

# Balancing Academic and Artistic Merit: Equity Concerns for Dance Students in China's College Entrance System

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**Abstract:** This study explores the effects of recent changes in China's dance college admissions, which now equally weigh academic and professional performance. While the policy aims to create fairer admissions, it presents challenges for students from specialized dance programs (*keban*), who may struggle with academic demands. In contrast, academically strong students with limited dance training may gain an advantage. The research highlights the policy's mixed impact and proposes flexible admissions strategies, such as conditional offers and ongoing academic support, to better accommodate students with diverse abilities. The study underscores the importance of refining these policies to ensure greater equity and cultural diversity in dance education.

**Keywords:** Dance education; College admissions; Equity; Dual assessment; Policy reform

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, college admission policies for dance students in China have shifted, especially in how academic performance is weighed alongside professional skills. Historically, a minimum academic threshold has always been required; however, admissions primarily focused on students' rankings in professional dance exams. Once students met the professional qualifications and achieved the school's set academic cutoff, they could secure admission. Recently, many comprehensive universities have introduced an equal-weighting model, evaluating candidates based on a 50% academic score and 50% professional score. This adjustment underscores a growing emphasis on academic achievement within the admissions process, directly impacting dance students' eligibility and altering traditional admission standards for arts programs.

This policy shift presents challenges for students from rigorous, structured dance training programs, known in China as *keban*. The term '*keban*' refers to a specialized art education system in China, where students receive intensive professional dance training from a young age. This educational model emphasizes comprehensive development in technical proficiency and artistic expression, aimed at preparing students

for successful entry into professional dance schools and companies. Starting from junior high school, *keban* students attend specialized dance academies, where they dedicate most of their time to dance training. Consequently, they may lack the academic foundation of peers who chose dance as a pathway later in their educational journey. With the new, more academically balanced requirements, *keban* students face significant challenges in meeting the 50–50 admissions standard while students with stronger academic backgrounds who enter dance later may find themselves at an advantage.

This study examines how these evolving admission policies affect fairness within the dance student community, considering how the 50–50 weighting system influences access to higher education for students with diverse training backgrounds. By evaluating the advantages and drawbacks of increased academic demands, this research aims to offer insights for crafting more equitable admissions policies that better accommodate the needs of intensively trained dance students within China’s arts education landscape.

## 2. Equity in dance education admissions: A global and national perspective

The pursuit of equity in arts education, particularly in dance, has become a major global focus, motivated by the need to address longstanding inequities embedded within gender representation, curriculum design, program diversity, and resource allocation <sup>[1]</sup>. Achieving fair representation, participation, and access to arts education remains challenging, especially when disparities in funding and institutional support limit opportunities for underrepresented and economically disadvantaged students. Specifically in dance education, researchers have highlighted an uneven distribution of resources, including advancement opportunities and funding, across diverse student populations, leading to systemic barriers for marginalized groups <sup>[1,2]</sup>. These inequities are particularly pronounced in contexts, where dance has been historically underfunded or undervalued as an academic discipline, often treated as a non-essential extracurricular activity rather than a core component of the curriculum.

Globally, efforts toward achieving equity in dance education are visible through national policies and grassroots advocacy. For instance, in Western countries, societal stereotypes often relegated dance to a recreational rather than an academic role, contributing to limited governmental support and funding. These perceptions and restrictions have narrowed access to dance programs, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and underrepresented communities <sup>[2]</sup>. Research indicates that creating inclusive dance programs requires reflective practices, increased funding, and robust community partnerships, which together foster environments prioritizing both accessibility and pedagogical quality <sup>[1,2]</sup>. These reforms bridge access gaps and enhance the educational quality of dance programs, expanding access to a more diverse demographic.

