

# *Research on Scale Retrogression and Development Countermeasures of Self-study Examination in China*

—Taking the Jiangsu Province as an Example

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**Abstract**—The self-study examination of higher education is a kind of three-in-one education form of individual self-study, social assistance and national examination. Its development in the past 30 years has been obvious to all. However, self-study examination has encountered a series of problems that hinder its advancement in the process of further developing. This article mainly analyzes the problems encountered in the development of self-study examinations and puts forward some measures to solve the difficulties.

**Keywords**—self-study examination; social assistance; scale retrogression; development countermeasures

## I. INTRODUCTION

Self-study examination for higher education is a kind of national higher education examination system founded in the early 1980s, which mainly focuses on self-study students. After registering for a certain major, the students will participate in the corresponding course examinations prescribed by the professional plan. When successfully passing all the courses stipulated in the major plan including practical assessment and graduation thesis, the students can obtain a junior college or undergraduate diploma for self-study examination. The graduates who meet the provisions of the "People's Republic of China Degree Regulations" can apply for a bachelor's degree. According to the different running subjects, self-study examination for higher education can be divided into three different forms: social self-study, university self-study and specialized subject-to-undergraduate education. Social self-examination means that the students registering for this kind of examination study in a social organization or study totally by themselves while university self-study make full use of the educating resources of colleges and universities and candidates study full-time in the running higher education institutions. Specialized subject-to-undergraduate education, just as its name implies, when the full-time junior college students finish the first two years courses, they can register for the undergraduate self-examination in a certain running university.

Since the establishment in 1981, self-study examination for higher education has been characterized by openness,

flexibility, and cost-efficiency and strict examination system. The combination of personal self-study, social assistance, and national examinations has trained a large number of applied professionals for social construction [1]. The development of self-study examinations has gone through three stages. In the first stage, social in-service personnel were the main force of self-study examinations. Due to the low admission rate of college entrance examinations at that time, social in-service personnel generally had low academic qualifications, and career development had encountered bottlenecks. Due to the requirements of job title assessment, salary increasing, and job promotion, a large number of social in-service personnel had joined the self-study examination, which not only satisfied the individual's demand for academic qualifications, but also cultivated a group of talents with both theoretical and practical ability for the economic construction. The second stage is where the self-study examination provided an opportunity for the students who failed in the college entrance examination. Before Chinese college entrance expansion in 1999, there were a large number of students failed in the entrance exam and were faced the situation of not having college-education opportunity. The self-study examination began to play the role of higher education. It not only satisfied the need to acquire knowledge and obtain diplomas, but also relieved the pressure on the social employment situation. In the third stage, students in college had more demands for the knowledge or degrees and self-study examination became the best choice for them. At that time, some junior college students wanted to get a bachelor degree while some college students were not satisfied with their own major [2]. These students choose self-study examination to meet their own individual needs. In the face of such demands, self-study examinations introduced the university self-study to promote the professional reforms and improved exam-passing rates and graduation rates.

## II. ANALYZE THE CHANGES OF COMPOSITION STRUCTURE OF SELF-STUDY EXAMINATION

From the above data, it is not difficult to see that in recent years, the overall scale of self-study examinations in Jiangsu Province has been shrinking year by year. After passing the

first and second stages, the number of social self-examination with employed personnel and senior middle school students failing in the entrance examination as its main force has been largely declining year by year.

Since 2001, the number of self-study examination students has shown an upward trend. Under the situation of expansion of college entrance examination and the increasing number of junior college students, Jiangsu Province's self-study examination has made bold reforms and was determined to innovate. In 2008, they officially launched the specialized subject-to-undergraduate education to carry out self-study examinations in ordinary colleges and universities throughout the province. After trial exploration in previous years, the number of applicants has been relatively stable after a steady rise, becoming a new growth point and also injecting new vitality into self-study examinations. In 2017, the total number of self-study examinations in Jiangsu Province reached 652,600, of which the social self-study was 347,900, accounting for 53.3 % of the total. The number of HEIs self-study was 203,300, accounting for 31.1 % while this register number of specialized subject-to-undergraduate education was 101,400, accounting for 15.6 % of the total. In 2017, there were 5356 graduates from the Jiangsu Provincial self-study examination, including 14,656 social graduates, 23,626 HEIs student graduates, and 15,314 specialized subject-to-undergraduate graduates. From the above data, we can see that the last two types have already occupied half the total number. It is precisely because of the reform of the professional curriculum system, the diversification of evaluation methods, and the unified training process, the pass rate and the graduation rate of the examination have significantly improved compared with the social self-study. It is also the breakthrough point of the self-study examination.

