Chinese Higher Education Reform and Social Justice

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2 Social justice through financial distribution in China's universities: A student survey in Shaanxi Province[1]

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Introduction

Two key policy goals in the reform of higher education in China over the last decade have been the expansion of higher education and the cultivation of 'world class' universities (MoE, 1998). Since 1998, gross enrolment in higher education has risen from 9.8 per cent (about one million students) to 15 per cent in 2002, a level of 'mass' higher education, and then further to 30 per cent in 2013 (MoE). This rapid increase has been driven by government policy, market demand, the activism of local governments and the self-interest of universities (Chan and Ngok, 2011). Existing universities expanded their intake and new institutions were set up, including private colleges. As with other countries expanding their higher education systems, diversification of institutions and levels resulted, with stratification both as a consequence and a goal. Within China's stratified system of higher education, universities are commonly placed in one of three tiers according to status and quality. Tier 1 refers to national key universities (the élite universities chosen to participate in Project 211 or Project 985, two government-funded projects aimed at strengthening selected institutions to become world-class universities and research leaders in key disciplinary areas as a national priority)[2]. Tier 2 refers to key universities owned by central government agencies (such as ministries of industry or telecommunications). Tier 3 refers to all other universities, usually the responsibility of provincial and prefectural governments. The huge concentration of government funding on selected élite universities, through Projects 985 and 211,with the aim of creating world-class universities and research

centres, has increased the distance between the resultant tiers of university status. Out of this some issues of equality and social justice have emerged.

The concept of social justice has proved difficult to define, leading its critics such as the economist Hayek (1976) to dismiss it as 'a mirage'. Nonetheless, it has carried meaning for many in different contexts, generally revolving around themes of fairness, equality and human rights. Attempts to define social justice lead us into a complex landscape of differing concepts and theories (Patton *et al*, 2010). One aspect relevant to higher education is that raised by Young (1990) who argues that the term 'social justice' has become conflated with the concept of distributive justice; that is, the distribution of material goods such as resources, income or social position (Rawls, 1971). Patton *et al* (2010:268) also warn that 'we can fall into the trap of equating social justice in higher education with distributive justice by exclusively focusing on distribution questions - numerical representation of minorities bodies among faculty, students, and administrators in universities/community colleges, college access, voice in the classroom, curricula, and so on—and ignore the social structures, processes, and institutional contexts that produce these distributions in the first place'. They state that in addition we need to understand the institutional processes, social relations and cultural norms at work; that is, the relational justice which structures society at individual and organizational levels.

Other critics, such as Young (1990) and Gewirtz (1998), also argue that while the concept of distributive justice includes a focus on equality of opportunity, outcomes, access, participation and the distribution of cultural and social capital, it fails to take account of the social structures and institutional arrangements that can often determine the distribution of resources. In other words, social justice in higher education involves several concepts in order to construct full understanding and a thorough analysis. This complex task is beyond the scope of this chapter but one small part of achieving understanding is through the experience and perceptions of

those engaged in higher education, and for this reason our research focuses on one constituency, the students. We also bear in mind that in China the notion of social justice (*shehui gongping*) differs slightly from that in some Western countries and literature. While Western notions of equal opportunity are more likely to recognize that it may involve different treatment according to need and make a distinction between equity and equality, the Chinese concept places more emphasis on sameness, an equal share for everybody in a group (an emphasis which emerged in some of our survey responses).

Given the social and economic inequalities in Chinese society, especially at the level of household income, this chapter explores the distribution of financial support to university students together with their views on it. Why focus on this aspect? Research has shown the effect of college costs and financial aid on educational outcomes to be strong and multi-dimensional (Avery and Hoxby, 2003; Bettinger, 2004; Kane, 1996; Long, 2008) yet communication to students about costs and aid is often inadequate (Loyalka *et al.,* 2013; Shi *et al.,* 2007). Our research examined the distribution of financial support across students from different socio-economic backgrounds together with students' perceptions about equality of opportunity and fairness in the distribution of resources for students in higher education. We begin by reviewing the policy context and current system for enabling wider access to higher education through financial support. We then move on to describe the research undertaken, its method and findings. In the final section we draw some conclusions in relation to policy implementation and issues of social justice. The chapter focuses on three questions:

- Is financial support distributed equally and equitably across different groups of students and universities?
- Do students themselves view the system as fair and equitable?
- To what extent is social justice achieved and how could the present system be made fairer?

