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"Local Preference" in Enrollment of Ministry of Education-Affiliated Universities: Rationality, Drawbacks and Equity Practices

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Abstract. China's higher education has entered the popularization stage, but the province-specific quota system in college enrollment has led to a prominent "local preference" in the quota allocation of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities. This paper takes the rationality and drawbacks of "local preference" as its core research focus, drawing on resource dependence theory, educational equity theory, and relevant empirical data. It systematically analyzes the positive value of "local preference" in responding to local financial support and retaining regional talents, while objectively discussing its negative impact on inter-provincial enrollment equity and human capital allocation. Furthermore, the paper combs through China's practical efforts in safeguarding educational equity, such as the new college entrance examination reform and special enrollment plans, and finally looks ahead to the future development trend of the enrollment system. The study holds that local preference is a product of multiple factors such as institutional inertia and regional development needs, and achieving a dynamic balance between regional development needs and educational equity is the key direction for future reform.

Keywords: Ministry of Education-affiliated universities, Local preference, Educational equity, Enrollment reform

1. Introduction

China's higher education has transited from the massification stage to the popularization stage, with the gross enrollment rate reaching 54.4% in 2020, surpassing the 50% threshold for the popularization stage as defined by Martin Trow [1]. In this context, the public's demand for higher education has shifted from "accessibility" to "high-quality and equity". As a core link in human capital reproduction and social mobility, higher education's enrollment equity is crucial to upholding social fairness and justice. Ministry of Education-affiliated universities, as the concentrated carriers of China's top higher education resources, their enrollment quota allocation mechanism not only relates to the quality of talent training, but also reflects the level of social equity.

In recent years, the "local preference" in the enrollment of these universities—defined as allocating a larger share of enrollment quotas to the university's location—has triggered extensive public discussion. Existing studies have confirmed the existence of "local preference" but lack a

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systematic analysis of its multi-dimensional impacts [2]. Bu Xiaoyang pointed out in his research that local preference in the enrollment of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities is not a simple policy bias, but the result of a game among institutional inertia, financial relationships, and regional interests [3]. Ding Jingyuan's empirical study further confirmed that the regional quota policy with local inclination has dual effects, possessing both practical rationality and inherent equity risks [4].

This paper takes the rationality and drawbacks of local preference as the research focus. On the basis of sorting out existing research findings and integrating China's educational reform practices, it conducts an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon. It also combs the policy measures taken by the country to safeguard educational equity, and looks forward to the future development trends, aiming to provide a more comprehensive cognitive perspective for research on the enrollment equity of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities.

2. The connotation and current situation of local preference in enrollment of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities

2.1. Definition of enrollment local preference

Enrollment local preference of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities refers to the phenomenon that these universities—primarily under central government management—allocate a relatively higher proportion of enrollment quotas to the provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) where they are located in the process of formulating national enrollment plans. Different from the normal regional quota allocation, local preference is manifested in an obvious "geographical inclination" that exceeds the proportional relationship between the location's population size, number of candidates, and level of educational development

It should be noted that local preference is not equivalent to "local protectionism" in the traditional sense. The latter is more inclined to exclude external competitors through administrative means, while the former is a relatively implicit resource allocation behavior shaped by the combined effects of financial investment, talent demand, and institutional tradition.

2.2. Manifestations of "local preference" in enrollment quota allocation

The most direct manifestation of "local preference" is the relatively high proportion of local enrollment in these affiliated universities. Data from 2006 show that the local enrollment ratio of Fudan University reached 47%, Zhejiang University 55%, and Sun Yat-sen University as high as 75% [5]. Since the implementation of the "equalization" policy by the Ministry of Education in 2008, which required the local enrollment proportion of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities to be gradually reduced to below 30%, the overall local preference degree has shown a downward trend. However, due to disparities in regional development, the phenomenon of local inclination has not been completely eliminated [6].

3. Rationality analysis of "local preference"

The long-term existence of local preference is not accidental, but is rooted in a solid practical foundation and rational logic. It is the result of the balance between the development needs of universities themselves and regional interests, primarily reflected in the following three aspects

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3.1. Feedback to local financial support

From the perspective of resource dependence theory, the survival and development of an organization depend largely on the resources obtained from the external environment. Although Ministry of Education-affiliated universities are mainly funded by the central finance, local governments have always played an important role in financial support. In the process of running schools, universities need not only financial investment, but also support in infrastructure construction, land supply, and talent introduction—most of which is provided by local governments [7]. In return for this kind of financial and resource support, increasing the local enrollment quota has become a realistic choice for universities, forming an implicit "resource-quota" interaction mechanism.

