

## Emergence of Application Examination System (AES) for PhD admission in China

### Introduction

PhD admission into China higher education institutions has been through an ongoing reform and landed into the Application Examination System (AES). Although there is a national need to maintain an admission system, the controversy among scholars is eminent. Hence, there is emergence of examination system for a better PhD admission in China.

### Historical development of the PhD admission in China

Beginning from 1920s and in the 1950s, the China PhD admission is called as the postgraduate admission. In the 1980s, the government, namely ministry of education, took charge of the PhD admission in terms of admission numbers and examination papers. It remained constant until PhD admission emerged into two types in 2006; direct PhD admission from Bachelor and Master to PhD program. Up to then, admission into PhD was exam based only (Ye, 2017). The first development stage of Application Examination System (AES) occurred from 2007 to 2012, when only a few universities in Beijing and Shanghai began to pilot the AES. The next stage was a rapid one from 2013 to 2016 when the "Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Postgraduate Education" was issued; clearly pointing out the need to establish AES for the selection of doctoral students.

Following that in 2014, former Vice Premier Liu Yandong, issued instructions to reform PhD enrollment system into AES. Then in 2017, the Ministry of Education officially proposed to promote and improve the reform of the AES for PhD enrollment. As a result, "Double First" universities began to adopt AES for PhD admissions and by 2019, 232 out of 312 domestic universities have implemented AES, accounting for about 75% of PhD awarding institutions in China (Huang, 2015). AES became the main policy of choice for PhD enrollment reform. Lastly, in 2021, 131 universities among the 141 "Double first" universities used AES as the only PhD application admission system (Wu, 2021).

### What is Application-Examination System (AES)?

Universities in China shifted over the years their PhD application admission system and they are currently using the new: Application-Examination System (AES). It is a form of recruiting PhD candidates by respective school based on comprehensive assessment according to principles of merit-based admission through both the opinions of their supervisors as well as the entrance examination organized by the university. Candidates apply and submit relevant documents, then the colleges and departments screen the candidates and those who pass the screening process which involves supervisors' opinions, will no longer participate in the doctoral entrance examination.

AES has high efficiency and validity in the selection process as it is based on specific discipline and assess the relevant abilities (Chen & Bai, 2021); unlike the past entrance examination system in which applicants must pass English test and two theoretical tests (Sung & Yang, 2021). The applicant may have to attend an interview with expertise from the field. The procedures for selecting PhD candidates under the AES include four steps: individual application, discipline assessment, school review, and approval by the admissions leading group (Zhang, 2021). The aim of AES is to enroll doctoral students with strong research ability rather than test-taking ability.

### Is there a need for AES to recruit PhD candidates?

Chinese scholars see that the unified written examination lack attention to the status and function of "application" in the recruitment of doctoral students, and the doctoral training units do not correctly understand the spirit of postgraduate education reform (Sung & Yang, 2021). Some colleges mistakenly believe that the AES only consists of two parts: "application material review" and "interview assessment", canceling the original important part of the written test (Wang, 2021). If there is no macro-

control of total quantity and quality that the unified examination provides, the pace of change is too large, and the risk is also greater than the opportunity.

On the other hand, some moderate scholars argue that the traditional examination system is widely accepted. The reason for the criticism is not the written test itself, but the fact that the admission results rely too much on the scores of the written test, which makes it difficult to effectively test the academic ability and comprehensive quality of students, and whether to increase the written test link depends on the characteristics of the school and discipline (Chen, T., & Bai, Z., 2021).

Nevertheless, AES has some advantages in being more efficient, diversified evaluation system and providing supervisors the right to voice. AES has diluted the weight of the test to a certain extent and set more evaluation indicators to give some candidates who are not good at examinations but have academic attainments a chance to stand out. Moreover, AES gives supervisors more autonomy, which is conducive to recruiting more high-quality students (Sung, M., & Yang, S. U., 2021).

Optimistic as it may, AES has some imperfections from fairness perspective including origin discrimination and supervisor interference. Institutions of higher learning have always been discriminated against because some colleges and universities that have implemented AES stipulate that candidate for master's or undergraduate degrees are from "Double First" universities or National Key disciplines. Therefore, skeptic scholars expressed that AES implementation has exacerbated the phenomenon of institutional discrimination in the recruitment of doctoral students, resulting in the elite class monopoly and high elitism of "prestigious schools to go to famous schools" (Zhang, 2021).

In addition, AES highlights the dominance of the supervisor right to choose independently. Although this method can more effectively examine candidates' scientific research ability, innovation ability and comprehensive quality, there may also be limited screening effects in the interview process. When the supporting restraint mechanism of the admissions unit cannot follow up the assessment in time, it is not uncommon for related households to squeeze out truly powerful candidates.

## Conclusion

Securing PhD candidature in first class university become a difficult task for common universities. Hence, AES should guarantee fairness of opportunities and play a real role on selecting candidates. AES cannot be turned from a reform tool into a political show. Monitoring measures and audits should constantly review the implementation of AES by institutions and supervisors alike.

## References

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