A specific example of the challenges in achieving equity in dance education can be observed in Brazil. Brazilian dance education has historically faced obstacles, including societal biases that diminish its academic and cultural value. Such prejudices restrict dance’s role as a pedagogical tool that can enrich students’ physical, aesthetic, and social development. Furthermore, the scarcity of qualified dance educators, particularly in underserved areas, limits students’ access to quality dance education, creating geographic disparities that hinder equity in arts education. Addressing these disparities requires targeted efforts to overcome ingrained stereotypes, establish comprehensive teacher training programs, and integrate dance into the national curriculum to better serve students from all backgrounds <sup>[3]</sup>.

In China, recent shifts in dance education admissions policies reflect a growing recognition of the

need to address equity issues within the field. Traditionally, Chinese dance programs have been highly competitive, with admission criteria focused heavily on physical aptitude, technical skill, and conformity to specific dance forms. This rigorous selection process often favored students with access to early and sustained dance training, typically those from more privileged, urban backgrounds <sup>[4]</sup>. Recognizing the limitations of these exclusionary practices, recent reforms in Chinese dance education admissions policies now seek a more balanced approach, considering students' passion, potential, and commitment in addition to technical skill. These policy changes align with a broader trend in Chinese education to democratize access to specialized fields, opening opportunities to a wider range of students, including those from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds <sup>[5]</sup>.

However, this shift also presents a dual challenge for educational equity. On one hand, increasing academic standards aims to achieve broader educational fairness by ensuring that students entering dance programs possess a strong academic foundation, supporting the development of well-rounded individuals. On the other hand, higher academic demands may overlook the unique needs of dance students, especially those from specialized dance training backgrounds who may have prioritized their artistic development over traditional academic pursuits. This creates a tension between the policy's intent to promote fairness and its practical impact, which can inadvertently disadvantage students with significant artistic potential but limited academic resources <sup>[4]</sup>.

The impact of these policy changes is profound. By promoting more inclusive admission criteria, Chinese dance programs have begun to welcome a more diverse student body, fostering representation from various socio-economic and regional backgrounds within higher education dance programs. These policies not only democratize access to art education but also encourage a more representative reflection of Chinese culture and society within the arts <sup>[5]</sup>. Nonetheless, persistent biases and structural inequalities within some admissions practices continue to challenge inclusivity. Further research and policy refinement are essential to ensure that dance education becomes a field accessible to students from all backgrounds, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and multifaceted arts education system in China <sup>[4]</sup>.

### **3. The dual demands of academic and artistic excellence in dance admissions**

The increasing demand for excellence in both academic and artistic fields within dance admissions highlights a complex tension for students engaged in specialized dance training. This dual requirement necessitates a balanced dedication to rigorous academics alongside advanced dance skills, which poses significant challenges for students in intensive training programs. Studies indicate that dance students across various educational levels, from universities to conservatories, often exhibit unique personality traits and creative preferences that align with their commitment to high-energy, creative pursuits <sup>[6]</sup>. However, these characteristics can sometimes contrast sharply with traditional academic expectations, making it particularly difficult for students to excel simultaneously in both academic and artistic areas.

In programs where academic and artistic achievements are equally weighted, students must perform at high levels in both domains, placing those with highly specialized backgrounds at a potential disadvantage. For example, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) offers a curriculum that prepares dance students for various roles, such as performance, choreography, production management, and education, thereby broadening their career options <sup>[7]</sup>. While this integrated approach benefits students by providing a well-rounded education, it may disadvantage those who have focused extensively on dance without equal

academic preparation, as admissions criteria now demand both academic and artistic proficiency.

The elevation of academic standards within dance admissions has a dual impact. On one hand, higher academic requirements can contribute positively to students' overall development, cultivating a more holistic skill set that benefits them within and beyond the arts. From a policy perspective, such standards help foster well-rounded individuals who can thrive in various interdisciplinary contexts, thus aligning with broader educational goals. On the other hand, this heightened academic emphasis can exert considerable pressure on students whose primary focus has been artistic development, especially those with extensive training in specialized programs. For these students, balancing rigorous academic standards with professional-level dance training may feel overwhelming, potentially leading to missed opportunities for those who possess significant artistic potential but lack strong academic backgrounds.

