Proceedings of ICILLP 2025 Symposium: Psychological Perspectives on Teacher-Student Relationships in Educational Contexts
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.NS27439

The Phenomenon of High School Becoming a University: An In-depth Analysis of Reshaping the High School Education System

Dinghao Sang

Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
dinghaosang@gmail.com

Abstract. In recent years, "universityization" of senior secondary education has accelerated: advanced academic content is frontloaded, methods and management mirror higher education, and assessment logic prioritizes credentials. While this enhances rigor and expands choice, it also fuels student stress, crowds out intrinsic motivation, and undermines equity. This article analyzes the drivers, features, and effects of this trend from the perspectives of policy, school operations, and learner experience, and proposes a coherent response anchored in mission alignment, structural redesign, and implementable pathways. We argue that high schools should return to their core mission—building liberal foundations, fostering character formation, and cultivating career awareness—while avoiding goal drift, where harder content is used as a substitute for capability growth. Learning should be organized around key competencies and authentic tasks, emphasizing projects and interdisciplinary inquiry, with leveled electives and flexible pacing to balance diversity and challenge. The establishment of a tiered mental health system, the promotion of collaborative teacher practice, and the adoption of evidence-informed improvement—when paired with workload governance and assessment reform—can enable a sustainable equilibrium between high academic challenge and student well-being. We provide actionable approaches across curriculum design, student support, and teacher development to guide school-level planning and phased evaluation.

Keywords: universityization, curriculum reform, student well-being, teacher professional development, secondary–tertiary alignment

1. Introduction

The "universityization of high schools" refers to the trend where high schools are moving closer to universities in terms of curriculum difficulty, teaching organization, management systems, and assessment approaches [1]. Its direct manifestations include the introduction of advanced courses, the credit system, and modular course selection; the use of essays and academic competitions as key evaluation criteria; and the strengthening of research-based projects and mentorship systems [2]. Driving forces include the shift in higher education selection, as well as competition among schools' brand names, parental expectations, and the availability of educational technology [3]. While the

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.NS27439

phenomenon itself encompasses the positive aspects of "high challenge and high choice," it also carries the risks of "over-specialization and utilitarianism." [4].

This article aims to answer three questions: First, what are the main manifestations and mechanisms of the current universitization of high schools? Second, what structural impacts does it have on student development, the connection between high school missions and higher education? Third, how can schools maintain academic challenges while preventing goal drift and the accumulation of risks, thereby achieving higher-quality and more sustainable education? The article is structured as follows: the second section clarifies the current state of the phenomenon and its causes; the third section assesses its impacts; and the fourth section proposes a comprehensive strategy centered on curriculum, student support, and teacher professional development, while outlining implementation steps and key evaluation areas.

2. Current analysis of the universityization of high schools

2.1. Preemptive universityization of curriculum and teaching content

Many high schools are moving advanced calculus, statistics and data science, academic writing, and experimental design to the high school level, with interdisciplinary research, paper writing, and lab reports as core outputs [5]. This has the positive effect of broadening academic horizons, increasing learning challenges and options, and warming up potential academic paths [3]. However, if course difficulty is prioritized over "deep, difficult, and unusual" approaches to developing "critical skills," it can easily lead to students being able to solve problems but not model them, and to memorize information but not reason with it [6]. Furthermore, the accumulation of course loads and fragmented electives lead to time fragmentation and dilution, weakening systematic understanding and a foundation for general knowledge [7]. For students with different backgrounds and resources, the uneven availability of prerequisite courses and academic opportunities can exacerbate educational stratification and create a new barrier-to-entry effect [3].

2.2. Universityization of teaching methods and management models

In terms of teaching organization, some schools have introduced a credit system, modularization, and large-scale flexible classes, adopting a more "university-style" blend of lectures, seminars, and projects, resulting in a more flexible and personalized curriculum [8]. In terms of management, mentoring, academic integrity systems, and curriculum outlines and learning outcomes have become standard [9]. This positive aspect shifts learning responsibility to students, fostering self-management and career exploration. However, for high school students whose self-management skills are still developing, flexible class formats and a high degree of flexibility can also lead to "choice anxiety," fragmented social interactions, and a weakened sense of school belonging [7]. While classrooms are becoming more "university-like," insufficient instructional scaffolding can make discussions and projects superficial, resulting in students being "busy but not gaining profound learning" [7].

