



A Study of the Barriers Faced by Students from Low Socio-economic Status Backgrounds in Pursuing Higher Education in China

Zihan Liu

The University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK.

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Corresponding author: Zihan Li, The University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK.

Abstract

Although China's tremendous economic growth in recent years has facilitated the expansion of the higher education system, providing greater access to education for many, educational equity remains a serious issue in the higher education system. Widening economic disparities have exacerbated educational inequalities between urban and rural areas, with lower socio-economic status (SES) students in some remote areas having much lower access to higher education than their urban counterparts, suggesting that low-SES students face many barriers to accessing higher education, thereby limiting their access. This paper attempts to identify the factors that influence the low enrolment rates of low socio-economic status students. For example, family perceptions, economic income, and unequal admissions policies between regions are important determinants of access to higher education for low-SES students. It also explores the responses that the Ministry of Education has successfully implemented to address these influences.

Keywords

Low socio-economic status students, Higher education, Inequality

1. Introduction and context

The Chinese education industry has experienced remarkable growth since the turn of the 21st century, particularly as a result of the expansion of the higher education system. The expansion of higher education means that increased access to education has led to a more equal distribution of educational opportunities and benefits many students (Lingli Wu et al., 2020). However, China's higher education system, educational equality is still a significant issue (Xu Yang, 2010). This is particularly true for many students of lower economic status. Low-SES students may suffer many inequalities compared to their urban counterparts. Many factors limit their access to education.

Therefore, the paper focuses on the participation of low-SES students in higher education in China and discusses some of the barriers they may face. The aim is to explore the extent to which low-SES students suffer from educational inequalities to raise social awareness.

2. Family attitudes affect the enrolment of low socio-economic status students

Based on traditional Chinese values, education may be more of a family issue than a personal one. The family influences the development of the student, especially the educational experience. Firstly, family education is the starting point and foundation of a child's education. Arjun Sekhar and Parameswari (2020) argued that as children are not mature enough to make their own decisions and their parents plan the future for their children, decisions about their children's education depend on the parents' choices.

However, it is important to mention that educational opportunities in remote areas are very low and most children lack positive family education. At the same time, most parents of low-SES students in remote areas have low levels of education and a serious lack of concern for their children's education, resulting in low enrolment of rural children in higher education. More importantly, Bourdier (2004) argued that individual habits are rooted in family upbringing and that a range of attitudes and dispositions shaped by family and life experiences influence an individual's position and practice in the field. In other words, in terms of education, if a family has not historically pursued education beyond primary or secondary school, the persons in question may tend to quit school early by family customs, indicating the value of family upbringing. Thus, the level of education of parents can also influence the educational choices of their children. Children are more likely to pursue higher education if their parents are highly educated. It is clear that children of highly educated parents are 13.95 times more likely to pursue higher education than children of parents with only a high school diploma or less (Lingli Wu et al., 2020). This seems to reflect, to some extent, that family perceptions are a barrier to children's education.

The Ministry of Education, therefore, takes this issue very seriously. To improve incorrect family attitudes, parent schools have been established in rural areas to instil correct family education concepts in parents, provide training and guidance to parents, and teach scientific education methods so that parents are aware of the importance of education (Deng Rui et al., 2022). Making parents attach importance to their children's education from an ideological point of view can, to a certain extent, help them develop a correct concept of gender equality. While these practices have been somewhat successful in improving family attitudes, entrenched attitudes have not been completely eradicated and there are still many students of low socio-economic status who are unable to access higher education. Lingli Wu et al. (2020) argued that urban students are up to 223% more likely to access higher education than rural students.

This large gap seems to indicate that family perceptions remain a barrier for low-SES students in less developed areas. In China, access to higher education is important and meaningful to many students and families, because attending university commands more respect from others and brings a higher social status (Wang Li, 2008). Therefore, this issue may deserve attention and also needs to be improved gradually.

3. Poor economic conditions affect the enrolment of low socio-economic status students

Financial income is also a factor in supporting the education of children. Parents' income levels could also influence the education of their children. Working-class parents are generally less involved in their children's educational decisions than middle-class parents, who are sometimes able to actively participate in strategic planning for their children's education (Jason D. Edgerton, 2014). This suggests that the economic situation of the family influences the education of their children. Higher education as non-compulsory education may have become a household consumption. Therefore, family income status is also an important factor influencing the participation of low-SES students in higher education.

Firstly, from an affordability point of view, most families may only be able to afford tuition for one person. Affordability is the link between the price of a college education and the financial resources available to pay for it (McPherson & Schapiro, 1991, as cited in Xu Yang, 2010). This suggests that affordability determines whether students may be able to access higher education. But unfortunately, tuition fees for higher education are increasing year after year. Data showed that in 1997 the national flat rate for higher education was about RMB 3,000, but tuition fees suddenly increased by about 15% after 2000. This is 1.2 times the per capita income of rural residents (Shen Hong, 2014). This has led to a gradual decline in the affordability of education for families in rural and remote areas. Families have less and less money at their disposal to keep up with the increase in tuition fees, leading to a decline in enrolment (Luo Yan et al., 2018).

