

The Improvement of the Selection Mechanism of International Students Coming to China: Take Countries along the Belt and Road as an Example

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Abstract. As China's influence grows globally, particularly after the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, an increasing number of foreign students are choosing to pursue their higher education in China. Given this context, China is beginning to place an increasing emphasis on the quality control of its international student population. Thus, this essay examines China's current system of international student selection. The examination reveals that there are issues with China's system for selecting international students. Both the language assessment and the academic ability evaluation are devoid of professionalism and refinement, as well as consistent criteria. Additionally, the preliminary mechanism has not gained traction or been useful, and other complementing, alternative mechanisms are disregarded. This paper offers recommendations from three perspectives—the language evaluation mechanism, the academic assessment mechanism, and the alternative assessment mechanism—to encourage the enhancement of the selection process for foreign students entering China. In order to support both the internationalization of higher education and the Belt and Road initiative, the Chinese government and universities should raise the bar for selecting international students and implement policies that are appropriate for the current state of affairs and the challenges facing the countries that form the route.

Keywords: International students in China; Selection; the Belt and Road; International education.

1. Introduction

China is now the world's third-largest recipient of international students, with an increasing number of foreign students choosing to study there since the reform and opening up. Statistics show that 54.1% of all overseas students studying in China in 2019 were from nations along the Belt and Road[1]. With the exception of the US, Japan, and South Korea, all ten of the nations with the highest concentration of international students studying in China are located along the Belt and Road[1]. Furthermore, China has established multiple "Belt and Road" education alliances with select universities in the nations bordering the Belt and Road since 2015, with promising first outcomes[2].

In the previous literature, many scholars have conducted research and analysis on policy changes, cultural adaptability, classroom teaching, and international student management in the field of international students in China. By sorting out the changes in higher education policies for overseas students in China, Qidong Zhao pointed out that the changes in China's policies for overseas students in China reflect the logical trajectory of "starting - perfecting - scale - quality"[3]. Xiaoyan Zhang, Yuanming You, Yuan Liang and Shenghua Wang took the business administration major of China Three Gorges University as an example, pointing out that there exist problems with language barriers, teaching methods and learning outcomes in the cultivation of international students from "Belt and Road" countries[4]. In the classroom, Singh Jasvir, Kaur Nachatar, and Kaur Amrita revealed through interviews that foreign students face challenges like instruction that is primarily in Chinese, little room for discussion or autonomy, little interaction with Chinese students in the home, and little opportunity for hands-on or practical learning[5]. Regarding the selection process, academics Philip G. Atterbach, Gao Yuan, Liu Jin, Simon Malkinson, and others think that China should improve international student quality management in the post-epidemic era because the disparity between the

number and quality of foreign students studying there will persist for a long time and is not encouraging[6].

In fact, the selection mechanism for international students in most Chinese universities is not perfect, which makes keeping up with the school curriculum or even graduate become a difficult thing for many foreign students. What's worse, some students have poor academic performance but still get high scholarships, which has caused serious dissatisfaction among local Chinese students. The People's Republic of China's Ministry of Education released the Standard for the Quality of Higher Education for International Students in China in 2018 with the goal of strengthening the system of quality assurance for foreign students studying there[7]. It points out the relevant policies on the enrollment and admission of international students in China, including entrance examination and assessment, scholarship evaluation, preparatory mechanism, etc., and hopes that all schools can formulate their own enrollment guidelines based on this document[7].

Through the literature survey method, combined with the previous academic articles and the relevant enrollment regulations of major Chinese universities for international students, this paper will divide the selection mechanism of international students in China into language evaluation mechanism, academic evaluation mechanism and alternative evaluation mechanism to explore the current situation and problems, in order to offer recommendations for enhancing China's system for selecting international students.

2. Language Proficiency Assessment Mechanism

2.1. Current Status of Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) and the Language Proficiency Requirements of Universities

HSK is the Chinese language examination that was created and carried out by the Office of the National Leading Group for the International Promotion of the Chinese Language of the People's Republic of China [8]. Having undergone several reforms, the current version of HSK is divided into six levels, with different test content and papers for each level to distinguish the different Chinese proficiency of candidates. HSK test has three modules: listening, reading and writing, the difficulty of which increases in turn. In terms of writing, level 4 requires writing several sentences, level 5 is writing two short articles of about 80 words, and level 6 is abbreviating an article of 1000 words into an article of 400 words.

