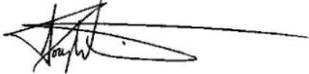


THE REFORM OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA: THE IMPACT ON THE QUALITY
OF EDUCATION CAUSED BY INCREASED ENROLLMENT

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Lv Si (Sabrina)
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Abstract

THE REFORM OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA: THE IMPACT ON THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION CAUSED BY INCREASED ENROLLMENT

Lv Si (Sabrina)

Under the Supervision of Kory Wein, PhD

This paper reviews the history of reform in China's higher education and analyzes how increased enrollment beginning in the 1990s has influenced the quality of education in the country. Chapter 1 provides the background for increased enrollment; it analyzes the reasons for expanding higher education in China, including easing economic and employment pressures and stimulating domestic consumption. The chapter explains why increased enrollment is necessary for China's economic survival. Chapter 2 examines current problems in higher education in China and reveals what impact increased enrollment has on the quality of education. Chapter 3 provides a summary of my findings and makes several recommendations to improve the quality of education in China.

Keywords: *China higher education; increased enrollment; quality of education; admission standards*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Faced with the challenge to adapt to the needs of a market economy, an unprecedented expansion in opportunities for higher education has been taking place in China since 1998” (Yinmei, 2006). A large-scale reform of higher education in China began in the 1990s. Several aspects included in the reform were and still are the entrance exam, increased enrollment, and quality education. Millions of students have taken The National College Entrance Exam (NCE) since it was implemented in the 1990s, and the government plans to increase enrollment in order to allow more people an opportunity to receive a college degree. However, some fear that with this increase in quantity there will be a decrease in quality (Jiani, 2007).

Even though the reform of China’s higher education system has been remarkably successful in some fields, increased enrollment has changed the faculty-student ratio, which has produced large class sizes, reduced admission standards, which has increased the number of underprepared students, and has saturated the market with job seekers (Jiani, 2007).

To solve these problems caused by increased enrollment, it is very likely that the government will eventually need to step in. The last thing it wants to do is close or cap public universities and send university students to the streets (Litao & Sixin, 2008). In addition to financial support, a systematic and effective evaluation may be needed to improve the quality of education.

Statement of the Problem

Why is increased enrollment necessary for higher education in China? How does increased enrollment affect the quality of education? What can we do to solve the problems caused by this expansion?

Definition of Terms

Increased Enrollment: Increased enrollment is a reform policy enforced in 1990s in China higher education. It allows a higher education institution to increase enrollment to alleviate economic pressure and ease unemployment in China.

Quality education: Quality education is a mode of education to improve various aspects of the quality of the student, which includes the education of ability, personality development, physical health and mental health.

Method of Approach

The research was conducted using the databases available at the Karmann Library at University of Wisconsin-Platteville and the library of South Central University of Nationalities in Wuhan, Hubei, China. Related online articles were searched through Google. The search terms included “China higher education,” “Increased enrollment,” “quality education,” and “admission standards.”

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Increased Enrollment

China's higher education system, after many years of reform, has made much progress and has been remarkably successful in some fields. The reform, however, has caused several problems. Some examples include the rapid development of higher education, industrialization of education, a lack of choice in regards to schools, etc. (Abramson, Robinson, Guohua, Litao & Sixin, Jiani). These problems have aroused the concerns of the public and of educators around the world.

According to the newly-founded People's Republic of China in 1949, "First, higher education system should have the right political nature; it should belong to the new government led by the Chinese Communist Party. Second, it should directly serve the needs of the rapid economic development taking place in the new country" (Ouyang, 2007, p. 141). And after Deng Xiaoping's (1904-1997) decision to change the university entrance system, the National College Entrance Exam was begun. Since then, millions of candidates have taken part in the exam. In 1985, tuition ceased being free. In 1989, the National Education Committee, Price Bureau and Ministry of Finance announced that a tuition fee and an accommodation fee are required to attend universities. Later in 1993, the government announced to students that higher education is not compulsory (Jianni, 2007). The tuition fee rose from 200RMB in 1985 to 5000RMB in 2007. As China began to expand enrollment in higher education, more and more people received higher degrees (Jianni, 2007). From 1998 to 2004, undergraduate enrollment increased from 3.41 million to 13.33 million. Adult enrollment increased by 1.38 million. As enrollments began to rise, educators around the world feared the decline of education quality (Yinmei, 2007). Deng Xiaoping's open door policy in 1978 offered China a chance to learn from western culture, and

“the aim of Chinese higher education . . . changed from a political weapon to a means of educating and cultivating” (Ouyang, 2004, p.144). The direction of China’s higher education went from quantity to quality. The government introduced Project 211 to build up 100 top-level higher education institutions in the 21st century. The project aims to improve the capacity of institutions and develop key disciplinary areas and public service system in higher education (Jianni, 2007). In May 1998, President Jiang Zeming announced that China needed to develop a number of top universities at the international level. Project 985 seeks to develop 10 to 12 famous universities and a number of renowned high-level research institutions to keep pace with other developed countries. According to some, Project 211 and Project 985 could be the most remarkable strategies in the field of China’s higher education (Jiani, 2007).

