

Research on the Impact and Balance of the "Double First-Class" Policy on Regional Higher Education Equity in China

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Abstract: With the continuous improvement of the popularization of higher education in China, the issue of regional equity has become increasingly prominent. As a major strategic deployment, the "Double First-Class" policy holds significant importance in promoting the development of higher education, achieving educational equity, social equity, and the long-term development of the country. This article focuses on the impact of the "Double First-Class" policy on the equity of regional higher education in China. It points out that while the policy has enhanced the international competitiveness of China's higher education and propelled China towards becoming a powerful nation in higher education, it has also sparked widespread controversy over the equity of regional higher education. The article proposes a regulatory path for regional equity from three dimensions: resource allocation, opportunity access, and institutional design, as well as from three aspects: government compensation, market coordination, and academic reflection, providing theoretical references for policy optimization. By combining quantitative data and theoretical analysis, this study systematically explores the impact of the "Double First-Class" policy on regional equity and proposes corresponding regulatory mechanisms to promote equity in regional higher education.

Keywords: "Double First-Class" Policy, Equity in Higher Education, Resource Allocation, Regulatory Mechanism.

1. Introduction

Globally, the creation of world-class universities has become a competitive policy. China's "Double First-Class" policy aims to enhance the international competitiveness of Chinese higher education and propel China from being a major player to a leading force in higher education. Following the "211 Project" and "985 Project", the "Double First-Class" policy further consolidates resources, optimizes the structure of higher education, and promotes differentiated development among universities. The "Double First-Class" policy is a major strategic deployment in China's higher education sector. Its core objective is to enhance the country's core competitiveness by building world-class universities and disciplines, serve the needs of economic and social development, and provide solid talent and intellectual support for the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Although the "Double First-Class" policy has enhanced the competitiveness of universities through centralized resource allocation, it has also exacerbated the structural imbalance of educational resources among regions, leading to the "Matthew effect" between developed eastern regions and central and western regions. Therefore, emphasizing regional educational equity is not only a necessary measure to correct the non-balanced orientation in policy implementation, but also a crucial step to safeguard the endogenous development momentum of underdeveloped regions, preventing the one-way siphoning of high-quality resources that could lead to a disruption in the higher education ecosystem. Moreover, the problems exposed in the process of policy implementation, such as the imbalance of regional resource distribution and the difference of enrollment opportunities, have triggered a profound reflection on the fairness of higher education in the academic community. Based on the triple dimensions of resources, opportunities, and institutions, this article

systematically analyzes the inherent logic of policy shocks and proposes a balanced path.

2. The Impact of the "Double First-Class" Policy on Regional Equity: Controversies and Evidence

As a key development strategy for national higher education, the "Double First-Class" policy aims to enhance the comprehensive competitiveness of universities through centralized resource allocation, but its impact on regional equity in higher education has sparked widespread controversy. In the process of policy implementation, the hierarchical allocation of resources, differentiated access to opportunities, and structural contradictions in institutional design jointly constitute the core contradiction of regional equity issues. This section systematically explores the challenges posed by policies to regional equity from the triple dimensions of resources, opportunities, and institutions, combining quantitative data and theoretical analysis.

(1) Regional imbalance in resource allocation: Matthew effect and spatial polarization

The resource-oriented mechanism of the "Double First-Class" policy has amplified the uneven development of regional higher education. The policy prioritizes support for selected universities through special funds, preferential treatment in scientific research projects, and other means. However, due to factors such as regional economic foundation and historical accumulation, high-quality resources have further accumulated in the developed eastern regions.

A comparative study by Wu Daguang and Wang Yiqian (2022) revealed that the number of high-level universities in the western region is only one-fifth of that in the eastern region, with a per-student financial expenditure gap exceeding three times.[1] Furthermore, the spatial

distribution of "Double First-Class" universities exhibits a characteristic of being densely distributed in the east and sparsely distributed in the west. Based on the fiscal expenditure equilibrium allocation model, Liu Xiaofeng[2] (2023) pointed out that the siphon effect of ultra-large universities has led to a general decline in the education resource carrying capacity index of central and western provinces, with infrastructure and teacher allocation efficiency being only 60% of that in the eastern region. The research data from Wu Daguang and Wang Yiqian (2022) corroborates the resource agglomeration effect of universities in the eastern region, while the 'carrying capacity index' proposed by Liu Xiaofeng (2023) further reveals the predicament of overloaded resource utilization in the central and western regions. Together, they constitute the empirical basis for the 'Matthew effect'.