Different schools have different standards for HSK level requirements of universities in mainland China. Taking the five schools in the top 50 QS rankings as examples, Tsinghua University requires HSK level 4 or above and no less than 60 points in a single subject. If the Chinese level is level 4, the student must reach Level 5 within one year of enrollment [9]. Peking University requires a score of 210 or above in Level 6 or the certificate of other specific Chinese courses [10]. Fudan University requires 210 points or above for HSK Level 5 or 180 points or above for HSK Level 6 [11]. Shanghai Jiaotong University requires 200 points or above in HSK Level 5 while the score of writing should not be less than 60 or 180 points or above in HSK Level 6 while the score of writing should not be less than 60[12]. Zhejiang University sets different requirements for different majors, with a minimum score of not less than 180 points in HSK Level 5 [13].

In addition, other universities that are popular with international students from the Belt and Road study in China also limit the level requirement of HSK. University of International Business and Economics requires 210 points or above in HSK Level 5 or 180 points or above in HSK Level 6[14]. Lanzhou University requires HSK level 4 or above, and the specific score is divided according to the major [15]. Huaqiao University requires a level 5 or above for liberal arts majors and a level 4 or above for science majors [16].

According to various schools, the HSK requirements of several Chinese colleges and universities with strong strengths are generally not less than level 5, and the HSK requirements of several universities with relatively weak strengths but popular with international students are not less than

level 4. Therefore, each school requires Chinese ability to a certain extent, to reduce the language barrier of students in the future learning process.

In addition to Chinese, most colleges and universities also require candidates to provide relevant proof of English ability, such as TOEFL, IELTS, etc. This is because Chinese colleges and universities have set up similar English courses for foreign students who are not proficient in Chinese and who are unable to adjust to Chinese teaching in order to guarantee the learning impact of foreign students in China.

2.2. The Problem of the Assessment of Language Proficiency

Although the Chinese language ability of international students in China has been evaluated, many of them still cannot adapt to the Chinese environment and Chinese teaching. Therefore, it is clear that there exist some problems in the Language proficiency assessment mechanism.

First of all, although HSK is a professional international Chinese proficiency test, the classification of its grades has certain leaps due to the different content of the test, which makes it difficult for colleges and universities to find more suitable criteria for selection in enrollment. Besides, the exam does not contain oral Chinese, so that the Chinese level of international students can not be fully tested, especially the actual application ability. What's more, HSK only examines daily communication and lacks academic and professional investigation, while the future study of international students in the university is related to professional knowledge, which results in many international students in China having difficulties keeping up with the pace of class [17].

Second, the admission standards of most colleges and universities are single and fail to be divided according to the requirements of different disciplines on Chinese ability, which makes students of different majors show certain differences in learning difficulty.

Third, the relatively weak institutions have low requirements for Chinese ability, which is not even enough to guarantee students' daily communication and let them have both difficulty in life and study.

2.3. The Suggestions of the Language Proficiency Assessment Mechanism

First, Add additional tests. Based on HSK, additional tests in academic language can be conducted for students who come to study in China, so that international students can be more familiar with some academic vocabulary and sentences. In this way, the international students' adaptability and application ability can be enhanced in the future, so that they can accept the reading of academic articles and the writing of Chinese papers more easily in the future[18].

Second, refining the HSK level. Set more appropriate selection of admission standards for colleges and universities, so that they can have a clearer understanding of the Chinese level of admitted students, to formulate more reasonable teaching methods while reducing the problems and costs of later language training.

Third, colleges and universities should reasonably consider the Chinese proficiency requirements of different majors when recruiting students. In one way, universities can make more detailed divisions according to different majors in the language requirements of enrollment. For example, Zhejiang University lists the language requirements of each major in detail on its enrollment website [13]. In another way, they can public a universal basic requirement, and then have different Chinese tests of different degrees in the entrance examination according to different majors.

3. Academic Assessment Mechanism

3.1. The policies of the Academic Requirement of Universities

3.1.1. Admission

The enrollment policy of Chinese universities for international students can be divided into undergraduate enrollment and graduate enrollment.

For undergraduates, different universities have different admission policies. Most universities only require international students to provide high school transcripts or high school unified examination results, such as Zhejiang University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Lanzhou University, etc[13][19][15]. Some universities require international students to provide the scores of international standardized tests (SAT/ACT/A-Level/UEC/IB), such as Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, etc.[11][12]. Some universities require candidates to participate in the school entrance examination after the submission of materials is approved, such as Peking University [10].

For graduate students, more universities require students to submit undergraduate transcripts, letters of recommendation from supervisors, professionally relevant achievements, as well as personal statements and research proposals. They pay more attention to professional ability, and interview candidates after they submit application materials, which is proposed to select talents further, such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, etc[9][10]. In addition, due to the lack of research funds, some developing countries along the Belt and Road have cooperated with Chinese universities and sent some outstanding graduates to Chinese universities for further study. In October 2015, Lanzhou University, Fudan University, Beijing Normal University and 47 universities from Russia, Malaysia, Turkey and other countries jointly established the "Belt and Road" University Alliance[2]. For example, Preston University in Islamabad, Pakistan and its Preston Institute of Nano Science & Technology (PINSAT) signed a two-level cooperation agreement with the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the National Center for Nano Science, so Pakistani students who apply for the scholarship can be sent to China for master's and doctoral studies[1].

