



Equity and access to higher education in China: Lessons from hunan province for university admissions policy



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ABSTRACT

Using survey data from 1028 high school seniors and interview data from 54 participants, this study investigates the status quo regarding equity and access to higher education in China. Findings indicate that students from higher socioeconomic family backgrounds, better high schools, and more urban homes are more likely to be admitted into prestigious colleges. We conclude that the surface fairness of the Gaokao system that allocates students to different college prestige strata masks an underlying design of deep social inequity. We finally recommend strategies to reform the admissions process in order to achieve greater fairness in university access in China.

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1. Introduction

Formal education is the primary pathway to social mobility in both developed and aspiring societies. Equality of educational opportunity is nearly universally regarded as a preeminent moral and social principle of society and its educational system. Though equality of educational opportunity may not guarantee an equal outcome in life chances, it does require that the process leading to achievement and attainment be fair. This is a fairness that is required not merely in perception by the members of a society but also in fact.

In this article, we focus on the operative principle of equality of educational opportunity in China with regards to access to higher education. Given that higher education in China is hierarchically-ordered in status and given that access to elite status IHE's is largely governed by test scores on the nation's university entrance examination (colloquially known as the "Gaokao") we focus on the Gaokao sorting system. On the surface, the university entrance examination seems fair, both procedurally and substantively, since all aspiring students appear to have an equal chance in terms of preparation and aptitude. But is that true? And is that true especially for minority groups and the socially and economically disadvantaged? A deeper investigation revealed some troubling issues – moral, social, and political issues that we take to be sufficiently important to question the Gaokao in its current and anticipated incarnation.

We begin by reporting recent mixed method empirical design research conducted by the senior author on students who took the Gaokao in a large province in China that contains sizeable minority populations. Then, we show how the research results interact with the Gaokao system to produce unjustified inequalities among social and ethnic groups. Finally, we discuss the deeper moral and policy implications of the Gaokao system and China's educational system, and introduce new recommendations for completely overhauling university access in China.

1.1. Background

In 2000, the number of tertiary students worldwide had grown to 100 million students, and the World Bank predicts that by 2050 that number will rise to 150 million students (World Bank, 2000, as cited in Clancy and Goastellec, 2007). This expansion has been largely driven by economic growth linked to globalization, technological exchange, and increased international competition. Along with that expansion came issues of equity and access to higher education, especially for marginalized and disadvantaged individuals or groups. Internationally, research findings of comparative studies conducted in prior decades (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Erikson and Jonsson, 1996; Massey et al., 2003; Bowen et al., 2005; Clancy and Goastellec, 2007; Shavit et al., 2007, etc.) have shown that expansion has failed to significantly reduce social class inequalities with regards to access to higher education. Many of the studies examine the impact of family SES, learning experience, home community, race, ethnicity, and gender upon student opportunities for higher education. More specifically, the impact of social economic status (SES) upon higher education

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opportunities still persists in many countries. Students from disadvantaged social groups are more likely to study at lower-level, less prestigious institutions or vocational tracks (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Ayalon and Shavit, 2004; Clancy and Goastellec, 2007). To what extent does China follow this general finding of system expansion without increasing equity?

China has followed the global higher education expansion trend. After the 1977 reinstitution of the National College Entrance Examination, colloquially known in Mandarin Chinese as the Gaokao, the Chinese people have enjoyed increased access to higher education opportunities. The overall percentage of students in higher education within the age cohort has grown from 1.5% in 1978 to 34.50% in 2013 (MOE, 2014), evidencing a shift from elite education to mass education. According to Trow (1973, 2006), the expansion of higher education in every society experiences three phases: elite, mass, and universal access. First, an elite level of higher education exists when a country's age cohort enrollment in higher education is less than 15%. Second, a mass level of higher education is attained when 16%–50% of the country's age cohort attends higher education. Finally, a nation achieves universal access when the proportion of the age cohort enrollment of higher education is more than 50%. The following statistics illustrate the expansion of the gross enrollment rate of higher education since 1978. The total student enrollment in Chinese higher education institutions at all levels in mainland China is 32 million, which gives China the largest gross higher education student population in the world (MOE, 2012a,b). The number of regular higher education institutions has increased from 598 in 1978–2491 in 2013. The annual new student enrollment in regular higher education institutions has increased from 0.4 million in 1978 to about 7 million in 2013 (China Statistics Yearbook, 2013).

