

The Multi-dimensional Effect of Family Income on Opportunity Equality of Access to Higher Education in Japan

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Abstract. Opportunity of access to higher education is related to personal development, as well as to the future status of the individual in the social hierarchy. Therefore, to ensure the opportunity equality of access to higher education is very important and has been a research focus. However, the existing research on the deep causes affecting the opportunity equality of access to higher education is still limited. As a supplement, this paper takes Japan as the research object, analyzes the current situation of higher education enrollment in Japan from three dimensions of material value, cultural value and thinking value, and finds out that there is also the problem of inequality of access to higher education in Japan. Through the analysis of survey data and qualitative analysis, the paper finds out that educational resources, comprehensive quality, cultural atmosphere of growth environment and students' thinking patterns are all important factors leading to such inequality, and these factors are all related to family income. Therefore, it can be inferred that family income affects the opportunity equality of access to higher education from multiple dimensions in Japan. In order to promote the equality of access to higher education, this paper puts forward some countermeasures to reduce the influence of family income. In the material dimension, it should improve the existing scholarship structure and increase its popularization rate, reduce the part-time job restriction, and alleviate the imbalance of educational resources caused by income difference. In the cultural dimension, it is necessary to balance the differences in the cultivation of comprehensive quality in different schools and families, and create a proper cultural atmosphere of growth environment for students through various methods. In the thinking dimension, families and schools should make more efforts to cultivate the educational thinking of students.

1. Preface

Opportunity of access to higher education has an impact on the distribution and redistribution of resources and interests such as individual rights and opportunities, and is related to individual's future development[1]. Therefore, the realization of equal access to higher education is an important part of the realization of education equality and even social equality. As a representative of developed countries in Asia, Japan has made considerable achievements in promoting opportunity equality of access to higher education and thus has a great reference value.

Since Japan entered the stage of popularization of higher education in the early 21st century, it has been committed to solving the problem of unequal opportunity of access to higher education. To ensure that high school students have equal opportunities when entering higher education, Japan's government has introduced a variety of relevant policies, such as the "Support Policy for Students with Financial Difficulties" updated in 2023[2] and the "Higher Education Cost Reduction Policy" to be implemented in 2024[3]. At the same time, Japanese scholars have been studying the internal factors that lead to unequal access to higher education, among which family income has been considered as one of the important

reasons[4]. However, at present, there are no in-depth studies to explore the impact of family income on the opportunity of access to higher education in Japan from material dimension, cultural dimension and thinking dimension. This paper starts with the shortcomings of the existing research, deeply explore the internal context of impact of family income on opportunity equality of access to higher education from the three dimensions. Meanwhile, the paper puts forward countermeasures to solve the existing problem of unequal access to higher education caused by family income in Japan, and makes some contributions to the realization of equal higher education opportunity.

2. The reality of unequal access to higher education

2.1. Material Dimension

In 2021, MEXT conducted a survey among high school students[5]. Among all the samples who participated in the survey, 8.6% chose direct employment, that is to give up the opportunity to enter higher education. In the statistics of the reasons for choosing direct employment, the three main reasons are "willing to make money as soon as

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possible or willing to achieve economic independence", "even if you access to higher education, you may not be able to find a good job" and "the cost of college or university is too high". It can be seen that in Japan, material problems are still a major factor affecting the choice of high school students. For students from low-income families, the pressure of tuition fees is greater, and the need to make money is also stronger, so it is easier for them to give up access to higher education and choose direct employment than students from high-income families.

What aggravate this inequality is the problem of the scholarship system. The average tuition at national and public universities is now as high as 530,000 Yen, which is very expensive for low-income families. Therefore the scholarship system is particularly important. But according to the survey data, the current scholarship system in Japan is not widespread enough.

Moreover, the part-time job restriction of Japanese college students needs to be relieved. According to statistics, nearly 80% of high school students who decide to pursue higher education believe that it is necessary to work to provide tuition fees and living expenses. In fact, more than 70% of college students do part-time job in their spare time, which is enough to prove the importance of part-time work for maintaining learning and living expenses during higher education. But at present, Japanese universities generally have a time limit for students to work. Under such restrictions, some students cannot meet the need to make money and have to choose to give up higher education.