Policy initiatives for financing wider access

The expansion of higher education from 1999 onwards was accompanied by the introduction of cost-sharing and the provision of financial aid (subsidies and grants for low-income students). The Chinese government has implemented various policies, both financial and non-financial, for supporting wider access to higher education. Non-financial initiatives have included the introduction of quotas and concessions in entry standards for minority students. Financial initiatives have been many and complex, involving government at national and local levels.

In response to a tripling of university fees between 1997 and 2006, the State Council introduced a new financial aid policy providing substantial funding for eligible students in four ways (Cheng, 2011; Loyalka *et al*., 2013):

(a) expanding the national need-based aid programme (grants and living subsidies) with the aim of reaching 20 percent of all university enrolment;
(b) increasing the number of merit-based scholarships;
(c) waiving fees and providing stipends for students at military colleges and normal universities for teacher education;
(d) introducing the Residence-Based Government-Subsidized Student Loan Programme for student loans through local Student Financial Assistance Management Centres affiliated with students' home county education bureaux and provided by the National Development Bank.

In 1999 the national Government-Subsidized Student Loan Programme (GSSLP) began to provide student loans to individuals through commercial banks near the student's university or college. In 2000, the 'green channel' programme was implemented to allow low-income

students to enrol and begin university courses without having to undergo a needs-based financial aid assessment or having to pay tuition fees up front. Further financial support for students has come from other sources: local governments, corporations, businesses, charity organisations and universities (through merit scholarships, tuition waivers, work-study arrangements, and special need subsidies for extreme cases). Public universities were required to earmark 4-6 per cent of their operating revenue for the support of low-income students, and private universities were encouraged to do the same (MoF/MoE, 2007).

The amounts of finance available to any individual student are not large (smaller than in some other countries), ranging from 1,000-3,000 Yuan per year for government-funded need-based grants to 6,000 Yuan maximum a year for loans and up to 8,000 Yuan for merit-based scholarships. For poor rural families they leave a large gap in the funds required. For example, the average annual tuition cost for a four-year public university course in Shaanxi was about 150per cent of an average rural household's yearly disposable income in 2007, even higher for the poorest families (Loyalka *et al*., 2013). The problem of financing university education is made especially difficult for poor rural families because of the way the process of communicating about financial support is designed. Students are required to apply and register for their courses before they know if and how much they will receive in financial support. Since this information only becomes available several weeks into the course and after registration, it is not timely. It is likely that this uncertainty deters at least some school students from applying or may unnecessarily limit their choice of university or subject track (Liu *et al*., 2011). A related obstacle is the nature of information available. Studies by Shi *et al*. (2007) and Loyalka *et al*. (2013) point to the inadequate and poor quality of information available and the jargon-laden language used in materials on China's financial aid policies for higher education students. Compared to poor rural students, those in urban schools and families with higher socio-economic status and higher levels of parental education and teacher know-how are more likely

to understand and be knowledgeable about the way the application process works and the various forms of financial support available to students.

Once they have entered higher education, does financial support reach the students who need it most? From a study of students from 41 counties in Shaanxi, Loyalka *et al.* (2013) draw five conclusions:

(a) Government need-based and merit aid was spread fairly evenly across tiers and subject tracks but since students in the higher tier universities tend to be from higher socio-economic levels, poorer students were disadvantaged by this even distribution, especially since tuition fees for Tiers 1 and 2 universities are lower than those for Tier 3.

(b) Government need-based and merit aid was indeed reaching lower-income and higher ability students.

(c) Aid from various organizations within society was allocated more often to students in higher tier universities than to students from disadvantaged backgrounds though the latter group was often their avowed target group;

(d) University-financed aid was not generally directed to the poorer students and was also distributed according to other factors (examination scores, gender, party membership);

(e) Some poor students (nearly a third) received little or no aid.

The findings from our research provide a little more evidence to support Loyalka *et al*. (2013) conclusions and further explore students' experience and perceptions about equality of opportunity and financial support.

