

Research on the Impact of Educational Equity on Access to Higher Education Opportunities

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Abstract: Educational equity is a core value in modern society, centered on the principle that everyone should have equal rights and opportunities to access education. In higher education, educational equity directly impacts individuals' ability to pursue fair opportunities, which in turn influences their career prospects and social standing. This article aims to explore the impact of educational equity on access to higher education. By conducting interviews with educators and analyzing both domestic and international literature, this study analyzed factors such as the allocation of educational resources, family economic and educational backgrounds, and educational policies. The findings highlight the important role of educational equity in the distribution of opportunities in higher education. Research has found that educational equity is crucial not only for individual growth and development but also as a key indicator of social equity and justice. This article proposes a series of strategies aimed at promoting educational equity and expanding access to higher education.

Keywords: educational equity, higher education, enrollment opportunities, educational opportunities.

1. Introduction

Educational equity, as a fundamental value of modern society, is of great significance for achieving social equity and justice. Access to higher education is significantly shaped by the level of educational equity within a system. Despite ongoing efforts and progress in advancing educational equity in China, the issue of fairness in access to higher education remains a critical topic of academic concern. According to recent data from the Ministry of Education (2024), the number of students in higher education has steadily increased. According to Yu Zhongning, the total number of students enrolled in various types of higher education in China in 2023 reached 47.6319 million, marking a 2.32% increase from the previous year.[1]

While the expansion of higher education continues, researchers argue that this growth has not effectively reduced inequalities in access to higher education. Factors such as regional economic disparities, unequal distribution of educational resources, and differences in family economic backgrounds significantly affect students' ability to access higher education.

Given these challenges, this article aims to examine the impact of educational equity on access to higher education through a comprehensive analysis of literature and interviews. The study delves into the root causes of unequal access and offers strategies to address these disparities to provide insightful

contributions that aid in better promoting educational equity and achieving a balanced allocation of resources.

2. Interview content

The interviewee in this case study is Professor Sun Jie, a manager at Shangqiu Normal University, who provides low-cost study abroad opportunities and educational information resources for students from low - and middle-income families. His initiative enables students to pursue higher education abroad and plan their future careers. To date, over 50 students have completed their undergraduate and graduate studies at overseas institutions through his assistance. I am one of the students who received help from Professor Sun, and I want to further understand his thoughts, so I interviewed him.

Teacher Sun's educational principle is "imparting knowledge and solving doubts". However, in his work, he has observed that disparities in family economic and educational backgrounds prevent some students from accessing educational resources equally, which in turn intensifies the competition for higher education. Realizing that his educational philosophy alone cannot solve the inequality among students, so when he became a member of the school management, he did his best to help students provide high-quality enrollment opportunities and educational information resources. Due to fierce competition for higher education admission opportunities in China, countries such as the UK, US, and Germany have extremely high tuition fees and expensive living expenses, which are simply unaffordable for impoverished families. So Teacher Sun is doing his best to help students in need.

Through interviews, I found that education equity in China is not synonymous with absolute fairness. Teacher Sun also stated that education equity in China is relatively fair. The nine-year compulsory education system implemented by the state aims to ensure that every child has the opportunity to receive basic education. For example, enrolling students in nearby districts can reduce the process of choosing schools and promote educational equity. As Du Shangrong found, achieving high-quality and balanced development of compulsory education in both urban and rural areas promotes urban-rural integration and contributes to social equity and justice.[2]

As the main selection method for higher education in China, the college entrance examination ensures that the majority of students across the country have the opportunity to participate in this competition, reflecting the universality of educational access. However, this system also brings about regional inequalities. Provinces such as Shanxi, Shandong, Hebei and Henan (collectively known as the "Four Provinces of Mountains and Rivers") face a large number of candidates, limited access to high-quality educational resources, and increased competition for college admission, making it difficult for many students in these regions to access equal opportunities.

Qin Hongxia, Fang Fang, Zhou Jianhua pointed out that after reforms of the college entrance examination system, class-based disparities in accessing high-quality higher education persist. The changes in the educational environment caused by the new college entrance examination reform have different mechanisms for the advantageous and disadvantaged classes.[3] The college entrance examination brings enormous academic pressure and heavy psychological burden to students. This leads to anxiety, depression, and other issues that affect their physical and mental health. So, true educational equity has not been achieved yet. The ultimate realization of educational equity requires continuous efforts from all countries and societies.

3. The influencing factors and analysis of equal opportunities in higher education.

Through interviews with Professor Sun and research on existing literature, I have found that there are several factors that affect access to higher education opportunities. The unequal distribution of educational resources, family economic and cultural backgrounds, and educational policies all have a profound impact on students' access to higher education opportunities.

3.1. Unequal distribution of educational resources affects access to higher education enrollment opportunities.

There are significant differences in the allocation of educational resources across different regions. Developed regions typically have the economic capacity to invest significantly in education, which includes constructing modern school facilities, offering robust teacher training programmes, providing modern teaching equipment, and cultivating an overall conducive learning environment. This economic advantage allows these regions to accumulate more abundant and high-quality educational resources, making it easier to attract and retain talented teachers. As a result, students in developed areas often experience improved academic performance and benefit from a higher quality of education.