The situation is also reflected in the inequality of educational resources. Japan has national, public and private schools from primary school to higher education. Generally speaking, private and national schools have advantages in teaching quality compared with most public schools because of their unique educational system[6]. According to the survey, from primary school to junior high school, private schools have obvious advantages over public schools in terms of academic standards[7]. In addition, in terms of the number of students enrolled in key universities, the number of students entering colleges and universities and the standard score, private schools are also significantly better than public schools[8,9]. Corresponding to that, private schools charge much more than public schools, which are often unaffordable for low-income families. Besides school resources, most students also take after-school remedial classes to enhance their academic performance. There are also differences between remedial classes. The classes with high teaching level and high enrollment rate are relatively expensive.

2.2. Cultural Dimension

To access to higher education in Japan, besides the General Entrance Examination which mainly examines academic qualifications, there are also Recommended Entrance Examination and AO Entrance Examination. Both of them focus on the comprehensive quality of students. In addition, when it comes to interviews, students with high comprehensive quality have obvious advantages. It is clear that in the face of access to higher education, high

comprehensive quality can improve the enrollment opportunity. In fact, comprehensive quality is also linked to family income. A study of Japanese students found out that an increase in household income significantly improved the comprehensive quality of students[10]. The difference of family income leads to the difference of students' comprehensive quality, which affects the opportunity of access to higher education.

Besides, from the perspective of cultural dimension, the cultural atmosphere of the students' growing environment also affects the opportunity of access to higher education. The cultural atmosphere within the family has an important impact on children. Generally speaking, a good family cultural atmosphere can stimulate children's learning motivation, improve children's learning efficiency, cultivate children's learning habits and confidence, expand children's learning vision, so as to enhance children's learning ability, and play a positive role in children's access to higher education. On the contrary, poor cultural atmosphere of family may lead to children's learning boredom, learning anxiety, learning deviations and other problems. In addition to family, the cultural atmosphere of students' peer group is also an important factor. Peer groups can be even more influential than parents and teachers because they are more similar in age, interests, and values. Therefore, the cultural atmosphere of the peer circle has a particular impact on students. When the circle has a better cultural atmosphere, that is, when most of the peers around have better academic ability and quality, it means being in a benign learning environment. While learning from and competing with people around, learning ability is improved and thus the opportunity of access to higher education is enhanced.

The problem is that both the cultural atmosphere of family and the cultural atmosphere of peers are tied to family income. Families with higher income tend to have a better cultural atmosphere, and students from higher-income families also tend to be in circles with better cultural atmosphere. Proper cultural atmosphere exerts a positive influence on students, and ultimately improves their opportunities of access to higher education, while low-income families do the opposite.

2.3. Thinking Dimension

The educational inequality brought by family income is not only at the material level, but fundamentally related to the thinking of students. Generally speaking, students' educational thinking includes the view of education, the awareness of the importance of education, the expectation of educational achievement, etc. This consciousness will be reflected in practice, and ultimately have an impact on educational achievement.

In Japan, students' views on education may vary depending on age, gender, region, school, etc. In general, Japanese students believe that education is a necessary learning process for their own future and social development. But there are also some students who do not realize the importance of education. Such students regard education as an obligation, ignoring its important meaning to themselves. The awareness of the importance of

education often determines the motivation to learn. If students understand the importance of education to their own development, they will be able to realize the necessity of learning and the benefits of higher education. In this way, they will have more motivation to learn and put more effort in order to achieve higher educational achievements. But the reality is that students' perceptions of education are also influenced by family income. In general, the higher the family income, the higher the children's expectations and satisfaction with education, and vice versa. Studies show that the higher the education level of parents and the higher the parents' income, the earlier the formation of children's higher education expectations and the higher the chance of access to higher education[11]. Such difference in thinking is actually a reflection of educational injustice.

3. Family income affects opportunity equality of access to higher education

3.1. Material Dimension

Family income affects students' choice of access to higher education. On the one hand, as the figure(Fig.1) below shows, a higher percentage of students from middle-and high-income families choose four-year colleges. On the other hand, the proportion of students from low-and middle-income families is higher among those who choose to study at short-term colleges and junior colleges which have short leaning system and help students obtain employment quickly. In addition, a considerable number of low-income students will choose to give up the opportunity of access to higher education directly because they can not afford the tuition or are eager to make money as soon as possible. Therefore, at the entrance stage, family income will directly affect the opportunity equality of access to higher education.