3.1.2. Preparatory Mechanism

Apart from direct enrollment, China has also begun to implement preparatory mechanisms in some schools to help international students solve language problems and cultural adaptation problems. Up to now, China has offered preparatory courses in some universities for international students such as Peking University[20].

As for the course, the current preparatory courses are mainly Chinese and cultural courses, while a small number of basic subjects such as mathematics, physics and chemistry are provided for students of Science.

3.2. The Problem of the Academic Assessment Mechanism

Although Chinese universities have certain academic ability requirements for international students coming to China, it is still common for international students to fail to keep up with the course progress after entering the university, mix credits with high scholarships or delay graduation. The mismatch between the quality treatment of overseas students and their own abilities and academic qualifications has also caused dissatisfaction among Chinese domestic students, making them feel serious unfairness, and it has caused great repercussions in society. For these problems, the imperfect academic evaluation mechanism needs to bear a lot of responsibility. The selection criteria are too loose so the ability of international students in China can not be well matched with the school and the curriculum. In general, the academic selection mechanism has the following problems.

3.2.1. No Clear Academic Requirements

Through the investigation and collation of the enrollment brochures of major universities, the paper found that most universities have almost no standards and no thresholds in academic studies, only symbolically requiring international students to provide high school/undergraduate transcripts. That is to say, for international students, they can enter these schools only after they pass the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi and achieve the required level, which has made it easy for many international students with weak foundations to apply and get into highly-ranked schools. For the Chinese government, this has led to a decline in the quality of international students coming to China as well as the international recognition of Chinese universities. For international students, this increases the academic difficulty of their future studies, making it more difficult for them to keep up with the school curriculum and meet graduation standards. For Chinese students, comparing their own need to make a lot of effort to get into a highly ranked school with the relatively easy way of admission for international students in China with large scholarships and more life services provided by the government, they will feel a huge injustice and have negative emotions.

In addition, due to the requirement of academic foundation, some schools require international students to submit international standardized test scores such as SAT/ACT/A-Level/UEC/IB when applying. However, since most of the countries along the Belt and Road do not take international standardized tests, many international students cannot provide them and can only use their domestic unified test scores instead. However, due to the difference in the subject Settings and difficulties of the national unified examination, this score can not play a role in comparison and selection, resulting in uneven levels of international students enrolled. Even if the courses can be unified for international students, the difficulty and progress of the courses also cause great difficulties for college teachers.

3.2.2. Single Content of the Preparatory Course

At present, several colleges and universities that set up preparatory schools generally set Chinese language and Chinese culture as the main courses of the preparatory school, making the preparatory school similar to a Chinese training institution, which is dedicated to improving the Chinese level of international students. This greatly reduces the transitional role of being in line with universities, and it is difficult to reach the overall goal of preparatory training for Chinese international students: "After completing preparatory education, students should achieve the basic standard for entering the professional stage of learning in Chinese colleges and universities in terms of Chinese language knowledge and ability, relevant professional knowledge and intercultural communication ability." [22]

3.3. The Suggestions for the Improvement of the Academic Assessment Mechanism

First, Chinese universities should develop standardized academic selection criteria and improve academic performance requirements. Referring to Beijing Normal University, students are required to provide international standard test scores, if not, they will participate in the unified entrance examination for selection, which not only makes the selection of international students have a unified standard, but also saves the workload of school enrollment and saves the time of students with international standard test scores [23]. Universities can independently or jointly develop and implement entrance exams for international students that meet the actual conditions of running schools and meet the evaluation requirements [7]. The specific content of the entrance exams can be referred to the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE), which are divided into Chinese proficiency tests, comprehensive written tests and interviews, and admission is made according to the comprehensive scores from high to low [21].

Second, the international standard test results should be graded according to the major. The setting of the scoreline can guarantee the academic ability of international students to a certain extent, ensuring that the admitted students meet the predetermined admission standards, while enabling different majors to select different talents.

Third, in terms of postgraduate selection, Chinese universities should set up additional expert reviewers. Through the dialogue and investigation between professors and international students, more excellent and professional international students will be selected for admission, and their practical application ability of Chinese will be tested. For undergraduate admission, considering the relatively high difficulty of the interview, the interview can be set up in universities with high ranking and used as a bonus. These schools can use written tests to determine the admission list and interviews to conduct the main basis for the distribution of scholarships, so as to select talents more effectively and give rewards. For postgraduate admission, most universities need to set up interviews to examine students' professional abilities and understand students' future study planning and research direction.