This kind of feedback is not only a moral return, but also an important guarantee for the sustainable development of universities. Stable local financial support helps universities to improve their school-running conditions, expand their school-running scale and enhance their school-running strength. From the perspective of local governments, this kind of "investment return" also aligns with public expectations for access to higher education resources, which has important practical significance for maintaining social stability and meeting the people's demand for high-quality education.

3.2. Guarantee for regional talent retention and local construction

Local governments' support for universities is not only for the development of education itself, but also for the long-term goal of talent reserve and economic and social development. The return of local university students has a direct promoting effect on the development of local industries. Through enrollment inclination, universities can strengthen the sense of belonging among local students, and with the support of talent subsidy policies, it can significantly improve the talent retention rate [7]. Bu Xiaoyang also pointed out in his research that moderate local preference is conducive to forming a regional talent closed loop of "training-employment-construction", which can effectively prevent the excessive outflow of high-quality talents and provide continuous talent support for local economic and social development [3].

In regions with relatively backward economic development, the role of this talent retention mechanism is more prominent. These regions are often faced with the dilemma of "difficulty in introducing talents and difficulty in retaining talents". The local preference of universities can cultivate a group of talents who understand local conditions and are willing to contribute to local construction, which is of great significance for narrowing the regional development gap and realizing balanced regional development.

3.3. Adaptation to school-running cost and student source adaptability

After long-term interaction between Ministry of Education-affiliated universities and their locations, a stable student source adaptability has been formed. On the one hand, local candidates have a more comprehensive understanding of the training mode of local universities and the demand for regional industries. After enrollment, they can quickly adapt to the learning rhythm and talent training objectives of the university, thereby reducing the adaptation costs for both universities and students

On the other hand, universities' participation in local basic education evaluation, enrollment publicity and other work also has obvious cost advantages. Local universities are more familiar with

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the local education situation, enabling them to make enrollment promotion more targeted and effective.

Ding Jingyuan's statistical data show that universities with a relatively high proportion of local students often have a higher degree of alignment with local industries, and the local employment rate of graduates is 15%-20% higher than that of non-local students [4]. This kind of student source adaptability not only helps to improve the quality of talent training, but also promotes the integration of university education with regional industrial development, realizing a win-win situation between university development and regional construction.

4. Drawbacks and negative effects of excessive "local preference"

4.1. Widening inter-provincial gap in enrollment opportunities

The uneven spatial distribution of high-quality higher education resources and local preference form a superposition effect, resulting in a significant gap in the admission rate of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities among provinces. Bu Xiaoyang pointed out that this kind of gap violates the principle of equality in the right to education stipulated in the Education Law, putting candidates in some provinces in a difficult situation where they "achieve high scores but fail to gain admission" [3]. Ding Jingyuan's research further confirmed that for every 10% increase in the local enrollment proportion of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities, the gap in admission rate between the province where the university is located and populous provinces widens by 0.8-1.2 percentage points [4].

4.2. Distorting the allocation of human capital

Excessive local preference may reduce the quality of university student sources, thereby affecting the efficiency of talent training. After the Ministry of Education issued the policy that "the local enrollment proportion shall not exceed 30%" in 2008, a number of studies showed that Ministry of Education-affiliated universities significantly improved their student source quality by allocating more quotas to other provinces [6]. This "structural optimization effect" not only improved educational equity, but also enhanced the efficiency of school running.

Bu Xiaoyang believes that relying too much on local student sources for a long time will lead to the simplification of the talent structure of universities [3], weakening the innovative vitality of universities and their ability to serve the national development strategy. In the long run, this will affect the overall level of China's higher education and the international competitiveness of universities.

4.3. Hindering social mobility and forming a vicious circle of regional development

Higher education is a key channel for upward social mobility, and excessive local preference has exacerbated the risk of class solidification. Data show that in provinces with significant local preference, the proportion of rural students entering "985" universities is only one-third that of urban students [8]. This gap forms a vicious circle through intergenerational transmission: children from urban families with better educational conditions are more likely to enter top universities, while children from rural families are trapped in the predicament of struggling to gain admission to high-quality schools. This phenomenon is not conducive to realizing the fairness of social mobility.

At the same time, the central and western provinces, due to the scarcity of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities and the squeeze of local preference policies, are facing the severe situation of

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the outflow of high-quality talents. The loss of talents further widens the development gap between these regions and the eastern regions, forming a vicious circle of "backward education - brain drain - lagging development".