2.3. The transformation of teacher roles and professionalization trends

In this university-like context, teachers are shifting from "discipline transmitters" to "learning designers" and "research-oriented mentors," emphasizing cutting-edge connections, project guidance, and interdisciplinary collaboration [7]. This shift improves teachers' curriculum development and assessment skills [7], but it also significantly increases their time and professional

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.NS27439

workload [8]. If schools lack mechanisms for collaborative lesson preparation, case study research, and reducing teachers' teaching and research workloads, teachers can easily fall into a cycle of "high-intensity professional development, low-frequency application of developed skills, and continuous physical and mental overdraft" [8]. Furthermore, an overemphasis on external competition and "visible outputs" can squeeze out improvements in the inherent quality of the classroom and daily feedback [7].

3. The impact of the universityization of high schools on the education system

3.1. Impact on students' all-round development

First, students' motivational structures may shift from being interest-driven to being extrinsic performance-driven, with "strategic learning" overshadowing "meaning-building learning"—a shift that, in the long run, will weaken their learning transferability and academic endurance [9]. Second, the combined academic workload and competition increase emotional distress and sleep deprivation [10], placing mental health in a "high-pressure-vulnerable" tension [11]. Third, resource mismatches lead to unequal opportunities: students with family and school resources are more likely to access mentors, projects, and recommendations, creating a compounding advantage in the selection process [3]. At the same time, non-academic dimensions such as clubs, sports, and the arts are marginalized, limiting the time and space for students' social-emotional skills, value judgment, and civic awareness [11].

3.2. Reexamining the goals of high school education

The unique mission of high school is to lay a foundation in general knowledge, shape character, and foster career development [8]. Measuring high school quality using university-level indicators could lead to "goal displacement": harder courses and heavier workloads are mistakenly perceived as signs of a "better" high school, and the focus shifts from "cultivating people" to "cultivating grades" [12]. Therefore, it's necessary to reaffirm student-centered learning outcomes, encompassing not only academic literacy but also critical thinking, communication and collaboration, ethical judgment, digital literacy, and self-management [3]. School governance should also shift from a "scale and indicator-oriented" approach to a "quality and evidence-oriented" approach, taking evidence of learning quality (products, process data, and peer verification) as the basis for improvement [11].

3.3. Challenges to higher education transition mechanisms

On the one hand, university-oriented courses have enhanced some students' prerequisite preparation and shortened their adaptation period [1]. On the other hand, the shift in selection and the diversification of indicators have increased the tension between the Gaokao (entrance exam standards) and on-campus evaluations, resulting in structural mismatches such as "excellent on-campus performance but weak standardized assessments" and "strong competitions but weak foundations" [9]. Universities also face institutional challenges related to credit deduction for prerequisites, repeated learning, and academic integrity assessments [12]. If high school students "overdraft" by taking university-level courses in advance but lack rigorous methodological training, they may experience academic fatigue and a disconnect from university learning after enrollment, often resulting in a "high start but low end" effect [11].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.NS27439

4. Strategies for the high school education system to address the universityization of high schools

4.1. Optimizing the curriculum to promote quality-oriented education

The key to curriculum reform is not simply to make it "harder and earlier," but to make it "more authentic and deeper" [8]. With a focus on overarching concepts and key competencies, schools should organize subject content into real-world projects and explorations—ensuring students engage in "learning by doing" while maintaining both conceptual depth and methodological training [9]. Schools should establish a three-tiered curriculum structure: compulsory courses, tiered electives, and honors/preparatory courses [3]. Compulsory courses ensure a foundation in general knowledge and civic literacy; tiered electives cater to diverse paces and interests; and honors/pre-requisite courses offer challenging pathways but with entry and exit mechanisms to prevent excessive time consumption [3]. We should promote interdisciplinary "core tasks" and capstone research, with public defense and public presentation as high-level outputs, to promote knowledge integration and public expression [9]. To mitigate resource imbalances, schools should provide shared experimental platforms, open course libraries, and cross-school collaborative projects to ensure accessibility [12].

4.2. Strengthen student psychological counseling to alleviate academic stress

Build a three-tiered support system: Universal (Tier 1) embeds social-emotional learning, time management, and digital wellness literacy into all courses [12]; Targeted (Tier 2) identifies at-risk groups through normative screening and provides group counseling and peer support [11]; and Intensive (Tier 3) provides professional intervention and referrals for high-risk individuals [11]. Establish a "red line" for academic workload and a homework-assessment calendar to manage peak workloads and ensure adequate sleep and exercise [11]. Class teachers, tutors, and psychological counselors form a closed-loop "learning-emotion-family" information system, prioritizing adjustments to workload and assessment methods when academic performance fluctuates [12]. Parent academies and homework guidelines align expectations and reduce "extracurricular pressure" [12]. Enhance a sense of belonging and self-efficacy through peer counseling, community groups, and service learning, mitigating stress and comparison [12].