In contrast, economically disadvantaged regions face considerable challenges in education. Limited fiscal revenues and insufficient investments in education lead to, low teacher salaries, which makes it difficult for these areas to attract and retain qualified teachers. In some impoverished areas, even basic teaching facilities are inadequate, which further hampers students' learning outcomes. Without the necessary economic support, students in these regions often lack access to the same level of educational resources, putting them at a disadvantage in competition. The uneven distribution of educational resources has exacerbated social stratification and educational inequality.

Du Haitao pointed out that public education resources should not only aim for relative fairness in the level of education but should also provide the necessary conditions for all individuals to pursue their life goals on an equal footing.[4] This is not just about demanding a fair distribution of opportunities, but also about ensuring that educational resources are distributed in a way that meets specific needs and demands. This is consistent with Mr. Sun's philosophy in the interview, where he discovered these issues during his teaching process, but he did not have the ability to change them.

Zhang Jiping pointed out that high-quality educational resources endow higher education with new characteristics of equal opportunities. High-quality educational resources offer a level of education that individuals can adapt to, building upon "universal quality".[5] They provide opportunities that are fair in terms of "quality" and "characteristics". It enables all citizens to have the opportunity to obtain higher economic income and social status, and truly transforms higher education into a ladder for social class mobility.

3.2. The impact of family background on access to higher education opportunities.

The economic conditions of a family play a crucial role in shaping students' access to higher education opportunities. Families with stronger financial backgrounds are usually able to provide their children with better educational resources and opportunities. Parental education levels, professional experiences, and cultural awareness often influence children's attitudes toward learning and their overall development. They provide children with scientific and effective learning methods and guidance from a young age, and plan their life paths. Some families' social status and influence also provide more learning and employment opportunities for their children, making it easier for students from economically well-off families to access high-quality educational resources, such as prestigious schools, excellent teachers for extracurricular tutoring, and international schools. Such resources enhance the likelihood of students receiving a high-quality education and accessing advanced learning opportunities.

On the other hand, families with limited financial means face significant challenges in providing their children with the same level of education investment. Parents from lower-income backgrounds may not have the necessary educational background or cultural knowledge to guide their children's learning effectively. Students from impoverished families also face greater psychological pressure, high education costs, living expenses, and other economic issues. Although students from poor

families can apply for scholarships and college loans, these policy measures cannot completely solve the problems they face, resulting in their inability to receive a good education. Teacher Sun found that some of the students he taught did not have access to higher educational opportunities and employment choices. Therefore, when he became a member of the school management and had access to high-quality educational resources, he did his best to help students in need. Hou Jingyi, Zhang Jianping, Ge Yang pointed out that the intergenerational transmission of education is more prevalent in rural areas and low education families, where children struggle to overcome the limitations of their background to achieve upward mobility through education.[6] Families with high incomes and education levels are more likely to maintain their advantageous positions by transmitting family capital to their children. Similarly, Cui Xiaojuan, Cai Wenbo, Fu Jingjing used data from the "China Household Income Project Survey" to interpret the influencing factors of rural children's education attainment for different income groups.[7] The increase in rural household income can reduce the impact of family factors on children's educational attainment, but cannot reduce the educational disparities caused by uneven distribution of educational resources between regions. Li Fengliang, Hong Qing explored the differences in access to high-quality higher education opportunities between urban and rural households and their internal family economic and social classes by using micro data from CGSS2018. The results showed that there were significant differences in opportunities between urban and rural households, and significant differences in opportunities between advantaged families and middle-class and disadvantaged families.[8]

Therefore, while higher education expansion has played a role in advancing educational equity, it has also revealed new disparities, particularly in access to high-quality education.. Addressing these inequalities requires targeted interventions that focus not only on increasing access to education but also on improving the distribution of educational resources and opportunities for disadvantaged families.

3.3. The impact of education policies on access to higher education opportunities.

Education policies directly affect the allocation of resources in higher education by adjusting financial investment in higher education. Efforts will be made to narrow the education gap between developed and impoverished areas, urban and rural areas, and between schools by increasing investment in teaching facilities, improving teaching staff levels and salaries, offering online courses, and allocating personalized education resources.

Research by Liu Ningning, Yang Jingjing shows that there is an imbalance in the regional distribution of high-quality higher education resources.[9] This inequality is exacerbated by the provincial quota system used in the college entrance examination, which has resulted in a growing disparity in admission rates to elite universities between the eastern municipalities directly under the central government and the central and western regions of China, as well as major provinces in the college entrance examination. The admission rate of high-quality higher education in regions reflects the actual opportunities for students to enter high-quality higher education, and essentially reflects the difficulty of the regional college entrance examination.

A fair enrollment policy is essential for ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to compete for higher education. However, variations in bonus policies and admission standards across different regions create disparities. For instance, some provinces provide bonus points to students from ethnic minorities or to the children of revolutionary martyrs, while other regions lack such policies. This inconsistency means that students from certain provinces may need significantly higher scores for admission, while students from other provinces may find the process relatively easier. This exacerbates the inequality of higher education opportunities between regions.