This kind of regional development imbalance will not only affect the overall efficiency of national economic development, but also trigger a series of potential social problems. The long-term existence of educational inequality will weaken the public's recognition of the college entrance examination system and even erode public trust in government credibility, which is not conducive to maintaining long-term social stability.

5. China's practical efforts to safeguard educational equity

5.1. Rigid constraints and dynamic adjustment of enrollment policies

The Ministry of Education has taken the regulation of local enrollment proportion as an important starting point to safeguard enrollment equity. In January 2008, it issued a notice requiring that the proportion of local enrollment plans in 2008 should not exceed that in 2007. For universities where the proportion of local enrollment plans exceeded 30%, the notice required that this proportion be gradually reduced to below 30% year by year [9].

5.2. Optimization of equity in the reform of the college entrance examination system

The new college entrance examination reform has further guaranteed educational equity through the reform of subject selection and grading system. At present, China's college entrance examination subject setting mainly has four combinations, including "Chinese, Mathematics, English + Comprehensive Liberal Arts or Comprehensive Science" and "Chinese, Mathematics, English + 1 + 2" [10]. The "3+1+2" subject selection mode adopted in most provinces not only retains the fundamental status of physics and history, but also grants candidates the right to independently choose subjects. This model can better adapt to the differences in educational level among different regions.

The implementation of the grading system is an important measure to solve the problem of score incomparability across different subjects. Before the implementation of the new college entrance examination, the original scores of each subject could be directly added because the examination subjects of the same competing group were completely the same. However, in the new college entrance examination, candidates in the same competing group have different elective subjects, and the difficulty levels of examination papers also vary across subjects. If the original scores are directly added, it will obviously be unfair. The grading system eliminates the unfairness caused by the difficulty difference of different subjects, and ensures the comparability of scores among candidates with different subject combinations. Although it still has some problems in practice, such as inducing speculative subject selection and distorting score gaps, it has laid a positive foundation for realizing college entrance examination fairness.

6. Future outlook

Based on the current reform practice and academic research, the future development of the enrollment system of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities will focus on the "rebalancing of equity and efficiency", and exhibit the following three key development trends.

First, the allocation of enrollment quotas will be more precise. In the future, China will further improve the multi-dimensional allocation model of "population base + student source quality +

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regional development needs". While strictly controlling the local enrollment proportion, it will implement more targeted quota inclinations for populous central and western provinces and border areas.

Second, the balance of educational resources will be long-term. The hardware and teacher level of basic education in central and western regions will be gradually improved, narrowing the gap with eastern regions at the source. At the same time, the national education digital strategy will reduce the impact of geographical factors on the quality of student sources by promoting the sharing of high-quality educational resources, laying a solid foundation for the equity of enrollment. The optimization of the layout of higher education resources will also be further strengthened,with more high-quality higher education resources allocated to underdeveloped regions. This will fundamentally alleviate the contradiction between supply and demand of high-quality education resources.

Third, the evaluation system will be more diversified. On the basis of the unified examination, factors such as regional educational differences and family background may be incorporated into the evaluation dimensions. This mode not only avoids the limitation of "only scores", but also prevents the alienation of evaluation through transparent standards. Ding Jingyuan pointed out that this mode can realize the organic integration of "compensatory equity" and "standard equity", which is the long-term direction to solve the problem of regional equity [4]. The improvement of the comprehensive evaluation system will also help promote the all-round development of students and cultivate more high-quality talents who meet the needs of the times

7. Conclusion

The local preference in the enrollment of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities is a complex educational phenomenon shaped by the combined effects of financial relationships, talent demands, and institutional traditions. It possesses dual attributes: on the one hand, it is the reasonable feedback of universities to local financial support, and an important guarantee for regional talent retention and local construction; on the other hand, excessive local preference will widen the inter-provincial gap in enrollment opportunities, distort the allocation of human capital and hinder social mobility.

In response to the equity problems caused by local preference, China has taken a series of effective measures, such as strictly restricting local enrollment proportions and advancing college entrance examination reform, which have made positive progress in safeguarding educational equity. Looking forward to the future, the enrollment system reform of Ministry of Education-affiliated universities will focus on achieving a dynamic balance between regional development needs and educational equity, and move towards greater precision in quota allocation, more balanced resource allocation, and more diversified evaluation systems.

It should be noted that the realization of educational equity is a long-term and arduous process that cannot be accomplished overnight. In the reform process, we need to fully consider regional development differences, coordinate the interests of all stakeholders, and promote the continuous improvement of the enrollment system with a pragmatic and progressive attitude, so as to better safeguard the equality of citizens' right to equal access to education and provide strong talent support for national development.

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