Mentorship from committed dance educators plays a crucial role in helping students navigate the demands of balancing academic and artistic excellence. Research shows that engagement, flow, and passion in dance are significantly influenced by supportive educators who provide both encouragement and structured guidance<sup>[8]</sup>. Such mentorship helps students manage the stress associated with meeting high expectations in both academic and artistic areas, sustaining their motivation and focus. However, as admission standards evolve to include elevated academic benchmarks, it is essential to consider whether these dual demands may unintentionally exclude students who have invested intensively in dance at the expense of broader academic skills.

The growing emphasis on both academic and artistic merit in admissions has also sparked discussions about equity within dance education. With criteria increasingly prioritizing academic achievements alongside artistic skills, students with limited academic preparation yet substantial artistic talent may face barriers to entering competitive dance programs. This situation raises critical questions about inclusivity and underscores the need for admissions policies that can accommodate diverse academic and artistic proficiencies, ensuring that talented dancers are not overlooked due to academic criteria alone. By balancing these dual demands thoughtfully, admissions policies can support both high standards and accessibility, preserving pathways for students with exceptional artistic promise.

#### **4. Social implications of admission policy shifts for dance students**

Shifts in dance education admission policies in China carry significant social implications, particularly in terms of equity and access for students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. In a country marked by stark regional disparities, economically developed areas such as Beijing and Shanghai provide easier access to high-quality dance training and resources, while students from rural or less affluent regions encounter substantial barriers to entry. This disparity highlights a broader societal challenge within the Chinese education system, where students from urban, wealthier backgrounds benefit from greater access to *keban* dance academies, elite instructors, and advanced training facilities<sup>[9]</sup>. These urban-centered resources contribute to the accumulation of cultural capital, making students from these regions more competitive under the increasingly academic-focused admission standards and reinforcing existing socioeconomic divides.

Additionally, the emphasis on classical dance forms, such as ballet and Chinese classical dance, often overshadows local or ethnic dance styles. Students from rural areas who specialize in traditional or regional dance forms face symbolic violence, and a struggle for equal academic recognition and advancement

opportunities, as mainstream dance programs tend to prioritize forms considered “prestigious” within broader cultural aesthetics and power structures <sup>[10]</sup>. This selective emphasis not only narrows students’ career trajectories but also risks marginalizing cultural diversity within the dance education system, as regional and folk dance forms receive less institutional support and recognition. This phenomenon underscores a critical issue: policies that appear to be neutral on the surface can, in practice, favor certain groups and forms of cultural expression while inadvertently disadvantaging others.

From an educational sociology perspective, such admission policies may inadvertently reproduce social inequalities, effectively privileging students from affluent families who can access high-quality dance and academic training from an early age. Economically disadvantaged students often lack the financial means to enroll in comprehensive *keban* programs or receive supplementary tutoring needed to meet high academic standards. As universities increasingly adopt a “50-50” admission model, which places equal weight on academic and professional dance achievements, students without balanced academic support are disadvantaged. This reinforces the socioeconomic divides within the field of dance education, making it harder for talented but economically disadvantaged students to access competitive dance programs <sup>[10]</sup>.

The shift towards higher academic standards in dance admissions has a dual impact on social progress. On one hand, raising academic requirements aligns with national goals to cultivate a more well-rounded, intellectually engaged talent pool. By emphasizing academic rigor, these policies aim to produce dance professionals who not only excel artistically but also possess critical thinking skills, cultural literacy, and a broader understanding of their field. Such skills are increasingly valued in a globalized society where cross-disciplinary knowledge and adaptability are essential. In this way, these policies may strengthen the societal role of dance professionals, enabling them to contribute artistically and intellectually to cultural and educational development.

However, the same academic standards may inadvertently exclude students with exceptional artistic potential who lack the academic background to meet these new demands. Dance students often dedicate years to intensive training, prioritizing their art over traditional academic subjects. For these students, the raised academic expectations can feel like a misalignment with their strengths, leading to missed opportunities to attend top programs. This focus on academic performance risks narrowing the diversity of students entering the field, potentially stifling the creativity and artistic innovation that arise from a variety of backgrounds. By setting high academic thresholds, institutions may unintentionally limit the pool of applicants to those who fit a specific academic profile, thus impacting the vibrancy and inclusivity of the arts sector.