Research design and data collection

The aim of the research was to examine the experience and perceptions of students on financing their studies in higher education and in relation to equality and equity. The research was carried out through a questionnaire survey of 1,547 students at six universities in Shaanxi province in 2011. Shaanxi is a medium-sized province in Northwest China with a population of 37.3 million (2010). It ranked 14th for economic development out of 33 provinces (or equivalent administrative areas) and its GDP per capita reached US$ 6,108 in 2012. Shaanxi is traditionally strong in the provision of higher education (with 77 higher education institutions in 2010). Its provincial capital of Xi'an has one of the largest concentrations of key institutions of higher education in China; ranking third after only Beijing and Shanghai. Shaanxi was selected for this survey for two reasons: its economic position could be taken to represent the national average and it allowed a sample to be drawn from a variety of universities. The sample of students came from the six universities listed, chosen to represent the different tiers of universities in China.

1st tier (high level)

1. *Xi'an Jiaotong University*is a national key university under the direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (MoE). It was included in Project 211 and Project 985 and has about 30,000 full-time students, including 13,000 postgraduate students. It is an active research university with a major emphasis on science and engineering.
2. *Northwest Agricultural and Forest University*is a national key university under the direct jurisdiction of MoE. It was included in Project 985 and Project 211 and is the leading agricultural university in northwest China. It has 20,000 full-time undergraduate students and about 40,673 students altogether including post-graduate and adult education courses.

2nd tier (middle level)

3. *Xi'an University of Technology* was originally an Institute of Mechanical Engineering but in 1972 it became a polytechnic university. It is supported jointly by the Shaanxi provincial and national government. It concentrates on science and technology and has about 36,000 students.
4. *Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology* achieved its present form in 1994 when the MoE gave approval for the existing institute to become Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology. It focuses mainly on civil engineering and architecture. It has about 40,000 students, including 19,000 undergraduates, over 5,000 postgraduates, and about 14,000 students at the vocational and technical college level.

3rd tier (low level)

5. *Shaanxi University of Technology* is a provincial-level university, established in 2001 from a combination of a teachers' college and an institute of technology as part of the expansion of university education. It offers a wide variety of courses and has about 19,000 full-time students.
6. *Xi'an University of Finance and Economics* is a provincial-level university with about 18,000 students (undergraduate and post-graduate). It is a multidisciplinary institution but with a strong emphasis on economics, management and finance.

Within each selected university two subject majors were chosen, the science and engineering track *(like)* and the humanities and social science track *(wenke)* and with the support of student administrators (Communist Youth League Committee) several courses were chosen. In 2011 student leaders within each selected course distributed and collected a hard copy of the self-administered questionnaire (the plan was to issue questionnaires to 300 students in each university though there was some shortfall). Second-year students were chosen because they had some experience of university life compared to first-year students, and were less occupied with examination preparation than third-year students. The overall administration of the

questionnaire was carried out with the help of a partner at Xi'an University of Technology, Professor Chen Aijuan.

The questionnaire consisted of 39 items on family background, financing of studies, perceptions of social and economic difference among their fellow students and government policy on access and support for rural and poor students. Where appropriate, space was provided for students to explain their choices. A total of 1,800 questionnaires were distributed and 1,560 were returned (a response rate of 86.7%). From these, 1,547 were judged valid. The data was analysed using SPSS to provide frequency and cross-sectional tables to reveal key differences between students in terms of their background, financial support for study, distribution between universities as well as their perceptions of equality in access to higher education. Chi-square or ANOVA analysis was used to reveal relationships between different variables (tier of university, place of birth, household income, gender, parental education and occupation).

Survey findings

The results are sequenced as follows: (a) profiles of the students in the sample according to various categories (rural-urban, gender, household income; university tier); (b) students' views of poverty and equality in higher education; (c) the distribution of financial support; (d) students' perceptions of fairness in the distribution of government financial support.

Profiles of students

The key characteristics of students are shown in Table 2.1 where students are grouped according to the tier of university they attend, place of birth, region of origin and gender. Place of birth is chosen as a proxy for the rural-urban distinction rather than the place of *hukou* registration since the latter can change in some circumstances. As can be seen, in our sample rural students outnumbered urban students overall (53.5% to 48.5%), reflecting the relative proportions of the rural-urban population nationally. Though at first sight, this suggests that rural students have roughly equal access to higher education the reality is somewhat different if comparisons are made with the relevant age group (18-21) within the population. In a survey of senior secondary students in Shaanxi province, Wang *et al.*, (2011) found that only 20 per cent of rural students entered higher education compared to the national average of 31 per cent (54% in cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin) and suggest that the actual percentage may be even lower than 20 per cent since this included non-poor rural as well as poor rural students. They also found the share of poor rural students entering the Tier 1 universities of Sichuan and Xi'an Jiaotong to be even less, 6.9 per cent, disproportionately low in relation to the poor rural population.