### III. REASONS FOR DECLINING NUMBER OF SELF-STUDY EXAMINATION

Higher education self-study examination has experienced 30 years of rapid development. After entering the third stage, the number of applicants has declined year by year due to various reasons. Take Jiangsu province as an example. Jiangsu started its self-study examination in 1983 and as of 2016, the total number of applicants has reached 22.27 million, more than 850,000 graduates have been cultivated for the society. It has made an indelible contribution to improving the quality of the nation and cultivating the excellent talents needed by the social economy. However, in recent years, with the continuous development of society, the expansion of enrollment of higher education institutions, and the diversified forms of higher education, the development of self-study examinations is facing fierce competition [3]. The number of applicants for self-study examinations has been declining year by year.

#### A. Enrolment and Composition of Self-study Examinations in Jiangsu Province of Recent Years

Analyze the registration changes. In recent years, due to the impact of other forms of higher education, the scale of self-study examinations in Jiangsu Province has experienced a certain downward trend. In 2013, the number of applicants was

806,242 while 718,323 for 2014, 653,041 for 2015 and 618,346 for 2016. In 2017, the number of applicants was 652,594.

Classify the statistics. In 2013, the number of social self-examination registering candidates was 570,487, 461,072 in 2014, 363,040 in 2015, and 322,518 in 2016 and in 2017, the number was 347,872. For specialized subject-to-undergraduate education, there were 100,738 registering students in 2013, 116,737 in the year of 2014, 116,579 in 2015, 107,714 in 2016 and 101,395 for the year of 2017. As for the HEIs self-study, the registration number in 2013 was 135,017, 140,722 in 2014, 166,800 in 2015, 188,114 in 2016, and in 2017, the number was 203,327.

Comparatively analyze the statistics. From 2013 to 2017, the number of people taking part in the social self-study examination dropped significantly, and the number of applicants for specialized subject-to-undergraduate education was relatively stable while the number of students enrolled in the HEIs self-study continued to grow steadily [4]. For more than 30 years, the self-study examination of Jiangsu Province has experienced a brilliant period of millions of applicants. In recent years, because the forms of higher education have become more diversified and the candidates have various choices, self-study examinations have begun to enter the developing bottleneck showing the "parabola". From the statistical data, we can see the scale of self-study examination shows a declining trend.

#### B. Analyzing the Reasons for the Declining in the Number of Applicants for Self-study Examination.

##### 1) Shrinking Supply of Students.

First of all, affected by the family planning policy, the population has gradually declined after the rapid growth, resulting in a reduction in the number of school-age students. This can be seen from the annual decrease in the number of applicants for the college entrance examination.

Secondly, as one of the forms of higher education, the source of self-study examination students is influenced by other forms of higher education. Since 1999 when the number of students enrolled in the general college entrance examination increased by 42 % over the previous year, a large-scale expansion for general higher education has been started for up to 10 years. In addition, the state has issued separate entrance examinations for students from vocational high schools and secondary schools. If the students could pass the exam, they also had the opportunity to do the further study in the colleges or universities. All these made the source of students failed in the entrance examination drop off.

In recent years, in order to speed up the popularization of higher education, the provinces have competed to enlarge the enrollment plans for adult higher education, coupled with the distance education and the open education of the Central Radio and TV University, which has attracted a large number of students. In the face of the diversification of higher education forms and the competition, the source of students entering self-study examinations has been reduced year by year.

Moreover, foreign higher education has gradually opened its doors to our country, and more and more students choose to

go abroad for further studies. This is also a reason why the number of self-study students has decreased.

### 2) *Deficiencies of self-study examination mechanism.*

The self-study examination has a complete management system, a unified professional plan, a separate examination system for teaching examinations, and extremely strict examination discipline [5]. Therefore, the system guarantees the authority, science, and seriousness. However, the self-study examination itself also has certain flaws, especially the lag in system, professional plans and curriculum settings being alienated from the reality, and single training method with low passing and graduating rates. These all constrain its further development.

The self-study exam is an educational activity organized around examinations. Under this educational system, everything is centered on the examination with the only aim of obtaining a diploma. Such a single academic education is out of social development and cannot be integrated into the lifelong education system proposed by the "18th National Congress". Faced with the rapid development of society and the improvement of professional requirements, self-study examinations can no longer meet the needs of the economic, social development or employment unit.

