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A Comparative Study on the Equity Mechanisms of Higher Education Between China and Nordic Countries from the Perspective of Popularization

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of the popularization of higher education, promoting equitable development has become a core issue. This paper focuses on the higher education equity mechanisms of China and Nordic countries, with a systematic analysis from three dimensions, that is, policy orientation, institutional design, and implementation effects. China has adopted a developmental path of "efficiency first, with due consideration for equity" and relied on strong government regulation to rapidly expand the scale of education. However, it also faces structural challenges such as regional imbalances and uneven distribution of resources. Based on the concept of inclusive welfare, Nordic countries have built a system of decentralization, autonomy, and lifelong learning under a legal framework, achieving a deeper level of procedural equity and quality equity. Nevertheless, their model also faces pressures regarding sustainability. The study suggests that while consolidating its own advantages in efficiency, China should draw on the concepts of higher education equity from Nordic countries. By optimizing the role of the government and strengthening the construction of the lifelong learning system, China can promote higher education equity from efficiency-oriented equity to quality-oriented equity, thereby building a higher education equity mechanism with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: higher education equity, comparative study, China, Nordic countries, popularization of higher education

1. Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, American scholar Martin Trow proposed the three-stage theory of higher education development, which takes the gross enrollment rate as the classification standard [1]. The 2024 National Statistical Bulletin on Educational Development shows that in 2024, the gross enrollment rate of higher education in China reached 60.80%, indicating that China has entered the stage of popularization of higher education [2]. However, higher education in the popularization stage presents diversified characteristics, with issues related to equity and quality becoming more prominent. How to improve the quality of higher education, enable more people to receive high-quality higher education, and achieve the "unification of quantity and quality" as well

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as the "balance between equity and efficiency" have become important topics in the popularization stage, and also practical demands for the high-quality development of higher education [3].

Against this background, expanding the research perspective to the Nordic countries—recognized as a "model region" for global higher education equity—holds important theoretical and practical significance. The Nordic countries have achieved considerable progress in higher education equity, which is rooted in the deep integration of their "inclusive welfare system" as the foundation and "effective guarantees from an active government". They have also vigorously promoted the "lifelong learning" policy, extending education equity to a longer-term scope, thus providing China with a richer and more referable policy framework.

This paper first briefly sorts out and reviews relevant domestic and foreign studies, then conducts a comparative analysis of the higher education equity mechanisms between China and Nordic countries from dimensions such as practical background, regional differences, resource allocation, and government regulation. Finally, combined with China's actual situation, the paper puts forward phased and operable policy suggestions for improving China's higher education equity mechanism and looks forward to the future development direction of China's higher education.

2. Literature review

2.1. The equity mechanism of China's higher education and its challenges

With the advancement of the popularization of higher education, the policy paradigm of China's higher education is undergoing a strategic transformation from "prioritizing efficiency" to "balancing efficiency and equity". For a long time, the main body of resource allocation in Chinese colleges and universities has been the government, combining "balanced development" and "key construction". A resource allocation policy of "key institutions driving general ones, general institutions promoting key ones, mutual improvement, and accelerated development" has been implemented [4]. Liu Baocun and Gou Minghan argue that China's higher education has entered a stage of connotative improvement featuring high-quality development and social innovation, and the focus of higher education policies has shifted from mere scale expansion to a development model centered on improving educational quality, cultivating innovative capabilities, and making social contributions [5]. At the same time, the level of popularization of China's higher education has increased rapidly, the coverage of beneficiaries has expanded, and the regional balance of higher education development has also been improved [6]. However, this transformation still faces many practical difficulties and problems in practice. For example, more than half of the school-age population in China still do not have the opportunity to receive higher education; there are still obvious structural differences in the regional distribution of higher education development, and the gap in the development level of higher education between different regions is significant [6]. In addition, the unbalanced regional development of China's higher education is prominent, mainly reflected in the unbalanced spatial distribution of high-quality higher education resources, the mismatch between the positioning of university talent training goals and the actual needs of regional social development, and the insufficient effective coordination between policy regulation and market mechanisms [7]. Despite these problems, China has persisted in advancing and adjusting its development path. Currently, research on the popularization of China's higher education is entering a new stage of actively responding to the coexistence of opportunities and challenges in the popularization and high-quality development of higher education [8].

