



# Do the "Guiding Opinions" Promote Equality of the Entrance Examination for Vocal Music Majors in Higher Education?

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**Abstract.** With the emergence of vocal music education in Chinese universities, the problem of how to recruit corresponding students has also followed. Due to the low admission scores of the vocal music examination, some candidates want to utilize this as a shortcut to enter the university, which affects the effective selection of talents and the fair admission to a certain extent. Over the years, the government has issued annual "Notices" to promote a fairer and more efficient selection mechanism. However, the equality of the college entrance examination for vocal music majors has been controversial. In the context of the new policy reform in 2021, this paper uses the theoretical framework of educational equality to discuss and analyze whether the "Guiding Opinions" are effective in making the selection of the college entrance examination for vocal music majors more equitable.

**Keywords:** Guiding Opinions, College entrance examination, Vocal music, Educational equality

## 1 Background

Vocal music education institutions originated in Rome [1]. Influenced by Western theories and systems, vocal music education in Chinese colleges was gradually formed in the 19th century [2]. In 1927, Dr Xiao founded the first professional higher music education college in China's history, thus initiating the cultivation of vocal talents in music colleges [3].

Gradually, as more and more people wanted to enter college to receive vocal music education, screening mechanisms emerged and the problem of how to recruit students became a serious one. The CEE for vocal music majors is a merit-based admission process based on the overall scores obtained by combining the candidate's academic performance with an additional exam in vocal music [4]. In the current context of strong demand for quality education but insufficient resources, the examination, as one of the important ways of allocating social resources, plays the role of "equality standards". It can be said that examination equality is the foundation of educational equality [5]. Yet,

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due to the low academic admission scores of the vocal music examination, some candidates wanted to utilize this as a shortcut to enter college. To a certain extent, it has affected the effective selection of talents and the fair admission of universities [6].

In order to explore a fairer and more effective selection mechanism, China’s Ministry of Education (2021) issued the "Guiding Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving the Admission Work of the Entrance Examination for Art Majors in General Higher Education" (hereinafter referred to as the "Guiding Opinions") [7]. This is the first time that the state has issued a programmatic guideline on the CEE for art majors, so it is of great significance. It aims to form an scientific evaluation system for the selection of artistic talents that promotes strong supervision and equality.

However, although the CEE for vocal music majors has existed for many years, little research has been conducted on its equality. As one of the key branches of the CEE, its value should receive attention. In the context of the new policy reform in 2021, this paper will explore and analyze whether the "Guiding Opinions" is effective in making the selection of vocal music talents for the CEE more equitable from the perspective of educational equality. Hopefully, it is to contribute to the promotion of CEE for vocal music majors and educational equality to fill some research gaps.

## 2 Analytical Framework

Since ancient times, equality has been the value ideal pursued by human beings. Plato was an early supporter of liberal education in ancient Greece. He believed that every youngster in the city-state should have the chance to become a student [8]. Swedish educator Husén further pointed out that the concept of educational equality has undergone three evolutionary processes of conservatism, liberalism and new concepts due to different social and philosophical views, forming a theory of equal educational starting point, equal process and equal outcome [9].

Equality of starting point emphasizes equality of educational rights, which means that everyone has equal access to college regardless of gender, economic status, etc. Equality of process is the development and supplement of starting point equality, which mainly refers to ensuring that students can be treated equally in the process and not be treated unfairly due to personal and family reasons [10]. Equality of outcome mainly focuses on the academic performance of students. However, this does not mean that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, achieve academically equally. Rather, the impact of components in the educational system itself on academic success is considered equally after subtracting variables outside of educational control [11].

This essay adopts Husén's theory of educational equality as its analytical framework since it is comprehensive and insightful as well as crucial to contemporary educational development.

### **3 Analyzing the "Guiding Opinions" from the Theory of Educational Equality**

#### **3.1 Equality of Starting Point**

The "Guiding Opinions" does not appear to promote equality of starting point in the entrance examination for vocal music majors in higher education.

Although there is no requirement for candidates' social and economic status, etc. in the application process. In a way, it seems that equality of starting point has been achieved by abandoning the obstacle of power and origin to equality in education. Yet, the growth of vocal music talent does not happen overnight but requires students to have certain innate talents, interests, and the development of professional vocal music ability [12].

Regardless of the matter of innate talent and interests, the cultivation of vocal music ability afterwards is a considerable expense. The unique nature of vocal music study means that large classes are not possible, so finding a professional teacher to provide one-to-one or small-group instruction has become almost the only way for students. Generally speaking, the period of vocal music learning is relatively long, with the cost of one lesson ranging from 300-800 RMB [13] and almost 150,000 RMB for three months of training before the CEE. This is even more expensive in first-tier cities [14]. It is difficult for average families to finance training due to its costly nature.

Therefore, even if a student is musically gifted, if their family is not financially well off or from a poor background, they will only be rejected. From the beginning, students are at different starting points, which means that they are not equal from the starting stage [15].

However, the "Guiding Opinions" does not respond to equality in starting points. There is no control over the cost of vocal music training, nor is there any suggestion of including vocal music and other art courses in general education, nor is there any concern for the disparity in teacher qualifications, infrastructure, etc. between urban and rural areas. How can it be said that it promotes equality of starting points?

#### **3.2 Equality of Process**

Although the CEE for vocal music majors does lead to some problems in the process, the "Guiding Opinions" seem to be promoting equality of process.