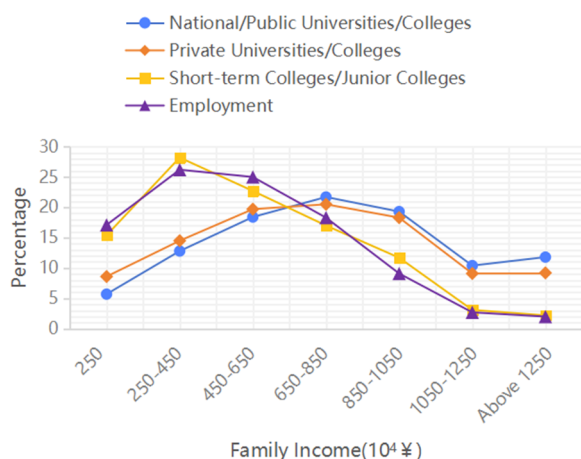


Fig. 1. The Proportion of Different Family Income in Different Higher Educational Choices

Besides, educational resources of high quality are expensive in Japan. According to the research[12], there is a clear difference in education expenditure between public and private schools(Fig.2). In terms of tuition fees alone, private schools are several times higher than public schools. And in terms of after-school tuition, private school students also pay more(Fig.3). The schools and

after-schools with better teaching level and higher enrollment rate are expensive, which are hard to afford for low-income families. Consequently, such high-quality educational resources tend to flow to high-income families, resulting in inequality of educational resources, which indirectly leads to unequal access to higher education.

Public Kindergarten	223,	647¥
Private Kindergarten	527,	916¥
Public Primary School	321,	281¥
Private Primary School	1,	598, 691¥
Public Middle School	488,	397¥
Private Middle School	1,	406, 433¥
Public High School (Full Time)	457,	380¥
Private High School (Full Time)	969,	911¥

Fig. 2. Difference in education expenditure between public and private schools

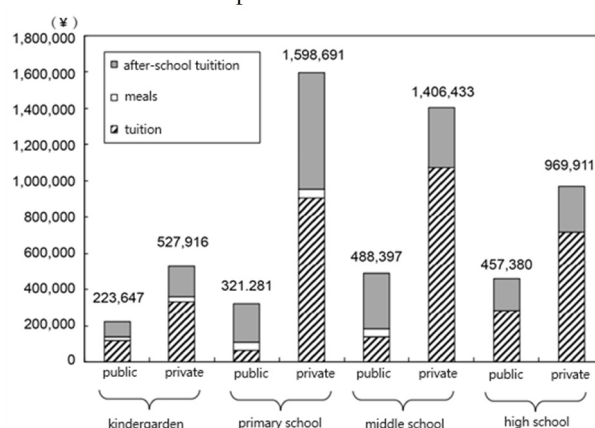


Fig. 3. Education expenditure for one year for public and private school students

3.2. Cultural Dimension

The gap in family income will cause the difference of students' comprehensive quality. First of all, families with higher incomes have the economic ability and social resources to provide better educational resources for their children, including schools, after-school tutoring, social activities and so on. In addition, from the perspective of physical quality, high-income families can provide their children with better nutrition and medical treatment to ensure children's health and physical development. Moreover, from the perspective of psychological quality, low-income families may have a negative impact on their children because of economic difficulties, family conflicts, social discrimination and other reasons, resulting in children's low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and other psychological problems. On the contrary, children from high-income families are more likely to have high self-esteem and confidence.

In addition to comprehensive quality, the gap in family income also causes difference in the cultural atmosphere of students' growth environment. Compared with low-income families, high-income families are more likely to pay others to do housework to ensure more time with their children[13]. Meanwhile, high-income parents themselves spend more time studying, which can play a positive role in guiding their children. According to the investigation,

Japanese high-income earners (annual income above 10 million Yen) read more books than the average income group and have better reading habits.[14] This data suggests that higher earners may value reading more or have more leisure time to do so. The reality now is that high-income parents spend more time with their children, and they have better study habits themselves, and thus create a better family cultural atmosphere. In contrast, low-income parents perform bad in this area. On the one hand, they are indeed forced by reality to make a living and lack the time to accompany their children. On the other hand, they lack awareness of the importance of education and self-learning. Besides, the peer circle of students from high-income families is more likely to provide a proper cultural atmosphere, which plays a positive role in improving the opportunity of access to higher education. For example, if students from a high-income family attend a good private school, there is a high probability that the friends they make also come from wealthy families and have similar high academic level. In such a proper educational environment, students compete and communicate with each other, and this interaction promotes their academic ability.

3.3. Thinking Dimension

Family income affects students' views on education and thus their choice of access to higher education. For students from high-income families, receiving higher education is a means to broaden knowledge. And it is also a necessary way to maintain or further improve their family's social status. However, for students from low-income families, they have to link education with material value, giving priority to issues such as cost and employment.

