CHAPTER 17

The College Entrance Examination: From the Selective Examination to the Adaptive Examination

In the phase of elite education, the college entrance examination is a kind of selective examination. The National College Admission Provisional Regulation, issued by the former State Board of Education, clarified the regulation aimed to select outstanding freshmen qualified for the university’s teaching requirements. In other words, only the best high school graduate students were entitled to admission to the university. This traditional view of the college entrance examination function is no doubt in conformity with the practical situation in the phase of elite education. In this phase, the higher education system features a single mode. When the college entrance examination was revived more than thirty years ago, the admission rate reached 4.8% from 1977 to 1978. Thus only the best students could be selected by the university. The principle of admitting the best examinee was even applied in the next ten years, and the admission rate reached 34%. However, after the enrollment expansion policy was implemented, the annual college entrance rate increased by 60% to 70%, and the rate in some places even reached over 80%. The abnormally high rate aroused disputes over the real meaning of the selective examination. With the ever-expanding enrollment, nearly all the high school graduates can enter the university. So people are wondering if it is necessary to recruit students through college entrance examination. And our answer is yes. Even if the college entrance rate comes to 100%, outstanding students in China have to take part in college entrance examination. Regarding the whole structure of the college entrance examination in China, it is essential to transform its selective function to an adaptive function. More accurately, we can integrate the adaptive function into a part of the selective function. The transition of examination function may give rise to a series of college entrance examination reforms, including reforms in examination targets, requirements, content, and methods.

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The traditional college entrance examination is a kind of selective examination, because it reflects the contradiction between the shortage of educational resources and the excessiveness of educational demands in the phase of elite education. That means the demand for college admission has exceeded the supply. As a result, a fair college entrance examination is indispensable to select students. With the fact that higher education has entered the popular stage in China, the enrollment is increasing, whereas the total supply and demand are tending to be balanced. Most high school graduates, instead of a few outstanding ones, are offered the chance of higher education. On the whole, what we should be concerned about is not about selecting “outstanding students,” but how to choose certain kinds of appropriate majors or schools for different types of students. Certainly, students enjoy the optimal choice to receive an education, because the education level and resources vary greatly even in the same major or type of university. But another option to the problem is adaptive selection.

The prerequisite for higher education popularization is diversification. The single education system cannot achieve popularization, because it’s hard to satisfy the multi-level and multi-type demand of special talents. The traditional universities’ single undergraduate education centering on theoretical learning and research found it difficult to accord with the diversified demands of the employment market (the large number of colleges also used a compressible undergraduate education system), leading to a massive structural unemployment among graduates. This will affect and even terminate the process of education popularization. Therefore, once the developed countries steps into the popular stage, higher education will be vulnerable to disruption. A large number of higher vocational technical schools once focused on vocation and technology—namely, the community colleges, the short-term and multi-disciplinary institutes of technology, the open universities, and all kinds of training institutions—are ready to foster massive marketable talents in production, management, and service sectors. The diversification of higher education means the school can implement diversified education targets, scale, content, and methods. At the same time, it means the college can be more selective, providing graduates with more job choices. For example, the research university attaches importance to the freshman-level students’ theoretical basis, thinking abilities, capacity for innovation, and scientific research potential; the vocational college pays attention to students’ ability to solving practical problems and their potential for organization and management. Professional colleges center on good practical operation ability. Of course, the above example is relative. Meanwhile, majors of different kinds are more specific and differ from one another in knowledge and capability.