From the perspective of resource structure, inter-regional differences are not only reflected in the total quantity, but also in the hierarchical differentiation of resource quality. Duan Congyu and Chi Jingming (2023) classified higher education resources into three categories: conditional, subjective, and developmental[4]. Their research found that the proportion of developmental resources (such as national-level scientific research platforms and international cooperation projects) in the eastern region exceeds 60%, while the central and western regions are still dominated by subjective resources (the scale of students enrolled), exhibiting a significant characteristic of being "large but not strong". This pattern of resource allocation exacerbates the spatial differentiation of regional innovation capabilities. Ma Junfeng[3] (2023) verified through a spatial Durbin model that the intensity of scientific research and innovation spillovers generated by the cluster effect of universities in eastern urban agglomerations increases by 8.2% annually, while western provinces exhibit a negative convergence trend due to talent outflow.

The imbalance in resource allocation under policy guidance has also reinforced the "center-periphery" structure. Gao Shuguo[5] and Shi Te (2023) proposed a strategy for the restructuring of higher education layout based on 19 national-level urban agglomerations, which has evolved into a fragmented development pattern in practice, with the eastern region "strengthening the top" and the central and western regions "filling the base". For example, the Yangtze River Delta region has absorbed 42% of the country's "double first-class" discipline resources through university alliances, while the discipline competitiveness index of the Sichuan-Chongqing-Shaanxi cluster is only one-third of that of the Yangtze River Delta. This polarization effect has led regional higher education into a "catch-up dilemma" - universities in the central and western regions, in order to compete for policy dividends, blindly expand their scale while neglecting connotation construction, further widening the quality gap with universities in the eastern region.

(2) Stratification and regional differentiation in opportunity access: The formation of dual barriers

Under the "Double First-Class" policy, the fairness of higher education opportunities faces dual challenges of class solidification and regional exclusion. Zhao Zhican[6] and Tian Haoran's (2022) coupling coordination degree model based on provincial panel data shows that the admission rate of "Double First-Class" universities in eastern provinces is 3.6 times that of the west, and the trend of high-quality degrees tilting towards high-income families is intensifying. This differentiation is particularly pronounced in less

developed regions: Bie Dunrong[7] and Chen Chunping's (2023) empirical research on Yunnan and Guizhou regions indicates that the proportion of local candidates entering "Double First-Class" universities through "special plans" is only 0.8%, far below the national average of 1.5%.

The institutional root of opportunity differentiation lies in the multi-track selection mechanism. Ma Pengyuan[9] and Mi Hong (2023) pointed out that universities in the eastern region have absorbed 72% of high-quality students through diversified channels such as independent enrollment and comprehensive quality evaluation, while the central and western regions still rely on a single competition based on college entrance examination scores. Students with rural registered residence account for less than 16% of students in "double first-class" universities. This selection disparity amplifies the transmission effect of cultural capital between social strata. Li Shuohao[8] and Wang Wanyue (2023) calculated the structural gap index, indicating that the correlation coefficient between family cultural capital and enrollment rate in "double first-class" universities is 0.72, and rural students are mostly concentrated in less popular majors, further limiting their career development space.

The reinforcement of regional barriers is closely related to local protectionism in policy implementation. Lu Wei's (2023) research on the integration of the Yangtze River Delta found that despite policies advocating cross-provincial enrollment collaboration, local governments, in order to protect the rights and interests of local students, still allocate 70% of high-quality places to candidates within the province in actual implementation[10]. This "nominally open but essentially closed" enrollment strategy has institutionally locked the disadvantaged position of education in less developed regions. The theoretical boundary of coordinated development proposed by Zhang Dexiang and Jia Xiao (2022) further reveals that the current Gini coefficient of enrollment opportunities between regions has exceeded the warning line of 0.4, far exceeding the gap in the development level of higher education[11].

Therefore, the long-term inequality in educational opportunities may lead to a talent shortage in the central and western regions, further affecting local economic and social development, creating a vicious cycle, and widening the gap between regions.