The poor rural students in our sample did not include their peers who might have dropped out of primary school (10%), junior middle school (22%), senior middle school (7.4%), but are the successful survivors among the 20 per cent who then passed the college entrance examination *(gaokao)*, if we use figures from Wang et al (2011)[3]. We found that most students in Tier 2 and 3 universities were from rural areas, and most in the Tier 1 universities were from urban areas (14.2% more urban than rural students). The gender difference was greater, with 29.4% more male than female students in Tier 1 universities and the opposite in Tier 3 (22% more female than male students). Most students (78%) in the Tier 1 universities came from outside Shaanxi province, indicative of the strong competition for places at the best universities and the government policy for enabling student mobility between provinces.

Table 2.1 Background and university destination of students

University tier	Total		Place of birth (%)		Region of origin (%)		Gender (%)	
	N	%	Urban	Rural	Shaanxi	Other	Male	Female
Tier 3	535	34.6	46.8	53.2	83.6	16.4	39.0	61.0
Tier 2	538	34.8	42.6	57.4	66.1	33.9	65.4	34.6
Tier 1	474	30.6	57.1	42.9	22.0	78.0	64.7	35.3
Total	1547	100	48.5	51.5	59.4	40.6	56.5	43.5

Notes: All tables and figures shown in this chapter are based upon our survey data and compiled by authors.

The rural-urban division is a key factor in economic and social inequality in contemporary China. Related to this is the increasing gap in household (HD) income which influences both the access to high quality secondary schools (a route to Tier 1 universities) and the quality of students' university lives under the current cost-sharing model. Table 2.2 shows household income in relation to father's employment, parental education and university tier.

*Table 2.2*Reported household (HD) income by place of birth and university tier (%)

HD income	Sector of father's work			Parental education			University tier		
	Public	Private	Farm	Low	Mid	High	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Low	14.2	12.4	73.3	53.1	38.5	8.4	23.6	44.4	32.0
Mid	43.7	33.3	23.9	29.1	35.3	35.6	29.1	28.9	41.2
High	67.9	29.2	3.4	7.8	20.1	72.2	46.9	24.6	28.5
Total	37.6	24.1	38.3	34.9	33.5	31.6	34.6	34.7	30.7

Given the difficulty of gathering reliable and accurate information about household income, students were asked to make an assessment of their family economic level, their gross annual income and the relative economic position of their family to others in their local community. Based on the information provided, students were grouped into three income levels: low (gross

annual income of less than 10,000 Yuan), middle (10,000 to 50,000 Yuan) and high (over 50,000 Yuan). In terms of 'father's work', three categories of employment were used: public (comprising government officers, civil servants, employees in public institutions and state-owned enterprises), private (those working in private enterprises, joint ventures and small or family businesses) and farming. Categories of parental education were designated as high (one or both parents had reached higher education); mid (one or both parents graduated from senior middle school, Grades 10-12), and low (neither parent had progressed beyond basic compulsory education, school Grades 1-9).

As can be seen in Table 2.2, 43 per cent of students placed their families in the category of low income, 36 per cent in the middle and 20 per cent in the high income group. How much reliance can be placed on this categorisation? In the absence of accurate data in China on household income (for example, based on income tax information) self-reporting is widely used by researchers and administrators as a rough substitute (Loyalka *et al*., 2012). University administrators determine how financial aid is to be allocated to students based on self-reported data from students on household background and income together with some other information. Provincial governments then make lump sum transfers of financial aid funds across institutions which allocate funds to individual students. The allocation is done according to national government guidelines but interpreted by the institutions (and provinces) in their own various ways and generally on the basis of inadequate, unstandardised and sometimes inaccurate data (Loyalka *et al*., 2012; Wang and Shang, 2005).

Nearly half (46.9%) of students from high-income households and about a quarter (23.6%) from low-income families (73.3% of them from farmers' families) were at Tier 1 universities. There was relatively small variation between the percentage of students from low- and middle-income families attending Tiers 2 and 3 universities although more low-income students attended Tier 2 universities than their middle income peers. In our sample, there was only a small difference

between the proportions of students from low- and middle-income families attending Tier 1 universities. Students from all income groups could be found at all university tiers though in different proportions, but the largest difference lay at the level of Tier 1 universities where twice as many students came from high-income as from low-income families. It seems that students are more likely to attend a Tier 1 university if their family has a high income, if their father works in a public or professional sector, if at least one of their parents has participated in higher education, and if they are male.

