

**THE STATE-ADMINISTERED HIGHER EDUCATIONAL
EXAMINATIONS FOR SELF-TAUGHT
STUDENTS IN CHINA**

by

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**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto**

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Abstract

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Based on a review of the available literature in Chinese and in English, this thesis gives an overview of China's Higher Educational Examinations for Self-Taught Students (HEE), an innovative aspect of China's system for post-secondary adult education. The HEE is viewed as a pragmatic response to a need for post-secondary training within China's long traditional value of selection by centralized external exams. Given the severe national financial limits available, the HEE has optimized the relatively high cost of building an infrastructure while meeting the current training needs of China's adult populace. The mechanism of this nationwide examination system and its rapid development over 15 years is detailed in terms of its administrative structure; examination operations; examination subjects available; profile of students; and academic assistance methods and technologies. The HEE system is critiqued within China's social development, and its shortcomings in relation to the training needs of China's vast rural population and other problems associated with the practice of the HEE are highlighted.

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INTRODUCTION

The system of Higher Educational Examinations (HEE) available through non-campus based self-education in China was established in early 1981 on a trial basis and was developed shortly afterwards into a nationwide system. It is a phenomenon that answers a need when available resources allocated to campus-based formal university training is outstripped by the demand of the population for this level of training. The rationale was to provide a total open opportunity to Chinese adults of learning through independent study and of obtaining a university degree through a nationally available external examination system.

This master's thesis will focus on this vital innovation among the 1.2 billion population of China and its fast development within 15 years into a multi-level administrative structure. The study was derived from two main interests. The first was an interest in the practice of distance education for adult learners within the Chinese context. The second concerned the fact that although there have been many western English studies about distance education and open universities within the past two or three decades, there is not much documentation on China's experience available on these topics in English. There is now a relatively large body of Chinese literature on this examination system, but documented systematic studies of the HEE in its entirety are still not sufficient. More detailed and critical research and studies focussed on this particular aspect of China's educational system need to be done in order to fully understand the characteristics of this recent educational innovation.

The purpose of this study is twofold:

(1) To give an in-depth overview of the HEE system from the perspective of western educational approaches. The rapid development of the system in the past 15 years will be detailed in terms of its administration, examination operations, academic assistance methods and technologies,

participating students, and examination subjects available. A main argument is that the HEE system, like many other things and happenings in modern China, is an adaptation of an international model and a pragmatic home-based innovation to suit local cultural customs and socio-economic requirements.

(2) To critically examine the advantages and limitations of the HEE examination system and to offer suggestions for possible improvements through further systematic study and in-depth research.

The method of the study is largely based on the review of the available Chinese literature and the experiential observation of the author having lived in China during the development of the HEE system and with an opportunity to interact with contemporary self-learners.

The Chinese literature presently available is found buried in overall education policy studies, written guidance and practical advice for self-taught students, and some moral educational essays on how to self-teach oneself to become an educated socialist worker. Although most of the studies are not written from a critical perspective, they are conducted by people directly involved in education policy making and educators working inside this examination system. Thus, the information revealed and implied is considered to be reliable.

I. BACKGROUND AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE HEE

1. Historical legacy

The establishment of the state-administered examinations for self-taught students in China may be regarded as the inheritance and further development of ancient China's Confucian civil service examinations which started in the fifth century of the modern era.

In order to strengthen his centralized government, the first emperor of the Sui Dynasty, Sui Wen Di, began to select the high government officers through a set of multi-subject national exams. In 606 AD, the emperor Sui Yang Di followed this practice and set up an imperial civil service examination system, which enabled the imperial state to control its human resources down to the administrative level of counties and prefectures. Central and local officials were selected from among students who passed the state-administered examinations, either with or without the assistance of formal schooling. Confucian concepts, arguments, and beliefs were embedded into the national educational practice via examinations by the emperor, and the bureaucracy that spoke for him.

Through changes over the dynasties, the system evolved to its final format during the Ming dynasty (outlined in Table I.1). Three testing sessions at both provincial and metropolitan levels were administered triennially over a period of several days. Normally, candidates would take the provincial examinations in the fall, and if successful, move on to the metropolitan examinations in Beijing and Nanjing in the following spring. A final palace examination was administered by the emperor himself to ensure impartial final rankings and personal political loyalty to him.

Each session was expected to be answered in one full day in an essay form. Those who passed this stage were tested again for their physical prowess in horsemanship and archery and their mental

prowess in calligraphy, mathematics, and penal law. The questions underwent frequent changes during the Qing Dynasty, but the main form remained largely the same.

Table I.1. Format of provincial and metropolitan Civil Service Examinations during the Ming Dynasty

Session Number:	Number of questions
One	
1. Four Books:	3 quotations
2. Change:	4 quotations
3. Documents:	4 quotations
4. Poetry:	4 quotations
5. Annals:	4 quotations
6. Rites:	4 quotations
Two	
1. Discourse:	1 quotation
2. Documentary style:	3 documents
3. Judicial terms:	5 terms
Three	
1. Policy questions:	5 issues

Source: Benjamin A. Elman & Alexander Woodside (eds). *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600-1900*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, Page 114

The examinations system lasted for more than 1,300 years in China's feudal history until Guang Xu, Emperor of the Qing Dynasty, ordered it stopped in 1905. The tailored Confucian teaching of obtaining career advancement through hard work and qualification through an external examination system still remains a more or less a general expectation within contemporary China's population.

2. Adult education in China after the Cultural Revolution

(1) Education of adults in modern China

The term "adult education" was non-existent in the educational vocabulary in the post-liberation period between 1949 and 1981. Before 1981, a Bureau of Workers and Peasants, originally

set up in the 1950s inside the Ministry of Education (MOE, State Education Commission of China after 1986), took charge of the education of China's adults under the leadership of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

Yao Zhongda, former deputy director of the Bureau of Worker and Peasant Education, when expressing his interpretation of adult education, said "adult education belongs to school education; the level of literacy, culture and knowledge is quite the same as in the formal schools. Adult education is supplemental and a continuation of formal schooling --- nonformal education belongs to the realm of societal education" (Zhou 1990:56). Obviously, in the eyes of Yao and his supporters, Chinese adult education should belong to the formal education sector. It is easy to understand their standpoint when one takes into consideration that China has a highly structured hierarchical education system for adults that parallels formal age-graded schooling, from primary education up to the tertiary level.

Since the traditional school ladder is no longer sufficient for adult students' preparation for their work careers and for life-long participation in the modern society, western industrialized countries are trying to employ continuing education of the work force, in part, to catch up with the fast developing pace of technology. In this sense, China's adult education system offers one model of continuing or recurrent education of the work force. The Great Encyclopaedia of China defines adult education as the education of adults through various avenues in one's spare-time or with full-time or part-time leave from work units. It is not confined within certain levels of educational attainment or any age cohort. Since the majority of adult education receivers are peasants and workers, it is also called worker and peasant education. (The Great Encyclopaedia of China, Volume of Education, 1985:32). For the convenience of this study, I would give adult education in China's context the following simple definition: all learning opportunities available for people generally

considered as adults (legally speaking, 18 years old and over) who are not in the regular age-graded formal education system belongs to the realm of adult education. It encompasses an overwhelming stream under the direction of the Adult Education Department of the MOE, which is the highly structured, planned and hierarchical formal system for educating the rural and urban work force.

Article 23 of China's constitution adopted on December 4, 1982 proclaims that the state should train specialized personnel in all fields in order to serve socialism and should provide political, cultural, scientific, technological and professional education for workers, peasants, state functionaries and other working people. It also encourages self-study as a means of developing individual talent. In the era of open door economic reform, the philosophy of education still remains to train and cultivate professionals and cultured labourers with socialist consciousness. A strong political will in China's adult education, or worker and peasant education in particular, is a cultural emphasis that is lacking in the objectives of western educational systems.

(2) The educational aftermath of the Cultural Revolution

When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the entire education system of China was in a state of paralysis. During the previous decade, an entire generation of young people had their schooling severely interrupted or even totally missed. School facilities and library holdings had been destroyed, abused or dispersed. Intellectuals had been humiliated or persecuted and had lost ten years of their professional life. Some of them had to leave their academic careers permanently. School and university courses had been shortened and academic standards had declined. University students, admitted on recommendations from the work units on the basis of their political reliability, instead of the academic considerations, were far from being educationally competent for China's modernization drive. In 1981, it was estimated that of the 500,000 students attending various spare-

time tertiary level education in Beijing, 50,000 were those who had previously received higher education (Hunter, 1985:24).

The adult education sector had been severely damaged. The meagre achievement of less than two decades of development which followed the devastation of four decades of war, had been drastically destroyed. Forty to fifty percent of the population was designated illiterate, 9 percent of them were urban residents (Wang & Colletta, in Epstein ed.1991:147, 149). A large number of secondary school leavers, produced during the previous decade, whether qualified or not, wanted further education. A great part of the work force was educationally underqualified for their job requirements. At this point after the turmoil, the country was facing a pressing need to educate its “double generation”.

An estimated 15 to 20 million unemployed city youth (Hunter 1985:15), most of whom poorly educated, and many of them students returning from the countryside, where they were sent for re-education during the Cultural Revolution, posed another major issue to be faced by Chinese authorities and educators alike. With no jobs and no educational opportunities available for them, juvenile delinquency, petty thievery and street demonstrations arose periodically. “Self-study”, whether effective or not, was often suggested as an alternative avenue for them: the generation which missed participation in the formal educational hierarchy.

(3) The shift of the state policy

In 1978, the National People’s Congress announced the policy calling for the four modernizations: agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology. This commitment of Chinese leaders to rapid modernization led to a rapid shift in the focus of the nation’s attention. Education was seen as the key factor demanded by rapid economic and technological progress. In his

report to the Twelfth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Hu Yaobang, General Secretary of the CCP, made the following statement:

“ . . . We must work vigorously to universalise primary education, strengthen secondary vocational education and higher education and develop educational undertakings of all types. . . . In the future, in our use and promotion of cadres, we must attach importance to educational background and academic records as well as to experience and achievements in work. . . . ”

Under the new state policy, educational background and credentials were once again considered essential for career advancement. Degree education was an emergent need of both the society and individuals.

The challenge was enormous. In 1977, after 10 years of total neglect, only 5.6 persons out of 10 thousand population were enrolled in institutes of higher learning. By 1980, less than 4 percent of the work force had ever received any form of higher education, including short-cycle university education and tertiary vocational training. In comparison, in the 1970's, the number of normal university participants were out of 10 thousand population, 456.3 in the US, 187 in the Former Soviet Union, 185.3 in Japan and 37.3 in India (Theory Committee on China's Adult Education 1994:2). In 1983, a nationwide survey of the country's professional and semiprofessional manpower was conducted, covering 99.5 percent of China's work force. The survey results showed that only 34,089 or 0.28 percent of a total of 13.9 million professional and semiprofessional manpower available in China had received a postgraduate education; 2,157,027 people or 15.5 percent a normal undergraduate study; 1,809,685 or 13 percent a short-cycle university study; 8,107,722 or 58.3 percent a specialized secondary schooling. Among those who had been given professional titles, 12.9 percent had not received a previous formal school training equivalent to their titles (Huang, in Hayhoe ed. 1992:143).

At the National Scientific Conference held in March 1978, Deng Xiaoping announced that, “We must take up the important task on the science and education front, of training in the shortest possible time, a group of experts in science and technology who are first-rate by world standard.” On 22 April, 1978, the National Education Conference was held. The Minister of Education, Lin Xiyao, stated the following four guiding principles for the development of education during 1978 to 1985:

1. revolutionising education;
2. structuring education outputs to the needs and capabilities of China’s economic development;
3. adjusting the content and methodology of teaching to the demands of modern science and technology;
4. placing greater stress on raising the quality of education, especially higher education’s ability to produce skilled personnel. (Hunter 1985:30)

When formal schooling was confronted with poor teaching, staff shortages, and shabby buildings and facilities, adult education was thus attached great importance in solving the country’s education problems. As implied in the “double-legs theory” initiated in the early post-liberation period, in the education sector, formal schooling was seen as one leg, adult education as the other (Ouyang 1987:98). Expansion of both regular universities and adult higher education was emphasized as one of the essential aspects of raising the science and technology standard of the country.

(4) The shortage of post-secondary places

It is worth noting that China’s current formal educational hierarchy constitutes a long and competitive ordeal which many of China’s children and youth have to live through. At each point of promotion from one educational level to another, great effort and sacrifice has to be made by students, teachers, and parents in preparing for the comprehensive entrance examinations. Since regular university places have been available only to a tiny part of China’s population, highly selective entrance examinations are given nationwide to secondary school graduates every year to admit

students. Due to these examinations, the major part of China's young population is bereft of an opportunity for university education at such an early age, that it might be too early for many of them to develop a career goal. Table I.2 presents the national statistics on regular university entrance of various years after the National Unified College Entrance Examination was resumed in 1978.

China has traditionally attached great emphasis to higher education, which is demonstrated in the headway made in the educational provision during the years after liberation up to the mid-80s. In the meantime, China's secondary education also gave first priority to general senior high schools. The main purpose of general senior secondary schools is to academically prepare students for further education leading to degrees. Therefore it is assumed that the majority of general senior high school attendees are aiming for university entrance. The competition brought on by exams has remained keen. Table I.2 presents the statistics on general secondary school graduates and regular university admissions during the period from 1979 to 1993. In 1981, for example, only a total of 202,477 students, or 4.17 percent of the nation's 4,861,000 general senior secondary school graduates, were admitted into regular undergraduate programs. The percentage of senior secondary school graduates entering normal university programs has grown much higher over the decade, reaching 16.68 percent in 1993. But this figure was still low when compared with many western countries. University entry is so competitive in China that almost all first year university students still remember how hard they worked during their last year in general secondary school. In effect, senior grade three students learn nothing new or original in subject content. Their final year in middle school is literally lived under high stress brought on by the hope that they can live up to the highest expectations of everyone who wishes them well.

