

Social Legacies in China's Later Massification of Higher Education in the Socioeconomic Context of the 21st Century

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Abstract

China's massification of higher education (HE) was considered beneficial to individual and regional economic growth and offers greater access to education to a larger population. China, as a late comer in HE massification, has reached the massified era in a short period. However, massive HE has left legacies of high unemployment rate, declining quality of graduates, and social inequalities caused by high tuition fees. This research reviews relevant works of literature, aiming to investigate how the late massification caused social conflicts in the socioeconomic context nowadays, additionally, responded policies including a quality assurance system, stratification of HE, and vocational education reform will be reviewed and evaluated. Future reform of policy implies that innovation should continue focusing on graduate stratification and employment-oriented curriculum development. Moreover, a larger number of employment opportunities could be provided for the socioeconomic society by growing private enterprises and stimulating entrepreneurship of university students, therefore, bring about the staying power of HE massification.

Keywords

Higher Education, Massification, Graduates Outcome, Higher Education Policy

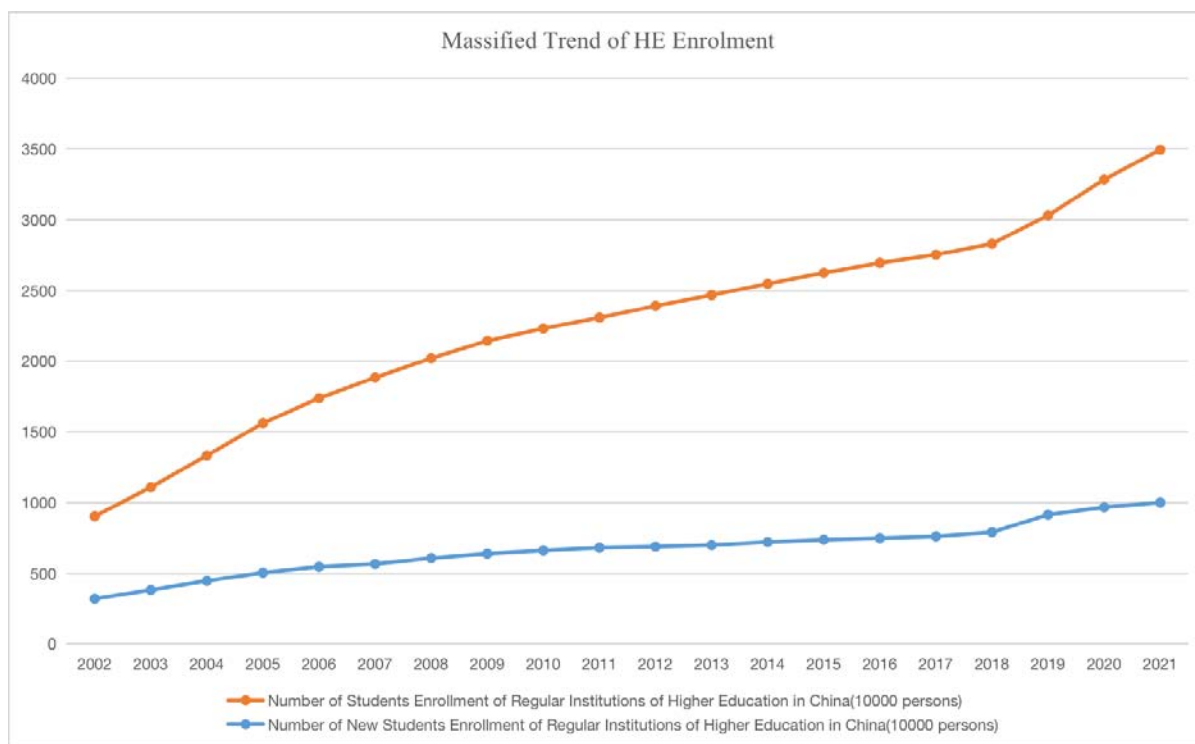
1. Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, China terminated its planned economy and made significant efforts to enhance its human resources, shifted the structure of the economy towards knowledge-intensive industries, and emphasized the role of education as a catalyst in economic development (Ministry of Education, 2001). Attitudes toward HE have presented a shift, regarding HE as an economic rationale to cultivate qualified talents for upgrading economic structure; therefore, realizing the goal of regional and national development in the long run (Chan & Lin, 2015). This paper will mainly discuss the massification process of HE, exploring its rationality, effectiveness, and possible social legacies. Lastly, policy responses will be reviewed and evaluated. Possible policy implications will be given to address unsolved issues and give direction to future reform.