Wang Xinfeng also pointed out that the number of students admitted to Tsinghua and Peking universities in county-level high schools is continuously decreasing, and the gap between them and

urban high schools in terms of competition and student recommendation is becoming larger and larger.[10] Moreover, this trend, along with the proportion of urban students admitted to Tsinghua and Peking universities, is gradually expanding.

4. Research results

Unequal access to higher education opportunities has significantly intensified social stratification. Individuals from advantageous backgrounds are more likely to secure high-quality higher education opportunities due to their financial resources and elevated social status, which in turn reinforces their privileged position in society. In contrast, vulnerable groups, lacking the necessary resources and support, struggle to access these same opportunities, leading to a cycle of poverty and disadvantage. This inequality not only hampers individual development but also affects the cultivation of high-quality talent, resulting in a waste of human capital and limiting the overall capacity for innovation and social progress.

Although the policy of expanding enrollment in universities has to some extent increased opportunities for higher education, it has not effectively alleviated the inequality of higher education opportunities between urban and rural areas. Students in rural areas still face many difficulties in accessing higher education, such as limited educational resources, constrained family economic conditions, and inadequate government policies. These regional inequality continues to exacerbate the inequity in higher education opportunities.

5. Corresponding

To address the issue of unequal opportunities in higher education, we can start from multiple aspects and implement comprehensive strategies to ensure that every student has equal educational opportunities.

Firstly, increase fiscal investment and optimize resource allocation. The government must continue to increase financial support for higher education, particularly in underdeveloped areas, to ensure the rational allocation of educational resources. This includes investing in educational resources and ensuring equitable teacher distribution across urban and rural areas and regions. Yao Wenjia, Li Jianhua pointed out that the allocation of educational resources not only involves the right to education of all members of society, but is also closely related to people's development, and is a key link in improving national quality and achieving a country with strong talent.[11]

Secondly, reform the enrollment system to ensure fair opportunities. Improve the college entrance examination enrollment system, increase the publicity of the enrollment system, and improve the awareness of policy promotion. Break down barriers such as geography, economy, and social class, and implement a more fair and transparent enrollment mechanism. Provide more opportunities for students from different backgrounds through diversified enrollment channels, such as independent enrollment and recommended exemption from exams.

Thirdly, the government should introduce relevant policies and measures, improve the funding system, and reduce the burden on students. On the one hand, the government should establish and improve a student financial aid policy system that covers all stages of education, ensuring that students from economically disadvantaged families do not drop out of school due to financial reasons. On the other hand, the government should promote and improve student loan policies, providing more loan channels and preferential conditions for students from economically disadvantaged families. By simplifying loan procedures, extending repayment periods, and other measures, the financial burden on students can be reduced. Hu Jianhua, Zeng Huilin, Liao Enpeng pointed out that education poverty alleviation is undoubtedly the most pioneering, critical, and sustainable approach, playing a great role in solving intergenerational poverty transmission. China's poverty alleviation

model also provides a distinctive model for the world's poverty alleviation practice.[12] Promote the concept of educational equity throughout society and make everyone aware of the importance of educational equity. Enhance students' confidence and independence, improve self-awareness, and encourage them to maintain a positive attitude when facing difficulties and challenges. Strive to obtain more educational opportunities for oneself.

Fourthly, the improvement of educational quality. Schools should strengthen the construction of their teaching staff by enhancing their professional competence and teaching ability, and providing students with high-quality teaching resources. Promote educational and teaching reform: focus on cultivating students' innovative spirit and practical ability, and improve the overall quality level of higher education. Introduce advanced international educational concepts and teaching standards to promote the internationalization of higher education.

Finally, information and guidance. Universities should publicly disclose information such as enrollment policies, enrollment plans, admission standards, etc., to ensure that candidates and parents can fully understand the relevant situation. And provide professional career guidance services for students, helping them make reasonable educational choices and career plans based on their interests and abilities. These information include but are not limited to enrollment policies, enrollment plans, admission criteria, scholarship and financial aid policies, etc. Through various channels such as official websites, enrollment brochures, and online consultation platforms, universities should ensure that this information is easily accessible and updated in a timely manner, so that candidates and parents can fully understand the relevant situation and make wise choices.

6. Conclusion

Research has demonstrate that unequal distribution of educational resources, disparities in economic and cultural backgrounds among disadvantaged families, and the implementation of specific educational policies significantly affect students' access to higher education opportunities. Educational equity is vital in promoting equal access to higher education opportunities. A fair education system ensures that every student, regardless of their origin, background, or economic conditions, has equal opportunities to pursue higher education and fully realize their individual potential. However, achieving educational equity is not an overnight task. It requires sustained efforts, continuous reform and innovative approaches. Movind forward, increased attention and support for educational equity are essential to address these disparities. Only through concerted efforts can we attain the ultimate goal of educational equity, ensuring that every student can thrive and fully engage in the pursuit of knowledge.

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