The higher education sector has gone through a considerably fast development after the

Cultural Revolution. In the regular university sector, new institutes were set up. Despite some mergers of small scale universities which occurred in early 90s, the total number of regular universities in 1993 was nearly double that of 1979. The total number of annual new enrollments has also increased dramatically over the years.

Table I.2. Statistics on high school graduates and regular university admissions

Year	No. of univ.s	No. of general sen. sec. schools	Students admitted (persons)		Student ratio	General sen. sec. sch. graduates (persons)	Normal university admission rate (%)
			Sh-cycle	Normal			
1979	633	40,289	70,889	204,210	0.35	7,265,000	2.81
1981	704	24,447	76,300	202,477	0.38	4,861,000	4.17
1983	805	18,876	134,581	256,219	0.53	2,351,000	10.90
1985	1,016	17,318	301,598	317,637	0.95	1,966,000	16.16
1987	1,063	16,930	284,457	332,365	0.86	2,467,793	13.47
1989	1,075	16,050	296,617	330,496	0.99	2,431,684	12.36
1991	1,075	15,243	290,372	329,502	0.88	2,229,493	14.78
1993	1,065	14,380	537,494	386,458	1.39	2,317,127	16.68

Source: Achievement of Education in China. Statistics 1949-1983, 1980-1985. People's Education Press, 1984, 1986; Educational Statistics Yearbook of China, 1987-93. People's Education Press

In spite of all this rapid development, in 1987, only 3.92 million students or 4 percent of the 18-21 years olds were enrolled in all China's regular universities and adult higher educational institutions (0.1 billion, or 9.3 percent of the population were in the age cohort in 1987. This figure includes students studying for a short-cycle university degree). While, in the same year, the rate of age cohort enrolment at the normal university level alone averaged 27 percent among developed western countries (the US not included). In the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe the average rate was 20 percent (Zhou 1990:88). Although this comparative gap was huge, this rapid

development in the scope of higher education in China was already a heavy financial burden on the economic development. The rapid expansion of regular Institutes of Higher Learning has been accompanied by the deteriorating condition of educational facilities, school buildings and students' residences. In 1993, the per student school floor space was only 42.4 square metres. The students' living area was 3.72 square metres per student, 0.6 square metres less than the previous year. Teaching and research facilities have been poorly equipped. The situation in adult higher educational universities is even worse. Many universities consist of only one poorly equipped classroom and several visiting teachers sponsored by individual factories. Significant improvement does not seem to be possible in the foreseeable future (Educational Yearbook of China 1993:78).

What has also changed is the pattern of regular higher education. In recent years, it has been realized that higher education provision at a more senior specialized level has been unduly prioritized over that of short-cycle colleges. This has caused an imbalance in the composition of the technical workforce. Since there are a plethora of senior specialized personnel in some sectors, as compared with ordinary technicians, many of them are forced to do lower-level work which is not commensurate with their training (Gu, in Hayhoe ed. 1987:80). This situation has necessitated the current reform in expanding short-cycle regular higher education. Table I.2 shows that the number of students admitted into short-cycle college level programs has increased 7.58 fold during the period from 1979 to 1993, while the volume of normal university entrants had hardly doubled during the same period. The ratio of admitted students into short-cycle programs versus that of normal university was around 1:3 before 1983, was roughly 1:2 in 1983, moved up toward 1:1 in the following three recorded years, and reached 1.39:1 in 1993.

Besides the expansion of regular higher education, secondary educational structural reform

has also been adopted, in part, to relieve the competition for university entry. As shown in Table I.2, the total number of general senior high schools has been dropping steadily during the years of reform. More and more junior high school graduates are streamed into vocational senior high schools instead of continuing a general academic education geared to university entrance competition. As a result, the number of general senior high school graduates has also been dropping, drastically in the first few years of reform, slowly and steadily in later years, with a little rebound now and then. The larger number of young students in vocational schools has also provided the opportunity for technical-vocational training to these students, who otherwise might have no chance of a higher education, nor job skills for employment.

(5) Expansion of adult higher education

Adult higher education in China means the adult education at the tertiary level. Adult universities included radio/television universities, worker's colleges, training programs run by individual work units for their employees, independent correspondence universities, and peasants' universities (Educational Atlas of China:160). These institutions issue graduation papers to students but may or may not be eligible to grant degrees. Admission to an adult institute of higher learning is based on the results of a uniform national examination (Yu & Xu 1988:22).

When the four modernization policy was announced in 1978, with only 598 regular Institutes of Higher Learning, China was facing a contradiction between the urgent need of expanding higher education and the shortage of regular university campuses with its attendant infrastructure of educational buildings. The country could not wait for regular universities to produce enough talent for the purpose of economic production. The reform decade of the 1980s witnessed a radical expansion of adult higher education. The Central Radio/TV University was set up in February 1979,

followed by the establishment of the radio/television universities network throughout the country with only Tibet uncovered. Full time study could be completed in three years. Upon graduation, a short-cycle university diploma, officially supposed to be equivalent to that awarded by a regular university, was to be issued by the student's local TV University. Part time and full time work-study programs, correspondence learning schools were launched under the leadership of the Adult Education Department of the Ministry of Education. Work units were supposed to give support for the education of employees. Paid study leaves were offered, academic assistance was arranged where possible. Diplomas were to be offered to those who graduated through adult education programs and were to be seen as of the same weight as that awarded by regular Institutes of Higher Learning. The salary standards and promotion of employees were directly linked with the level of educational achievement in terms of credentials. Taking work problems to classrooms and combining production and study had become a common practice. As Hunter wrote in 1985, China in its post-Mao reform period was a nation in a hurry (Hunter 1985:30). It was within this historical context that the State-Administered Higher Educational Examination System for Self-Taught Students was conceived.

3. The establishment of the examination system

In his "Some Comments On Work In Science And Education" (Aug.8, 1977), Deng Xiaoping pointed out "Education still has to 'walk on two legs'. In higher education, colleges and universities constitute one leg, while work-study universities and spare-time universities constitute the other." (Hu & Seifman 1987:58).

On February 26, 1978, at the First Session of the Fifth National People's Congress, the Government Working Report first announced the decision of the State Council : "We should establish an appropriate examinations system for people who study in their spare-time. Those who can

demonstrate the qualifications for a university degree should be treated equally as a university graduate". In response to this Government Working Report, the Ministry of Education shortly thereafter started preparing the required related documents. In 1979, "Tentative Methods of Higher Educational Examinations for the Self-Taught Students (draft)" was ready. This document covered six main issues: the examinees, registration procedures, exam methods, the treatment of the graduates, administration and budget. On January 13, 1981, the State Council approved the application report submitted by the Ministry of Education and the "Tentative Methods (draft)", which marked the establishment of the state-administered higher educational examination system for the self-taught students in China. "Tentative Methods" was to be effective until March 3, 1988, when the succeeding "Provisional Regulations on Higher Educational Examinations for the Self-Taught Students" was formally promulgated by the State Council.

Upon the establishment of the Examinations in 1981, the cities of Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai were selected as experimental cities for the exams in the same year, Liaoning Province was added in April 1982 as an experimental province. At this first stage, the exams were mainly confined to short-cycle university level courses except that a small number of normal undergraduate majors were available in Shanghai. The exams for the normal university level were not officially initiated until October, 1986, when Shanghai, Tianjin and Hunan Province were selected for the experiment.

The "Provisional Regulations on Higher Educational Examinations for the Self-Taught Students", promulgated on March 3, 1988, stipulate that the main tasks of the state-administered examinations were: "to promote self-study and academic assistance in all sectors of society, to further work-related training and post-collegiate continuing education, to produce and select socialist knowledgeable talent, and to help raise the overall educational standard of the whole population

eventually” (Liu ed. 1991:2017). According to the “Provisional Regulations”, all citizens of the PRC may apply for the examinations without any restrictions in regard to sex, age, nationality, race or previous schooling. The “Provisional Regulations” also confirm that the examinations system for self-taught learners is one aspect of adult higher education, comprising self-study, community academic assistance and the state-administered exams. The higher education credentials obtained through self-study and their related exams, and through regular Institutes of Higher Learning are equivalent to each other in so far as the educational purpose and the standards of evaluation are concerned. Once the short-cycle university or normal university credentials are achieved by individual examinees, the credential holders are to be treated as equal to regular university graduates when seeking employment, promotion and change of jobs. For those who are already employed, the work position and salary standard are to be adjusted accordingly (Documents on Self-Study Exams, 1989:7).

II. THE ADMINISTRATION AND OPERATION OF THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

1. The national structure of administration

The Higher Educational Examinations (HEE) were established in 1981 on a trial basis in three municipalities and one province. In May 1983, after two years of pilot experiments, the State Council offered examinations throughout China in the years that followed.

In its "Provisional Regulations on Higher Educational Examinations for the Self-Taught Students" promulgated in March, 1988, the State Council confirmed that the national exam system should be administered by administering bodies on three levels: the central level, the provincial level and the local level. Table II.1 shows the basic structure and relative relationship of the HEE administration.

Table II.1. National structure of the HEE administration system

Government level	Jurisdiction	Committee
MOE/SECC in the State Council	Central	National Steering Committee (NSC) - Subcommittees: Academic 13; Research 1
Provincial governments	Provincial	Exam Committees in provinces/municipalities
City governments	Local	Exam Working Committees in cities; Working Offices in counties/districts

Source: Theory Committee on China's Adult Education. China's Self-Educational Exams. Beijing: Education Science Press, 1994

The central administration, the National Steering Committee for Examining Self-Taught Students of College Courses (hereafter referred to as the National Steering Committee (NSC)), was set up in May 1983 by the State Council to provide overall guidance under the leadership of the Ministry of Education (MOE). After 1986, it was entitled the State Education Commission of China

(SECC). Since its establishment, the National Steering Committee (NSC) has been composed of about 30 high ranking officials drawn from the following three bodies: (1) the MOE (or later the SECC), (2) the State Council, and (3) the administrative directorate and subject specialists from selected Institutes of Higher Learning. An office with full-time staff was set up inside the Ministry of Education to take care of the routine work required by the National Steering Committee. As decided by the First Plenary Meeting of the National Steering Committee held in May, 1983, various subcommittees by fields of academic interest were to be set up under the leadership of the National Steering Committee. By 1990, 13 subcommittees were established on the following academic fields: Economics and Management, Chinese, Philosophy, Law, Civil Engineering, English, Mechanical Engineering, Physics, Electrical Engineering, Agriculture, Mathematics, Journalism, and Governmental Administration. The academic curricula and program designs involves 214 experts and scholars from all over the country, working as various subject and research subcommittees. In 1987, a national research committee was established, which had 10-odd experts in the field of higher educational research and educational measurement. Its main task was to take charge of the research work of the examinations and the national and international academic interflow activities.

By the fall of 1985, 29 provinces and municipalities had established their own provincial level examination administration committees, which had been delegated decision-making powers on policies and regulations related to the operation of examinations and the granting of diplomas. Thus, the management system of the state-administered examinations for self-taught students was extended on a national scale. Each of these committees is assisted by its own working office in the provincial department of education to take the responsibility of the routine work relating to the exams within its jurisdiction.

Shortly after Guangdong Province established its provincial examination committee in the fall of 1984, special examination centres were set up in Shenzhen and Zhuhai to serve participating students from Hong Kong and Macau. By 1992, nearly 2,000 persons from these two regions had taken the exams (Theory Committee on China's Adult Education 1994: 5). Hainan Province, after its independence from Guangdong Province, set up the 30th provincial level administration committee.

The third level of the management structure is composed of the local examination working committees established in most cities, whose routine work is carried out by the respective city bureau of education. The work of each of these committees is subject to the direct leadership of its higher level administration, the provincial committee, as well as the local city government.

In the early period of conducting the examinations, all examination centres were regulated to be set up in cities and no county level examination administrative bodies were established. With the expansion of the examinations and the number of examinees, many counties and districts have also established their own working offices to take care of the exam related work within their local areas. This work includes: student registration, examination arrangements, distribution of study materials, guidance and academic assistance organization work. Examination centres have been set up down to the county and local district level as well.

As Table II.1 shows, the three-tiered administration system of the state-administered examinations is a hierarchical top-down administrative structure, which extends the state policies and control over the examination operations down to the counties and prefectures. The structure also features a high degree of politicization at each of its administrative levels. The National Steering Committee, the highest authority at the central level of the examination administration, is composed

of department leaders inside the State Council as well as the directorate of prestigious universities. This guarantees relatively convenient cooperation between relating departments inside the central government, and between the government and universities, on examination matters such as budget, planning, and staff management. Provincial/municipality examination committee directors are usually installed by the same deputy president of the province or municipality who is responsible for education, while the leading officials in the provincial department of education sit as the deputy directors of the committee. The bureaucratic network between the levels of government, educational departments and universities ensures that the state's guidelines and policies concerning the examinations are carried out at all levels throughout the country.

More than 200 regular Institutes of Higher Learning have been designated by provincial examination committees as the examination administering institutes. Their responsibilities include: drafting the examination standards in their respective fields, compiling a course guideline for each exam subject, drafting and recommending the self-teaching materials, participating in the preparation and correction of the exam papers, offering the required exams that cover practical work (such as the evaluation of final papers, graduation projects and experiment courses, and oral exams for foreign language learners), collaborating in granting certificates and diplomas to the qualified students, and performing research to improve the examination system.

Special test service centres have been set up in the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Wuhan, Chengdu and Shenyang to carry out the preparation of the written examination papers. These centres work under the dual leadership of the National Steering Committee and provincial examination committees. Their main task is to prepare national unified examination papers for those public and foundation courses which are required nationwide. Individual provinces are responsible

for giving those examinations which are specific to their localities.

Up to the present, more than 10,000 faculty members from various Institutes of Higher Learning have participated in the preparation of the written examination papers. Full time staff working on the self-taught examinations amount to more than 3,800 persons throughout China (Theory Committee on China's Adult Education 1994:20).