However, with the impressive expansion of Chinese higher education, a large variation of quality and status within higher education also emerged (Li, 2007). Among 2491 regular higher education institutions, 1,170 offer full degree programs and 1321 are short-cycle (junior/vocational) higher education institutions. In addition, there are 297 adult higher education institutions and 802 non-state/private higher education institutions (China Statistics Yearbook, 2013). China initiated Project 211 and Project 985 towards the end of the 1990s to increase the competition capacity of elite universities (Li, 2004). In 1993, the central government implemented the Project 211 University plan to build 100 “key” universities nationwide in the 21st century. In May 1998, former President Jiang issued the Project 985 University plan to build world-class universities in China. To date, there are 39 Project 985 universities and 112 Project 211 universities. To respond to the demands of rapid higher education system expansion, independent colleges were permitted starting in 2003. The Ministry of Education issued the “No. 8 Document” delineating regulations for independent colleges. Accordingly, independent colleges are co-constructed by regular public universities (applicant) and some social entity (collaborator), including enterprise, institution, social organization, and other organizations (Liu, 2005). As supplementary institutions to regular public higher education, independent colleges charge higher tuitions but also have lower Gaokao admission scores. Although independent colleges are private, the Ministry of Education oversees their teaching, scholarship, and research because they offer bachelor diplomas, and this oversight offers some degree of quality assurance. However, it is clear that differentiation in status and perceived quality among higher education institutions is the intended result of government policy. Higher education in China can be characterized into three tiers of status and perceived quality; with Project 985 universities in the top tier, Project 211 institutions in the second tier, and low provincial and independent four-year universities and non-degree, short-cycle, and junior/vocational schools in the bottom tier.

In dealing with issues of equity and access, some researchers focus on analysis and critiques of Chinese education policies, such as lopsided college cut-offs, high-stakes college entrance exams, unfair admission quotas and so on (Jin, 2008; Huang, 2008; Feng, 2008; Ericson, 2008). Others use quantitative research methods to analyze data collected from surveys of current college students (Li and Min, 2003; Xie and Wang, 2006; Jacob, 2006; Fan, 2008; Liu, 2007, 2011; Li, 2007; Liu and Wang, 2010). The current study is the first known endeavor to have tackled issues relating to equity and access to higher education using a mixed-methods research approach. The main focus of this study is the dynamic tension between accessibility to higher education and equity in terms of social justice for Chinese students as a consequence of current policies and procedures in the context of higher education expansion and differentiation in China. We comment on equity as it relates to access to the higher status reaches of higher education in China. Higher education opportunity relates not only to mere access to higher education but also to access to elite vs. non-elite universities. Education in China can be divided into two categories: “status education” by which Liu means four-year higher education that can potentially bring higher social status, and “survival education” found at junior/vocational higher education that provides lower level survival skills and techniques (Liu, 2006, p. 161). Graduates who want to compete for limited government jobs or take graduate school admissions exams must first obtain a bachelor degree in order to take their civic examinations. Within the context of higher education expansion and differentiation, both the job market and graduate schools raise “entrance” criteria expectations, preferring students from elite institutions. Currently, the cut-off scores for vocational/junior colleges are very low. For instance, in 2010, the cut-off score for math & science was 270 (out of 750), and the cut-off scores for humanities & social science was 330 (out of 750) (Hunan, 2010). Interestingly, the cut-off scores for admission to these colleges continue to get lower. In 2015, both tracks had cut-off scores of just 200 (out of 750) (Hunan, 2015). Essentially, anyone who takes the entrance examination will gain acceptance into these colleges, but the degrees from them will not bring any tangible benefits for graduates. Therefore, admission to these types of colleges is not the primary concern of this study.

1.2. Research context

The research for this study was conducted in Hunan Province, China. Hunan is located in the central south region of China, and the province links the developed east-coast to the underdeveloped west. Data collected in this province reflects the standard of socio-economic development, the quality of education, and other factors. Hunan is home to both Han Chinese and 55 ethnic minority groups. According to China Statistical Yearbook (2013), ethnic minorities comprise roughly 10% of the total population of Hunan. This is close to the national percentage (9%) of the combined population for minority groups in China as a whole. The main minority groups include: Tujia, Miao, Dong, Yao, Bai, Hui, Zhuang, Uygur, Mongol, She, and Manchu. The ratio of urban to rural population is 59.9%–40.45%. The ratio of males to females is 51.41%–48.59%. This diverse population represents China's multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society. Hunan Province is the senior author's home province, making it convenient for data collection.

To better represent the student population, we researched Hunan cities that had different levels of 2010 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) based on information obtained from the China Statistics Yearbook (2010). The research sites were Changsha, Loudi, and Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture. Changsha is the capital city of Hunan, and its GDP is \$ 67.9 billion. Loudi is located in central Hunan, and its GDP is \$10.2 billion. Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture is located in the northwest of Hunan, and its GDP is 4.5

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