The professional plan of self-study examination is based on the teaching requirements of general higher education, and is consistent with the academic level of the corresponding majors in general higher education. The curriculum setting emphasizes the deepening of theoretical knowledge not put its focus on cultivating application-oriented and career-oriented talents. Moreover, professional plan does not keep up with the times. In recent years, the curriculum has changed little, the textbook revising cycle is long, and most of the knowledge given is relatively backward information, which is out of step with the development of the times. It cannot meet the demand for new knowledge and new skills under the rapid development of society. The vast majority of people who take self-study examinations are on-the-job personnel and students. They are usually busy with work and their own studies having limited energy to invest in self-study examinations. Relying on students' self-study without pointed instruction gets fewer and poorer result. The difficulty of courses, lacking means of study, single examination method and poor results of the lower pass rate and graduation rate of not only has a great negative impact on students' enthusiasm and confidence in learning but is also an important reason why students are squeezed by adult higher education, distance education and open education.

### 3) *Policy restrictions on self-study examinations.*

The students who take self-study examinations have only obtained the examination status without student status in the HEIs system. Therefore, students lack a sense of cognition and belonging. Compared with the full-time students and adult education students studying in the same school, the self-study students don't have retention files, opportunity to join the party, or job referral forms [6]. All these have a great influence on the employment of self-study examination graduates.

Due to the lack of national policies and institutional guidance for self-study examinations, the graduates have not received relevant employment guidance, and they encounter

more or less discrimination in the employment process. For example, at the talent recruitment conference, advertisements for "recruiting only full-time graduates" can be found everywhere. In the recruitment of National civil servants and even enterprises, graduates of self-study examinations cannot be given the same treatment as full-time graduates. This social discrimination stops more students taking self-study examinations.

## IV. COUNTERMEASURES

In the face of the developing obstacles after more than 30 years of fast development, especially the rapid decline of the number of applicants, self-study examination should face the defects of its mechanism. Stand on a higher position to broaden the thinking, speed up the reform, promote institutional innovation, implement structural adjustment, and improve the quality of education. We should make self-study examination an important platform for open, flexible and convenient civil education and lifelong education. It is an important way to cultivate talents with practical and professional ability and an important force for building a modern national education system.

### A. *Explicit self-study Test Orientation*

As an important part of the higher education system, self-study examination is an overpass to construct the lifelong education system. It shows the unique role and status of training applied professionals in the development of higher education in China.

We will place equal emphasis on academic education and non-academic certificate examinations, make balance between scale and quality, focus on candidates and take the market as the center. Work hard to transform self-study examinations from single academic education to lifelong education and from subject education to applied education, from the emphasis on examination results to the education process.

The self-study examination should continue to change its thinking, adjust its functions and improve its innovation mechanism. It should be positioned as continuing education and lifelong education, and become a powerful tool to build a lifelong education system.

### B. *Innovate the Professional Planning and Curriculum System*

Change the current situation of putting focus on theoretical study to develop a strategy combining the knowledge study with occupation and non-academic education. Self-study examination should gradually form a professional and curriculum system based on applied and vocational types. Practical and applied courses should be added into the professional program. Strengthen the students' practical and application ability on the basis of acquiring basic theoretical knowledge to continuously improve the students' employability competitiveness [7]. To cultivate applied talents, the theoretical courses should be evaluated by the same standard as the ordinary higher education. Covering the just needs is perfect. It is necessary to reduce the difficulty of theoretical courses and focus on practical and applied courses to ensure that students

can make use of what they have learned. It also helps to improve pass and graduation rates. The curriculum of the specialized subject-to-undergraduate education is composed of communication courses, bridging courses, professional backbone courses and practical training courses, highlighting practicality, and strengthening the teaching and assessment of practical learning links. After two years of study, students can systematically master the basic theories, basic knowledge and basic skills required by the profession. They can use the theoretical knowledge and skills they have learned to engage in the actual work of the profession, and have strong ability to study independently and analyze and solve problems.

### *C. Change the Single Cultivating Mode of Academic Education*

In foreign countries, self-study examinations mainly focus on the cultivation of students' actual skills, culture and other substantive abilities. They pay attention to the students' personality and combine the basic education, professional education and skills developing required by the working units together, emphasizing the re-improvement of students' abilities. On the other hand, self-examination education in China is simply converted into academic compensation education. Abandoning the concept of students' own personal development and skills training needs has made many self-examination colleges and universities fail to form their own unique advantages. Faced with the rapid development of society and the improvement of professional requirements, a single educational training model cannot meet the needs of social development, nor can it meet the requirements of students seeking employment. The development of self-study examinations must shift from a single academic education to a talent training model that combines non-academic education, expand a specialized multi-certificate channel, and widen the range of credits interchanges between self-study examinations and certificate examination courses, trying to achieve the "dual certificate system" or "multi-certificate system" talent training model.

Gradually realize the communication and convergence between self-study examinations and non-academic education in other sectors to deepen the educational function of self-study examinations and attract new students. It can also meet students multiple needs for academic qualifications, post certificates, and vocational certificates.