First of all, universities have the autonomy to decide on the content and format of their examinations, and teachers have the right to mark examinees. Yet, the CEE for vocal music majors is marked face-to-face, with a limited number of examiners making a subjective assessment of the candidate's performance based on their own experience and feelings. In terms of the nature of the art, even as examiners of the same vocal music major, each has different genres and different perspectives to appreciation, making it difficult to form a uniform marking standard [15].

In addition, as there are many candidates, they are assigned to different examination rooms, and the professionalism of the examiners may vary. Then, the grasp of marking

criteria in different examination rooms is also a problem. Some teachers receive a clustering effect, scoring high marks for the whole examination, while others score relatively low, leading to inequality in the examination process [6].

As a result, the subjective nature and overly centralized power of the CEE for vocal music majors have led to the frequent bribing of examiners.

Fortunately, with the introduction of "Guiding Opinions", this phenomenon is expected to change. Firstly, the "Guiding Opinions" captures the key points, by further expanding the scope of the state's unified examinations to restrict universities' independence in organizing examinations, thereby preventing arbitrary manipulation. Additionally, in response to the difficulty of standardizing marking criteria, the "Guiding Opinions" proposes to establish a database of qualified assessors that universities in all provinces can use, and to increase the number of examiners, thereby enhancing the reliability of marking. Moreover, the "Guiding Opinions" states that a system of recusal of assessors should be established, requiring that the proportion of examiners from outside the province and the college should be at least half.

Therefore, the policy basically guarantees that students can be treated equally in the vocal music examination process and promotes equality of process.

### 3.3 Equality of Outcome

While low academic scores required for CEE for vocal music lead to social issues that affect equality of outcome, the "Guiding Opinions" seems to promote equality of outcome.

There seems to be a consensus in society that vocal music students must be poor academic performers, mainly because the academic scoreline is lower in comparison to the general CEE. According to statistics, in 2021, the second-level score for vocal music in Henan Province was 337, 129 points lower than the general CEE [16]. Additionally, some of the independently established art colleges approved by the Ministry of Education are allowed to set their score lines. Under such circumstances, the temptation of "going to college with a low score" has led some candidates to adopt dishonorable means such as bribing examiners, driven by utilitarianism. However, the low quality of students will seriously affect the cultivation of high-quality vocal music specialists, leading to a decline in the overall quality of talent development and undermining the equality of outcome [15].

It is worth noting that the "Guiding Opinions" responds to this. It emphasizes the need to gradually increase the academic scores requirements for vocal music candidates and sets minimum standards, with academic results accounting for no less than 50% of the total score. The increased weighting of academic grades discourages "going to college with a low score" and can go some way towards weakening the utilitarian tendency of students.

Therefore, the policy seems to do its best to exclude variables beyond the control of education, essentially ensuring the quality of vocal music talent recruited by colleges and promoting equality of outcome.

## 4 Conclusion and Implication

Since the introduction of the CEE for vocal music majors, people have had a fixed mindset that only the rich can learn vocal music, while students from poorer socio-economic status or rural families are out of reach due to the high cost of vocal music training. In addition, the overly centralized independent admissions power of colleges, the subjective nature of the vocal music exam and the excessively low academic score-line have given some candidates the opportunity to exploit loopholes to enter universities through disgraceful ways such as bribing examiners, leading to widespread corruption. Its inequality has been hotly debated as a social issue of concern.

The "Guiding Opinions" is a realistic response to the current situation of the CEE for vocal music majors, which confronts the existing problems as well as reflects the pursuit of objectivity and equality. To a certain extent, it does promote "equality of process" and "equality of outcome" of the entrance examination for vocal music majors in higher education.

However, China's population base is so large that it is impossible to achieve absolute equality. In an ambitious attempt to undermine the right of colleges to recruit students on their own, the "Guiding Opinions" points out to basically achieve full coverage of the unified examination for arts majors by 2024. Yet, even the exam questions for the general CEE vary from province to province and do not have a completely uniform scale or comparability. How can the CEE for vocal music majors be unified nationally? Additionally, to reduce corruption, the "Guiding Opinions" proposes a system of recusal, that only requires an expanded proportion of out-of-province and out-of-school invigilators to be at least half. The reality is that there will be loopholes to exploit as long as there is no total recusal. Perhaps it is the unspecified interests involved that have led to the policy being formulated in this way.

Moreover, It is worth mentioning that the "Guiding Opinions" does not address the issue of "equality of starting point". In order to be truly equal, it is necessary to establish protective policies for vulnerable groups. France is a good example of this. Tuition fees at French public art schools are completely free, with only the registration fees, and the French government covers two-thirds of the actual cost of education. From 2019 onwards, the French authority is offering 15,000 scholarships, a threefold increase compared to the previous year, and providing other financial aid or fee reductions to students on a case-by-case basis [17]. In this case, the decisive influence of economic status can be reduced and the equality of starting point can be promoted in practice.

Although it would be unrealistic to try to replicate the French policy in its entirety due to China's large population, it is possible to tailor the policy to China's situation and develop it from a practical point of view. For example, by providing subsidized tuition fees for distinguished students, and by controlling prices in the vocal music training market, etc. This would help increase access to college for students with outstanding vocal music talent but struggling to afford to study. Unfortunately, this is only an optimistic idea, and there is still a long way to go before it can be fully achieved.

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