2. The operation of the examinations

As decided by the National Steering Committee, the unified written examination times fall on the last Saturday and Sunday in each April and October. There is a little variation among different provinces. Some provinces have three days for each set of the exams and others schedule the exams on each Sunday in April and October.

Two shifts of parallel examinations are scheduled on every examination day, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. A variety of subjects required by different programs are scheduled to be offered in the designated community examination centres, which are usually located in regular school buildings. Two or three vigilating teachers are assigned to each examination room during the examination period. Participating students can choose which examination centre to attend within their residing cities. An examination permit is given to the prospective examinee at a very small cost for each examination subject, when he/she registers for the exams at the local examination working office.

Within a variety of the exam subjects, which are required by the students' chosen programs, and which are also available in the students' cities of residence, the examinees are responsible for choosing which examination subject(s) to take. Each examination subject is not repeated within the same year, so successful students in the previous exams can consistently take other subjects required

by their program of study. This makes it possible to reduce the length of time needed for the completion of a degree. One shortcoming of this annual procedure is that those who have failed one subject cannot make it up until at least one year later.

Before 1983, different provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions had varying examination plans and standards, which were largely based on the education plans of similar programs offered by local regular Institutes of Higher Learning. The establishment of the 13 academic subcommittees in 1983 by fields of study was to devise the national unified examination plans and standards for some of the widely adopted academic programs offered in the HEE examinations. Beginning in 1984, the uniform academic credit system has been adopted in the operation of the examinations as guided by "Opinions on Unifying the Credit Criteria for the Exams", released by the National Steering Committee in August of that same year. The credit value for each exam subject is calculated according to the number of lecture hours and the number of hours needed for the home work for an equivalent course offered in regular universities. It is stipulated that anyone subject of a particular major which would require one lecture hour and two hours' home work per week in a regular university semester equals one credit. Thus, in HEE, different exam subjects available, or even the same subject for different specialties, may bear various credit values.

Fixed credit values are regulated throughout the examinations for the public courses, the ones that students in almost all fields have to take: 6 credits each for College Chinese, Philosophy and Chinese Revolutionary History; 4 for Common Logic; and 14 for Foreign Language (Chen, Yu & Ren eds. 1994:223). The number of courses required and the minimum credits to be achieved vary depending on program levels and specialties, but the adoption of a credit system on a national basis has offered a unified academic standard for comparison among students of the same major.

3. Financing of the examinations and student fees

The expenditure of the HEE system includes the costs entailed by the compiling of exam plans, outlines and study books; the preparation and correction of exam papers; the operation of exams; purchasing of necessary equipment and the routine expenses for administration.

The financing of the examinations system is largely a self-sustaining one since the payments made by examinees cover the major part of the administrative costs. All payments collected for examination fees and a percentage¹ of all the tuition fees paid to each regulated but autonomous academic assistant agency go to the local departments of adult education and are used only for HEE examination-related purposes (Ren ed. 1990:78).

There are three supplemental sources of funding for the HEE. (1) The government budgetary expenditure. From 1987, HEE expenditure has been a major part of the national or provincial government budget for adult higher education. (2) The government departments and work units which have entrusted HEE to add new specializations on exam schedules are required to pay an exam sponsor fee to the local examination committee. This funding usually comes from the employees' educational expenditure allocated to individual work units by the government. (3) The expenses entailed by exam-related work done by regular universities are covered by the state expenditure on regular higher education (Ren ed. 1990:78).

Table II.2. Government expenditure on the HEE in Beijing: 1991-94

Time	Government budget	Exam registrants	Expenditure per student
1991-1994	700,000 Yuan/ year	147,711 persons / year	4.74 Yuan / person

Source: NSC. Research on the Educational Function of Higher Educational Examinations for Self-Taught Students. Hangzhou, Zhejiang: Zhejiang University Press, 1996, page 332

¹ This percentage is regulated individually by localities. In Beijing it is five percent.

Table II.2 shows the government expenditure on examinations in the city of Beijing during a four year period from 1991 to 1994. According to 1992 statistics (Educational Atlas of China 1995:132), the state budgetary educational expenditure per student averaged 5,297.3 Yuan nationally, covering staff salaries, public expenditures and basic construction. Thus, the state would have to spend an average of 10,594.6 Yuan on every two-year college graduate. A random survey (NSC 1996:332) of 489 short-cycle university graduates in 1994 shows that the average time needed to finish the exams was 3.4 years. Provided that all exam registrants would finish the short-cycle courses within 3.4 years, the government expenditure on each of these students would be 4.74×3.4 (year) = 16 Yuan. As compared with that of regular universities, the government expenditure on the external examinations is very low. HEE represents a state saving of 10,578 Yuan per short-cycle university graduate when compared to a regular university. Since the major part of the HEE examinees cannot graduate with a desired degree, the actual state expenditure on each graduate is higher than the above calculated amount. According to a random sample survey (NSC 1996:9), in 1992, the public expenditure on each Beijing HEE short-cycle university graduate covered only 0.2 percent of the amount spent on a regular university graduate.

Individual expenses on self-study and examinations vary greatly, since students have a variety of choices as to how to conduct their studies. Fees paid by individual students for the purpose of study and exams depend on the degree levels, and the type of academic assistance they choose to take. The individual expenses necessary for only taking the actual examinations are rather low. In 1994, approximately half of the nation's examinees did not attend any type of academic assistance programs. For these students, only an average of 10 yuan on the study material for each subject and a 10-odd yuan registration fee for each of the exams is necessary (exam registration fee per subject

is slightly different between provinces). Therefore, 500 yuan or so would be the total monetary input for a Bachelor student who has to complete 21 courses without taking any academic assistance. For other students who have to take the various fee-paying academic assistance classes and programs, expenses would be much higher and varied. Tuition ranges from 30-60 yuan for a single-subject short term course to about 1,000 yuan per semester for some of the long-term NGO-sponsored university assistance programs. Extra expenses are necessary if transportation and lodging are needed when an examination centre is only available out of town.

With this implicit private individual nature of the financing, the state's budgetary expenditure is only one small portion of the HEE funding. Individual and community expenses have formed the major part of the expenditures necessary for running the examinations system. This financial mode is probably both pragmatic and suitable under the current economic situation in China, since the state does not have the financial means to provide a significantly larger portion of money required to operate this open learning system.

III. PROGRAM AREAS AND EXAMS

1. Dual level exams and diploma programs

In China, higher education is by state definition an educational category which includes all forms of tertiary training at the short-cycle university level or above. In compiling statistics, the structure of regular higher education institutions is composed of all state-run specialized colleges, short cycle vocational colleges, and universities which grant multi-level degrees starting from short-cycle university credentials.

The Higher Educational Examinations (HEE) offer degree programs which certify the qualification of self-taught students through examinations for the award of a degree. The degrees available to be granted by the HEE are designed to be parallel to those of China's traditional higher educational system. The regular tertiary degree programs fall into the following three types:

- Graduate level programs leading to a master's or a doctor's degree;
- Normal university degree programs leading to a bachelor's degree, which require 4-5 years of undergraduate training;
- Short-cycle university degree programs, which fall into two types: (1) 2-3 year programs compressed down from a 4-5 year university education. There is hardly any difference between the graduation requirements of these programs and those of normal university programs in the same field, except for the duration of study. (2) 2-3 year programs confined to the foundation courses in a special area.

At the present time, China's HEE programs offer tertiary credentials only at two levels, which are the short-cycle university degree and the normal university degree. Owing to the relatively short

history of development and the overall poor educational background of the enrolling student population, the HEE programs have not yet been extended to the graduate level. The programs and specialties leading to a short-cycle university degree were the first ones to develop and still serve the majority of the student population. Normal university programs were not formally initiated by the National Steering Committee (NSC) until October, 1986, five years after the short-cycle programs were started. In 1983, the HEE examinations were experimented with at the special skill high school level, and were shortly thereafter expanded to a national scale. China's examinations for self-taught learners were thus extended to a secondary school level. The interest of this thesis, however, is within the confines of adult higher educational examination programs.

After 10 years practice, the examination programs have been developed within the following four basic examination plans leading to two levels of degrees (Theory Committee on China's Adult Education 1994:109-111):

(1) The plan for foundation courses leading to a short-cycle university degree. The graduation qualification is equivalent with that of a successful completion of the first half of a 4-5 year university education. Normally 12 subjects with a cumulation of around 75 credits have to be passed for a degree.

(2) A job-specific short-cycle university degree plan. This is a terminal short-cycle university degree plan largely geared to those examinees who are mainly interested in gaining or upgrading special skills for occupations. The requirement for the basic knowledge is lower than that of the foundation courses plan but more examination subjects have to be taken. A short-cycle special skill university degree is granted to students who passed 13 to 17 chosen courses with 75 to 80 credits achieved.

(3) The alternative degrees plan. With this plan, an accumulation of 20 to 24 courses with 125 to 140 credits and an additional final paper or a graduation design project or assignment are the requirements for a normal university education equivalency. Upon completion of the short-cycle level courses and requirements, a short-cycle university degree is independently granted when 12 courses with 70 to 75 credits are achieved. Students can either choose to stop at this point or continue to finish the remaining number of exam subjects, credits and graduation projects at the advanced level for the completion of the normal university graduation. This endeavour can also be resumed later on at any time of students own choosing. Those normal university graduates who demonstrate a certain level of proficiency in one foreign language are qualified for a bachelor's degree.

(4) Independent normal university level exams. For those students who have already obtained a state-acknowledged short-cycle university degree through adult higher education or from regular short-cycle universities, and who intend to work for a bachelor's degree through self-learning, a minimum of 14 university senior level courses with 75 credits and a final paper or a graduation project or assignment are required.

When all the exam subjects required by a desired degree have been passed, a student has to fulfill a final assignment or take an examination testing practical work application before he/she is qualified for the degree. This final requirement can take the following forms according to the nature of the academic field being examined: a laboratory experiment, an internship, a course design, a graduation project or thesis, or an oral examination for foreign language majors. Experiments and oral examinations take place in the administering institutes or designated work units where the appropriate facilities are available. The student's administering institute is responsible for the design of the examination procedure and the evaluation of the experiment report or language ability.

Production or medical internships for students in the related fields are fulfilled in designated places under the supervision of teachers from the administering institutes. A final internship report is evaluated by the institute. For students majoring in engineering, a final course design has to be completed independently in a designated place and within the required period of time. For the final assignment or thesis, it is the individual student's responsibility to choose the topic, devise the outline, and to find a supervisor. After the thesis/design is approved by the supervisor and then by the administering institute, a final oral defence is arranged and evaluated before a degree is awarded.

2. The development of program areas

In January 1981, when the HEE was initiated on a trial basis, the State Council approved and circulated a Ministry of Education report on tentatively governing the examinations for self-taught students. The report says: "All localities should decide the specialties to be tested in light of the needs of their respective localities for various kinds of professionals, so that on-the-job personnel who have passed the examinations may be transferred to other suitable posts and jobless personnel who have made excellent scores may be assigned work." The four pilot localities, Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai cities and Liaoning Province designed their own majors and subjects for examinations, basically according to the courses and areas offered in regular institutes of higher learning, as well as the manpower requirement of the local job market.

In June, 1981, when the first set of exams for self-learning students were given on a trial basis in Beijing, exams were offered in only eight short-cycle specialty areas: Chinese, Industrial Economics, Commercial Economics, Law, Finance, Mathematics, Archive Management and the English Language. As guided by the principles of "Science and Technology after Humanities" and "from easy-to-offer courses to complicated ones", Shanghai city offered two normal university level

programs in Chinese Literature and the English Language, and four short-cycle programs in Chinese Literature, English Language, Accounting and Law. Accounting and Textile Engineering were offered in Tianjin city and ten short-cycle specialties were designed for exams including Chinese Literature and English Language in Liaoning Province (Liu ed. 1991:2015). On a national level, exam specialties in Humanities were the first ones to be identified since the nature of these specialties made the operation of exams relatively easy. Suitable specialties in Science, Technology, Agriculture and Medicine were added gradually. Inter-provincial cooperation was sought as an efficient and economical means of expanding specialty areas.

An NSC document concerning the initiation of normal university level examinations was released on June 6, 1986. Four pilot Bachelor programs in Chinese Literature, Mathematics, Physics and Mechanics were offered in Fall, 1986 in Shanghai, Tianjin cities and Hunan Province (Liu ed. 1991:2016). More exam specialties were added subsequently for both levels, due to rapid economic and social development need and with the burgeoning of new fields of study. By the end of 1992, there were 142 examination specialties covering the areas of Arts, Sciences, Engineering, Agriculture, Medicine, Teaching, Finance and Economics, Politics and Law, Education and Administration. The numbers of specialties offered for each set of examinations are shown in Table III.1. We can see that the number of available specialties has increased seven fold over the years from 20 in 1983 to over 140 in 1992.

Within the short history of the HEE, there has been an ever-expanding number of exam specialties offered. However, statistics show that the expansion of exam specialties are not evenly distributed among regions, as one can see from Table III.2, which was compiled in the latter half of 1993. In 1993, the original four pilot areas, Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai cities, and Liaoning province

still lead in the expansion of the number of specialties, but only a very few majors were available for short-cycle university level exams in Tibet and Qinghai areas. Also, throughout the country, fewer specialty areas were developed at the normal undergraduate level than that at the short-cycle university level, which is still the case today.

Table III.1. Growth of the number of exam specialties over the years*

Exam Date			Exam Date		
No. of Specialties			No. of Specialties		
1983	Oct.	20	1988	Apr.	70
1984	Apr.	31		Oct.	75
	Oct.	34			
1985	Apr.	40	1989	Apr.	79
	Oct.	42		Oct.	97
1986	Apr.	60	1990	Apr.	97
	Oct.	60		Oct.	102
1987	Apr.	60	1991	Apr.	102
	Oct.	70		Oct.	111
			1992	Apr.	111
				Oct.	142

Source: Theory Committee on China's Adult Education. China's Self Educational Exams. Beijing: Education Science Press, 1994:70

*Statistics include the number of both level specialties, without double counting of different level programs with the same major title.

