

Research on Strategies to Improve the Quality of Master's Student Enrollment in Local Universities under the "Double First-Class" Initiative

-- A Case Study of Municipal University S in Chongqing

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Abstract: Based on the enrollment data of master's students at University S in Chongqing from 2021 to 2025, this study aligns with the requirements of the "Double First-Class" initiative to analyze the current enrollment status of local universities. Addressing the dual challenges of "expansion" and "quality improvement" in graduate enrollment, this paper proposes specific strategies from four perspectives: targeted promotion, brand-building, policy support, and scientific selection mechanisms. Provide some reference opinions and suggestions for the college enrollment mechanism.

Keywords: "Double First-Class" Initiative; Master's Student Enrollment; Data Analysis; Strategy Research.

1. Introduction

The *Overall Plan for Promoting the Development of World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines* issued by the State Council emphasizes that building world-class universities and disciplines is a major strategic decision of China. It is important for enhancing China's educational development, and laying a foundation for long-term growth [1]. Graduate education represents the highest level of talent cultivation for local universities, so ensuring high-quality enrollment is critical for improving talent-training outcomes. This paper takes University S as a case study and analyzes its five-year enrollment data to explore strategies for enhancing the quality of master's students in local universities.

2. Analysis of Master's Student Enrollment Data at University S

2.1. Overview of University S

University S is a comprehensive local normal university with over 30,000 students and 2,000 faculty members. It covers 12 disciplines, including philosophy, law, economics, education, literature, and science. The university offers four first-level doctoral programs, 24 first-level master's programs, and 19 professional master's degree programs. It boasts one provincial-level first-class discipline, 18 key provincial-level disciplines during the 14th Five-Year Plan, and four

disciplines ranked in the top 1% globally by ESI. [2]

2.2. Data Sources

The research data selected includes the first-choice application and admission data of master's students at University S from 2021 to 2025, covering the number of applicants and admitted students, the male-to-female ratio, the proportion of fresh graduates versus previous graduates, the number of high-quality students, the number of students admitted through recommendation, the number of students from the university itself, and the academic qualifications of admitted students, among other data. Using the basic characteristics of S University's enrollment data as an example, this paper analyzes the current situation and development trends of master's student enrollment in local universities, elaborates on the current state of student sources, and proposes countermeasures and suggestions to address the existing issues.

2.3. Key Enrollment Characteristics

2.3.1. Application and Admission Scale

University S maintained stable first-choice application (>10,000) and admission (>2,000) volumes (Table 1, Figure 1). Applications peaked in 2022 (24,188) but declined thereafter, while admissions grew steadily at approximately 6% annually.

2.3.2. Student Quality

Table 1. Master's Application/Admission at University S (2021–2025, Unit: Persons)

| Year | Applicants | Admitted | Admission Ratio |
|------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| 2021 | 14479 | 2361 | 6.13 |
| 2022 | 24188 | 2527 | 9.57 |
| 2023 | 20220 | 2652 | 7.62 |
| 2024 | 16435 | 2726 | 6.03 |
| 2025 | 14464 | 2893 | 5.00 |

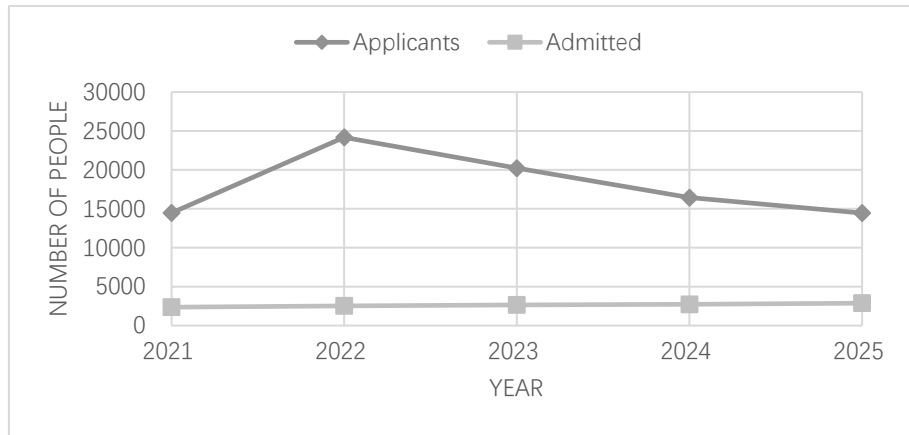


Figure 1. University S Master's Program Application and Enrollment Trends (2021-2025, Unit: Persons)

The first-choice admission rates increased by 10% over five years (Table 2). The number of high-quality students (recommended, top-tier institution graduates) increased

overall but dipped slightly in 2025. University S's enrollment remained high, while the recommended numbers remained low.

