



Expansion and equality in Chinese higher education



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ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between the fast expansion of higher education and the equality of college enrollment opportunity in China? Based on the data from four large-scale surveys on college graduates in China, this paper explores this question by conducting empirical analysis on the family occupational, educational, regional, and economic status through descriptive and regression analyses. The result shows: Firstly, quantitatively speaking, enrollment opportunities have equalized in some aspects as well as unequalized in some others. The percentage of students from medium and inferior occupational families and the percentage of female students have increased, while the percentage of students from families with low academic qualification has not changed much more; but the percentage of students from county and below has obviously decreased. Secondly, qualitatively speaking, enrollment opportunity inequality has deepened continuously. Students with better family occupational, educational, regional, and economic status and male students have more chances to enter elite universities, and those groups have become more and more advantaged with the passing of time.

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1. Introduction

Since the implementation of the reform and opening door policy in 1978, China has enjoyed a long-term and fast-growing economic boom. In 2010, China surpassed Japan and became the second largest economy in the world in terms of GDP. The fast economic growth greatly improved the fiscal revenue of the country, which provides a necessary condition for the development of higher education. Meanwhile, with the increase in the income level, people's demand for higher education has increased remarkably. Since 1999, the scale of higher education in China began to expand quickly and the entrance rate of higher education has greatly improved. In 2002, the gross entrance rate of higher education reached 15%, indicating that China entered the era of mass higher education. By 2012, the rate rose to 30.0%; the gross scale of Chinese higher education reached 33.3 million Fig. 1. China has replaced the U.S as the country that has the largest scale of higher education.

As the economic development and the income level reached to a certain extent, people's demand for higher education increased rapidly. The expansion of Chinese higher education satisfied the need of the broad mass. However, due to the limitation of

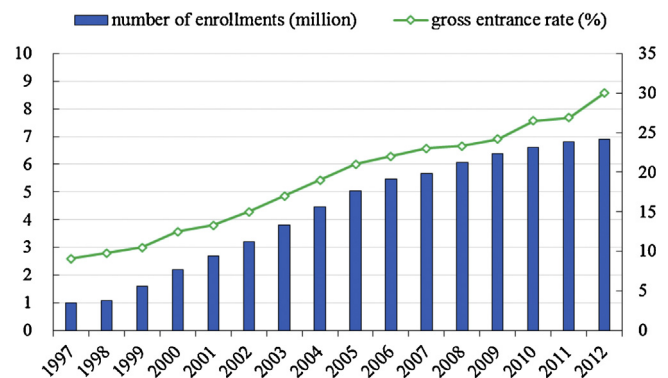


Fig. 1. Number of enrollments and gross entrance rates of Chinese higher education. Data source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (2013).

enrollment scale and the budget constraint of many families, there are still many students who cannot receive higher education. Consequently, there has much been written on whether the expansion of higher education has equally benefited students with different family social status.

On July 29, 2010, the General Office of the State Council (2010a,b) issued “the Outline of the National Medium-and-Long Term Program for Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)” (using “the Outline of Program for Education” for short), which declares the guideline of “developing education in priority”,

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“teaching the people”, “reform and innovation”, “promotion of equality” and “improvement of quality”. The equality of education is an important foundation of social equity. “The Outline of Program for Education” emphasizes “the promotion of equality” as the fundamental education policy of the country. The key of education equality is opportunity equality, which demands to ensure people’s legal rights to be educated. The government should bear the main responsibility, and the whole society should promote education equality together.

As for higher education, the opportunity equality mainly embodies in the enrollment opportunity equality. In the aspect of examination and recruitment system, “the Outline of Program for Education” pays much attention to better allocation of higher education’s enrollment opportunities and better admission procedures. A sound multi-way-admission system should be established to promote enrollment opportunity equality and to select out excellent students.

However, “the Outline of Program for Education” gives no detailed explanation of higher education opportunity equality. “There is still inequality between the urban and rural areas, and among different regions and social groups. Narrowing such disparities is the most important job of the next stage.” said Yuan Guiren, the Minister of Chinese Education Ministry, on the press conference of “the Outline of Program for Education” ([The State Council Information Office, 2010](#)).