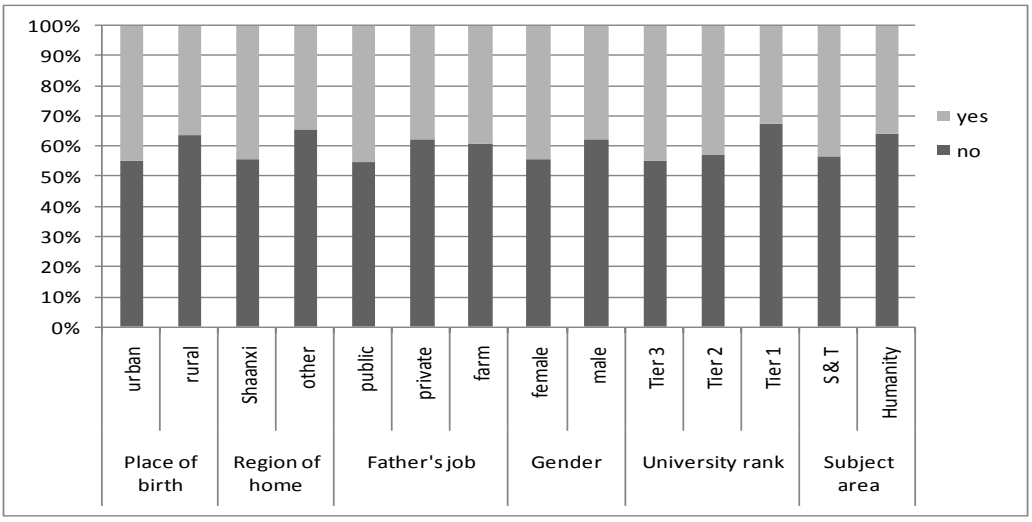
From the above data, it seems that access to university education is available to students from both rural and urban areas, from families with high, middle and low incomes, and from professional and farming families, though unevenly distributed. The expansion of higher education has included poor and rural students, according to our data. However, our sample only includes the small percentage of poor rural students who have successfully navigated access to higher education and not those who decided against it, either because they perceived it as unaffordable or for other reasons relating to disadvantage. Once within higher education, do students see the system as an equitable one? The rest of this chapter will examine one aspect of this, the distribution of funding for study in higher education and student perceptions of it.

Students' views on poverty and equality in higher education

Did students think there was equal opportunity for all young people in China to access higher education? Overall, 60 per cent of the students said there was not. This negative view was more evident in rural students, those coming from outside of Shaanxi province and those whose fathers worked in the public sector (see Figure 2.1). More students at Tier 1 universities thought there was inequality of opportunity than those at Tiers 2 and 3 universities. Students on Humanities and Social Science courses more often said there was unequal opportunity than

those on Science and Technology courses, a view also shared by more male than female students.

Figure 2.1 Does the current higher education system provide equal opportunity to all young people?



Where then did the perceived inequality lie? Around a half (48.4%) of all students identified access as a source of inequality, agreeing with statements that poor and rural students have less opportunity to access higher education (see Table 2.3). Around 20 per cent disagreed and the rest (over a quarter) took a neutral position. Overall, 58.9 per cent of rural and 46.5 per cent of urban students agreed that rural students had less opportunity for higher education. Between a quarter and a third of all students expressed no view on this issue, suggesting either a lack of awareness or indifference (interestingly, a quarter of rural and poor students fall into this neutral category). Without interviewing students, we can only guess at the reasons for this response.