Table 2. Student Quality Metrics at University S (2021–2025, Unit: Persons)

| Year | Admitted | First-Choice | High-Quality | Recommended | University S |
|------|----------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| 2021 | 2361 | 1867 | 724 | 25 | 466 |
| 2022 | 2527 | 2040 | 808 | 29 | 473 |
| 2023 | 2652 | 2262 | 886 | 38 | 506 |
| 2024 | 2726 | 2371 | 824 | 33 | 488 |
| 2025 | 2893 | 2569 | 793 | 44 | 497 |

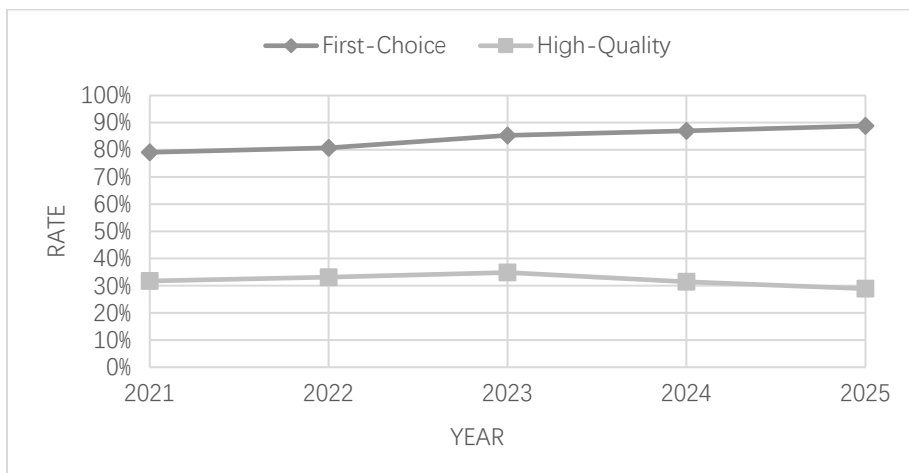


Figure 2. Changes in the First-Choice Enrollment Rate and High-Quality Student Source Rate for Master's Programs at S University (2021-2025)

2.3.3. Demographic Structure

Gender imbalance (1:3 male-to-female ratio) persisted (Table 3), likely due to differences in career preferences.

STEM enrollments grew modestly, reflecting the national priorities. Fresh graduates slightly outnumber previous graduates, previous graduates constitute a certain proportion, indicating a sustained demand for degree advancement.

Table 3. Composition of Master's Student Sources at University S (2021–2025, Unit: Persons)

| Year | Male | Female | Fresh Grad | Previous Grad | Equivalent Qualifications | Graduate Student |
|------|------|--------|------------|---------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| 2021 | 551 | 1810 | 1305 | 1056 | 94 | 0 |
| 2022 | 656 | 1871 | 1431 | 1096 | 72 | 2 |
| 2023 | 726 | 1926 | 1435 | 1217 | 115 | 1 |
| 2024 | 772 | 1954 | 1570 | 1156 | 99 | 2 |
| 2025 | 817 | 2076 | 1699 | 1194 | 108 | 5 |

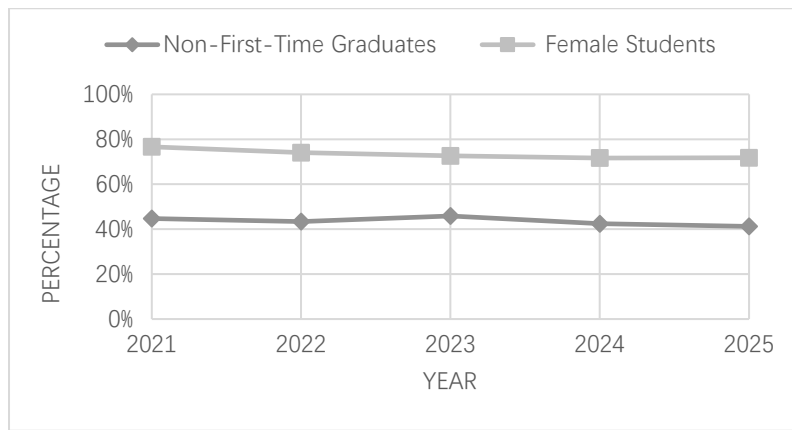


Figure 3. Changes in the Proportion of Non-First-Time Graduates and Female Students among Master's Candidates at S University (2021-2025)