Is the opportunity inequality more serious with the expansion of higher education? The answer should base on the real data. In recent years, empirical studies have become more important in Chinese educational research. More and more researchers analyzed real data from surveys with statistical and regression methods. Yet the relevant data are still limited and inadequate. The quality of the data should be improved. This paper uses data from four large-scale surveys on Chinese college graduate students to study the current situation and the tendency of enrollment opportunities of higher education.

2. Literature review

Education equity is such a complex concept that it is very difficult to define it clearly. Education equity is classified into horizontal equity, vertical equity and intergenerational equity. While considering education as a process, there are start equity, course equity and result equity. “Equality” is also frequently used when studying education equity. Obviously, “equality” and “equity” are different concepts. For example, vertical equity means different treatment to different groups. In Chinese higher education admission, the policy of adding marks for minority students embodies vertical equity rather than the equality of education opportunities.

However, horizontal equity means the same treatment to the same group. In this case, “equity” and “equality” nearly have the same meanings. The equality of education opportunity is important characteristic of education opportunity equity. Since the paper does not lay emphasis on the definition of the two concepts, “equality” and “equity” will not be distinguished from each other, except for instances with special explanation.

2.1. Quantity equality and quality equality

In the era of elite higher education, the gross entrance rate was lower than 15%. There were so few people who could receive higher education that people focus more on whether they could enter universities. The opportunity equality of higher education was mainly embodied in quantity equality. Since it enters the era of mass higher education, the gross entrance rate generally increases rapidly. More and more people have the chance to enter

universities. At this stage, people begin to pay more attention to quality equality of higher education opportunities instead of quantity equality. When higher education gets into the popularization era, most people even everyone has the chance to enter universities, so the opportunity equality of higher education mainly embodies in quality equality.

According to the Maximally Maintained Inequality Hypothesis ([Raftery and Hout, 1993](#)), the expansion of higher education does not necessarily change how family social status influences the enrollment opportunity. Only when the educational needs of the high status are fully satisfied can the gap of enrollment opportunity between the high status and the low one be reduced. Moreover, Effectively Maintained Inequality Hypothesis ([Lucas, 2001](#)) indicates that after the realization of quantity equality on a certain level of education, the inequality of quality should be considered. The high status will maintain their prestige of entering university no matter when and where. Before the popularization of a certain level of education, the high status will ensure them to receive education of that level with all kinds of resources. Once a level of education becomes popularized, they will seek for education on the same level but of better quality.

2.2. International experiences

Researches of the U.S. find out that the social vulnerable groups (i.e. students from low-income families, the minority students or the female) have lower entrance rate, which means quantity inequality. What is more, the limited increase of entrance rate of that group is realized mainly by enrolling in the 2-year community colleges, which means quality inequality. The enrollment opportunities of higher education in the U.S. distribute disparately in groups with different social and economic backgrounds, which favors the high status evidently ([Corazzini et al., 1972](#)). The intelligence quotient and family background are two important factors which determine whether children can receive higher education or not ([Taubman, 1989](#)). The U.S. expands the higher education through low-cost community colleges, which enroll more students with relatively worse family background ([Whitaker and Pascarella, 1994](#)). [McPherson and Schapiro \(1994\)](#) review the enrollment changes of students with different income status during 1980 to 1993 using the data of the U.S. university freshmen. They find out that students from low-income families mainly distribute in community colleges, while students from mid- and high-income families mainly distribute in 4-year universities. [Karen \(1990\)](#) indicates that it is important to study how the social vulnerable groups enter different levels of higher education institutes especially the elite universities, because undergraduate education influences the economic prospect of the students.

In the aspect of education equality, [Levin \(1976\)](#) points out that there is direct relationship between fathers’ occupations and children’s education quantities in western European countries (mainly OECD countries). Though the condition seems somewhat better since 1960s, the inequality degree has got worse considering the quality disparity of higher education received by students with different social status. While the majority of children from high-status families entered the most distinguished universities and the most famous colleges of those universities, the enrollment of students from low-status families was realized mainly through the low-cost expansion of ordinary colleges and the foundation of new low-cost colleges.

Analyzing European Social Survey data for 24 countries and for cohorts born between the 1950s and 1970s, [Haima and Shavit \(2013\)](#) find that educational expansion enhanced inequality of opportunity for tertiary education among cohorts born in the 1950s and 1970s. Although the Spanish University System has

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