Table2.3 Student perceptions of equal opportunity for higher education (%)

Statement		*'Poor students have fewer opportunities for higher education than urban students'*			*'Rural students have fewer opportunities than urban students'*		
Category	Item	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Place of birth	Rural	21.7	25.3	53.1	17.3	23.9	58.9
	Urban	23.9	32.3	43.8	20.3	33.1	46.5
HD income	Low	22.8	26.1	51.1	17.7	24.5	57.8
	Mid	24.8	26.6	48.6	19.4	30.8	49.8
	High	18.8	35.9	45.3	19.3	33.2	47.5
Parental	Low	21.4	26.7	51.9	17.0	25.7	57.3
education	Mid	23.8	27.1	49.1	19.3	24.9	55.7
	High	23.7	32.6	43.8	20.3	35.1	44.5
Mean		22.9	28.7	48.4	18.7	28.6	52.7

To explore awareness of poor students in their midst, the students were asked if there were any poor students in their classes. As Table 2.4 shows, more rural students (61.5%) said that there were. A similar difference was found for income groups and levels of parental education: fewer students from high-level income (35.3%)and better educated families (39.3%) thought there were poor students in their classes and also more responded with 'don't know' as their answer. The reasons for the size of this neutral response are open to various interpretations, both negative and positive.

Table 2.4 Are there poor students in your class?

Category	Item	Yes %	No %	Don't know %
Place of birth	Rural	61.5	11.3	27.2
	Urban	41.6	12.9	45.5
HD income	Low	65.0	9.4	25.6

	Mid	46.3	14.6	39.1
	High	35.3	13.1	51.6
Parental education	Low	59.0	11.3	29.8
	Mid	56.4	11.7	31.9
	High	39.3	13.6	47.1
Mean		52.1	12.1	35.9

Students who said that there were poor students in their classes were asked to estimate their proportion. Overall, they estimated that 30 per cent of students in their classes were poor. Students who were themselves from poor and rural families judged the proportion to be only a little more (5%) than those from urban or high-income families. This was close to the actual number of poor rural students in the sample (502; 32.4%); 631 of all students (40.7%) were in the low-income group and poor rural students constituted 79.6 per cent of these.

Were there any differences between groups in their satisfaction with university life? Did differences in the family's economic and social status influence it? Our data appears to suggest that it did. As Table 2.5 shows, more students from urban areas and high income families (around 40 per cent in both cases) were satisfied with their university experience than those from rural and low income families. As might be expected, students' satisfaction was also related to university tier, with those in the Tier 1 universities expressing most satisfaction. However, 40 per cent overall were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. It is possible that this result may be influenced by the involvement of the universities' administrative systems to distribute and collect the questionnaires, causing some students to be reluctant to express any negative opinion.

Table 2.5 Student satisfaction by family background and university tier (%)

Category	Item	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied
Place of birth	Rural	23.2	44.5	32.3
	Urban	14.4	43.8	41.8
HD income	Low	20.4	46.5	33.1
	Mid	20.4	40.0	39.6
	High	12.9	46.5	40.6
University tier	1	12.0	41.6	46.4
	2	20.6	43.7	35.7
	3	23.2	47.6	29.2
Mean		19.0	44.1	36.9

Given the difficulties of some poor students in financing higher education and in accessing labour markets after graduation, students were asked if young people from poor families should find alternatives to higher education after they left school. Opinion was equally divided on this among those who agreed and disagreed, and not different is between rural and urban, and between low and high-income family students in this question.

Availability and distribution of government financial support

Though the government has increased the amount of financial assistance for students, especially those from low income families, and though social organisations, local governments and universities have also increased aid for students, it is nonetheless difficult to judge how well the financial aid is reaching the students most in need of it. About 60 per cent of the students in our survey said they were familiar with the government's policy on financial support for students in higher education. Familiarity was claimed by 10 per cent more students from rural and poor family backgrounds than from urban and high income groups. Of the students who said they were unfamiliar with government policies, 60 per cent also said that there were no poor students in their classes. Students' claims of familiarity with government policy were not explored

further so we are unable to say what level of knowledge the students and their families had, but this area needs further research. As Loyalka *et al*., (2013) found, many students lacked timely and adequate information about available resources.

The survey collected information about three forms of financial support to students: scholarships provided by the university or commercial companies; need-based support and bank loans. About half (49.2%) of students had benefited from at least one of these three. As Table2.6 shows, 23 per cent of students received a scholarship of 2068 Yuan on average and of these just 3.2 per cent were sponsored by commercial companies. Compared to the scholarship funding, the need-based funds paid out more (an average of 2,525 Yuan) to more students (29% of the sample). The bank loans were bigger (6,737 Yuan on average) but were provided to fewer students (13%). About a third (32%) of students was in receipt of more than one form of support and a small number (2.2%) received all three.

