



Social exclusion and inequality in higher education in China: A capability perspective

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ABSTRACT

Following calls for further research in education inequality beyond input and output measures, especially with a qualitative approach, and building on the implications of capability deprivation on equality (Unterhalter, 2003a,b), we extend the findings of Sen's (1979, 1990, 1992, 2000) capability approach to higher education (HE). This article employs social exclusion theory as the analytical framework to examine educational inequalities in China posed by the HE admission system in Post-Mao era. This paper is driven by certain key motivations and makes a significant contribution to the extant literature. Firstly, the paper seeks to outline a usable definition of social exclusion in the context of HE enrolment. Following this, Sen's (1979, 1990, 1992, 2000) capability approach is adopted for the first time as a theoretical construct to examine the situation facing HE in China. Sen's approach facilitates an appraisal of the process of exclusion in HE enrolment. The importance of the capability approach is that it allows one to recognize different needs and choices confronting different social groups by distinguishing between different types of social exclusion in this area. Finally, this information is used to evaluate responses which are available to the existing issues within the current Chinese HE enrolment mechanism i.e. that the mechanism is fundamentally flawed and risks reducing, rather than enhancing, capability by excluding certain groups of students from fair competition in terms of access.

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1. Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed tremendous social, political and economic changes in China since the adoption of the open-door policy in the late 1970s. A market economy was adopted as a replacement to the planned economy which allocated resources in the country. Since then, however, sociologists' attention has been drawn to social inequality due to the emergence of notable disparities across the country. These inequities are noticeable particularly between urban and rural areas, between regions and between different social groups (UNDP, 2005). Education has been transformed from a public good to a mixed good in the transition from a planned economy to a market economy and research has focused on reviewing the problems associated with educational inequality mainly within the context of social equity and equality (Devaney and Weber, 2003). This paper builds on this literature but explores the issue with a new theoretical paradigm.

This paper adopts social exclusion theory to examine the prevalence of educational inequality related to the higher education (HE) admission system in Post-Mao China. The primary

contribution made by this article is a test of Sen's (1979, 1990, 1992, 2000) capability approach in the Chinese context. It commences with an introduction of the social exclusion theory in general and the key features of Sen's capability deprivation approach. Following this, the paper seeks to operationalize Sen's idea for the first time to examine the situation facing HE in China. Sen's approach facilitates an appraisal of the process of exclusion in HE enrolment. The importance of the capability approach is that it allows one to recognize different needs and choices confronting different social groups by distinguishing between different types of social exclusion in this area. Finally, this information is used to evaluate responses which are available to the existing issues within the current Chinese HE enrolment mechanism i.e. that the mechanism is fundamentally flawed and risks reducing, rather than enhancing, capability by excluding certain groups of students from fair competition in terms of access.

2. Social exclusion and educational inequality

There is a vast and growing body of work examining social exclusion triggered by the rise of the concept in 1970s (Lenoir, 1974; Silver, 1995; Popay et al., 2006). However, social exclusion is a nebulous concept, and there are different approaches to research on social exclusion. Some adopt the approach of policy analysis to look into the shifting political discourses. For example, when

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referring to the British public policy, Levitas (2005) identifies three discourses of social exclusion which view the causes of the problem as, at the risk of oversimplifying, lack of resource, exclusion from paid work, and moral deficiencies. Applying the social exclusion discourse to education however, proved to be theoretically challenging as shown by Alexiadou's work (2002). She argues that there is no consensus or consistence of the social exclusion discourses in relation to education policy in England. Moreover, this policy analysis approach is criticized for the tendency to 'accept the discourses of policy as the governing structures for research', hence the research 'results become nothing more than recapitulation of given systems of reference in state policy rather than a knowledge produced through critical analysis' (Popkewitz and Lindblad, 2000, p. 6).

Other scholars endeavor to define a fair starting point to examine social exclusion. In his seminal work, Rawls (1971) argues that it is fair when 'all social primary goods . . . are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these goods is to the advantage of the least favored' (p. 36). Attempts have been made to specify a list of factors excluding people from a normal social life (for example, Silver, 1994) and the primary goods for a basic decent life (for example, Levitas et al., 2007) in search of a fair starting point. However, this basic need approach has been widely criticized recently, for its conceptual and philosophical inadequacy (Reader, 2006). Consequently, Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1979, 1990, 1992, 2000) which highlights 'the central and basic things that people can *do* and *be*' is taken as an alternative to tackle social exclusion (Vizard and Burchardt, 2007, p. 18).