### *D. Develop Diversified Forms of Students Aids*

On the basis of adhering to the teaching-test separation, self-study examinations rely on existing social education resources to gradually form self-study examination learning service centers. We should further expand cooperation with industry departments and institutions of higher learning to create brand projects and social effects.

HEIs self-study examination should make full use of the teaching resources of the running colleges or universities to provide better service for the students and make all the resources, teaching equipments and teachers available to the self-study students. The running schools should pay close attention to teaching process management and quality

monitoring. At the same time, it also should carry out cultural and community activities to enrich campus culture [8]. Reinforce the daily management of college students and attach importance to student services to effectively improve the comprehensive quality of students. Making students identify with the university campus cultures and attracting the students who fail in college entrance examination and junior college graduates has become a new growth point for the HEIs self-study examinations.

Specialized subject-to-undergraduate education has fully mobilized the enthusiasm of students, the running units, and functional departments. If the junior college students have finished all the courses required in the corresponding cultivating plan, they can choose to register to participate in the specialized study of the college at the last year. With the help of the examiners' school, the junior colleges could organize their students to participate in the teaching and learning activities at the located original junior colleges. The junior colleges provide unified and high-quality services for students which could help them get rid of cumbersome procedures of the whole process and it is also a new growth point for self-study examination.

### *E. Improving the Learning Service System*

Characterized by personal self-study and social assistance, the students registering to self-study exam usually do not have study plan and they cannot distinguish the key points of certain course, and even some students don't fully understand the corresponding policies. Faced with these problems, functional departments and student assistance units should change their thinking patterns to strengthen guidance and highlight services.

In the modern information-based society, self-study examinations must actively carry out online learning based on informatization and other networked means of learning assistance, and build a learning service system that combines online and offline learning to provide students with comprehensive support services including learning guidance, resource sharing and technical services. The self-study exam in Jiangsu province is ahead of the rest of the country in this respect, with more than 50 majors and more than 200 online student education programs, providing candidates with more extensive forms of student guidance.

Jiangsu self-study exam uses the Internet to answer questions online and strengthen interaction for self-study students. It has developed the "online consultation" and "online interview" platform so that students can have "face-to-face" exchanges with self-study examination management departments and examiners at all levels just stay indoors.

### *F. Adjust the Student Source Structure and Strengthen the Publicity of Admissions*

In the face that self-study examinations have entered the third stage of development, the student source structure has been actively adjusted. It should put focus on the social aided education and the specialized subject-to-undergraduate education. Students who fail in the entrance exam and from the higher vocational colleges and junior colleges should become the main sources.



Actively carry out publicity campaigns for enrollment and make use of Internet resources and other available platforms to send recruiting propaganda to all levels of schools and colleges to preach self-study examination policies and eliminate students' misunderstandings about self-study examinations to attract more students to take part in that kind of study [9].

#### *G. Formulating and Implementing Relevant Policies to Safeguard Students' Rights*

As one of the forms of higher education, the functional departments should pay attention to the interests of self-study students when formulating policies to help advocate the rights and narrow the policy differences with other forms of higher education. Eliminate prejudice against self-study examinations and acknowledge the studying effects and the undergraduate identity of self-study examination students.

In Jiangsu province, students of specialized subject-to-undergraduate education have the access to policy support in getting certificate of registry. If the junior college students can get a diploma through the up-to-undergraduate program in two years after their graduation, they can return back to the employment department of their original junior college to apply for an employment certificate for graduates at the undergraduate level, which solves the problem that students need to hold a higher academic qualification certificate to report to the applicant unit.

The main function of higher education is to solve the employment problems of students, so is the self-study examinations. If it can solve the employment problems, self-study examinations will be of more attraction. Functional departments should be in coordination with other relevant departments to take active and effective measures to remove restrictions, break discrimination and widen channels to create a more favorable employment environment for self-study examination graduates. To strengthen guidance on employment and provide policy support, recruitment units should eliminate the stereotype of previous hiring standards and government agencies and institutions should remove the restrictions on self-study examination applicants to give the graduates the equal opportunity. Since 2005, Jiangsu self-study examination has held a special job fair for the graduates every year to provide

jobs information and this effectively solve the employment problems of some self-study examination graduates.

#### V. CONCLUSION

As an education system with Chinese characteristics and suitable for China's National conditions, self-study examinations for higher education must constantly insist on reforming and perfecting itself, update the concepts and innovate the mechanisms to fully reflect the advantages of self-study examination which is of open educational platform, flexible form of running a school, low learning cost, and high educating quality. It plays an important role in promoting education equity, constructing lifelong education system and promoting social harmonious development.

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