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2.2. The equity mechanism and practice of higher education in nordic countries

Nordic countries have significant institutional advantages in building higher education equity mechanisms. Their inclusive welfare model, combined with government regulation, has formed a practical system of education equity represented by the "lifelong learning" policy. Finnish scholar Antikainen defines the "Nordic education model" as an educational system based on specific local values and practices, with welfare, democracy, equity, and universal participation as its main attributes [9]. Ahonen holds that there is no rigid class habitus in the higher education of the four Nordic countries, and all of them regard higher education as an important means to achieve and maintain social justice [10]. Zhou Yi and Bie Dunrong argue that formulating laws and regulations and establishing physical institutions are important means for the governments of the four countries to clarify the public welfare attribute of higher education. For example, Denmark and Finland have successively issued the Education Support Act and the Student Financial Assistance Act to safeguard students' economic welfare; subsequently, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway have promulgated the University Act (Finland), Higher Education Act, University Act (Denmark), and University and College Act respectively, establishing corresponding legal frameworks to improve the lifelong education system, encourage universal continuous learning, and further enrich the connotation of the popularization of higher education [11]. Studies have shown that the participation rate in lifelong education in Nordic countries has always been high [12]. Moreover, since lifelong education is highly consistent with the goal of the popularization of higher education, the four countries have successively launched many new initiatives. For example, in 2019, the Nordic Council of Ministers proposed the Nordplus Programme, which takes everyone's lifelong learning and development opportunities as the guiding principle for reconstructing social sustainable development [13].

Through sorting out relevant literature, it is found that existing studies lack a systematic comparison of the higher education equity mechanisms between China and Nordic countries in the popularization stage, involving multi-dimensional comparisons such as the role of the government, resource allocation, and institutional design. Based on this, this study focuses on the following two research questions:

(1) Against the background of the popularization of higher education, what are the similarities and differences in the higher education equity mechanisms between China and Nordic countries?

(2) What enlightenment does the aforementioned Nordic model provide for optimizing China's higher education equity mechanism?

3. A comparison of higher education equity mechanisms between China and nordic countries from the perspective of popularization

Against the background of the popularization of higher education, the construction of an equity mechanism is not only related to the equal distribution of educational opportunities but also involves the coordination between institutional design, policy orientation, and implementation effects. China and Nordic countries have shown different path choices and policy practices in terms of higher education equity mechanisms. This section conducts a comparison from three dimensions—policy orientation, institutional design, and implementation effects—to analyze the commonalities and differences between China and Nordic countries in promoting higher education equity.

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3.1. Comparison of policy orientation: prioritizing efficiency vs. inclusive equity

In the process of popularizing higher education, China has long adhered to the policy orientation of "efficiency first, with due consideration for equity". The "efficiency-first" orientation in China has demonstrated strong mobilization capabilities and development advantages in practice. Through the key construction model, China has concentrated limited resources to build a number of high-level universities with international competitiveness in a short period of time, significantly improving the country's scientific research capabilities and the peak level of talent cultivation, and providing key intellectual support for the rapid rise of the economy and society. Although in recent years, the policy discourse has continuously emphasized educational equity and the balanced allocation of educational resources, in practice, resources always tend to tilt towards some colleges and universities. To a certain extent, this approach has promoted the academic strength and international competitiveness of some top universities, but it has also exacerbated the imbalance between regions and among universities. Against this background, the focus on educational equity has further emphasized the balanced allocation of higher education resources and equal educational opportunities among social groups, shifting from emphasizing "quantity equity and opportunity equity" to "quality equity and procedural equity" [14].

In contrast, the "inclusive equity" orientation of Nordic countries is committed to building a non-discriminatory and inclusive educational environment, whose advantage lies in fundamentally curbing class solidification caused by family background and economic status. Nordic countries regard higher education as a basic civic right and social public welfare rather than a competitive commodity. They pay more attention to the policy orientation of inclusive equity, and the allocation of higher education resources is often centered on narrowing social gaps. Through high public financial investment and a balanced resource allocation strategy, Nordic countries are committed to ensuring that every student can enjoy relatively equal educational opportunities, regardless of their family background or region of residence. There is no rigid class habitus in the higher education of the four Nordic countries, and all of them regard higher education as an important means to achieve and maintain social justice [15]. In practice, this orientation is reflected in the establishment of new higher education institutions, the increase in school enrollment quotas, and the support for distance education, thus forming a more inclusive higher education system.