Table III.2. Statistics on exam specialties by regions, 1993

Region	Number of specialties on offer		Region	Number of specialties on offer	
	Short-cycle	Normal univ		Short-cycle	Normal univ
Beijing	40	16	Hubei	45	15
Tianjin	31	10	Hunan	32	14
Hebei	32	10	Guangdong	36	6
Shanxi	39	11	Guangxi	27	2
Inner Mongolia	35	8	Hainan	28	5

Region	Number of specialties on offer		Region	Number of specialties on offer	
	Short-cycle	Normal univ		Short-cycle	Normal univ
Shanghai	34	15	Sichuan	37	7
Jiangsu	22	5	Guizhou	19	5
Zhejiang	27	6	Yunnan	33	6
Anhui	24	3	Tibet	7	0
Fujian	27	5	Shaanxi	21	9
Jiangxi	25	6	Gansu	32	4
Shandong	37	8	Ningxia	20	3
Liaoning	43	12	Xinjiang	32	4
Jilin	35	6	Qinghai	18	0
Heilongjiang	35	7	PLA*	3	0
Henan	29	7			

Source: The National Examination Steering Committee of Higher Educational Examinations for Self-Taught Students (NSC) ed. National Statistics on Higher Educational Examinations for Self-Taught Students. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 1996:159

*PLA: People's Liberation Army

Since the examinations for self-taught students were initiated with the aim of offering a second-chance higher education to adult learners, the original design of programs and subject areas were mainly based on the courses and areas offered in regular institutes of higher learning. The foundation courses, the main specialties and the course loads were similar to regular university programs. On the other hand, the examination majors and subjects for self-educators have been largely affected by the requirements of the job market, which in turn, changes with China's overall economic development needs. The First Plenary Meeting of the NSC held in May 1983 pointed out that: the programs and exam subjects for the HEE should not totally replicate the program offerings readily available at regular universities; and that specialties for exams should be based on broader categories in order to cater to the all-around need of the society. The NSC required that all provincial

examination committees conduct research on local job market needs. When designing and modifying exam programs, priority should be given to those specialties which were urgently or widely needed by the economic reform requirement, as well as those suitable for self-study and exam operations.

In recent years, China's educators, regular university graduates, and employers alike have noted that the program fields for university students are narrow, resulting from an over reliance on the traditional structure of university specialties. For example, when an English language major graduates and enters a job, he/she hardly knows anything other than the English grammar and literature, thus, it will take years for him/her to fully qualify for a particular job. Traditional universities are trying to address this problem by adding optional courses, which are available to students in various departments. However, due to limited space, expertise and faculty, high quality optional courses do not satisfy the need. More over, the long accepted division of regular university majors and provision of training are not easily reformed overnight. During nearly 50 years after liberation, the Ministry of Education (later the State Education Commission) has only been able to promulgate two national scale revisions on the regular university curriculum and the third one is still in progress. However, the examinations for self-learners, because they are flexible by design, can be easily adapted to course changes as needed by the dictates of the job market. The National Steering Committee of HEE has been modifying the national overall examination plans once every five years since the start of the examinations. Newly appearing specialties and subjects, especially the cross-disciplinary ones, are included as long as they are suitable for self-study and that the local examination committee has the expertise to offer the exams.

The HEE bases the design of new majors mainly on the job skills needed within the society, since helping to raise the educational standard of the work force is one of its principal aims. One

important aspect in the expansion of specialty offerings comes from the direct request of exam additions by different sectors of the work force. Article 15 of the “Provisional Regulations on Exams for Self-Taught Students of College Courses” reads: “All ministries and departments under the State Council and their affiliated bodies, military forces and other sectors of the work force can entrust the Provincial Examination Committee or the National Steering Committee to establish new exam specialties as needed by the respective field of work.”

In 1983, aiming at raising the educational level of the political and party cadres, the Department of Organization and the Department of Propaganda inside the Central Party Committee jointly entrusted NSC to provide exams on foundation courses for political cadre training. Because of this request, related subjects were added, which later evolved into two short-cycle level specialties: Executive Management and Political Management. Starting from 1985, the State Statistics Bureau, the State Pricing Bureau, the State Committee for Family Planning, Customs at Beijing, the Judicial Department, the Ministry of Finance, Beijing Education Bureau etc. have requested NSC to offer related specialties in their respective fields. Hence new specialties in Statistics, Pricing, Demography, Customs Management, Judicial Law, and Primary School Pedagogy have been established.

Since it only takes half a year for a new exam subject to be ready for offering, it is easier for the HEE, as compared with regular universities, to modify the program offerings to cater to the changing societal need. Among all the exam offerings up to now, in Shandong Province for example, it is reported that 20 local HEE specialties, including Statistics, Accounting, Security Management and Advanced Nursing etc., have filled the vacuum of the course offerings provided by the present four regular universities in one of its major cities, Yantai (NSC 1996:146).

With the development of the examinations, the HEE has also become the authoritative

examining body to verify the study results of graduates from NGO-sponsored universities, correspondence tuition programs, and adult higher educational institutes. Since most of these institutions and programs cannot issue a state-acknowledged credential to their graduates, in order to get a social acceptance, many of these program sponsors have their graduates tested by the HEE, whose graduation papers are legally accepted by the state and employers.

3. Students' choice of specialties and subjects

Written examination subjects basically fall into three categories: public courses, foundation courses and specialty courses. This design actually still exactly follows the pattern set by regular universities.

- Public courses are common subjects required by almost all specialties, for which nation-wide unified examinations are given. These subjects include: three political theory courses (Philosophy, Political Economy, Chinese Revolutionary History), College Chinese, and one Foreign Language, which are also required by most of the regular universities.

- Foundation courses are set within different study areas, which examinees of the area have to take, as decided due to the nature of the field of study. For example, in engineering specialties, these foundation courses are Advanced Mathematics, General Physics and General Chemistry. Accounting, Statistics, and Computer Application are required foundation courses for students in the study area of Economics and Management. Public courses and foundation courses account for around 80 percent of the credits required for degree completion (Chen, Yu & Ren eds. 1994:141).

- Specialty courses make up the remaining 20 percent of the course load. These courses are more closely related to different job skills. This part of the HEE subjects is especially designed to appeal to students with various needs as required by occupations, as well as by individual interest.

In theory, as compared with regular full-time university majors, the HEE specialties are designed so that students in any specialty program can be exposed to a relatively broader knowledge field and training owing to the cross-disciplinary nature of the specialty courses. In practice, however, although each specialty has a number of optional courses from which students can choose, students' free choice is limited to a very small number of courses once their own majors are decided. For example, according to the examination plans updated in 1995, all accounting majors at the short-cycle university level should complete 12 subjects, among which 11 are required for students to take without any specific time order. Only one subject remains to be chosen by students from among Basic English, Economic Law and Management Accounting.

There are very few restrictions on the students' choosing of majors, although participants are encouraged to choose those specialties related to their work place requirements. Generally speaking, those specialties which have promising job prospects are the students' favourite ones. Many also like to choose the relatively easy-to-cope-with areas inside the humanities specialties.

Since 1993, among all the specialties on offer, Accounting has been the most popular subject area with the examinees. In the fall of 1994, the registration figures show that the most popular program areas were Accounting, Law, International Trade, English, Finance And Computer Science. These subject areas accounted for 61 percent (or 110,000) of a total of 180,000 subjects taken during this exam period. The second most popular subject areas were Chinese, Nursing, Commerce, Economic Management And Traditional Chinese Medicine, with over 5,000 subjects taken by examinees within each program (Beijing Self Educational Examination Bulletin 1995,1,1).

On the one hand, the popularity of some of the majors with students reflects the trend of the job market requirement and the societal manpower demands. On the other, certain fields of study

which might lead to low pay or hard-to-fill future jobs are rarely chosen by students, although the society is also in great need of educated manpower in the fields. The specialties of Veterinary Medicine and Post And Telecommunications are such examples. For those program areas which have constantly attracted few examinees, the provincial examination committee may consider cancelling the specialty. In Beijing, Philosophy, Advanced Mathematics, and Physics etc. have been drawing about 10 examinees each per examination term in recent years (Beijing Self Educational Exmination Bullitin 1995,4,2). Considering that regular universities were graduating enough talent in these traditional fields, the Beijing Examination Committee permanently cancelled Advanced Mathematics And Physics in 1996. Students already enrolled in a cancelled field of study can either stick to the field and finish within two years upon notice, or move to other specialties, with credits gained from public courses and other subjects with the same titles transferred over.

4. Exam guide books and self-study materials

With no direct tuition provided by the examination administering organizations, students' successful performance is totally based on the satisfactory study of printed course materials as guided by the exam guide books, and a good job done in the related exams. The preparation of guide books and study materials are mainly the responsibilities of the 13 academic sub-committees. In case the line of study is covered by none of these national academic sub-committees, the provincial exam committee will take charge of the preparation work.

Exam guide books are the guiding documents on which individuals' self-study, community academic assistance, the preparation of study materials and exam questions have to be based. The main requirements of a course, basic contents to be studied, exam criteria, the measurement of credits, suggested study methods and recommended study materials are included in the guide book

for each subject.

In the early period of exam taking, selected text books and instruction guidelines used in regular universities or compiled for correspondence education were recommended for use by self-taught students. From 1984 onward, the HEE exam guide books have been prepared for courses within various lines of study (see Table III.3). Numerous tutorial text books for many HEE courses began to be compiled in 1986 (see Table III.4).

Table III. 3. Exam guide books compiled by academic sub-committees as of Dec. 1989*

Line of study	No.published	No. to be published	No. in planning	Public courses included
Econ & Management	58	16	74	Incl: Political Econ
Chinese	12	6	18	Incl: College Chinese
Philosophy	21		21	Incl: Philosophy
Law	14	14	28	
Civil engineering	15		70	
English	6		6	Incl: Public English
Mechanics	29	17	75	
Physics			17	
Electronics		33	33	
Agriculture	7	20	44	
Math	16		16	
Journalism	6	8	14	
Politics& Management	3	24	27	Incl: Revolutionary History
Total	187	138	443	

Source: Ren, Fuchang ed. Ten Years Development of Higher Educational Examinations. Economics Science Press, 1990, page 51

*The guide books for Traditional Chinese Medicine, Demography and Nursing majors are not included in this table.

Table III.4. Self-study text books prepared by academic sub-committees as of Dec. 1989*

Line of study	No. published	No. to be published	No. in preparation
Econ & Management	18	8	24
Chinese	6	1	5
Law	11	3	14
Journalism		1	13
Politics & Management	2	3	22
Civil engineering	5	10	
Mechanics	4	2	12
Agriculture			2
Electronics			5
Math		8	5
Philosophy	1		
Total	47	36	102

Source: Ren, Fuchang ed. Ten Years Development of Higher Educational Examinations. Economics Science Press, 1990, page 54

*The text books for Demography and Nursing majors are not included in this table.

In China's regular undergraduate programs, the university usually provides all the required course books at the beginning of each semester and students are required to purchase them. The systematic and well-planned instruction and educational process makes everything very predictable. The HEE students, on the other hand, have to take care of their own learning progress and the purchase of the study materials. With various study materials and guide books published by different institutions flooding onto the book market, students are very often confused about what are the appropriate books to use.

This confusion comes in part, from the examination authorities. Owing to the experimental status of the examinations, changes in exam regulations and plans occur frequently. Besides their

particular academic studies, students have to always keep an eye on the HEE specialty policy changes and make constant adjustments. One example of changes concerns the preparation of exam papers on Math. Each year, the HEE central administration will single out the guide book and course book for a specific subject to guide students' preparation. After the April, 1994 Math exam, the researchers attributed the poor pass rate to the ill-planned exam paper in terms of contents, scope of knowledge covered, and level of difficulty. In light of this study result, not long before the same exam subject was to be given in April, 1995, it was decided that instead of the old practice of mixing contents on Advanced Math, Linear Algebra, and Statistics together in one exam paper, Advanced Math should be separated out. Students were notified to prepare for the exam according to certain newly published course books. This sudden notice of exam change left students little time to find the designated books in the market and to hastily change their study plan before the exam date. It was later found out that the exam results were still not satisfactory. After more laborious researching and planning, it turned out that the exam plan and designated books to be used for the 1996 Math exam were later changed back to that of 1994. Again, students were notified shortly before the exam date.

It remains an unresolved problem for the HEE administration to raise the students' pass rate on each exam subject. The constant changes of exam plans and policies have not raised the average pass rate of students, but have made students more puzzled as to how and what to study. Lacking systematic instruction and often without an efficient self-learning method, students have to rely heavily on exam guidelines and officially designated course books. No matter what the exam results are, many are exam instrumentalists, being constantly driven by the changing exam plans.

IV. STUDENT ADMINISTRATION, STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AND STUDENT PROGRESS

1. Student administration: open entry and student files

The evolution of adult education at a distance since World War II and the establishment of western derived life-long education theories in the 1970s have provided China's educators the theoretical base for experimenting with raising the nation's overall educational standard. In searching for suitable models on an international level, China also took its inspiration from the British Open University (BOU), which features an open entry, as well as other international initiatives of open learning systems.

Upon its establishment, the Higher Educational Examinations in China adopted a principle of "lenient entry and strict exit (graduation)". Article three of Regulations on Exams for Self-Taught Students provides that: "... All citizens of the PRC may apply for the examinations of their own accord regardless of sex, age, nationality, race or previous schooling. . . ." This broad mandate, in practice, has made China's examinations system more flexible and egalitarian than the BOU as far as students entry is concerned. Although the BOU has been committed to widening access to higher education since its inception in 1969, it still has to reject students because demand for entry has always been greater than the number of places available. The BOU's open admission of students, though, is totally based on a "first come, first serve" policy, with no consideration of students' qualification for study with the University (Rumble 1982: 45). In China's case, since the state has set up a management structure which only administers examinations and offers no instruction at all, it is practically possible that the system by design can absorb all interested students. Thus, for those students beginning with short-cycle university level courses, the Higher Educational Examinations

system has no limitations whatsoever as far as admission is concerned. Those who intend to skip exams at the short-cycle university level, however, have to present a short-cycle university credential, earned either from the Examinations, or from other state-acknowledged Institutes of Higher Learning, when they register for normal undergraduate level exams for the first time. All students who do not previously have a high school graduate equivalency are required to take extra exams for any desired degree.