Table 2.6 Type and allocation of financial support

Items	Scholarship	Need-based subsidy	Bank loan
Number of holders	356	450	203
% of students	23.0	29.1	13.1
Mean allocation (Yuan)	2068	2525	5737

Table 2.7 provides more detail. In general, students' access to financial support varied depending upon university tier, with merit-based scholarships more often given to Tier 1 university students. There was little difference between the universities in their allocation of grants.

Table 2.7 Distribution of financial support to students (%)

Category	Item	One or more forms of support	Merit-based scholarship	Need-based grant
University-tier	1	56.1	36.1	*33.3*
	2	49.2	21.0	*35.1*
	3	42.9	13.5	*32.5*
Place of birth	Rural	67.2	*24.1*	55.3
	Urban	30.0	*22.5*	10.4
HD income	Low	70.7	*22.7*	60.0
	Mid	37.8	*23.4*	20.1
	High	27.5	*22.3*	4.2
Mean		*49.2*	*22.9*	*34.4*

Note: cells with italic denote item not passing statistical test (Chi-square)

Numerically more students from rural or low income groups gained financial support than their counterparts in urban and high income groups (Table 2.7) suggesting that financial support was reaching students in need to some extent. The award of merit-based scholarships (a small percentage overall) was fairly evenly distributed between income groups. However, half of the students in our sample (50.8%) and 30 per cent of students from poor rural families received no form of financial support other than from family and personal resources.

Students' perceptions of government financial support

Did the students think that government policy on financial support was fair and adequate for their needs? Approximately 43 per cent of the students in our sample agreed that the 'current financial support system is unfair'; only 12 per cent disagreed and 45 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed. A greater proportion of the students who did not receive financial support or who did not know about government financial aid policies said that the system was unfair than those

who had gained financial support or who knew about government policies. Of those who claimed familiarity with government policies, 60 per cent viewed the level of current financial support as appropriate (no difference in this opinion was found between rural and urban and between low and high income groups).

On the issue of fairness, the vast majority of students (92%) agreed that the government should give special support to students from poor families. Students were then asked if financial aid for poor students should be increased and whether all students were equally entitled to financial aid (see Table 2.8). About 45 per cent overall said financial aid should be increased, making comments such as 'the government should increase financial support to the poor students so that their income is equivalent to the average income of non-poor students.' Those from urban and high income groups and not in receipt of financial aid showed lower levels of agreement (14-17% less). Over a third (36.8) of students said that all students are equally entitled to financial aid, adding comments such as 'Most students are short of funds, not just poor students, and so all students should get government support.' Students from urban and higher SES backgrounds showed stronger support for this idea. From all groups, around a third or more of students took a neutral position.

Table2. 8 Student views on governmental financial support for study (%)

Category	Item	*Financial aid for the poor should be increased*			*All students are equally entitled to financial aid*		
		Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Place of	Rural	15.0	32.9	52.1	36.4	33.4	30.2
birth	Urban	18.2	43.8	38.0	20.4	35.5	44.1
HD income	Low	13.4	33.3	53.3	36.1	34.4	29.5
	High	19.0	44.7	36.3	20.4	38.4	41.2
Beneficiary	Yes	12.4	32.3	55.3	42.0	35.0	22.4
	No	18.9	41.0	40.2	21.8	34.0	44.2
Mean		16.1	38.1	45.3	28.9	34.3	36.8

The data in Table 2.8 indicates a division of opinion among students in relation to the fair distribution of government financial support. We can speculate that this reflects different notions of social justice. On the one hand the students (36.8%) agreeing that all students are equally entitled to financial support appear to be operating on the principle of equality, that is, same shares for all regardless of need or difference. On the other hand, students disagreeing (28.9%) that all should receive equal shares or agreeing (45.3%) that financial aid for poor students should be increased, may be operating from principles of equity: that is, accepting that shares may vary according to individual need. Students opting for 'equality' (just over a third) were slightly more likely to come from urban and richer students, whereas those choosing 'equity' came from poor and rural backgrounds. These different views may also reflect differences in expectations about government responsibility for funding higher education and the low amounts of grants generally.