(3) Controversy over the fairness of institutional design: efficiency priority and lack of coordination

The institutional framework of the "Double First-Class" policy exhibits a profound tension between incentivizing competition and ensuring fairness. Cui Haili[12] (2023) analyzed local government behavior and found that in order to compete for policy resources, provinces allocate 65% of their fiscal increments to enhancing the subject rankings of a select few universities, while the per-student funding for institutions with weak foundations increases by less than 5%. This "tournament" logic leads to the alienation of policy objectives—universities blindly expand their subject scale to meet targets, neglecting the adaptability to regional needs. Wang Chengduan[13] and Wang Shiwei (2023) conducted an empirical study on Sichuan Province and found that the matching degree between the scale of engineering disciplines and the secondary industry in the province is only 0.47, highlighting a significant problem of resource mismatch caused by redundant construction.

The absence of a policy coordination mechanism further undermines the efficacy of equitable governance. Guo Jian

and Gu Yanfeng (2023) compared the regional higher education systems of China and the United States and found that China lacks a classification and connection mechanism similar to the California public system[13]. Central and western universities have long been institutionally marginalized in areas such as discipline layout and talent mobility. For example, in the dynamic adjustment mechanism of the "Double First-Class" initiative, central and western universities face higher exit risks due to evaluation shortcomings such as low conversion rates of scientific research achievements and weak international influence. Ma Junfeng's (2023) evaluation of the central and western revitalization plan shows that although policies have increased scientific research output by 22.1%, the turnover rate of young teachers remains high at 18%, indicating insufficient sustainable development capacity[14].

The value conflicts inherent in top-level design have also exacerbated regional imbalances. Tan Yingfang[15] (2023) pointed out that the success of the public system in California lies in the establishment of a "pyramid structure" paradigm for resource allocation, which guarantees the differentiated positioning of universities at different levels through legislation. In contrast, although China's policies emphasize "characteristic development", the quantitative evaluation system forces local universities to blindly benchmark against the "Double First-Class" standards, resulting in the dilemma of "a uniform face across thousands of universities". Zhang Fawang (2023) proposed a multi-dimensional goal selection theory, emphasizing that regional coordination needs to take "development gap smaller than economic gap" as the bottom line[16]. However, the current Gini coefficient ratio of higher education to regional economy has risen from 0.68 in 2015 to 0.91 in 2022, indicating a significant lack of institutional constraints.

3. Adjustment Mechanism for Regional Equity: Policy Compensation and Academic Reflection

(1) Government-led compensatory policies

As the core entity responsible for allocating public resources, the government plays a pivotal role in balancing the regional equity issues in higher education arising from the "Double First-Class" policy.

Firstly, the central and local governments have increased their inclination towards educational resources in the central and western regions through special fiscal transfer payments. For instance, they have established initiatives such as the "Central and Western Universities Revitalization Plan" and "Provincial-Ministerial Joint Construction of Universities Project", which provide targeted support for infrastructure development, faculty recruitment, and the establishment of research platforms in universities in less developed regions. Such policies narrow the hardware gap in educational conditions between regions by directly injecting resources, gradually breaking the resource monopoly pattern formed by historical accumulation in the eastern region.

Secondly, the concept of regional coordinated development has been strengthened in policy design. For example, it promotes the establishment of a counterpart support mechanism between "double first-class" universities in the east and institutions in the central and western regions, achieving knowledge spillover effects through joint training, faculty sharing, and scientific research cooperation. This

"strong leading weak" model not only enhances the self-sustaining ability of central and western universities but also promotes the spatial redistribution of high-quality educational resources.

In addition, the government adjusts and optimizes enrollment policies to ensure fairness of opportunity, such as expanding the coverage of "national special plans" and "local special plans", increasing the proportion of students from rural and impoverished areas entering "double first-class" universities, and alleviating the imbalance of educational opportunities between regions.

However, the implementation of current compensatory policies still faces issues such as fragmented execution and single assessment criteria. Some local governments' short-term performance orientation leads to a focus on hardware over software and indicators over connotation in resource allocation, failing to fundamentally reverse the competitive disadvantage of central and western universities. In the future, it is necessary to further refine policy tools, such as establishing regional higher education development funds and improving cross-provincial collaborative governance mechanisms, to strengthen the rigid constraints of fairness orientation while ensuring efficiency.