To register for any of the examinations, the individual student has only to take a trip to the local examination office within the regulated time period prior to each of the two annual examination dates. Collective registrations are also organized by those work units or institutions which have entrusted the HEE to examine their students or employees. For filing purposes, ID and educational credentials are expected for first time registering students.

Although the entry requirement is lenient, it is quite likely that a significant proportion of the registered examinees will drop out later on during the course of study, and only those who have passed all the necessary examinations with sufficient credits required for completion will be certified as graduates.

Students may apply for a change of specialty at any time, but a request form has to be submitted by the examinees and be approved in turn by the district/county level, city level and finally the provincial examination committees. Some previously earned credits can be transferred, depending on the nature of specialties involved. Examinees who cannot take the exams in their home towns if restricted by work location are allowed to sit exams in another province, and have the results sent back to their original local examination office of registration.

An examination file is established for each individual student as soon as he/she has passed

his/her first exam subject. The student's registration forms for all exam sessions, records of results, qualified exam papers, and records of reward and punishment are kept and updated by special personnel either in the provincial examination committees or in the city committees entrusted by the province. If a student has failed to pass any new exams over a time span of five years, his/her file is taken out and kept separately.

The common and basic rationale for the practice of distance learning systems in an open mode at the tertiary level is to provide an egalitarian educational opportunity to adults who may pursue a university degree by upgrading the qualifications required by their professions and/or in the subjects of individual interests, and who otherwise do not have the chance to undertake a university education. With egalitarianism and democratization as the basic ideologies for an open university education, in theory, all adult students are equal in choosing to, or not to, undertake the education offered by the open learning system featuring open access and open entry. The broad mandate of the Regulations on Exams for Self-Taught Students regarding student registration makes the HEE system open to all adults, with factors such as occupation, position, condition of health and academic preparation very flexible.

The concept of "open entry" however, does not guarantee open access, which has larger implications than the former. The degree of openness of entry into a certain institution is largely decided by the nature and restrictiveness of the regulations and the selection criteria. Qualifications required for entry, the right to compete for a limited number of places available, the right to take an entrance examination, timing, age limits, location of home, sex, race, religion and nationality are among the examples for such criteria. In addition to openness of entry, the degree of openness of access is affected by other factors, such as the economic, geographic, timing, health and other

conditions or restrictions under which individuals have to study, even if they are accepted entry (Neil ed. 1981:37). The remaining sections of this chapter show that self-learning students are by no means a homogeneous group. Various factors and conditions faced by students in their process of studies are examined.

2. Student characteristics

Broadly speaking, the self-taught students vary greatly in age, occupation, social status, education background, and other conditions under which they have to study for the exams. The tables used in this section show some national or provincial statistics on the break down of certain characteristics of the examinees. Table IV.1 below shows the result of one random survey among registered participants of Guangdong Province, and Table IV.2 shows the statistics obtained from a survey of all the examinees in Yantai City, Shandong Province in the April examinations of 1995.

Table IV.1. Random survey of the Higher Educational Examination participants in Guangdong Province

Time	Size of survey (No. of persons)	Percentage (%)		Percentage by age (%)		
		Male	Female	16-35	36-60	> 60
Apr.89	51,731	66.4	33.6	n/a	n/a	n/a
Oct.89	46,785	65.18	34.82	88.69	10.73	0.58
Apr.90	50,465	67.03	32.97	90.22	9.14	0.64
Oct.90	51,233	64.70	35.30	90.63	9.17	0.20
Apr.91	60,585	64.57	35.43	90.50	9.27	0.23
Oct.91	69,095	60.36	39.64	91.23	7.18	1.59

Source: Theory Committee on China's Adult Education. China's Self Educational Examinations. Beijing: Educational Science Press, 1994, page:29

As indicated in Table IV.1, during 1989-91, the number of male participants was nearly double that of females in all six terms of exams surveyed in Guangdong Province. This male-female

ratio is similar to that of the national statistics on men and women student ratios in China's regular universities around the beginning of 1990s. From 1987 to 1991, the annual female participation rate for regular universities was 33.0%, 33.3%, 33.2%, 33.5% and 33.4% respectively (Educational Statistics Yearbook of China). The disadvantaged situation faced by Chinese women concerning access to higher education does not seem to have been improved by the HEE's total open entry of students.

Table IV.2. Statistics on examinees' distribution by age in Yantai City for April 1995

Age	Total	25 and below	26-35	36-45	46-55	56 and above
Examinees	21289	15813	4371	939	81	85
Percentage (%)	100	74	20.5	4	0.4	0.4

Source: Hu, Jiajun & Wang, Shengxiang. *Essays on Self Study and Exams*. Shandong: Shandong University Press, 1991: 111

The examinees are virtually from all age cohorts but the majority are relatively young. About 90 percent of the Guangdong examinees during 1989-91 could be found in the age cohort 16-35, and 94.5 percent of the total examinees in Yantai City, Shandong Province were below 35 years old according to April, 1995's statistics (Hu & Wang 1991:133). Other data collected from 26 provinces in 1993 also show that 81 percent of the participating students were between age 26 and 35 in that year (Beijing Self Educational Examination Bulletin 1994,3,27). Many younger teenagers have also been active in the examinations and the oldest examinees can be found in their 80s (Guan 1989:142).

It is impossible to compile statistics with regard to detailed job classifications since self-taught students permeate virtually every walk of life in China. If the occupations of the participants are divided into seven broad categories as shown in Table IV.3, we can get a general idea of the percentage of participants by different occupations.

Table IV.3. National statistics, Fall, 1992: percentage of exam participants by occupations

Cadre	Teacher	Worker	Peasant	Soldier	Unemployed	Others	Total
42%	4.48%	31.8%	1.42%	1.22%	7.48%	11.24%	100%

Source: Theory Committee on China's Adult Education. China's Self Educational Examinations. Beijing: Education Science Press, 1994, page 65

Table IV.4. Distribution by occupations of Hubei examinees

Term	Cadre (%)	Worker (%)	Peasant (%)	Soldier (%)	Unemployed (%)	Others (%)
84F	47.8	33.4	0.2	6.7	1.7	10.2
85S	61.6	26.4	0.8	5.7	1.8	3.7
85F	58.8	29.7	0.4	3.6	3.9	3.6
86S	58.9	29.6	0.4	2.8	3.9	4.4
86F	61.2	27.5	0.8	2.7	4.3	3.5
87S	58.6	29.7	0.4	2.0	5.2	4.1
87F	58.2	21.5	0.4	2.2	8.0	9.7

Source: Huang, Enyou. On Present Status of Self-Taught Examinees. In: Zhang Xiangdong & Stephens, MD eds.: Adult Higher Education in China. Jinan, Shandong: Shandong Education Press, 1992, page 151

Enyou Huang (Table IV.4) studied the occupational status of the examinees in Hubei Province over a three year period from the latter half of 1984 to the latter half of 1987, and found that the examinees' distribution by occupation was skewed, but the pattern was relatively steady over the years.

Cadre, a term translated by the New York Times as "party functionary" in the Chinese use of the word, denotes anyone in a position of responsibility, especially referring to government or Party personnel. Cadres, as a group, is traditionally considered the nation's skeleton of administrators and should therefore include the academic elite. Their education is seen as of special urgency and importance. Not long after the Higher Educational Examinations were established, various state's functioning bodies began to register their cadres for the exams, many of whom had not had the

opportunity for any type of tertiary education. Cadres were encouraged to obtain a tertiary educational credential through spare time study and a series of exams in order to be qualified for their positions. In the examination term of Fall, 1992, as shown in Table IV.3, cadres made up the largest occupation group of the national exam participants. In Hubei Province, cadres took up an even larger percentage of the examinees during the period of Huang's study.

The worker's group was the second largest category with approximately one third of the examinees demonstrated both in the national statistics and in Hubei's case study. Some provincial statistics collected at other times also show that workers have been continuously representing a relatively large proportion of the examinees. Peasants, on the other hand, are very slightly represented, albeit that they currently compose 0.8 billion or 75 percent of China's 1.2 billion population. The percentage of the unemployed has been increasing over the years, owing to the yearly influx of many young high school leavers, who do not have an opportunity to enter regular universities, or the work force.

The exam participants also vary in their level of educational achievement before the exams. The average prior educational level has been increasing over the years with 1989 seemingly as a turning point (Wang 1995). Before 1989, those who had previously received only a junior secondary schooling or lower had been taking up around 23 percent of the nation's total examinees. However, between 1990 and 1994, statistics show that a much lower percentage of the total participants had a rather low level of previous education (primary school or junior secondary school leavers). The percentage for this group dropped to 9 percent in October 1992 and was 3.6 percent on a cumulative average from 1990 to 1994. In October 1992, 83 percent of the national total examinees had previously achieved a senior secondary education (special skills schools and worker's training schools

included), and another 8 percent had a short-cycle university degree and above.

The low educational certificate holders, which are a small percentage, are mainly those who have been working for a long time. They have accumulated a rich work experience but feel that their job advancement is hampered by their low educational attainment. For some, without the opportunity to study on a university campus, a university degree has been a long-held dream. The medium level education achievers (senior high school leavers and the equivalent), which take up the majority of the participants, are of two kinds. The first kind have just begun their jobs. For one reason or another, they have started a job instead of entering a regular Institute of Higher Learning, and are in urgent need to raise their educational standard through an alternative channel. The second kind of medium students consist of those who, after a long period of working, either intend to make a job change or wish to get a promotion to a higher job rank in their chosen vocational field. In recent years, many young graduates fresh from senior secondary schools have been joining the HEE examination system in order to get a university education and an equivalent degree through an alternative channel.

For some who already have a university degree, the exams for self-learners become the vehicle for getting a second degree. With the development of economic reforms and the increasing demand for higher educational attainment, more and more short-cycle college or even normal university degree holders tend to join the exam system, either to catch up on a normal university education, or to study for a second degree. In the eastern coastal areas, this trend is especially obvious. A different distribution by examinees' prior educational achievements in the economically developed Jiangsu Province for 1992 is shown in Table IV.5. We can see that the overall pre-exam educational standard of the participants are much higher as compared with that shown in the national statistics for the same period.

Table IV.5. Distribution of participants by level of education before the exams: Jiangsu Province

Time	Junior sec. & below	Senior sec.(incl. SSSs)*	Short-cycle univ. on**
Apr.92	3.59%	65.56%	30.85%
Oct.92	4.62%	71.96%	23.42%

Source: Theory Committee on China's Adult Education. China's Self Educational Examinations. Beijing: Education Science Press, 1994:66

*SSSs = Special Skill School

3. Students' progress, drop out and completion rate

Student progress, drop-out and completion rates are prime concerns in any educational enterprise, especially when the HEE system is viewed as a benchmark in China's educational innovation.

The Higher Educational Examinations accept all interested students who are willing to self-study and to sit the examinations. Whether or not to continue the process is totally decided by the individual student. The door is wide open to all adult learners seeking entry in probably the most lenient way. However, a systematic and strict credit policy has been observed in operating the examinations and evaluating prospective graduates. Seventy to eighty academic credits have to be achieved through a combination of exams for a short-cycle university degree, and 120-140 credits plus practical work or exams for a bachelor's degree. For those students who do not hold a senior secondary school diploma before the exams, extra subjects bearing 6 more credits which test for prerequisite knowledge are required. Table IV.6 shows the number of applicants, examinees, qualified examinees and number of graduates for each examination term on the national basis from Spring, 1984 to Spring, 1996.

**IV.6. National statistics: Number of applicants, examinees,
qualified examinees*, and graduates**

Term	Applicants (ten thousand)		Examinees (ten thousand)		Qualified examinees (ten thousand)		Graduates (persons)	
	Sh-cycle	Normal	Sh-cycle	Normal	Sh-cycle	Normal	Sh-cycle	Normal
84S	62	0.16	47	n/a	18	n/a	133	0
84F	85	0.2	65	n/a	32	n/a	1345	0
85S	108	0.28	77	n/a	41	n/a	2060	14
85F	142	0.2	110	n/a	64	n/a	6565	12
86S	135	0.3	107	n/a	62	n/a	29693	11
86F	157	0.5	123	n/a	68	n/a	43189	14
87S	164	2.6	127	1.9	67	1	35358	47
87F	167	3	131	2.2	70	1.3	44585	51
88S	172	3.6	128	2.5	68	1.4	62168	111
88F	144	4.4	115	3.2	6.3	1.9	61371	297
89S	158	5.7	118	3.8	66	2.3	65231	575
89F	151	7.2	118	5.4	77	3.5	68690	468
90S	174	9.4	131	6.8	71	4.3	55930	968
90F	197	10.1	153	7.4	83	4.6	62128	996
91S	232	10.7	171	8	92	5.1	50873	1493
91F	235	11.9	178	8.9	87	5.3	57261	2097
92S	275	14.4	202	10.8	100	6.2	56547	1882
92F	256	13.1	182	8.5	99	5.1	68830	2335
93S	245	13	180	8.7	108	5.6	64315	3131
93F	228	14.9	181	10.9	114	7.1	79241	4405
94S	177	13.2	139	9.5	89	6.8	59814	2882
94F	191	17.2	151	13	101	8.8	74548	3238
95S	266	25.7	211	20	141	14.4	88024	3893
95F	297	32	240	25	157	17.4	98001	5504

Term	Applicants (ten thousand)		Examinees (ten thousand)		Qualified examinees (ten thousand)		Graduates (persons)	
	Sh-cycle	Normal	Sh-cycle	Normal	Sh-cycle	Normal	Sh-cycle	Normal
96S	366	47.4	291.5	36.8	178	25.5	110061	6323

Source: National Steering Committee of Higher Educational Examinations for Self-Taught Students (NSC) ed. National Statistics on Higher Educational Examinations for Self-Taught Students. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 1996

*Qualified examinees: the examinees who have passed at least one subject in each examination term.