To achieve a balanced approach that supports both educational equity and artistic excellence, more flexible admission policies are essential. Implementing a differentiated admission model could allow students who demonstrate exceptional artistic talent to enter programs with tailored academic support or adjusted academic requirements. For instance, students with significant dance potential but weaker academic records could receive conditional admission, with targeted academic assistance provided upon enrollment. This approach would enable schools to attract students with true artistic potential while also supporting their academic growth. It would also recognize that artistic talent and academic strength, though valuable, do not always develop in parallel, especially in fields that demand intensive early training, such as dance.

Moreover, a “dynamic assessment” model could be introduced, allowing students to receive ongoing academic support post-admission. Under such a model, students would receive tutoring or mentorship to gradually build their academic skills without compromising their professional development in dance. By

implementing dynamic assessment, institutions could ensure that students are equipped with a balanced skill set over time, rather than requiring all qualifications upfront. This approach aligns with the principle of “progressive inclusivity,” which recognizes that students from varied backgrounds may require different forms of support to succeed within a rigorous program.

Flexible admission policies also carry broader social implications by fostering a more diverse and inclusive dance education system. By accommodating students from rural areas or those specializing in regional and ethnic dance forms, admissions policies could enhance the representation of diverse cultural perspectives within academic institutions. This diversity is essential not only for equity but also for the artistic innovation that emerges when students from varied backgrounds and traditions collaborate. Encouraging students from underrepresented areas and traditions could help break down the symbolic barriers between “prestigious” classical forms and marginalized regional forms, allowing the dance field to become a more inclusive reflection of the nation’s cultural heritage.

Furthermore, policies that recognize the unique strengths of each student could help maintain the balance between academic rigor and creative expression, fostering a richer cultural environment where artistic innovation thrives. By allowing flexibility, institutions could cultivate a new generation of dance professionals who are not only technically proficient but also equipped to advocate for and preserve the diverse forms of Chinese dance, from classical to folk.

In summary, while raising academic standards in dance admissions has potential benefits for societal progress, it also presents challenges that require careful policy consideration. A more adaptable admissions approach, combined with targeted academic support, could ensure that dance programs remain accessible to a wide range of talented students, enriching the arts through diverse perspectives and supporting both educational equity and artistic excellence. By adopting these inclusive measures, Chinese institutions can better align with the broader goals of educational reform, supporting students from all backgrounds to reach their full potential in a competitive yet inclusive environment <sup>[11]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex implications of recent shifts in dance education admission policies in China, particularly regarding their impact on equity and educational quality for dance students. As policies increasingly emphasize both academic and artistic merit, students from diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds face new challenges in balancing these dual demands. The findings indicate that the “50–50” academic and professional assessment model can equip students with strong academic support, often those from economically privileged backgrounds while disadvantaging those with intensive dance training but limited academic preparation. This shift in policy risks reinforcing social disparities within the arts field and narrowing the pathway for students whose backgrounds focus heavily on artistic rather than academic development.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size and geographic scope of the research were limited, potentially restricting the generalizability of the findings across all regions and institutions. Additionally, the study’s timeframe covered only recent policy changes, making it challenging to capture long-term trends or assess the broader effects of these policies over time. Further research with a larger and more diverse sample size could provide a deeper understanding of how these admission changes impact various demographic groups within the dance student population.

Future research could explore how similar policy shifts affect other art disciplines, such as music, theater, and visual arts, where students also balance intensive training with academic requirements. Examining the experiences of students across different art forms would shed light on whether such dual demands universally impact arts education fairness. In addition, longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how these policy changes affect students' long-term career trajectories, helping policymakers refine admissions practices to promote inclusivity and educational quality in arts education.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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