	69.1	62.9	66
2001	65.3	58.8	62.1
2000	60.1	54.1	57.1
1999	53.8	41.3	47.1
2005	68.4	62.9	65.4

Source: Data based on the 2006–2015 Ministry of Education Bulletin Study

Table 2 shows that although the admission rate of urban candidates in China is higher than rural candidates and higher than the total admission rate of the year, while the admission rate of rural candidates is always lower than the total admission rate of the year. The gap between the admission rates of urban and rural candidates is gradually narrowing.

At the same time, we also notice that the proportion of rural candidates registering and admitting to the corresponding college has not yet reached the natural proportion of the rural population in the total population of the country in the same period, and the admission rate of rural candidates to participate in the college entrance examination has not reached the level of the total admission rate of the same year, which truly reflects the objective gap between urban and rural areas ^[2].

The study of Yang Dongping ^[3] pointed out that the trend of unfair access to higher education for urban and rural students is narrowing, but the gap between urban and rural areas are shifting from external, aggregate, and macro imbalances to implicit and deeper levels. The urban-rural gap in access to higher education includes two main issues; Firstly, whether the distribution of access to ordinary colleges and universities between urban and rural areas is balanced, that is, whether the access of peasant children to higher education is increasing or decreasing. And secondly, whether the distribution of different types of higher education resources among urban and rural students is balanced, that is, how the children of farmers are distributed in the higher education system.

Distribution of urban and rural students in higher education system. Rural students are mainly concentrated in relatively weak local colleges and universities, mainly distributed in agriculture, forestry, military, education, and other low-cost disciplines, many of them are in a state of poverty. In the national key colleges and universities with relatively strong educational resources and quality, urban students still

occupy a large proportion of cultural, economic, and social resources, while rural students are gradually decreasing. Relatively weak local institutions of higher learning have gathered more rural students. This clearly shows that the improvement of the urban-rural gap in higher education has only shifted from the superficial, aggregate, and macro imbalance of the past to the current implicit, deeper urban-rural gap.

China is the country with the most significant regional differences in the world, and the regional gap in China's higher education is caused by factors such as the ability to supply education between regions and the policy orientation focusing on the development of higher education. In order to narrow the regional gap in education, institutional and policy orientation should be adjusted to maintain equity in education. Regional disparities in education are a reflection of the gap in the capacity of education to be provided between regions, which depends on the level of expenditure on education, which includes government expenditure and all costs required by students to pay for the learning process.

3.2. Class factors

Before China's reform and opening up, under the guarantee of the socialist system, the class differences in social stratification were not serious, and the class differences were prominently manifested after the reform and opening up.

The class gap in education is a manifestation of the social class gap, and the children of the dominant class who have more economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital in society can enjoy the advantages of education^[4], while the children of the lower social class are at a disadvantage. Before 1949, the vast majority of college students came from socially advantageous classes and wealthy families, and in 1952, 20.5% of college students were workers and peasants; In 1958, 55.28% of the new students in colleges and universities were workers and peasants, and in 1965, it reached 71.2%^[6]. During the Cultural Revolution, the high proportion of workers and peasants among college students was not a natural manifestation of competition or academic achievement among different groups in society, but was forcibly promoted by political forces. By the time the college entrance examination was resumed in 1977 and the score-ability criterion replaced the mandatory political criterion, the situation immediately changed, and the proportion of workers and peasants decreased rapidly, while the number of cadres and intellectuals increased significantly.

The children of management cadres, professional, and technical personnel, and intellectuals who have more cultural and social assets have more advantages in higher education enrollment opportunities, and they account for a larger proportion of the national key universities. In recent years, the newly added college students from rural areas are mainly distributed in local colleges and universities with relatively weak educational resources and educational quality, additionally, the largest number of poor students in colleges and universities are also concentrated. In addition, in higher vocational and private colleges and universities with higher fees, the source of students is mainly from small and medium-sized cities and towns. In addition, the distribution of students in different disciplines and the admission scores of the college entrance examination also show a strong class attribute^[3].

3.3. Ethnic factors

In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), many ethnic minorities had not yet established a modern education system, the population with Chinese blind accounted for a large proportion, and some ethnic minorities were still at the end of primitive society, or undergo transition from primitive to class society.

After 1950, although the education of ethnic minorities has developed greatly, there is still a certain backward gap when compared with the national average level. Based on this situation, the China government has stipulated that ethnic minority candidates can enjoy preferential policies for lowering their

scores when enrolling in colleges and universities with the aim to increase the opportunities for ethnic minority students to enter institutions of higher learning and as well giving them an equal right to enter higher education. After the resumption of the unified admission examination for colleges and universities in 1978, the policy of “the minimum admission score line and admission score range for ethnic minority candidates in border areas is appropriately relaxed” [5]. Meanwhile in the 1980, “Regulations on the Enrollment of Colleges and Universities” emphasized that some key national colleges and universities should hold classes for minorities ethnic, appropriately reduce scores, and recruit candidates from minorities ethnic in areas inhabited by minorities ethnic such as frontiers, mountainous areas, and pastoral areas. For minority ethnic candidates in the above-mentioned areas, the admission scores of other general institutions of higher learning are appropriately relaxed, and the candidates of ethnic minorities living in the diaspora are given priority in admission under the same conditions as those of Han candidates.

After the founding of People’s Republic of China, the China Institute for Nationalities has successively opened a number of ethnic preparatory classes and education, which is very important for improving the cultural basic knowledge of ethnic minority students, thereby more minority ethnic students may enter institutions of higher learning to play a great role in promoting them, and have become a unique form of running schools, mainly for minority ethnic students, which is an important part of ethnic education.

In recent years, the enrollment of Chinese colleges and universities, the fairness and impartiality of ethnic minority students enjoying preferential policies for reducing scores have aroused social concern and discussion. During his inspection of Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, Teng Xing found that the children of Han workers who had made outstanding contributions to Xinjiang’s construction had obvious disadvantages compared with the children of ethnic minority workers in the college entrance examination competition, and believed that it was contrary to the principle of equality stipulated in the Constitution and Education Law [5].

In the enrollment policy of lowering the admission score line, the issue of equity of higher education opportunities for minorities ethnic has also changed, and the original minority ethnic higher education enrollment policy, which was originally based only on ethnic composition as the criterion, can no longer adapt to the diversity and multi-layered of ethnic minority students, and the increasingly diversified and differentiated status of the whole society. It is essential to re-examine and test the preferential policies based on the division of nationalities and make them meet the requirement of social development.

4. Conclusions and discussions

Under the background of the new era, higher requirements have been placed for education to assure the fairness of opportunities in China’s higher education, and it has also given as a sacred mission. To strengthen research on the equity of higher education opportunities in China, it is important to conduct the following four aspects: (1) the Government should play an active role, and it has an unshakable responsibility to promote equity in higher education opportunities; (2) efforts should be made to ensure China’s financial investment in education and the promotion of equitable opportunities for higher education; (3) it is important to continue to reform the existing high-level admission system and make up for the shortcomings of the college entrance examination system in ensuring the fairness of opportunities for higher education admissions; (4) it is important to improve the regulatory mechanism for fairness in higher education.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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