3.2. Comparison of institutional design: government-led vs. decentralization and autonomy

China's institutional design presents a distinct "government-led" characteristic. The central government conducts top-level design and macro-control over the development direction, scale, speed, and regional layout of higher education through strong administrative means such as legislation, planning, financial appropriation, and project approval. For example, to promote regional balance, the government has implemented preferential policies such as the "Revitalization Plan for Higher Education in Central and Western China", encouraging the take-off of higher education in eastern regions and supporting the accelerated development of higher education in central and western regions. The Chinese government has gradually established the overall development goal of "making the structure of higher education in western China more reasonable, with more distinctive features and significantly improved school-running quality, building a number of distinctive and high-level institutions of higher learning, and laying a solid foundation for comprehensively improving the development level of China's higher education and building a powerful country in higher education" [16]. Special funds have been used to support colleges and universities in central and western regions to improve their school-running conditions and talent

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cultivation capabilities. At the same time, the college entrance examination system, as the core mechanism for talent selection, emphasizes equality for all in terms of scores, reflecting the principle of formal equity. However, due to significant regional differences in basic education, disadvantaged groups are still at a disadvantage in the competition for further education. Nevertheless, while this top-down management model brings efficient execution, it may also lead to relatively limited autonomy of colleges and universities, making it difficult for them to flexibly respond to the dynamic needs of local society and the market.

The institutional design of Nordic countries reflects "decentralization and autonomy under a legal framework". The main role of the government is to build a sound legal and policy framework to provide solid institutional guarantees for educational equity, rather than directly interfering in the daily operations of colleges and universities. Colleges and universities enjoy a high degree of autonomy in aspects such as specialty setting, curriculum design, and personnel appointment, and can independently adjust according to social needs and academic development. For example, Denmark promulgated the University Act in 2003, which carried out a relatively thorough reform of the management system of general higher education and established university boards independent of the government. The boards have the right to decide on strategic issues related to the university's development, the allocation and use of university funds, and the appointment and dismissal of university presidents [17]. The government guides the development direction of higher education through performance evaluation and financial appropriation mechanisms. This model of "macro-control and micro-decentralization" not only ensures the basic bottom line of educational equity but also stimulates the internal vitality of colleges and universities. The tolerance for pluralistic values in the Nordic higher education system enables it to not only serve the development of individuals but also become an important force driving the continuous progress of society.

3.3. Comparison of implementation effects: enrollment opportunities and resource access

In terms of enrollment opportunities, during the process of popularizing higher education, China's gross enrollment rate has continued to rise—from only 0.26% in 1949 to more than 50% in 2019 [18], and further to 60.80% in 2024. At the same time, the per-student funding for higher education in China has maintained an upward trend, with an average annual growth rate of 6.4% [19]. The increase in per-student funding, driven by economic development and increased educational investment, has provided a material foundation for the expansion of enrollment opportunities.

Relying on their inclusive and equitable policy orientation, Nordic countries have maintained a high gross enrollment rate for a long time, with a relatively balanced distribution of per-student funding. In 2019, the average gross enrollment rate of higher education in the four Nordic countries was 83.84%, and by 2021, the gross enrollment rate of higher education in all four countries had exceeded 80%. The gross enrollment rate of higher education in Finland even reached 100.87%, ranking among the top in the world [20]. This ensures that students from different classes can equally enjoy enrollment opportunities. This equitable educational ecology is not only reflected in the enrollment stage but also runs through the entire educational process. For example, Finnish education is fundamentally an activity and process in which society passes on its spiritual content and inherent form to the next generation, and it attaches particular importance to helping students develop their individuality [21]. In addition, in terms of curriculum setting, Nordic countries fully consider the interests and strengths of different students and provide a wide range of curriculum choices. Whether in the fields of humanities and social sciences or natural sciences, there are sound curriculum systems to support students in conducting in-depth learning according to their own development directions.

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In terms of resource access, there are certain gaps between urban and rural areas in China. Colleges and universities in urban areas often have access to more high-quality educational resources, including advanced experimental equipment, rich library materials, and high-level teaching staff. Students from families with better economic conditions and abundant social resources often have access to more information and opportunities related to high-quality education, such as participating in various competitions, training programs, and even overseas exchange programs. In contrast, colleges and universities in rural areas have relatively scarce resources. Although students there also have a strong desire for knowledge and aspirations for the future, they often miss opportunities due to information asymmetry and limited resources. They may need to make more efforts to gain a firm foothold in the competition with urban students, and such efforts are often accompanied by enormous psychological pressure and economic burdens. The expenditure on tuition and fees for children imposes a certain economic burden on relatively poor rural families, and many children from poor rural families drop out of school because they cannot afford tuition and fees. The gap in the quality of basic education between urban and rural areas has objectively placed urban and rural children on different starting lines, further leading to inequality in educational opportunities [22].

In contrast, Nordic countries emphasize the balanced distribution of resources in higher education, and the differences in resource access between colleges and universities in urban and rural areas as well as between regions are relatively small. Benefiting from the effective regulation of the government and the equitable institutional design, students in various regions are ensured to enjoy relatively equal resource support. In 1977, Sweden promulgated the Higher Education Act, which further clearly stipulated that the fundamental principle followed by the Swedish higher education system is that everyone has equal access to higher education, regardless of their race, social background, or place of residence [23]. Its higher education system has demonstrated unique vitality and inclusiveness. Colleges and universities not only pursue excellence in academic research but also attach great importance to the cultivation of practical abilities and maintain close cooperative relationships with all sectors of society. They have cultivated a large number of compound talents with innovative thinking and problem-solving abilities. This educational approach has laid a solid foundation for the diversification and sustainable development of society.