3. Current Status of Master's Student Enrollment in Local Universities

According to the 2024 National Education Development Statistical Bulletin China enrolled 1.857 million master's students in 2024, with a total graduate student population reaching 3.4192 million—a 30% increase in enrollment and 40% growth in total student numbers over five years. This expansion has made China the world's largest graduate-education system. However, the diminished exclusivity of graduate degrees and rising post-graduation employment challenges reflect applicants' rationalized decision-making under policy shifts and employment pressure [3]. Against this backdrop, with the analysis of University S's five-year enrollment data reveals three shared characteristics among local universities:

3.1. Enrollment Scale is Steadily Increasing.

The scale of master's student enrollment in local universities has shown a consistent and steady upward trend. This phenomenon is a result of the macro-level context created by the in-depth advancement of China's "Double First-Class" initiative and the connotative development of higher education. It represents a necessary response to the national strategy of elevating talent cultivation levels and serving regional innovation development. At the same time, enrollment expansion presents a historic opportunity for local universities to integrate into the broader "Double First-Class" framework and achieve self-development. For these institutions, expanding master's student enrollment is a critical measure to strengthen their educational foundation, enhance academic reputation, and secure more educational resources. However, this expansion has also placed local universities in a competitive dilemma against "Double First-Class" universities. Compared with ministry-affiliated "Double First-Class" institutions, local universities face significant gaps in soft power, such as faculty quality and research platforms, as well as insufficient hardware resources, including dormitories, classrooms, and libraries. These shortcomings have been exacerbated by rapid enrollment growth. Consequently, the shortage of educational resources per student has constrained the improvement of training capacity and education quality.

3.2. The Enrollment Structure is Continuously Being Adjusted

Under the guidance of the "Double First-Class" initiative,

which emphasizes "characteristic development and world-class disciplines," the adjustment of the master's student enrollment structure in local universities is no longer a passive adaptation but an active, strategic self-reconstruction. Enrollment plans prioritize disciplines closely aligned with local economic and cultural development, as well as those that leverage unique regional advantages, particularly in specialized and applied fields.

By establishing local high-quality student recruitment bases and collaborating with regional enterprises to implement targeted training programs, local universities aim to attract and retain applicants who are familiar with local conditions and committed to contributing to regional development. This approach enhances the relevance of talent cultivation and increases the local retention rate of graduates.

3.3. The Quality of Student Recruitment Needs Improvement.

Ultimately, the competition under the "Double First-Class" initiative is a competition for talent—not only for top-tier faculty but also for high-quality students. Whether local universities can improve the quality of their student recruitment directly impacts the effectiveness of their "Double First-Class" construction. Compared with "Double First-Class" universities, local institutions face a structural disadvantage in attracting outstanding students. "Double First-Class" universities selectively cultivate high-achieving undergraduates through the national college entrance examination system, and these students form the backbone of their master's program applicants. Furthermore, there is a misalignment between applicants' motivations and the goals of the "Double First-Class" initiative. Many candidates regard applying to local universities as a "safety option" for pursuing postgraduate studies or simply as a pathway to obtain a degree. Their academic enthusiasm and innovative potential are often insufficient, which contrasts with the core objective of the "Double First-Class" initiative to cultivate innovative talent.

4. Strategies and Recommendations for Master's Student Enrollment in Local Universities under the "Double First-Class" Initiative

In the graduate enrollment process, local universities face significantly weaker appeal to prospective students than "Double First-Class" institutions. Addressing this challenge hinges on resolving two core issues: expanding scale and

enhancing quality—that is, increasing the number of applicants who prioritize the institution as their first choice, and selecting outstanding candidates. To achieve these dual objectives, local universities must systematically examine and clarify the complex motivations and underlying logic behind applicants' decision-making. This involves pursuing distinctive development and connotative growth, while critically analyzing how to leverage their unique strengths to better attract high-quality students [4].

4.1. Targeted Promotion: Develop Diverse and Substantive Enrollment Campaigns

Local universities must move beyond traditional recruitment models and adopt data-driven, content-centric, and precision-oriented promotional strategies to accurately attract target student populations.