With the tremendous demand for higher education, it was necessary for the government to carry out an enrollment expansion policy beginning in the 1990s. The development of China’s higher education system reached great success in recent years. However, in the course of enrollment expansion, a series of new problems have come forth. Jianni (2007) identifies major problems in China’s higher education system: the widening gap between distribution of opportunities in urban and rural areas; the lack of employment opportunities; the quality of higher education; and fewer students because of the one-child policy. There are still many social problems, but there are some interesting areas of higher education to be explored (Jiani, 2007).

Zhishan (2007) identifies three main reasons for increased enrollment. The first reason was to ease the economic pressure brought by insufficient domestic demand. Enrollment expansion can be traced back to 1998. Zhishan states that at that time some economists argued that the government should accelerate the pace of college enrollment to relieve the pressure caused by the lack of domestic demand. Since 1997, Southeast Asia's economic crisis spread throughout the

entire Asian economy. Nearly all of the country's trade and economy suffered severely. China was no exception (Zhishan, 2007, p.3). Increased enrollment, many argued, would stimulate education consumption (Yinmei, 2006). Against this background, the economists' suggestions on enrollment expansion based on stimulating domestic demands were taken seriously and quickly turned into policy by the government (Zhishan, 2007).

The second reason for increased enrollment is to relieve the employment pressure from national economy transfer. After Deng Xiaoping issued the reform and opening-up policy, China's economy began a period of rapid development from 1992 to 1997. But being affected by the Asian financial crisis in the second half of 1997, the economy began to slide, and domestic demand insufficiency had become the main problem. In addition, there was a new employment pressure, as 3 million high school graduates could not get into higher education. Therefore, the government took active financial policy in order to take every possible measure to cope with financial crisis and keep the economy as stable as possible. Some economists looked at education for ways to solve the economic difficulty. They thought that higher education was the most potential market to stimulate consumption and expand domestic demands; it was a useful method to change the situation, and explore new consumption fields (Zhishan, 2007). Education investment plays a very important role in promoting economic development and GNP, and the investment in human capital is an important way to stimulate economic and social progress (Zhishan, 2007). From a certain aspect, the government has taken education expansion as one of measures to solve the current economic difficulty (Zhishan, 2007).

The third reason for increased enrollment is to stimulate domestic demand, domestic economy, and to promote the development of tertiary industry. Higher education has an obvious role in promoting the economy, mainly in the following ways: First, it alleviates the high

pressure on economic growth by stimulating consumer demands. Second, high consumer demand can also catch investors' focus in related industry and in a way that boosts the net investment potential of the community. Third, with the increase of local investment, potential job opportunities are also increased. This will buffer the unemployment situation in the society and improve human resources (Zhishan, 2007).

The impact on education quality caused by increased enrollment

According to Larry (2008), higher education in China still faces competition on the international stage. First, the college entrance examination plays a key role in someone's life. Success on the exam means someone can get into an ideal school and, in turn, possibly get a ticket to a bright future. The government strictly controls the admission rules. So many students can only enter private schools or specialized colleges. Some students with special talents complain about this system, which they argue is unfair because it prevents some from going to top public universities. Second, private schools with relatively lower requirements offer students with lower scores a chance to receive a sound education as well as a choice of many majors. While still looked down upon by many, private schools remain quite impressive because of their well-equipped facilities; however, the focus is not on the quality of education. Third, by offering quality foreign education, foreign campuses in China now are enjoying a boost in popularity. The foreign degree after graduation is extremely valuable, so foreign schools in China are very attractive, even though the tuition is over 10 times that of public schools (Abramson, 2008).

Litao and Sixin (2008) point out that there are more and more enrollments in universities with limited teaching resources and funding. Limited funding in higher education may cause universities to fall into financial crisis. Many universities have turned to banks for relentless lending to relieve their financial crisis when the government's financial support gradually

decreased (Litao & Sixin, 2010). Additionally, the oversupply of college graduates in the job market will result in educated unemployment. “The job market is unlikely to expand as quickly as higher education” (Litao & Sixin, 2010, p.3). In 2003, over a million graduates could not find a job (Litao & Sixin, 2010). Litao and Sixin (2008) state that the problems caused by increased enrollment cannot be resolved soon, even though the government decided to put more effort into quality improvement. They suggest slowing down the pace of enrollment increase in higher education.