Fourth, improve the preparatory content. The preparatory course can set up compulsory courses and optional courses. The compulsory courses mainly involve Chinese language teaching, cultural experience, and the addition of university academic guidance, such as thesis writing, logical thinking, and the teaching of the use of other academic software, etc., while the optional courses set up some introductory courses according to different majors, so that international students can choose and have a better transition. The Foundation completion examination also involves compulsory and elective courses, and the examination results are taken into account in the awarding of scholarships, so that they can be distributed more effectively to excellent students.

Fifth, popularize the preparatory school system. For a wide range of international students with different foundations, especially students from developing countries with relatively backward education along the Belt and Road, more schools should carry out preparatory courses to help them adapt to college life in China, improve their academic level and professional quality, and reduce the difficulty of undergraduate teaching and learning.

4. Alternative Assessment Mechanism

4.1. The Policies of Alternative Requirements of Universities

In addition to language and academic assessment, some schools also conduct other admission policies for international students in China.

Some art colleges, such as Beijing Film Academy, require applicants to provide professional work, which will take precedence over academic ability. Students with artistic talent and strong professional ability will be more favored by the school.

In addition, some universities in China accept international students who have graduated from junior colleges with excellent grades, which is mostly done by direct docking between schools. For example, Zhejiang Institute of Water Resources and Hydropower and Zhejiang Mechanical and Electrical Vocational Technical College of International Students "upgrade" joint training pilot, that is, Zhejiang Mechanical and Electrical Vocational Technical College of international students completed 3 years of junior college study, application and approval, can enter the undergraduate for 2 years of study[24]. Upon completion of their studies, a bachelor's degree certificate shall be issued to those who meet the graduation requirements and the conditions for granting a bachelor's degree. This can not only save the learning time of foreign students with poor ability, but also meet the needs of undergraduate institutions for professional talents.

4.2. The Problem and Suggestion of Alternative Assessment Mechanism

In fact, some international students willing to study in China have excellent professional ability, but due to the underdeveloped education in their home countries, their discipline foundation is weak and they cannot meet the admission requirements of Chinese universities. In this regard, in addition to art colleges and some vocational schools, most colleges and universities in China lack consideration, and the selection of professional talents is insufficient, so that students with special skills in a certain aspect are ignored.

Therefore, colleges and universities need to improve the selection mechanism, that is, in addition to the basic comprehensive academic ability, they should set up a special recruitment mechanism for professional talents, mainly in the form of material submission and interview, to provide special admission channels for foreign students with special talents. Meanwhile, because of the lack of comprehensive ability of these students, the special enrollment quota will be reduced to a certain range, requiring them to provide convincing proof such as scientific and technological patents, high technical level, professional knowledge, endangered language and craft inheritance, etc. This not only meets the demand for professional talents, but also increases the attraction of foreign students in China and reduces the brain drain.

5. Conclusion

By checking the recruitment brochures of major universities in China for international students as well as previous literature and research, this paper finds that there is still a lot of room for improvement in the recruitment and selection mechanism of international students in China. Compared with the relatively perfect recruitment and selection system in Western countries, China is relatively backward in this respect, especially the lack of hard assessment and selection standards in the academic quantitative aspect.

In terms of language selection mechanism, the current HSK test lacks professional investigation and has certain leaps and bounds of results, making it difficult for each school to choose appropriate standards at the language level. Therefore, in terms of language assessment, HSK institutions and Chinese universities need to make continuous efforts to gradually improve the language assessment system. In terms of academic selection mechanism, most universities in China lack clear and specific standards, which makes the threshold of international students in China too low, and the quality of international students in some universities is uneven. In addition, on the issue of preparatory courses, most education countries in the world have established a relatively complete curriculum system and entrance mechanism, while China is still in the initial and exploration stage. Based on the existing problems, in general, quantitative performance assessment and improvement of the preparatory school system are the most necessary measures to select outstanding international students and improve the overall quality of international students. In terms of alternative selection mechanisms, Chinese universities still have greatly neglect this aspect of selection. In the future, more studies can recruit students with special skills in a certain field separately and cultivate them. In a word, although China's current policy is more inclined to abstract more foreign students to expand the scale of international students in China, quality control still needs exploration.

However, relatively speaking, this paper mainly focuses on the sorting and interpretation of literature survey policies and lacks some practical investigation. Consequently, in order to strengthen policies and better support the globalization of China's higher education, future research might be more focused and based on the feelings and personal experiences of foreign students studying there.

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