By conducting an in-depth analysis of historical admission data, local universities can create a "student source map" to identify key feeder institutions, disciplinary distributions, and student preferences. This enables targeted digital outreach through methods such as customized e-posters and strategically placed enrollment advertisements on online platforms. Additionally, hosting interactive events like roundtable discussions, online lectures, and experience-sharing sessions can break geographical barriers, allowing prospective students to immersively experience the academic environment and research facilities from their homes. The core of effective promotion lies in resonating with and captivating students. Thus, hollow slogans must be replaced with dynamic, authentic, and high quality content.

4.2. Brand Building: Highlighting Flagship Disciplines, Distinguished Faculty, and Regional Advantages

In terms of comprehensive rankings, faculty strength, and overall educational resources, local universities cannot compete directly with "Double First-Class" institutions. To overcome this disparity, they must cultivate a distinctive brand identity that transforms their unique strengths into an irreplaceable enrollment appeal.

Focus on "Flagship Disciplines": Concentrate superior resources to build several disciplinary brands. These disciplines should be deeply integrated with local pillar industries or strategic emerging industries, exhibiting distinct regional characteristics and irreplaceability. Highlighting "Distinguished Faculty": Faculty advisors are primarily responsible for graduate student cultivation and are key figures in attracting prospective students. Support outstanding faculty to step into the spotlight by recording micro-lectures, hosting academic live streams, and opening academic blogs, leveraging their personal academic reputation to attract applicants. Implement a "Faculty Team Endorsement" system to create research communities, promoting research teams as units to showcase their research directions, project funding and academic environment. Leverage "Regional Advantages": Uncover the unique value of the host region by highlighting the city's industrial clusters, cost-of-living benefits, and development potential to attract applicants who wish to pursue local opportunities. Integrating local cultural distinctiveness with campus culture to shape a unique campus image that is livable, conducive to learning, and supportive of professional growth—meeting the new generation's pursuit of quality in both education and life.

4.3. Policy Safeguards: Enhancing Competitiveness of Local Universities Through Strategic Differentiation

Amidst the enrollment advantages enjoyed by "Double First-Class" universities due to their prestige, local institutions must deploy a *targeted policy framework* to compensate for systemic disadvantages. This requires a "differentiated competition" approach—leveraging tailored policy instruments to create unique value propositions.

Build a comprehensive scholarship and financial aid system. Scholarships and financial aid are the most direct and effective forms of attraction. Local universities should significantly increase funding standards, establish a full-coverage and tiered scholarship system to ensure all enrolled students have the opportunity to receive financial support, and add "Three Assistantships" positions to guarantee all students basic living security, allowing them to focus on academic research. Simultaneously, differentiate scholarship levels to ensure that outstanding students receive higher amounts, attracting top talent, such as those from "Double First-Class" universities and recommended exempted students. Create "humanized and warm" service support. Providing high-quality hardware conditions for accommodation and teaching areas, establishing cozy academic cafés and communication spaces to foster a homely atmosphere, and implementing a "one-on-one" new student liaison system to offer detailed services from admission to enrollment, making them feel the school's attention and care, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging and identity.

4.4. Scientific Selection: Advancing Comprehensive Evaluation Reform to Ensure Selection Effectiveness

While enhanced promotion, brand building, and policy safeguards are crucial measures for local universities to attract applicants, a scientific selection mechanism serves as the pivotal link in identifying outstanding candidates. Local universities should deepen reforms in enrollment and selection processes by establishing a scientific, diversified, and efficient assessment system.

Establish categorized assessments and multi-dimensional evaluation standards. For academic master's programs, focus on examining theoretical foundations, literature review capabilities, and research innovation potential. For professional master's programs, the evaluation of practical skills and professional competencies should be emphasized, with industry experts potentially participating in interview assessments. Explore quantifying innovative practical achievements, such as discipline competition awards, patents, and software copyrights into the scoring system to enrich evaluation dimensions. The design of the examination subjects should be optimized to highlight core professional fundamentals, prioritizing the assessment of logical thinking, analytical skills, and problem-solving abilities. Preliminary exam results should be deeply integrated with the re-examination process, treating them as an entry threshold rather than the sole basis for selection, thereby reserving greater space for comprehensive evaluations of research potential, practical abilities, interview performance, and other qualities. Strengthen process evaluation and whole-course supervision to ensure fairness, impartiality, and transparency in assessments. Establish effective appeal and reconsideration mechanisms to protect the legitimate rights and interests of

applicants.

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