Yong (2008) analyzed some major existing problems in education from different aspects, such as the concept of education management, faculty-student ratio, and admission standards.

Education Management

The most significant factor influencing teaching quality is the policy of universities. After China’s education reform many problems still remain: some universities are still not clear about the concept of education; some universities don’t recognize the importance of quality education; there is limited attention from leaders; and teachers’ commitment to teaching and students’ work cannot keep up with the fast development of education (Yong, 2008). There are mainly three factors contributing to this situation: Firstly, China is committed to making higher education accessible to the majority of young people, while the education budget always lacks enough funding from the government. Meanwhile, in response to enrollment expansion policy, many universities have been very actively trying to increase enrollment numbers. But they also neglect the urgent command of improving teaching facilities and qualities brought by the expansion. Second, many universities fail to adjust their management and administrative policies to have a better control of the normal order on campus. They focus on expanding enrollment makes them overlook teaching and management. Third, many administrators of universities mistakenly focus on

building public relations and constructing new facilities while teaching methods, course design and education management are neglected. Education is sacrificed (Yong, 2008).

Faculty qualifications and faculty-student ratio

The expansion of university enrollment causes an insufficient supply of university teachers, which in turn affects teaching. Some universities ask unqualified teachers to deal with the expansion. While not a serious problem in Beijing and Shanghai, where the educational level is higher, it is becoming a serious problem in areas where the economy and education level are poor. In recent years, in order to solve the shortage of teacher resources, some provincial high schools have had to recruit people who are junior or senior students in college as teachers (Yong, 2008). Additionally, how can teachers ensure teaching quality when they teach 100-200 students? Teachers with so many teaching tasks have no time and energy to improve their teaching.

Admission standards

To a certain degree, teaching quality is affected by the quality of students. By increasing enrollment in higher education, a large number of students with relatively low scores and poor abilities result in a decrease of the quality of students. Relaxing admission standards by lowering the exam scores influences the teaching quality in a certain way. Even though the score is not the only standard to judge the level of students, it can reflect the basic level and potential of students to a large extent. The disparity in class makes it harder for teachers to teach and discourages teachers' positivity. Some students are not a fit for university courses, or they feel afraid of learning, are disinterested, or some lack a sense of urgency, and have no plans for the future. According to one national study, a good many teachers think that students after expansion are worse than those before expansion in terms of learning, attitude, quality, etc. (Yong, 2008, p.25).

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper introduces the development of China's higher education since 1949. The newly-founded People's Republic announced a series of policies to reform China's higher education. The aim of the reform was to meet the government's needs to consolidate political power and stimulate economic growth. The entrance requirements of higher education have been changed and the tuition fee has been increasing since 1985. In the 1990s, China was suffering from the Asian financial crisis. At that time, the increase in the number high school graduates and decrease in job opportunities became an urgent problem. Economic growth is of vital importance to China, and higher education is considered a potential market for stimulating the domestic consumption and for discovering a new consumption field. The increased enrollment is a reform policy announced by the government to encourage higher education institutions to stimulate the economy in China. Overall, increased enrollment relieves job market pressure and the pressure of increased high school graduation rates; it also expands domestic demands. Increased enrollment offers more and more people opportunities to obtain a higher degree. The tertiary industry is an emerging industry in China at 1990s. By improving the overall quality of labor sources, the efficient labor productivities promote the new developing industry.

Meanwhile, the rapid development of China's higher education system has been well-known all over the world. World educators have various views of the impact on education quality caused by increased enrollment. Many research shows that China's higher education faces a complex situation. The college entrance exam greatly influences a person's life. With a large population in China, it is very competitive to enter the top list public universities. Hence, a big number of students with lower scores choose private colleges. Millions people in China have the chance to

receive higher education. And the number of private colleges is growing very fast. China's higher education developed so fast that the education resources could not catch up with the expansion. The rapid growth of numbers in higher education also aroused public concern about the quality of higher education. Education management, unqualified teachers, an imbalanced faculty-student ratio, and relaxed admission standards resulting in poor quality students are of great concern to the public.

Some universities leaders misunderstand the goal of education and focus more on facilities than on resources and educational quality. Also, increased enrollment results in an the hiring of unqualified teachers and increased class sizes. To increase enrollment, universities lower the entry requirement for applicants; this is also a factor that influences the quality of education.

The problems of education quality caused by increased enrollment cannot be easily resolved. However, the quality of higher education is key to revitalizing the country and the future of China. The goal of education is to cultivate our understanding and appreciation of the world and to develop life-long learners. All colleges and universities should strive to improve teaching quality, which is the eternal theme of education. The development of China's higher education has a long history, and efforts should be made to comprehensively strengthen the quality of students and to ensure the long-term development and success of China's educational system and of China itself.

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