

Who deserves a better life? Expansion, access and social equality in Chinese Higher Education

Abstract

A marked policy transition of higher education expansion has provided new opportunities for higher education development in China. However, this expansion has brought the issue of social equity to the fore. This paper explores the relationship between family's background, on the one hand, and access and the implications this has for social equity, on the other. The description of China's higher education development as 'expanded, but still elite' contrasts sharply with the shift from elite to mass higher education seen in the West.

Drawing on field work and interviews carried out with policy makers and university applicants, as well as a survey examining the dynamics of these issues, this paper examines issues of expansion, access, equity and social mobility in Chinese higher education. This investigation helps to understand the consequences and impacts of this expansion on university applicants, and how Chinese policy makers see and respond to these outcomes.

Outline

Introduction

Marginson (2010) suggests that higher education (HE) value has historically been recognized as the social contract in China. It is extremely important of being a well educated person in China's society. HE was the best way to reproduce or promote people's social, cultural, economic, and political status in the past, and still is the best way in nowadays. From a cultural perspective, the whole Chinese society has highly valued HE in terms of social mobility since ancient time. This cultural value can be seen to have a continuing and strong impact in current Chinese society. Chinese HE has been transformed dramatically since 1999; regarding national HE development, the central government has decided to further increase university enrolment; the national university attendance rate of the age18-22 reached near 41.2% in 2011 from the 9.8% in 1998 (Ministry of Education statistic year book 2011). A HE development and the policy transformation has called into question the role of HE in China's society and how HE still can be for the public good?

To compare with contemporary Britain, for instance, with the transition from elite to a mass system, there is a political rhetoric of widening access in higher education, achievement-for-all and meritocratic equalisation within mass higher education (Reay et al, 2001). However, from China's perspective, we cannot see this transition from elite to mass system on HE. On the contrary, Chinese HE policy has promoted so called 'elite' universities since later 1990s with the mass higher education transformation (for example, Project '985'). Elite universities are the 39 universities in Project '985';

they receive the largest share of education funds from both central and provincial government, they are also able to select talented students before the national HE entrance examination and students with better results after the examination. It is clear that these elite universities in China take the priority position in China's HE.

Recent arguments show the issue of equality of education to be of particular concern to educationists in their objections to markets and its implications in shaping social class opportunities and relations. In other words, markets do not provide equality of opportunity or promote equality. For example, Ball attacks markets, arguing that "inequality is not only inevitable but necessary in the market in order to provide differential rewards which stimulate competition and produce incentives" (Ball, 1990, pp2-3). He also says that in university selection "...there is no sense of an awareness of the processes of performance, choice and selection which produce intake difference. Nor is there any reference to the outcome for poorer or minority ethnic background" (Ball, 2006, p213). The outcome tends to "lead to far greater inequalities of opportunities" (Levitas, 2000, p84). And as Jonathan (1990, p 915) argues, if educational provision is left to the market there will be:

A further twist to the spiral of cumulative advantage and disadvantage which results when the state is rolled back to enable "free and fair" competition between individuals or groups who have quite different starting points in the social race.

Although there is a vast international literature critical of the market and its implication for both education in general and higher education in particular, it is still hard to find papers to pursue the argument in this way in China's context. Referring back to the questions I raised before, in what ways are we able to capture the equal opportunity in HE with social equity and mobility perspectives in China's higher education access could be interesting in terms of the purpose of research? The overarching research question is:

How, in what way, and with what likely future outcomes, does social class shape the aspirations and opportunities of university applicants and their access to universities, and what are the wider social equity and mobility issues that arise from these patterns?

With the aim of answering this question, there are two levels (policy level and individual level) questions which must be answered:

Policy Level

- How and in what ways has HE expansion policy and programmes been in China been changing over the past decade?
- How far have the concerns of the equal opportunity addressed in this policy in China?

Individual level

- How has discourse of social equity been presented in the policy compare and contrast with local reality in four senior high schools in Xi'an, China?

Sub questions:

1. How do individuals understand and act upon the new changes, and how does individuals' social, cultural, economic, and political status affect their capacity to act in terms of the higher education access?
2. Who have more chances to go elite universities; it depends on the good academic results or others?
3. Is there an equal opportunity entering elite university for all the students from different social, economic, cultural, political background?

In this paper, I investigate policy maker's perceptions of HE expansion policy and students' experience and understand of what they have been through in HE access. The primer objective of my PhD project is to explore the social relationship between individual university applicants from different social background with HE expansion policy, and reality (individual opportunity and choice) in China's context (higher educational policy transition from 1999).

Research design

This is a mixed-method investigation study of my research (survey, focus groups, and interviews). This paper presents mainly on my qualitative data (focus groups and interviews), but combines some quantitative data (survey) evidence to support the analysis.

Findings

- The transformation of social class (difference, hierarchy, privileges) for the intelligent through the social understanding of the national HE entrance examination. It is through this examination that the HE system in China reproduces the unequal distribution of cultural capital to secure privileges for certain groups of people.
- Through the promotion of elite HE within HE development, the Chinese model of HE expansion is not matched by equal access to opportunities for social mobility.