4. Enlightenments

It can be seen that the higher education equity mechanisms of China and Nordic countries are not simply a matter of superiority or inferiority, but rather path choices under different national conditions, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. The enlightenment of Nordic countries for China lies in how to selectively absorb Nordic experiences while inheriting its own advantages, and blaze a path of higher education equity with Chinese characteristics in the popularization stage. China should adhere to balancing efficiency and equity, expand the new connotation of efficiency, and move towards quality-oriented equity and lifelong learning driven by high-quality efficiency. China needs to further deepen its efforts from guaranteeing enrollment opportunities to guaranteeing academic success and quality development, and promote the concept of equity from "providing education for all without discrimination" to "teaching students in accordance with their aptitudes".

Specifically, the government should focus on formulating equity standards, improving laws and regulations, and conducting macro-control, while delegating more autonomy in school-running and the right to formulate resource allocation plans to provincial governments and colleges and universities. This can not only maintain the country’s strategic leadership but also stimulate the innovative vitality of local governments and colleges and universities, realizing more precise and

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context-appropriate equity regulation. While continuing to support the construction of first-class universities, China should continuously increase investment in colleges and universities in central and western regions, rural areas, and students from disadvantaged groups. At the same time, it is necessary to enhance equity in the educational process and guide resources to flow towards areas that can best promote substantive equity. A targeted support strategy should be implemented: to address the shortcomings in enrollment opportunities, greater policy support should be provided for specific regions and groups in terms of enrollment plans and special scholarships. Furthermore, it is more important to help these regions and colleges and universities improve their own capabilities, and fundamentally narrow the gap in educational quality through teacher training, curriculum co-construction, and information technology development.

In summary, the improvement of China's higher education equity mechanism is a profound reform. On the basis of affirming its great achievements in realizing efficiency-oriented equity in a relatively short period of time, China should pursue quality-oriented equity, selectively draw on the core concepts of inclusive equity and lifelong learning from Nordic countries, and ultimately build a high-quality higher education system that not only reflects the advantages of the socialist system but also is dynamic and capable of meeting the needs of every individual's free and all-round development by optimizing the role of the government and innovating institutional design.

5. Conclusion

The popularization of higher education is not the end of China's educational development, but a new starting point for moving towards a higher level of educational equity. By placing China in a global perspective and comparing its equity mechanism with that of Nordic countries—known as a model of equity—this study aims not to find a one-size-fits-all standard answer that can be completely replicated, but to explore the diverse paths and cores of higher education equity in the popularization stage amid profound differences.

Through the comparison, we clearly see that relying on its strong national mobilization capabilities and strategic policy planning capabilities, China has made unique historical achievements in creating scale-oriented equity, and has demonstrated the "Chinese speed" of realizing the leapfrog development of higher education through "Chinese efficiency". However, there is still much room for improvement in its transformation and upgrading. In contrast, Nordic countries, with their profound and long-standing inclusive welfare and the spirit of legal autonomy, have built a quality-oriented equity system that covers the whole life cycle and focuses on processes and outcomes. These two models are rooted in their respective unique historical contexts, policy systems, and cultural environments. For China, which is committed to realizing the high-quality development of higher education, the enlightenment of the Nordic model does not lie in the replication of its specific policies, but in the reference of its concepts. Educational equity should extend from the starting line to the process and the final results; after balancing efficiency and equity in the mechanism, it should transform from a "privilege" for school-age young people to a "lifelong right" for all citizens. The future path of educational equity in China must be an independent and innovative path based on China's national conditions. On the basis of affirming the historical achievements of government leadership, China should selectively introduce more diverse social forces and stimulate the independent vitality of colleges and universities. While continuing to maintain its advantages in efficiency, it should more firmly tilt resources towards weak links and disadvantaged groups. On the basis of consolidating the achievements in scale, China should make every effort to build a lifelong learning system serving all people.

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The core of building a higher education equity mechanism with global influence and Chinese characteristics lies in realizing a profound and correct transformation—from popularization oriented by efficiency priority to popularization oriented by all-round development. China's higher education will no longer be a victory for a few under cruel selection, but a broad platform that enables every learner to have a more wonderful life. This is not only an update and transformation of the educational system but also a macro cause related to social equity and economic innovation. On this challenging path, in-depth international comparisons from different perspectives and practical explorations will surely continue to provide impetus for China's higher education equity.

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