2. Massification of Higher Education in China

China has witnessed an unprecedented expansion in its education system in a short period to a mass level (See Figure

1). Mok and Wu (2015) described the process as a broad, pervasive massification. During the past decades, younger individuals in China enrol in HE showing an increase of approximately 25 million compared to 2002, which is over a threefold growth. The number of new-student enrolment, which had been growing steadily at around five million per year for the previous decade, surpassed the 10 million annual population growth in recent years.



Source: NBS, available at : <https://data.stats.gov.cn>

Figure 1. The number of students enrolment for HE, both sexes, 2002-2021.

A variety of ways, including privatised and marketised initiatives, were used to provide educational possibilities. Facing limited HE resources, China adopted the inflow of private capital investment for constructing a large-scale tertiary education system. Since the 1980s, and notably in the new century, private colleges and universities have been allowed to exist, with the legal ability to offer academic degrees and certificates (Bie & Yi, 2014). The Chinese government drew numerous private education institutions to fill the scarcity of HE, most of which are managed on market-based principles, to transform the elite system into a massified system (Hayhoe et al., 2011).

Affected by China's marketization and decentralization strategy on HE expansion, the evolution is not limited to undergraduate studies, but also encompasses professional college (Jiang & Ke, 2021). Institutions upgraded by eliminating their offering of sub-degree level or vocational courses (Chou & Wang, 2012). The progress of massification has improved the social standing and reputation of universities and colleges, for example, it has also created chances for more students with lower credentials to enhance themselves.

3. Purpose of Higher Education Massification

3.1 The Greater Economic Return

Based on Human Capital Theory, Becker (1964) believes that there is a linear positive relationship existed between education and individual or societal economic growth. Investing time and money in education is a human capital investment. Unlike the constant return on physical capital, the investment in human capital reveals a higher return. Education was placed at the central role of boosting individual productivity and returns on the base of human capital theory.

For individuals, the level of education obtained is positively correlated with the graduates' earnings and negatively correlated with earnings variability at younger ages (Delaney & Devereux, 2019). Resonated to a recent study by Song and Lu (2020), HE in China is also experiencing a rapid increase in the adoption of ICT, leading to positive rewards on

graduates' labour market performance and career development.

For firms, the Cobb-Douglas production function reveals that a company's production relies on the input of labour which refers to the sum of the physical and intelligence that people provide in the production process. Thus, investment in human capital, especially through education, provides a positive driver of production, particularly in a labour-intensive industry to increase their output and make a profit. Furthermore, through the East Asian model defined by Marginson (2011) towards HE, tertiary education is regarded as the 'state-driven momentum' (Marginson, 2011, p. 596). Investing in university education benefits the public sector since tertiary-educated persons pay greater income taxes and social contributions in the long term (OECD, 2021).

3.2 Social Equality and Upward Mobility

Rong and Deng's (2021) study, which uses data from the China Family Panel Studies, covers a representative sample of 21,822 adults from 25 provinces in 2008 and focused on the changes in equal access to education after resuming college entrance exams. It is argued that the most significant factor attributed to educational inequity in China is the Household Registration System, where varied enrolment standards and quotas in different provinces have led to unequal access to the entrance to HE. Rong and Deng's (2021) research finds out that expanding HE helps to promote access to HE by reducing disparities in access among regions. The expansion of undergraduate education has lowered the barrier to entry for students from disadvantaged areas and enabled them to enjoy the same level of education as students from developed areas. Moreover, it provides students with larger possibilities of obtaining top-tier university degrees, consequently, a better chance of moving up the occupational and social mobility.

4. Social Legacies of Massified Higher Education

4.1 Unemployment Issue

China has achieved a great transformation from an elite system to a massive one in the short term. The number of college graduates reaches 10.76 million in 2022, 1.67 million more than the previous year (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence indicating graduates' unemployment was caused by massified post-secondary education (Mok & Wu, 2015). The issue of increased rivalry for jobs among college students has surfaced in recent years, graduates spend more time looking for a job, and deal with the possibility of being laid off more frequently since there are a huge number of graduates who compete in the labour market every year. The huge expansion has resulted in an oversupply of graduates with unchanged demand, causing graduates apprehensive about obtaining jobs and progressing in their professions (Wu, 2011). Based on the data extracted from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), the unemployment rate of young people aged 16-24 rose significantly as university graduates concentrated on job-seeking, with the unemployment rate of young people aged 16-24 standing at 14.3% in December – approximately double what it had been a decade before.