A survey shows that the higher the income of parents, the more they expect their children to go to university, and the better the grades their children get[15]. This is because parents with a high degree and high income experience the benefits of higher education and they can afford the cost of further education, so they are more inclined to expect their children to have a high degree. However, some of students with high academic attainment in the survey also came from low-income families. Their common characteristics are: listening to parents talk about picture books since childhood; being asked by families to read books and newspapers; eating breakfast every day; being urged to study in a planned way, etc. It can be seen that students' academic ability and parents' income is not an absolute relationship. Actually, it is parents' ideology and family's living habits that affect students' performance. On the whole, parents with high-income generally pay more attention to education and to the cultivation of children's learning habits. In such a subtle cultivation, students from high-income families have a clearer understanding of the importance of education and a stronger willingness to high-level universities. Such mindset also promotes their academic attainment, thus improving opportunity of access to higher education.

4. Countermeasures

4.1. Material Dimension

Material-related problems are still a barrier to access to higher education for students from low-income families. To alleviate such problems, both scholarship and part-time job system should be improved. On the one hand, the existing scholarship system needs restructuring. Nowadays, scholarships in Japan are mainly divided into two types: grant scholarships (which do not need to be repaid) and loan scholarships (which need to be repaid). Survey data shows that more than 70% of families are not willing to apply for the loan scholarship because they think it will become a burden on their children. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the proportion of grant scholarships and appropriately reduce the difficulty of application according to the family conditions of students. In addition, the existing scholarship penetration rate is not high. The survey shows that about 80% of people who choose to forgo higher education opportunities do not know or have never heard of the scholarship system. To improve this situation, various institutions providing scholarships (including student support agencies, civil organizations, schools, etc.) should step up their publicity efforts. Students' family backgrounds can be investigated through schools and other channels in advance, thus students from poor families can be introduced and offered scholarships point-to-point. On the other hand, the restrictions on part-time work can be relaxed to ease the financial pressure on students. In addition, universities and colleges can provide some work-study opportunities to generate income for students.

Besides, it is necessary to balance the educational resources of families with different incomes. For one thing, the government should increase the investment in public middle and high schools, increase the financial allocation for teachers, teaching equipment, venues and so on in order to reduce the difference in teaching level between public and private schools. For another, in view of the current problem of high after-school tuition fees, schools can provide students with low or free remedial classes. In another way, the network platform can be applied to ensure the equality of educational resources by releasing unified high-quality teaching videos.

4.2. Cultural Dimension

In the comprehensive quality cultivation, family should pay special attention to psychological quality. Low-income families should avoid bringing additional negative effects on children due to economic difficulties, family conflicts, social discrimination and other reasons. Parents should give children positive encouragement to cultivate their self-esteem, confidence and optimism.

Moreover, shaping a proper cultural atmosphere of students' growth environment is of great significance. From the perspective of family, low-income parents should spend more time with their children learning and communicating, and increase their own learning and reading time to give their children positive guidance.

Communities can organize publicity activities to popularize the correct awareness of education to parents, and regularly organize parent-child learning activities in order to create a proper family cultural atmosphere. From the perspective of peer circle, it is necessary to break the restrictions of family income on students' circle of friends and expand their scope of making friends. To achieve this, communities or regional teenager's organization can regularly organize cultural exchange activities among young people, so that students from different family backgrounds have opportunities to contact. In this way, students from low-income families have opportunities to be in circles with better cultural atmosphere.

4.3. Thinking Dimension

The educational injustice brought by the family income gap is also reflected in the thinking dimension. To let students have a positive understanding of education needs multiple efforts. For family, low-income parents may lack awareness of the importance of education, so it is necessary to carry out family education training or educational demonstration activities to parents. In this way, parents will consciously cultivate children's learning habits and instill positive educational thinking into children's minds. Besides, schools should also make efforts to let students understand the importance of education and the benefits of higher education for personal development. For example, schools can conduct one-on-one talks or three-way talks regularly, giving reasonable guidance to make students clear their higher education intention as soon as possible.

5. Conclusion

This paper makes an in-depth study of how family income affects the opportunity equality of access to higher education in Japan from three dimensions and puts forward countermeasures against the current situation. Based on the problem of unequal access to higher education in Japan, it can be inferred that such problem also exists in other countries. To solve such problem, we can analyze it from the perspective of family income. By reducing the influence of family income, we can gradually promote the opportunity equality of access to higher education, and finally realize the equality of access to higher education in various countries.

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