2.1. Sen's capability approach

Sen's capability theory is motivated by dissatisfaction with utilitarianism, libertarianism and Rawlsianism which is rooted 'in the failure of standard theories to take adequate account of forms of deprivation and inequality' (Vizard and Burchardt, 2007, p. 15). Sen (1979) disputes Rawls' resources-based concept of justice and argues instead that the focus of social justice should be put on distribution of capabilities. This includes both process equity – the achievement of capabilities (such as respect, participation in social life, access to education, housing, healthcare and other public services), and the opportunity equity – the freedom to do so (Sen, 2005).

From this perspective, Sen (1979, 1990, 1992, 2000) developed the capability theory to illustrate how social exclusion is caused by various deprivations which prevent people from living 'a minimally decent life' (Sen, 2000, p. 10). He employs two pairs of separate but not mutually exclusive criteria to unlock the connection between social exclusion and capability deprivation (Table 1). The importance of the typology is it allows one to recognize different needs and choices confronting different social groups by distinguishing between different types of exclusion. If we look at the effect of deprivation, 'Social exclusion can . . . be constitutively a part of capability deprivation as well as instrumentally a cause of diverse capability failures' (Sen, 2000, p. 11), and thus two types of social exclusion can be identified:

- *Constitutive deprivation* which refers to social exclusion that is intrinsically part of deprivation. For instance, being excluded from social relations is in itself capability deprivation. The exclusion from community life is also a type of direct deprivation. Under this circumstance, social exclusion has the constitutive relevance to capability deprivation. The core of analysis on this kind of social exclusion lies on its intrinsic nature.
- *Instrumental deprivation* which means that being excluded from some other things is not capability deprivation on its own, but rather, this type of exclusion may further result in deprivation. Sen used credit market as an example and pointed out that being

Table 1
Typology of social exclusion.

Criterion	Type	Feature
Inherence	Constitutive deprivation	Constitutive importance; direct deprivation
	Instrumental deprivation	Instrumental relevance; result in other deprivation
Intention	Active deprivation	Deliberate exclusion; usually a result of a particular policy
	Passive deprivation	Non-deliberate exclusion; usually a result of the overall situation

Source: Adapted from Sen (2000).

excluded from credit market is not necessarily part of deprivation itself; however, lack of access to credit market may lead to other deprivation of opportunities or advantages which are connected with the use of credit. In this case, social exclusion is instrumentally relevant to capability deprivation. (Sen, 1979, 1990, 1992, 2000).

In terms of the intention of deprivation it is possible to distinguish two further types of social exclusion:

- *Active deprivation* which occurs when a group of people are deliberately excluded. It is usually a direct result of policies or regulations. In other words, active exclusion is usually caused by authorities.
- *Passive deprivation* which 'comes about through social processes in which there is no deliberate attempt to exclude' (Sen, 2000, p. 21). Unlike active deprivation, passive deprivation is not caused by a particular policy or a government department. Instead, it is more likely a consequence of a series of social circumstances (Sen, 1979, 1990, 1992, 2000).

The capability approach has clearly demonstrated its value academically and practically as it is used as a framework to examine social exclusion and inequality, human rights, quality of life and effectiveness and equity of economic development (Robeyns, 2006a,b). There are both a normative and an evaluative dimensions embedded in Sen's approach. The former aims to answer the question 'what is justice and equity' and the latter concerns evaluation of position of individual, groups and society (Vizard and Burchardt, 2007). As there has been substantive studies on the evaluative quantitative dimension and few on the other (Unterhalter, 2003b), this paper focuses on the understudied normative dimension which has particular implications for understanding of inequality in a number of ways. Firstly, the categorization of deprivations illustrates the different cause and effect of social exclusion. It captures the key features of the process of exclusion by highlighting the context (in the case of passive deprivation), direct cause (in the case of active deprivation), capabilities under deprivation (in the case of constitutive deprivation) and further possible deprivation (in the case of instrumental deprivation), which is vital for acquisition of social inclusion remedies. Secondly, it acknowledges individual differences and constraints which would affect what people can *actually* do and be even if they are confronted with the same set of goods, because 'conversion of goods to capabilities varies from person to person substantially' (Sen, 1979, p. 219). Therefore, different people may need different things to achieve a same goal. This leads to a critical question on whether the institutional design, and in this case, the mechanism of HE enrolment, would enable people to enhance capability in their realm of autonomy or would confine them to specific states or actions. Finally, the capability approach is sensitive to context, which is achieved through establishment of

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