The number of applicants for short-cycle university level exams has experienced three main periods of expansion and two major drops. During the early developing years, from the inception of the examinations to the first half of 1988, the figure had been increasing in a fast and steady pace. Large numbers of young students, as well as those older ones whose education was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, were attracted to this open mode external examinations system. When all sectors of society were facing the urgent need of educated personnel, higher education through spare time study and external exams was seen as a popular alternative route of getting a credential due to its practicality in terms of guaranteed entry and the flexibility in the study time.

The volume of exam registrations at the short-cycle university level was fluctuating between the latter half of 1988 and the first half of 1994. In the most recent couple of years, the number of exam applicants has been increasing very fast, reaching 3,660,000 in Spring 1996, among which 79.6 percent actually showed up in the exams. From 1983 onward, the absence rate (applicants who haven't shown up in the exams versus the total applicants) has been fluctuating between 20 to 30 percent, with an average rate of 24 percent (Ren 1997 unpublished paper).

At the normal university level, the number of applicants has been significantly fewer as compared with that of the short-cycle course examinees. There had been a steady increase in the

student population before Spring 1992, followed by an even developing period until Fall, 1994. In the most recent two years, in the same manner as what has happened with the short-cycle courses, the examinee population has seen a sharp increase term by term. The absence rate of normal university level exams has been between 20 to 30 percent, with 27 percent on the average (Ren 1997 unpublished paper).

Students' enthusiasm went down at both levels of exams during 1992 to 1994, which mainly resulted from the relatively easy access to various forms of adult universities in this period. To attract more students, a senior secondary school diploma and scores of about 250 on the adult university entrance examinations were all that were required to qualify for study at an adult university. Since it was difficult to pass the required exams with HEE, many students chose instead to attend an adult university, where a higher education credential was almost guaranteed once they got in. When the adult university entrance scores requirement went up later in 1994 to over 400 for quality purposes, adults seeking higher education flooded back again to the HEE, which also contributed to the increase in the number of applicants in the last two years.

The recent significant increase in the number of students taking normal university level exams has resulted from the following four factors. Firstly, after years of expansion into the 90s, adult universities had already graduated large numbers of on-the-job short-cycle university trainees. The new job-seeking graduates, finding that job vacancies were no longer easily available for short-cycle university degree holders, had to resort to HEE to catch up for a normal university education.

Secondly, job recruitment requirements are currently getting higher in urban areas, especially in industrialized China. Many employers who used to complain about the difficulty in getting tertiary education graduates, are no longer satisfied with a short-cycle university degree. In 1996, the city

government of Beijing released a new policy, according to which only graduates from normal universities and above are eligible to apply for high ranking professional titles. The gap in treatment between short-cycle university and normal university graduates, the fast development of the economy, and the soaring societal demand of a higher educational standard in the work force, give self-taught students a greater pressure to raise their degree levels.

Thirdly, with the development of the examination system itself, the policies and practices of the HEE are more widely known to the general public. New students are continuously attracted to the examinations. Many regular university graduates who are not satisfied with their original fields of study are drawn to the HEE to get a second degree in a more popular area needed by the job market.

Fourthly, although credentials can no longer guarantee a job, people are realizing that they are becoming a basic necessity for individual progress in the urban employment market. Since many adult education programs and NGO universities cannot issue the state-acknowledged degrees, employers tend to get confused about the higher educational credentials obtained from institutions other than regular universities. The HEE, however, remains a highly authoritative state-administered degree program, whose credentials are readily accepted by the state and employers. Thus the HEE applicants's enthusiasm has been boosted tremendously in recent years.

Another important achievement of the HEE is reflected in its cumulative number of graduates. The examinations had the first 133 short-cycle university graduates in Spring, 1984 and 14 normal university graduates in Spring 1985. The semi-annual number of graduates has been increasing with the development of the examinations, at first little by little, and later at a rapid speed. In Spring 1996, the short-cycle university graduates broke through the 110,000 mark. While only ten-odd or tens of students could achieve a normal university graduation in each of the first several examination terms,

the number increased to 6,323 for the single term of Spring 1996 alone. Statistics (NSC Statistics 1996:3) show that by the first half of 1996, a cumulative total of 1,386,090 students had graduated from the HEE, of which 1,245,960 or 97.1 percent obtained a short-cycle university degree, and 40,136 or 2.9 percent got their normal university graduation certificates. This significant increase in the graduation volume has resulted both from the rapid expansion of the HEE student population and from the improved community academic assistance strategy over the years.

Although rapidly increasing, the number of students working at the normal university level is still a tiny minority. Among the huge HEE student population of the country, in 15 years, only an total of 40,136 students have been certified as normal university graduates by the HEE.

IV.7. Basic national statistics on the Higher Educational Examinations as of April, 1991 (persons)

Region	Current term applicants	Cumulative single-subject certificate recipients	Cumulative awardees of graduation certificates		Bachelor's degree recipients, cumulative
			Short-cycle	Normal courses	
Total	2,361,982	3,268,637	551,432	5,294	1,017
Beijing	58,171	195,594	18,184	300	175
Tianjin	20,009	53,008	13,903	341	68
Hebei	152,334	157,587	33,423	51	22
Shanxi	98,325	181,269	20,753		
Inner Mongolia	31,002	37,934	4,351	16	
Liaoning	127,550	26,038	69,316	364	245
Jilin	476,817	116,800	21,208	422	
Heilongjiang	59,620	204,808	22,795		
Shanghai	21,203	279,359	17,083	496	496
Jiangsu	202,273	432,903	38,687	590	

Region	Current term applicants	Cumulative single-subject certificate recipients	Cumulative awardees of graduation certificates		Bachelor's degree recipients, cumulative
			Short-cycle	Normal courses	
Zhejiang	60,585	n/a	17,230	194	11
Anhui	147,514	176,519	23,415		
Fujian	38,213	50,021	9,810	13	
Jiangxi	68,507	80,877	14,100		
Shandong	113,821	176,873	26,732	50	
Henan	132,099	165,090	22,858	419	
Hubei	163,279	22,729	37,229	592	
Hunan	135,943	247,509	26,057	580	
Guangdong	74,599	171,617	26,050	622	
Guangxi	58,486	95,093	18,960		
Hainan	3,368	8,457	1,288	33	
Sichuan	232,042	247,778	33,780	27	
Guizhou	25,067	41,783	4,384		
Yunnan	52,291	93,341	11,816	107	
Tibet*					
Shaanxi	65280	238876	17,627	60	
Gansu	60374	63846	8,383	17	
Qinghai	4885	6706	1,399		
Ningxia	n/a	8661	1,161		
Xinjiang	75807	n/a	n/a		

Source: China's Educational Yearbook. Beijing: People's Education Press, 1991: 119

*No examinations were offered in Tibet in April, 1991.

Table IV.7 shows the number of applicants in the upper half of 1991, the cumulative number of awardees of single-subject certificates, graduation certificates, and bachelor degrees as of Spring, 1991, broken down by geographic regions. Given the discrepancy between the statistics available in Tables IV.6 and IV.7 (for example, according to Table IV.6, the exam applicants for short-cycle and

normal courses totalled roughly 2,427,000 nationally in Spring, 1991, while the figure was 2,361,982 in Table IV.7), we assume that the statistics are not highly reliable. However, when the information is combined from both Tables IV.6 and IV.7, we can draw two clear implications. First, there is a large discrepancy between the number of normal university graduation certificate holders and that of the awardees of a bachelor's degree. The difference is result of the HEE regulation concerning the degree convocation. All graduating students who have successfully finished all course exams have to pass a graduating assignment or a final test before a graduation certificate is awarded. However, to qualify for a degree, a B or above has to be achieved on these final requirements. The second implication is that the number of graduates, especially at the normal university level, had been extremely low as compared with the huge examinees population. The more developed eastern part of China obviously showed a better achievement in terms of the volume of graduates at both levels.

No systemic records have ever been compiled regarding students completion rate at either level of the HEE. This has resulted, in part, from the complicated nature of the student population, since it is totally up to individual students to decide the number of subjects to register for at one time, whether to take the exams after registration, when to drop out, when to retake the exams etc. However, it is obvious that only a tiny minority of enrolled students have ever graduated from either level. According to a recent survey, those who have actually graduated with a short-cycle university degree every year account for roughly 5-7 percent of the national yearly examinees registered for this level of study (NSC 1996:96). At the normal course level, as many as nine economically less-developed provinces had no record of any graduates at all by 1991. Despite the huge population involved in these national examinations over ten years, only a total of 5,294 students had achieved a normal university completion, among whom only 1,017 had got a bachelor's degree.

Several factors have collaboratively contributed to the relatively small number of completions, especially at the normal university level.

Firstly, the self-taught students on the whole are upon entry low in their academic preparation for university study. Many young students enter the HEE to get a higher education owing to their lack of competency for regular university entry. High school leavers produced during the Cultural Revolution particularly show a deficiency in both knowledge and their study abilities. Those who have been in the work force for a long time possess a rather old knowledge background which is no longer compatible with the fast developing technology and the economic situation. However, seeking an equivalency in the educational standard with that of regular universities, the HEE system has been constantly upholding strict examinations and evaluation criteria. Especially, less prepared in English and Mathematics, many examinees have failed to meet the graduation requirements because of these two basic subjects, which are required by most majors.

Students' different prior educational attainment has also influenced individual progress. For those who already have one higher educational degree before the exams, it is quite likely that a second degree is relatively easy to achieve because these students have acquired the ability to study in a systematic manner. For the majority of students however, the study with the HEE is not an easy process. Many have failed the exams continuously, and have finally dropped out frustrated. Owing to the heterogeneity of the exam participants, the time period required for an individual student to pass the whole set of exams required for a degree varies greatly. According to a survey (Theory Committee on China's Adult Education 1994:7) of 4,000 Beijing students, up to 1991, the shortest time span for a short-cycle university degree was one and a half years and the longest eight years. Table IV.8 presents statistics on the prior educational level of Beijing short-cycle university graduates

in Fall, 1996. Among the 2,941 graduates of the term, only 4 or 0.14 percent had a junior secondary schooling as their highest prior educational achievement. Through the HEE, two of them earned a diploma in Accounting, one in English Language, and the other in Law. The graduates who previously had a short-cycle university education or above comprised 14.41 percent of the total. The majority or 85.45 percent of the total graduates previously had either a senior general secondary schooling or a special skill school education. From this data, it seems safe to say that the original academically disadvantaged group is still under represented in the HEE graduates.

Table IV.8. Survey result: prior educational attainment of Beijing graduates, Fall, 1996

Prior educational attainment	Junior sec. schooling	Senior general sec. schooling	Special training school	Short-cycle u. & above	Total graduates
No. of persons	4	1,263	1,250	424	2,941
Percentage	0.14 %	42.95 %	42.50 %	14.41 %	100 %

Source: Zheng, Jiyue. Survey on Beijing Higher Educational Examination Graduates' Status. Beijing Self-Educational Examination Bulletin, 1997, 1, 6

Secondly, from an official Chinese perspective, all who have taken a short-cycle university education and above are regarded as higher education receivers, and are therefore regarded as the country's academic elite. Up to 1996, the state policy had guaranteed short-cycle university degree holders an equal salary level and qualification for promotion with that of normal university graduates. Since it is an arduous experience to teach oneself through all the exams, many are satisfied with a short-cycle university credential and tend to stop upon completion of this level of study. This also explains the discrepancy between the student volumes for the two levels of exams. With getting a credential as the only aim, many examinees aspire no higher than a passing score for each of the exam subjects. Working adult learners also face disadvantages such as a full-time job, domestic work, lack of physical facilities and systematic classroom instruction, which make the spare-time study and exam

taking more difficult.

4. Students' learning abilities

In this study, the concept of learning ability is understood as the self-learners' ability to memorize, research, analyse, synthesize and solve academic problems, as well as to think creatively. Much research and many reports have been centred upon these abilities of the HEE examinees. Many teachers who have been involved in correcting exam papers have found that most examinees are accustomed to learning by rote and that they tend to have a weak understanding of basic theories and lack the ability to associate theories with the analysis of problems as presented. Others also find that self-learners lack logical thinking and synthesizing, and that most examinees demonstrate book knowledge remembered from the printed study materials and/or transmitted from the academic assistance teachers.

In 1990, the examination office of Sichuan Province studied 307 sample exam papers, randomly selected among qualified work sheets of examinees, which covered 12 subjects within 8 specialties. The distribution of scores gained from exam questions showed that about 80 percent of single choice and blank-filling questions were correctly answered. The students' performance on multiple-choice questions were less well done. And only less than 25 percent of the sample papers had achieved a passing score on those questions requiring creative thinking (NSC 1996:259).

Researchers in Beijing also find that the majority of examinees do not know how to answer essay questions properly. Many of them filled the answer sheets with tutorial book contents which were emphasized as important by the examination guidelines, or by the academic assistant teachers. This material was therefore memorized by heart by the self-learners before the exams (Wang 1995).

In 1991, the Sichuan Foreign Language Institute teachers who were responsible for preparing

English Language exam papers conducted research on self-learners language abilities, the main concern being whether English language majors who had graduated through the HEE and those from regular universities had the same academic quality. After comparative studies and in-depth discussions, their findings were: the difference between self-taught graduates and regular university English majors was mainly their ability to use the language. Although many HEE graduates had grasped enough knowledge in the language to meet the official graduation requirements, their practical ability in using the language was rather low. In light of these study results, the teachers expressed doubt on the HEE language majors' qualification to actually perform well in their future jobs commensurate with their degrees.

5. Social acceptance of the HEE graduates

One final concern of student progress is the status and acceptability of what these students have achieved through their studies and the exams.