Apart from unemployment, problems that costs of investment in post-secondary education are becoming greater than the expected benefits have arisen for individual graduates since they confront a crowding-out effect, where they encountered mismatch and underemployment - accepting jobs that were intended for individuals with less education (Tomlinson, 2007). Another challenge for graduate employment is that the relative employment advantage of university graduates in the labour market appears to be diminishing as university and college students gradually converge on individual wage levels (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). A decrease in financial return has doubted the rationale for the progress of massification in tertiary education. The human capital theory, which states that graduates with a higher level of education are more competitive, does not appear to support this societal agenda, high rates of non-employment and underemployment in turn inhibit economic development.

4.2 Unqualified Graduates

Originally, investment in HE is an accumulation of intelligence, and according to the Cobb-Douglas production function, people who received HE are considered more qualified to increase production for the company. Nevertheless, Chan and Lin (2015) claim that graduates of the massive HE era are criticized in terms of weakening productivity, working ability, and attitude. The standpoint argued by Bedi and Edwards (2002) is that an extra admission quota is offered to marginal graduates who are not qualified for entrance before the massification of postsecondary education. Due to the expanding scale of HE, 'sub-standard' students are captured. Therefore, the quality of college graduates is deteriorating, indicating decreasing productivity of graduates in the job-seeking market (Juhn, Kim, & Vella, 2005).

Colleges originally aim to provide technical knowledge to prepare society for competent labour. Responded to mas-

sive policy, institutions upgraded by eliminating their offering of sub-degree level or vocational courses (Chou & Wang, 2012). For instance, in Taiwan, homogenization of institutions has appeared to some extent, consequently, a convergence of graduates in their features has been found as well. To achieve universal access by reducing vocational training courses coupled with a lack of clarity in the stratification of teaching objectives, generated a less diverse group of graduates who had to compete in finding suitable positions in the labour market, leaving a huge talent gap for employment in technical positions.

4.3 Income Disparities

Chinese families, inspired by Confucian values, are more willing to afford HE tuition fees for their offspring since qualifications and highly rewarding professions are regarded as the consequence of HE (Jiang & Ke, 2021). This cost may dismiss students from disadvantaged backgrounds or may result in long-term debt for them, imposing an additional financial burden on students from lower-income households, hence increasing socioeconomic inequality (Liu & Cheng, 2012). As an extra financial burden is left with the growing tuition fees, disadvantaged students may be forced to work to pay for their tuition, notwithstanding their desire to attend school. This will divert their attention away from their academic pursuits, establishing a negative loop and, directly or indirectly, contributing to educational inequity (Chan & Lin, 2015).

Also, the primary principle behind encouraging the expansion of private education should be to create different types of private education and have them work together with public education to better meet citizens' educational needs (Yan, 2009), which purportedly provides students more options but can promote internal competitiveness (Mok & Wat, 1998). However, private universities characterized by higher tuition fees mainly cater to students from the working class with uncertain job scenarios (Wang, 2012), who regard the obtaining of education as a springboard for upward social mobility. As private sectors are less recognised than public ones and government subsidies slanted less on them, the disparities in institutional repute and the dual-track tuition price regime may result in reverse income redistribution among various social groups (Chan & Lin, 2015). Contrary to the original intention of developing private education, it exacerbates the social divide between the affluent and the poor increasingly.

The longstanding agreement that education is one of the most significant drivers of labour market success is being questioned. In the survey conducted by Wen's research team (2006), they found that family background plays a vital role in the employment process when graduates are entering the labour market. The positive correlation between family background and advantages owed in the job-seeking procedure is revealed as well. Echoes with Mok and Wu (2015), family background and resources were cited by 79.4 percent of respondents as having a significant effect on university students' employment and future growth. In the later Guangzhou survey, Mok, Wen, and Dale (2016) confirmed that social capital, defined as resources contained in family network links, is highly important when it comes to obtaining better jobs. Additionally, parental guidance and information from relatives have an impact on one's employment practice and chances strongly supported by the respondent in this research. Thus, family ties rather than education play a significant role in getting the job of choice when more graduates are competing for scarce jobs.