(2) Attempts to balance market and society

The intervention of the market and social forces provides diversified complementary paths for regulating regional educational equity. On the one hand, market mechanisms promote the reallocation of educational resources through capital flows and technology diffusion. For example, private enterprises collaborate with universities in the central and western regions to establish industrial colleges and training bases, integrating corporate needs into the talent cultivation process and enhancing the ability of local universities to serve the regional economy. Private higher education institutions, while expanding educational supply, fill the gaps in the public system through flexible educational models, providing more choices for students in less developed areas. On the other hand, social organizations participate in educational equity practices through public welfare projects, such as educational foundations setting up scholarships to support students in the western regions and public welfare organizations building distance education platforms to promote the sharing of quality courses. These attempts reduce the impact of geographical barriers on educational opportunities through technological empowerment.

However, the participation of the market and society also faces potential risks: the profit-driven nature of capital may lead to a further agglomeration of educational resources towards economically developed regions, for example, private universities tend to expand in eastern cities, exacerbating regional disparities; the fragmentation and short-term nature of public welfare projects make it difficult to achieve systemic change. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a framework for collaborative governance among the government, market, and society, such as guiding enterprises to invest in the education industry in the central and western regions through tax incentives, establishing a long-term evaluation mechanism for public welfare projects, and promoting the transformation of social forces from "supplementers" to "co-builders". It is worth noting that market-oriented reforms should not weaken the public attribute of education, and a dynamic balance between efficiency and equity needs to be sought.

(3) Theoretical criticism from the academic community

The academic community's reflection and criticism of existing regulatory mechanisms provide theoretical support for optimizing regional equity policies. Firstly, scholars point out that current policies rely excessively on administrative intervention, neglecting the complexity of the educational ecosystem. For example, government-led compensatory policies can quickly fill resource gaps, but the top-down implementation model can easily lead to the alienation of policy objectives, such as universities in the central and western regions blindly imitating the development path of the eastern region and falling into the trap of "homogenization competition". Secondly, doubts about market-oriented reforms focus on the conflict between educational equity and capital logic. Critics argue that market mechanisms may alienate education as a commodity, exacerbating the dual stratification of class and region. For instance, the rise of high-priced private education may squeeze the enrollment opportunities of disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, the academic community criticizes the existing theoretical framework for failing to fully respond to the multidimensional nature of regional equity. Traditional policy analysis often focuses on quantitative equilibrium in resource allocation, neglecting the impact of implicit factors such as cultural capital and institutional environment on equity. For example, universities in the central and western regions have long been in a weak position in the academic evaluation system, leading to their development needs being marginalized. In response to these issues, the academic community calls for reconstructing the theoretical paradigm of regional equity: firstly, advocating the concept of "differential justice", recognizing the right to development of different regions, and establishing a classified evaluation system; secondly, promoting "localization" research, deeply integrating regional characteristics with the mission of universities, and avoiding one-size-fits-all policy design; thirdly, strengthening the perspective of critical pedagogy, paying attention to the power relations and cultural hegemony behind educational policies. Future theoretical exploration needs to break through the boundaries of a single discipline, integrating multidimensional perspectives such as economics, sociology, and spatial politics, to provide intellectual support for building a more inclusive regional equity mechanism.

4. Conclusion

This paper takes the impact of the "Double First-Class" policy on regional higher education equity in China as the main research thread, systematically deconstructing the structural contradictions in policy implementation from the triple dimensions of resource allocation, opportunity access, and institutional design. The study finds that the high concentration of policy resources exacerbates the "Matthew effect" in regional development. The eastern region, relying on historical accumulation and economic advantages, forms spatial polarization in scientific research innovation and disciplinary resources, while the central and western regions are deeply trapped in a "catch-up dilemma," with blindly expanding scale leading to resource mismatch and quality imbalance. At the same time, the multi-track selection mechanism under policy guidance and local protectionism reinforce class solidification and regional barriers. The proportion of students from less developed regions entering high-quality universities through special programs is significantly lower, and the strong correlation between family cultural capital and access to education further weakens the

underlying logic of educational equity. At the institutional level, the "tournament" logic prioritizing efficiency and the absence of collaborative mechanisms have led to homogenization competition and marginalization of universities in the central and western regions, highlighting the contradiction between the adaptability of quantitative evaluation systems and regional needs. In response to the above issues, the study proposes an adjustment path of "policy compensation - diversified collaboration - theoretical reconstruction": the government needs to break resource monopolies through differentiated fiscal support and cross-regional collaboration mechanisms, while market and social forces can compensate for policy shortcomings through capital guidance and technology empowerment. The academic community needs to break through traditional analytical frameworks and construct a theoretical paradigm that integrates "differential justice" and localized development, providing theoretical support for breaking institutional barriers to regional equity.

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