Surveys (Ren ed. 1990:150) done among employers show that the HEE graduates have generally demonstrated a better performance in their work than before the study. In the first half of 1988, China TV and Correspondence University of Statistics in Wuhan City had 613 graduates examined and certified by the Higher Educational Examinations. To assess the quality and status of these graduates, the University sent out questionnaires to their employers later in the same year. Among 455 survey results returned, 73 percent agreed that the graduates had gained a strong basic knowledge about their specialties. 305 or 67 percent believed that the specialties of the students were tightly related to work. Ninety percent of the employers surveyed found that these graduates picked up knowledge fast but the majority of the employers were aware of their lack of creativity. Only 40 percent of the survey results ranked the research abilities of the graduates as high, although 65

percent reported that these employees were capable of solving practical work problems. According to the surveys done at the same time among graduates, 71 percent reported that their abilities in data collecting and reading had greatly improved, 83.4 percent confirmed a positive change in their individual thinking abilities. 63 percent held that their studies had helped their job performance. According to another follow-up survey done in the early 90s on 1,154 HEE graduates in Shandong Province, 40.2 percent had been rewarded by the central or local examination authorities for their profound achievements either during or after the studies.

No systematic survey results are available to show the graduates' change in job status brought on by their studies. While, China is a developing country crying out for educated manpower, and academic credentials are signified, both culturally and institutionally, as an important indicator of one's social status and are closely related to job positions. At least in educational theory and government policy, the credentials earned through the external exams and from regular universities bear the same weight with each other. The HEE credential holders, as regulated by the state's policies, are guaranteed an equal qualification with regular university graduates in competitions at work for job promotion, salary increases and other material benefit.

There have been reports of HEE graduates who were promoted after their studies, due to their good performance at work, and also a small number of graduates have been admitted by regular universities as master's students. Those who have survived the tense studies and exams, often in their spare time, think it is worth the effort. Generally speaking, the HEE system and its graduates have been accepted by the general public as a form of adult higher education and higher education receivers.

Although no published sources reveal complaints from the HEE graduates concerning their

treatment, individual students do have private complaints about their experience of difficulties and depression brought on by their seemingly lower educational status as compared with that held by a regular university graduate. In many's eyes, the self-taught graduates are only second class university graduates, despite the state's policy on their equal status and treatment in terms of salary and qualification for promotion. This is also true to some extent inside the hierarchy of China's regular university system, when graduates from prestigious universities sometimes tend to have a sense of superiority over others. The state and the central examinations management, after paying lip service by putting equality in the policies and regulations, cannot and will not do anything about this reality as long as more graduates continue to be produced. As true in any innovative endeavours from traditional practices, it remains a difficult task for self-taught students and educators alike to work towards an equal acceptance and recognition among their peers and from the general public as well.

V. ACADEMIC ASSISTANCE

The principal aim of the Higher Educational Examinations is to promote home-based and self-paced study by self-learners through a flexible mechanism. The curriculum of state-administered examinations is the commanding authority, to which students have to conform. Thus, self-study and the state-administered examinations are both necessary and complementary elements of the HEE.

The general public also generally associates community-based academic assistance programs as the integral third part of the practice of the HEE, in addition to self-study and the state-administered exams. At present, roughly 50 percent of the country's total higher educational examination participants are studying independently and do not participate in any type of the academic assistance program offered within the community to help self-learners prepare to take the exams (Theory Committee on China's Adult Education 1994: 88). The other 50 percent of HEE students currently taking the exams are attending some kind of formal academic assistance program geared toward helping the examinees with their studies. In the first half of 1994, there were 76 academic assistance agencies of various kinds in Beijing alone, with a registration of over 49,000 students, which were equivalent to 70 percent of the total examinees in that city (Wang 1995).

As regulated by "The Provisional Regulations Concerning Higher Education Exams for Self-Taught Students" promulgated by the State Council, higher education credentials obtained through self-study and their related exams, and through regular Institutes of Higher Learning are equivalent to each other in so far as the educational purpose and the standards of evaluation are concerned. Thus, the requirements of the self-study exams are high and challenging. Because of varying levels of educational achievement before the exams, and without access to systematic formal training, it is

therefore difficult for the self-taught students to pass all the exams required by an intended degree without coaching assistance. This is especially true in the fields of natural sciences and engineering, which require access to laboratories and special equipment. Therefore, these academic assistance programs, aiming at assisting self-taught students in their academic studies, have a very important role to play.

1. Programs of assistance for self-study students

As differentiated by sponsors of the programs, academic assistance can be recognized within three categories: (1) national unified assistance by fields of study, (2) assistance organized by Institutes of Higher Learning, and (3) other various NGO-sponsored programs.

(1) National unified assistance by fields of study

National unified academic assistance is sponsored by those state ministries/departments and bureaus who have entrusted the HEE to offer certain specialties required by their respective fields. For example, in 1985, the State Bureau of Statistics, who requested the HEE to offer exams in the major of Statistics, organized a National TV Correspondence School of Statistics. This school is headquartered in Beijing and has set up 36 subsidiary branches at all provincial and municipal level bureaus. With no budget from the government, no specific infrastructure of school buildings, and no permanent teachers, the School has created a nation wide learning system for China's employees in the statistics field by making full use of existing expertise and physical resources in terms of the internal executive management, local school buildings and intellectuals, regular school teachers, and other bureau materials. Participating students have been around 200,000 on a yearly basis, all of whom are studying part-time. Study groups are formed according to varied circumstances, either by work units or by geographic localities. One local cadre or a participating student is elected as the

administrative person in charge of each group's academic activities. Throughout the whole country, around 3,000 people are serving as teachers or staff with the School. The working staff to student ratio is 1:70. Teaching facilities and face-to-face assistance are available at the local school buildings borrowed or leased from regular educational institutions. Four years after the School was established, by the end of 1989, over 5,600,000 copies of printed materials had been published, over 700,000 audio tapes and 120,000 video tapes had been circulated. Tutorial TV programs had also been produced for some core courses and broadcast through the TV educational channel to the targeted audience all over the country (Theory Committee on China's Adult Education 1994:89).

The State Pricing Bureau has also set up a National Self-Learning Correspondence Institute for Pricing. Subsidiary institutes and work stations are located in many cities. Video-taped teaching programs are prepared in Statistics, Accounting and Advanced Mathematics. Full and part time working staff number about 500 people throughout the country. Another national level correspondence school, the National Law Training Center has been established by the Judicial Department. Short-cycle university level assistance is offered to all employees of the Judicial Department and its various branches through correspondence teaching materials and local assistance centers.

(2) Assistance offered by Institutes of Higher Learning

According to a recent survey (NSC 1996:189), 12 percent of all registered academic assistance programs are sponsored by and run inside regular Institutes of Higher Learning. When these external programs are combined with those sponsored by adult universities (as defined on page 13), the figure comes to roughly 17 percent. Many other regular as well as adult universities are more or less involved in the assistance to self-learners. In big cities where regular universities are densely

located, many full time assistance programs have been established to enrol HEE students. The existing facilities, teachers, classrooms and other educational resources of the universities are available for the use of those who are attending these part-time or full-time programs.

(3) Various NGO-sponsored assistance programs

In December 1982, shortly after the system of the state-administered higher education examinations for self-taught students was established on a trial basis, a new Constitution of the People's Republic of China was adopted at the Fifth Session of the Fifth National People's Congress. Article 19 of this Constitution provides that: "... The state encourages the collective economic organizations, state enterprises and institutions and other sectors of society to establish educational institutions of various types in accordance with the law ...".

One category of full-time systematic learning programs are NGO-sponsored universities which are very popular with young people who are without a job and with those college entrance exam failures who wish to further their education through self-study. During the mid-1980s that followed the promulgation of Article 19, the initial stage for the development of NGO-sponsored higher educational institutes was established. At first, they catered mainly to the needs of adults preparing for sitting the state-administered higher educational examinations. With the rapid evolution of these institutes, some of them gradually extended their services by offering programs similar to those of regular Institutes of Higher Learning. By 1994, there were over 800 NGO-sponsored colleges (China National Institute of Educational Research 1995:7), which actually grew to become an integral part of the higher education system of the country. Since only 14 of these colleges have been authorized by the State Education Commission to grant students the higher education diploma in their own name, the majority of them are still only used by many self-taught students as a means of preparing

for the state-administered examinations.

Besides NGO-sponsored universities, and as a by-product of the self-taught examination system, other NGO-sponsored assistance programs have appeared. These ancillary NGO programs have mushroomed with the development of the exam system through an increase in the number of exam subjects offered. These programs are organized by various public academic departments, working units, mass organizations, learned societies and individual citizens and take the form of radio and/or television broadcasts, correspondence, and face-to-face tutorial classes. The duration of study and scale of the programs vary greatly. The basic statistics on types of programs and their respective numbers of enrollees in Beijing area in 1987 are shown in Table V.1.

Table V.1. NGO-sponsored academic assistance program enrollees in Beijing, 1987

Program Sponsor	Cadre Training (persons)	Schools (persons)	Crash Courses (persons)	NGO Univ.s (persons)	Total (persons)
Govt. Bodies	1,300			1,800	3,100
Societies		650	1,500	8,350	10,500
Military Troops	5,800				5,800
Individual		910	3,150	430	4,490
Total	7,100	1,560	4,650	10,580	23,890

*Source: Ren, Fuchang ed. Ten Years of Development in Higher Educational Examinations for Self-Taught Students. Beijing: Economics Science Press, 1990:144

In 1987, there were 48,548 examinees in Beijing, among whom 23,890 or 49.2 percent participated in some form of academic assistance programs (Ren ed. 1990:145). More programs were established in the 1990s. In 1994, in the city of Beijing alone, a total of 51 NGO-sponsored assistance units were serving 32,970 students, accounting for 47 percent of the city's total examinee

in that year (Wang 1995).

All the programs and schools are under the leadership of central or local educational executive departments. Newly-opened schools and programs have to qualify as to their purpose and plan of operation, their expenditure sources, and the availability of their facilities, teachers and staff. Advertisements for enrolling students must be approved by the local working office in charge of the exams. Although the HEE administration does not have a central institution offering a single methodology and a unified tuition, with the practice of numerous academic assistance programs under the guidance of the common examinations management, the HEE has created a large scale unique learning environment open to all China's post-secondary adult learners.

2. Media, methods and teaching staff

The HEE academic assistance programs feature great variety in their media offerings as well as the methods of conducting tuition and program assistance to the self-taught examinees. Unlike the British Open University, which has a centralized delivery system to offer tuition to its students mainly in a correspondence mode, the HEE management does not actually have a tuition delivery service. The educational goal of the HEE is supposed to be achieved through self-study, aided by the community-based academic assistance and under the common direction of the national or provincial examination syllabi.

Different programs and schools employ various teaching methods and media. The main form of assistance available in medium-sized and big cities is spare-time face-to-face tutorial classes. The duration of these classes varies. A long term night school might last two to four years, while many single course programs take 40 to 80 tuition hours per course, and a pre-exam "crash" course only

takes several days to half a month, during which the teacher just sums up the main points of the learning materials. According to a random survey conducted in 10 provinces in the middle part of China in 1995, 62 percent of the assistance receiving students in these areas are attending spare-time face-to-face courses (NSC 1996:190).

In the past three or four years, in addition to NGO-universities, many full time assistance programs appeared, aimed at offering a systematic higher education to those who can afford the time and funds for full-time study but who are unable to study within a diploma awarding institution. These programs are usually two to four years in length and their courses are usually designed according to the exam subjects currently offered.

Tuition through correspondence, the most traditional educational method, is also employed by some of the HEE assistance programs. In this case, the academic contact between students and teachers is established through the mail, and through periodic face-to-face assistance arranged in local study centers. Video and audio tapes are widely used where face-to-face teachers are rarely available, especially in small towns and remote areas.

As one aspect of the national educational provision, the HEE academic assistance requires large numbers of teachers, who are involved in various ways in the teaching of students. Regular universities have provided the main source of the HEE teachers. A small number of professors are involved in the preparation of study books, audio and video tapes, and the training of other teachers. The majority of the teaching staff in the HEE programs are employed from regular universities as HEE contract teachers. Their pay scale is often associated both with the pass rate of their students for the subject they have taught, and with the students' evaluation of the teacher after the course.

After a long association, some schools have established permanent contracts with popular teachers. University teachers, on the other hand, are also attracted to the spare-time teaching work. In small towns and remote countryside areas, outstanding HEE students and local high school teachers often take the responsibility of teaching other students in local study groups.

3. Functions and characteristics

Academic assistance is often regarded as one of the three essential aspects of the HEE system together with the state-administered examinations and the students' self-study. However, academic assistance is not structurally an essential part of the exam system, because the HEE is principally established as a management system to only administer exams and grant degrees to self-taught students who show the qualification through these exams, with or without the aid of any assistance programs. Academic assistance has, however, evolved as a very important adjunct to the development of the HEE educational system and is integral to its overall quality. These programs can be viewed from three functional aspects.

Firstly, research shows that academic assistance programs have helped to raise the study results of students. An analysis conducted in the Spring of 1989 was made of 17 subject exams in Shanghai's four administering institutes (Theory Committee on China's Adult Education 1994:91). Table V.2 shows the comparison between qualification rates of the examinees who have never participated in any kind of assistance program and those who selectively chose to enter some kind of program. The totally self-educated students (without assistance) demonstrated a relatively worse performance in all the 17 subjects of the exams.