More importantly, While Li Wang (2010) argued that China's rapid economic growth in recent years has raised the economic incomes of low-SES households to increase students' access to higher education, it has also exacerbated the gap between rural and urban income levels and access to education. For example, Xu Yang (2010) surveyed the growth of economic levels in rural and urban areas, their gap grew from a figure of 0.457 in 1999 to 0.458 in 2000. Due to this, paying for college becomes simpler for the wealthy while more challenging for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In China, tuition fees for non-elite higher education are easily affordable for those from economically secure families (Cora Lingling Xu, 2020). Higher-income families' access to non-elite higher education may be influenced by money. They still have many opportunities to access higher education. This means that the family could invest more in the following generation's education the better off they are financial.

Secondly, the lack of social resources in rural and remote areas with too many low-quality schools can affect the value of education (Wang Li, 2011). The value of education is a primary consideration for households from low socio-economic levels, who may place greater value on the return on investment in education. However, graduates from low socio-economic backgrounds earn less in the labour market, even if they have the same qualifications as those from

wealthier households (Anna Vignoles & Neil Murray, 2016). This affects the return on investment in education, making parents reluctant to send their children to education and children reluctant to actively pursue it. More importantly, higher education qualifications are perhaps more important to women than to men in the labour market as a whole. Although gender equality has been promoted as much as possible in the labour market in recent years, companies still tend to hire men over women in cases of comparable work capability, even if the men are not as competent as the women (Zhang Jian et al., 2021). For most occupations, it may be more difficult for female graduates to obtain a job than for males. Therefore, even if women in rural areas have access to tertiary education, the fact that there are still fewer job opportunities may lead to a reduction in the value of education and affect female enrolment in tertiary education.

As a result, the Ministry of Education has devoted more resources and attention to education in rural areas in recent years (Deng Rui et al., 2022). The Ministry of Education promotes higher education for students in poor areas as much as possible by providing financial support, such as bursaries for poor students, to solve the problem of tuition fees for poor students, although the bursary policy promotes their access to higher education to a certain extent and increased students' motivation to attend school. However, solving the problem of poor students' access to education cannot always rely on financial support (Deng Rui et al., 2022). Therefore, the issue of funding remains one of the main obstacles to the low enrolment of poor students.

4. Geographical constraints affect the enrolment of low socio-economic status students

In general, low-SES students are usually found in less developed regions, but there are also fewer universities in less developed regions. Most universities in China are concentrated in developed regions or coastal cities (Li Wang, 2011). The imbalance in regional development leads to an imbalance in university admissions. Due to geographical constraints, it is difficult for students of low social status to enter universities.

First, there are significant differences in financial allocations for education between regions (Wang Li, 2008). The unequal distribution of the government's education budget has resulted in insufficient funding for education in rural and remote areas, affecting the access of low-SES students to higher education. In recent years, the education sector has invested heavily in the higher education sector as a result of expansionist policies in higher education. The funding available to universities perhaps is closely linked to the economic development of the regions in which they are located, with governments in prosperous coastal regions generally investing more in universities. With 41.4% of the population, coastal areas receive 55.8% of the country's education budget and generate 67.2% of its non-government education revenue (Mok & Lo, 2007, as cited in Wang Li, 2008). It can be seen that there are clear economic differences between developed and less developed provinces, which create a socio-economic environment for inequality in education.

More importantly, this inequality is exacerbated by regional differences in admissions policies (Liu Ye, 2015). Admission to Chinese universities is mainly determined by the results of the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE). Whereas the NCEE is a national set of joint exams set in China, it is still a standardised set of exams taken by high school graduates across the country (Bai Chongen et al., 2014). However, even though the NCEE is a national examination, the admission requirements vary from region to region. Universities in each region have a fixed number of places for students from their own province and therefore have relatively low requirements for students from their own province. It is possible for students from Beijing and Shanghai to be admitted to prestigious universities with a lower standard than students from other places. This also exacerbates inequalities.

In response, the Ministry of Education has also reformed the college entrance examination system by adopting a decentralised approach to make it more suitable for individual regions. Some provinces were allowed the power to determine their own higher education examination documents (Li Wang, 2011). Secondly, in response to the issue of university places, the Ministry of Education allocated places to universities in each region and each institution developed its admissions plan to determine the number of students from different provinces (Li Wang, 2011). This help improves the education standards of local students. These policies have greatly improved access for students from poorer regions, but the admission quota system is still unpopular with students from poorer regions, and some have even called it geographical discrimination (Xing Teng & Ma Xiaoyi, 2005).

5. Discussion and conclusions

In a period of expansion in higher education, the challenge is to reduce the inequality gap in higher education. Access to education is considered a right that every individual should have and an important means of promoting social cohesion (Xu Yang, 2010). This means that there is no time to lose in improving educational inequality. For students of low economic status, however, there are still many barriers to accessing higher education. Some of the influencing factors have been mentioned above in this paper. For example, entrenched family attitudes do not want children to be educated, and traditional feudal thinking also affects female enrolment. Poorer economic incomes make university fees unafford-

able for students of low economic status, and regional differences in admissions policies affect students' right to choose a university.

Although some of the solution measures mentioned in this paper have gone some way to increasing access to higher education for students from lower social classes, but the different levels of educational development in different regions bring different educational opportunities to students of different economic statuses. In conclusion, in the changing socio-economic environment of the new era, new problems have emerged for students of low socio-economic status in accessing higher education, revealing a lack of attention to these student groups. The current situation and problems of students' access to education should be carefully analysed to help students with financial difficulties or other obstacles, and so on. This will help them to develop fully into the talents that society needs.

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