Though social inequality is an increasing concern of the Chinese government and public, a concern with social justice issues was not highly visible in our survey. Students' views on equality and equity varied, as might be expected, and a large number of students expressed no views at all. Two-thirds of the students in our sample agreed there were inequalities in access to higher education but this recognition differed according to the university tier, subject track and gender of students. Views on the equitable distribution of financial support may be influenced by the low level of awareness in some students about student poverty or the significance they attached to it. About 60 per cent of students were aware that some of their fellow students were poor. The 30 per cent who were unaware tended to be from urban backgrounds, with higher levels of income or with parents with higher education, suggesting some urban or class bias. Student views of social justice were divided and sometimes not clear-cut. For example, half of the students said that family background and students' income levels did not affect a student's life at university, while at the same time, two-thirds of students said that poor students were not able to study as well as their richer peers.

Discussion

This chapter attempts to shed light on the distribution of financial resources for higher education in the context of one province, Shaanxi, and from a perspective of social justice. Government policy has opened access to students from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds and provided earmarked support for poor and rural students. However, while access has greatly expanded and government financial support is spread fairly widely if thinly inequalities persist. As Ding, (2012) observes, while there has been a decline in inequality of access to higher education (the quantitative dimension), the degree of qualitative inequality (the type and quality of education accessed) has increased. Socio-economic status remains influential in determining which university a student will attend. Attendance at Tier 1 universities is regarded as having a significant impact on social mobility, hence its importance in promoting equal opportunity. In our sample: twice as many males as females attended Tier 1 universities.

The participation of poor and rural students in Tier 1 universities is lower than that of students from urban and higher income families. Not only do Tier 1 universities have twice as many students from high-income as from low-income families, the Tier 1 universities themselves receive more government funding and charge lower fees than Tiers 2 and 3 universities. Though Wang *et al*.(2013) found that financial aid for poor students who gain access to Tier 1 universities 'is currently sufficient and accessible for poor rural students' it is not the case for poor rural students in Tier 3 universities, which often provide no financial aid., As Li (2007, p.734) concludes: 'There is therefore a reverse relationship between family affordability and cost burdens. Lower income families are taking on much higher burdens for their children's education than higher income families.'

Looking beyond the indicators of distributive social justice, it seems that systems and structural arrangements are not yet working well enough to ensure equality and equity if we define social justice as the activity of 'ensuring systemic and structural social arrangements to improve equality' (National Pro Bono Resource, 2011:2). Persistent inequalities remain, reaching well back into the school system which feeds the universities. As Wang *et al.* (2011) found in their sample of Shaanxi upper secondary students, there was no statistical difference in the school grades achieved by poor and non-poor students or in their college entrance *(gaokao)* examinations, yet poor students were under-represented in higher education, a gap attributed to inequalities in earlier stages of education.

The distribution of financial resources is, as Young (1990), Gewirtz (1998) and Patton *et al*.(2010) have argued, determined by the processes and institutional arrangements involved, key agents in shaping social justice. Processes which limit opportunity for poor rural families include the flow and quality of useful information, the timing of financial information about grant awards to students and their families, and inflexibility in the process of choosing and registering for an institution and course. Some institutional arrangements could be more equity-focused and less merit-focused. Though the government issues general guidelines about the distribution of financial support, the universities can interpret them as they wish. While this provides useful flexibility to meet local circumstances it also allows unfairness in the system. University practices raise questions about the role of universities in promoting social justice within and beyond their campuses and their approaches to fostering equity for disadvantaged students and groups. Fairer distribution requires better targeting of available funds to avoid the drift of financial support towards Tier 1 universities and higher SES groups. This would result in more loans and fewer grants for those in higher socio-economic groups, and more and larger grants and fewer loans to those in lower ones. Greater equity would also be achieved by shifting more aid to lower tier universities and to poor rural students, including those who receive no aid at present. However, we agree with Yang's (2010: 568) conclusion, that 'pumping more money

into the student aid system is not the single best solution. It is the structure rather than the scale of aid system which makes the biggest difference in access to aid.' To this we would add the need for a stronger focus on social justice values.

Notes

1. The empirical data of this chapter is based upon a questionnaire survey in 6 universities across Shaanxi province in 2011. Special thank is given to Professor Chen Aijuan from Xian University of Technology who participated in the design of the questionnaire and was in charge of the survey implementation.
2. Two projects were launched by Central government in 1995 and 1998 respectively. The 211 project refers to the financial support to 100 top universities toward 'world-standards' in the 21st century whilst 985 project is named the date in May of 1998 when the government decided to provide special financial support to a number of top universities to create 'world-class universities' (Zha ,2011).
3. Wang *et al.* (2011) estimate that only 4% of rural children who begin primary school enter university

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