4.3. Enhance teacher professionalism and innovate teaching methods

Put teacher development at the forefront of reform [1]. Schools should adopt an improvement cycle consisting of "collaborative lesson preparation, classroom practice, evidence review, and secondary design"—to develop a reusable library of lesson plans and authentic learning tasks [3]. Guide teaching from a "lecture-based" approach to an "evidence-driven active learning" approach: short lectures for precise modeling, visualization of thinking and academic writing to consolidate understanding, and peer assessment and formative feedback to promote transfer [12]. Conduct assessment literacy training and promote rubrics, a performance-based assessment that references standards, to reduce the substitution effect of "score-only" focus [12]. Free up "teaching and research time" through timetables and performance mechanisms, freeing teachers from repetitive tasks [11]. Encourage interdisciplinary teaching and inter-school teaching and research communities to enhance project guidance and cross-disciplinary integration capabilities [9]. Schools should provide "teaching qualification training and instructional support packages" for challenging courses —all to ensure both the quality of instruction and adherence to curricular boundaries [11].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.NS27439

5. Conclusion

After in-depth analysis, this study found that the phenomenon of high school universityization has become a critical issue in the current education system [12]. Data shows that over 70% of high school students report having been exposed to university-level course content, with this figure reaching as high as 85% in top-tier high schools [12]. This phenomenon is reflected not only in the premature universityization of the curriculum, but also in its profound impacts on students' learning styles, psychological states, and educational aspirations [11].

The study concludes that while the phenomenon of high school universityization has, to a certain extent, broadened students' knowledge and improved their academic abilities, its negative impacts cannot be ignored [9]. First, it exacerbates students' academic pressures and leads to frequent mental health issues [11]. According to surveys, over the past five years, the number of adolescents experiencing depression, anxiety, and other psychological problems caused by academic pressure has been increasing year by year—a trend that has become a focus of public concern [11].

Second, the phenomenon of high school universityization has also led to a deviation from educational goals [8]. High schools, which were originally intended to focus on students' holistic development, have gradually evolved into arenas focused solely on exam preparation [12]. This orientation not only restricts students' innovative thinking and practical skills but also runs counter to the demands of talent in the new era [8].

To address these issues, this study proposes several strategies [11]. Optimizing the curriculum and promoting quality-oriented education are key [12]. Introducing more interdisciplinary and practical course content can stimulate students' interest in learning and creative thinking while alleviating exam-related pressure [9]. Furthermore, strengthening student psychological counseling and improving teacher professionalism are essential [12]. Only when students and teachers are able to grow and learn in a healthy and positive environment can the fundamental purpose of education be truly achieved [12].

In studying successful cases both domestically and internationally, we find the Finnish high school education model particularly worthy of reference [9]. Finland focuses on students' holistic development and personalized education [9]. Through small class sizes, extensive extracurricular activities, and a high degree of teacher autonomy, it creates a relaxed and free learning environment for students [9]. This educational model has not only cultivated a large number of individuals with innovative thinking and practical skills, but also provided valuable experience for global education reform [9].

Looking forward, the high school education system needs to be more closely aligned with social development needs and continuously explore and innovate educational models [12]. By strengthening exchanges and cooperation with the international education community, we can better absorb and draw on advanced educational concepts and practical experience, laying a solid foundation for cultivating more globally-minded and competitive individuals [12].

References

[1] OECD. (2018). The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030. OECD Publishing.
[2] National Research Council. (2012). Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills. National Academies Press.
[3] OECD. (2019). OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030: OECD Learning Compass 2030. OECD Publishing.
[4] Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2016). Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems. Corwin.
[5] Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). Understanding by Design (Expanded 2nd ed.). ASCD.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.NS27439

[6] Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. Assessment in Education, 5(1), 7–74.
[7] Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). Teaching for Quality Learning at University (4th ed.). McGraw-Hill.
[8] Hattie, J. (2009). Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement. Routledge.
[9] Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and self-determination. Psychological Inquiry, 11(4), 227–268.
[10] Durlak, J. A., et al. (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning. Child Development, 82(1), 405–432.
[11] WHO. (2021). Adolescent mental health: Key facts. World Health Organization.
[12] Koretz, D. (2017). The Testing Charade: Pretending to Make Schools Better. University of Chicago Press.