Students without a privileged degree and advantaged family background confront a double obstacle compared with their urban counterparts since most students who come from rural regions enrol in non-prestigious universities (Chan & Ngok, 2011). Rural poor students had a 30.5% unemployment rate, compared with 22.3% for city dwellers when facing the shrinking supply of positions resulting in massification (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2013). This tendency aggravates the income disparity between urban and rural populations, which is one of China's most significant drivers of disparity.

5. Policy Response

5.1 Quality Assessment System

To improve the declining quality of graduates, quality is seen as the most pressing issue in China's educational system. Implementing effective reform policies to ensure teaching quality while maintaining HE's scale is necessary.

A quality guarantee system for HE was built up. In 2010, the Ministry of Education (MoE) promoted administrative accountability policy on the macro-level: to establish the MoE's Center for HE Evaluation, which will be responsible for assessing the teaching quality of institutions, and developing a quality report system by year for universities. Moreover, university ranking was further developed to realize their self-positioning, the purpose of a league table is to display the reputation of a school and its programmes. Approximately 20 units in China have released over 30 distinct types and degrees of university rankings (Zhou, 2016), the emergence of school ranking has broken the government monopoly on

HE assessment and facilitated the development of institutions in a market-oriented direction. The greatest advantage of rankings is that they use a language that is understood by the public to measure educational quality and have gained a high degree of social recognition. However, such rankings have also generated numerous controversies and questions, and they face the challenge of a credibility crisis.

On a micro-level, the MoE imposed accrediting criteria and regulations on the internal evaluation system of institutions, which was designed to ensure quality teaching and improve teachers' competence (Bie, 2012). It established the mechanism to supervise teaching based on teaching instruction, refined the student evaluation system of teaching instruction based on the involvement of all registered university students, rising peer evaluation among institutions on teaching quality.

5.2 Stratification and Vocational Education Reform

Jiang and Ke (2021) have demonstrated that the previous expansion of undergraduate studies has led to a mismatch in the distribution of jobs and talent. Therefore, the stratification of institutions is an urgent need while ensuring the quality of educational development.

It is critical to continue streamlining education to accomplish various educational goals. In 2016, the MoE formally abolished the 985 and 211 schools and they have been restructured into 'Dual First-Class' programmes. 985 and 211 are seen more as ratings for schools that enjoy a decent reputation even in terms of weaker subject offerings. The Dual First-Class policy emphasizes that outstanding disciplines from non-985/211 universities may also be classified as part of the First Class project. Additionally, in the process of competing for Dual First-Class subjects, schools can better develop the quality of their teaching.

Lately, depending on different teaching objectives, the country has introduced postgraduate expansion plans and professional graduates expansion plans one after another. The purpose of the National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform (Ministry of Education, 2019) by expanding vocational college education is to ensure the provision of sufficient high-quality technical personnel for the modern economic system, to provide students with a variety of admission and study options (Jiang & Ke, 2021). As a result, students who are not qualified to go to university can be trained in vocational schools to have their skills and fill the gap in skilled jobs as highly skilled people.

Students are expected to be streamed into their respective competitive pools, reducing job mismatches and the crowding-out effect in recruitment.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implication

In the early stages, the massification of tertiary education was seen as the main tool to achieve regional and national development, meanwhile, education opportunities were provided to a greater population to improve the income disparity. However, social legacies such as exceeded supply of talent, unemployment and underemployment, unqualified graduates, and widen social disparity were left unsolved. The policy has responded to the social contradictions with the introduction of a quality regulation system for institutions and the stratification of education, but there is still room for policy improvement.

Future policies should still focus on layering graduates and embedding employment-oriented curricula, work-related courses, and practices as part of the assessment, to assure students are equipped with good work skills, rich in the qualities that employers like best, therefore reducing the unemployment rate. Besides, the government should strongly encourage vigorous development of private firms for enticing graduates to enter, at the same time, measures should be adopted to protect the interests of graduates who chose private enterprises. In addition, government policies should stimulate more entrepreneurship among university students to provide more jobs for society. Entrepreneurial competitions are highly recommended to ease the rivalry for jobs, with financial support to organize national, provincial, or university-level competitions for university students to provide an incubation environment for their excellent business ideas.

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