Table V.2. Comparison between performance of examinees with or without assistance

Subject	Persons with assistance			Persons without assistance		
	Total	Pass	Rate (%)	Total	Pass	Rate (%)
Advanced Mathematics	53	23	43.4	63	10	16
Reliable Engineering	9	9	100	10	7	70
Finance & Management	219	152	69	241	143	59
Operational Research	56	44	78.6	68	30	44
Quality Management	24	16	66.7	52	34	65.3
Testing Technique	46	38	84	61	46	75
Electrical Engineering	15	13	87	25	21	84
Theoretical Mechanics	11	4	36	30	6	20
Metal Processing	16	14	88	57	38	67
International Law	27	16	58	2,243	880	39
China's Legal System Studies	31	29	93	2,303	1,455	61
Economics	73	48	65	3,106	891	28
Political Economy	15	9	60	1,822	913	50
Philosophy	50	40	80	1,306	794	61
Herbal Medicine	160	146	87	187	141	75.4
Chinese Prescription	161	112	69.5	150	83	55.5
Chinese Diagnosis	184	165	91	156	120	82
Total examinees	1,164	886		11,970	5,621	
Mean qualification rate	76%			47%		

Source: Theory Committee on China's Adult Education. China's Self-Educational Examinations. Beijing: Educational Science Press, 1994, page 91

In a pure self-learning process, students cannot get immediate feedback from the instructor or the other students as they can in the classroom environment, nor do they enjoy a mutual contact as they do through correspondence education. Thus, the self-learning adult faces greater difficulties

than university-based students in dealing with their studies, especially when their understanding of the subject is stuck or is in danger of going astray. The various academic assistance programs, by backing up the self-learning process with face-to-face teaching, correspondence tuition, audio-video teaching etc., have helped to fill up this missing link between teaching and learning. The wide diversity of media and methods used in the assistance programs offers a great variety of choices for individual students with various backgrounds to choose in getting the help which is suitable for them. Many long term programs, by employing teachers from regular universities and by making use of the existing university facilities, have tried to offer the self-taught students a learning environment as close as possible to that of a full time regular university education. Educational resources from various aspects of the community have been used to their largest potential in the HEE academic assistance programs and all these endeavours have effectively facilitated the self-learning process of students. Table V.2 also shows a considerable variation in the pass rate by subject. This might be reflective of the teaching methods used in different programs. It might also be a result of the nature of courses, since some courses might be easier for self-study. This topic could be worthwhile looking into in the future research on the HEE system.

Secondly, the assistance programs offered in certain fields required by the work force have also raised the general skill level and expertise of the nation's employees. For example, when the National TV Correspondence School of Statistics was established in March of 1985, 310,000 or one sixth of China's statistical employees were registered. Five years later, by the end of 1990, a cumulative total of 2,400,000 subjects had been taken by short-cycle university level self-education examinees. More than 80,000 students obtained their short-cycle university graduate degree. The

number of self-study graduates was equal to four times the total university graduates (including short-cycle universities) in the same field during the entire 30 years following liberation. According to an extensive survey conducted by the organizing agency, the working units were satisfied by the performance of the majority of these graduates (Ren ed. 1990:145).

The third function of the assistance programs is that of promoting the policies and practices of the self-taught examinations to the general public through the activities of advertising, enrolling students and other organizing and academic functions. Also, through these activities, the contacts between self-taught students and assisting teachers, as well as between students themselves, have been strengthened. That the exams have grown in volume to today's large numbers in such a short time is partly due to the assistance programs.

4. Problems and limitations

Community-based academic assistance, as one important aspect of the HEE system, has greatly contributed to the rapid development of the examinations system and the enhancement of students' self-learning over the past 10 years. However, many problems and limitations which apparently exist in the practice of the various assistance programs are threatening the very essence of the HEE system, the quality of the studies and the accountability of graduates.

First of all, in order to attract future students, most assistance sponsors see raising the pass rate of their students as the guiding principle in running the programs. Although to enhance students' performance in the exams is not the sole and utmost aim of the HEE academic assistance, a higher pass rate is no doubt the wish of students, assistance program sponsors, as well as exam organizers. Naturally, the student pass rate has also become the most outstanding factor in the evaluation of any

specific assistance school or program.

Secondly, seeking a better exam performance, many assistance programs associate the teachers' pay scale with the pass rate of their students in the exam which the course is geared to. Under the pressure brought on by the pass rate requirement, the assistance teachers have to base their teaching mainly on the exam-oriented contents and the question answering techniques at the cost of overall subject comprehension and creative teaching methods. Experienced teachers have carefully studied the exam guidebooks and are fully aware of the trend of examination questions. Prior to each exam session, almost all assistance courses, especially those "crash" ones, are devoted to instructing students on important learning points, possible questions, and simulation exam exercises. The self-learning ability and the systematic overview of the course materials are overlooked. These exam focused practices have virtually turned many programs into an exam passing assistance rather than academic assistance.

In order to maintain the accountability of exam results, the HEE administration carries out academic assistance policies in order to protect the secrecy of exam information. The central principle of these policies is that no one individual or organization should serve in both academic assistance and exam-related work in the same time period. Inside the central examinations working office, the paper preparation department, the exam executive department and the academic assistance guidance department are strictly separated with respect to their specific duties. Exam working offices on all levels cannot sponsor or organize any type of academic assistance programs, nor can they circulate materials geared to pre-exam preparation. Exam working office staff and teachers involved in the preparation of exam papers are not permitted to be simultaneously employed by an academic

assistance program. Exam administering institutes do not sponsor or organize any assistance program in their respective fields. In practice, however, these policy ideals are far from being fully implemented.

In the wake of the individual profit motive fostered by the economic reform toward a market economy, many NGO-sponsored HEE assistance programs have put monetary profit ahead of all other considerations in their “teaching” efforts. As a result, many practices run totally counter to the original objective of academic assistance, which was to help raise the academic quality of self-learning students. Cheating and violation of policies have become an important problem requiring immediate attention. Exaggerated statements are put into the program advertisements, and open fights over prospective students between program sponsors are often seen. Teachers in charge of preparation of exam papers are sometimes sought after by the assistance programs. What is more blatant is the cooperative relationships that have been established between some program organizers and exam administering institutes, based on the sharing of profits gained from students’ tuition (Xiao & Zhao 1993:57-58).

Studies of recent years’ exam answer sheets show that students’ answers to most of the essay questions reflect learning by rote (NSC 1996:258). Surveys also show that students now spend much less time on reading course books than they did in the 1980s (Wang 1995). Instead, they attach a much greater importance to attending academic assistance programs and to reading exam guidebooks. After about ten years of teaching, a small number of teachers seem to have learned the tricks of guessing upcoming exam questions beforehand and then they are able to offer their students this most valuable assistance on probable questions and their answers right before the exam sessions. Many

others, although not being able to guess the exam questions effectively, can at least direct students into learning the most important parts by rote. According to a Beijing examinee, as long as one listens to the teachers carefully and works hard, it is not difficult to get a pass (Wang 1995). The trend is that examinees are more and more dependent on academic assistance programs in their studies, since the exam process is still difficult for the majority of students. Although in recent years the average pre-exam educational attainment level is rising, many students are still rather poorly prepared to study on their own (Wang 1995).

The HEE management, having realized the many problems with the academic assistance programs, seem impotent to curb these test-oriented practices. Allegedly, the executive management of the HEE at all levels should be strengthened, education and training should be given to the assistance program organizers and teachers to guarantee uniform practices, and the teaching should be under strict regulations and surveillance. However, since there is no effective means of surveillance and punishment in face of the large variety of assistance programs among the huge population involved, the same practices continue. In the city of Shanghai, the only examination municipality without an executive office, all exam-related work and academic assistance service are the responsibilities of several designated administering Institutes of Higher Learning, the secrecy of exam questions before exams are more problematic.

Since many educational aspects, such as systematic instruction, assignments and instructor's feedback, classroom discussion, and interval quizzes are missing in many HEE academic assistance programs, exam scores become the single absolute factor on which a judgement of study results and students qualification for graduation can be based. The accountability of this judgement is greatly

compromised when the exam results themselves have become problematic. What might also be shaken is the basic rationale of the state-administered examinations, namely, to offer an educational form which promotes learning among the nation's adults through the motivation of exams. When the passing of exams has become the sole purpose of learning, as is widely encouraged by some current academic assistance practices, the original educational rationale of the examinations is being threatened.

Other problems and limitations of the academic assistance concern the unique nature of the HEE system itself. One important difference between a regular university education and that of the HEE lies in the systematic relationship between personal teaching and learning. In regular Institutes of Higher Learning, students learn under the systematic close instruction and inspection from teachers. Teaching and learning are closely related to each other, with teaching as the core. The campus-based learning process is also backed up by the readily available resources of libraries, labs, facilities, as well as help from other students. In the HEE academic assistance, however, teaching is relatively separate from, and by design not instrumental to, the learning process. With limited academic interaction between teachers and students, which is true in many HEE academic assistance programs, one-way knowledge transmission often becomes the only link within the learning processes, with the possible exception of some relatively systemic long-term face-to-face tuition, and some correspondence programs, where a two-way communication is possible through the mail.

Although aiming at giving the examinee a higher education equivalent to that of a regular university, many conventional educational components are missing in the HEE system and its related academic assistance. In the face-to-face tutorial programs offered in medium sized and big cities,

large numbers of students are often seen crowded in big classrooms, listening to the instruction and taking notes. The teachers do not give systematic instruction on the whole course materials, nor do they require or correct assignments, not even to mention classroom discussion. Due to variation in age, occupation, educational background, the conditions and time schedule under which they have to study, the large number of students in one classroom definitely have only one common factor to share, which is they are the receivers of the same exam-related knowledge transmission. This being the case, it seems safe to say that students might receive little help from many academic assistance programs in so far as non-exam oriented academic ability is concerned, even if they might obtain a satisfying exam score.

In recent years, large numbers of high school leavers who failed the College Entrance Examinations have joined the HEE. Generally speaking, this part of the HEE student population is not educationally well prepared for self-directed learning at the university level. Besides, having been refused entry into a regular university, these students might easily get an inferiority complex when they compare themselves educationally with their university peers. They also have often developed a passive attitude toward academic responsibilities, which greatly discourages their studies within the HEE system. To many of them, a mere pass score in every required exam is the highest aspiration. The present exam-oriented academic assistance, coincides exactly with the low achievement aspirations of many of these students, instead of trying to cultivate their self-learning motivation and ability. The learning problems of these large numbers of young high school leavers remain a great challenge for the HEE workers and teachers.

Much has been discussed on the drawbacks and limitations of the HEE academic assistance

programs. While, for the other half of the HEE students who, due to various reasons, cannot join any of the academic assistance programs, learning is more difficult and challenging. Lacking an efficient study method and outside assistance, many students fail time and again in the exams and finally drop out after years of study effort in vain, which is a waste of individual time and resources. To help these students who are totally educating themselves, the HEE management has the slogan of “sending a school to every self-learning student”. However, since most of China’s regular universities limit the use of campus facilities and libraries only to their own campus-based students, self-learning students’ access to educational resources is very limited. It’s even more limited for the many adults who cannot attend any class-room assistance. In the vast countryside areas, where no regular universities are located and where communication is hampered, the delivery of tuition is even more problematic. The distance between a slogan and the reality remains a great challenge faced by the HEE system.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The emergence of the Higher Educational Examinations for Self-Taught Students (HEE) in the early 1980s and its rapid development can be explained within China's deep-rooted social, economic and cultural factors. Firstly, the HEE was initiated at a time when China's available talent and those being produced at regular universities fell far short of the numerical demands of the work force at the beginning of the post-Cultural Revolution reform era. China's economy began to develop at a fast pace after the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP, in December, 1978, when the commitment of rapid economic development in accord with the four modernizations was made. The whole nation realized that the key to success in this phase of China's socialist construction was the availability of educated personnel. Large numbers of educated manpower were needed in the fast-developing priority sectors of the society and the whole nation's workforce needed to upgrade its education. In the face of this serious lack of qualified personnel, the need to develop higher education was urgent. This manpower need was compounded by serious shortages of teachers, school buildings and laboratory facilities. Devastated by the economic reversals brought on by the Cultural Revolution, as well as its stage of development, the country did not have enough money to put into education.

Secondly, many people already in the workforce, and those secondary school leavers were eager to further their education. Around the beginning of the 1980s, only less than ten percent of the annual secondary school graduates were able to go on for a higher education, due to space limitations. The majority of young school leavers neither had any practical skill for working in industry, nor did they have an opportunity to further their education. In this situation, the HEE was

welcomed with great enthusiasm by these students and their parents.

Thirdly, the HEE has been, from the beginning, a talent selection system based on external exams, aiming at measuring self-learners' academic achievement in order to qualify for a degree. Its theoretical and social roots, and hence its popular acceptance, can be found in the Imperial Civil Service Examinations in ancient China, an official selection system based on multi-level examinations, mainly in the Confucian classics, on a national scale. In modern China, rather than taking examinations to become Imperial officials, the yearly College Entrance Examination failures and many other adults take the Higher Educational Examinations as an alternative avenue to advancement in the employment market, as well as general social acceptance. The social advancement value in examinations and the social credentials they may bring, an attitude which has prevailed from feudal times, remains more or less the same among the modern Chinese population. The establishment of the HEE has responded to the social and economic demand for an increase in the educational standard of the workforce and people's need for a higher educational credential. Educational egalitarianism, although always ideologically cherished in modern China's educational policies, was not a main concern in the establishment of this examination system.

In China's campus-based university education system, most of the tests and exams given today by various educational programs and institutions are prepared and evaluated by individual teachers in charge of their individual course instruction. The universal acceptance of these regular university test results is therefore questionable since there is little comparability between tests given by different teachers or at different schools. The prestige of a regular university degree is, therefore, dependent on the national acceptance of the university itself. The HEE, however, is a state-administered examinations system, whose authority is guaranteed in the legal provisions promulgated by the State

Council and whose graduation papers are, therefore, readily acknowledged by employers. The three-tiered national structure of the HEE administration system has been well established in China's 30 provinces and municipalities, and extended to include Hongkong and Macau. Unified national and provincial question banks have been established. The unified academic credit policy offers a universal national standard of evaluation of students' achievement.

The HEE system pragmatically responded to the need of promoting education within a limited state budget. A relatively small public budgetary expenditure is spent on the HEE system, and this complementary tertiary national educational system is probably run under the most publicly frugal means. Since the state established an administrative structure only to give exams, offer degrees and conduct exam research, the expenditure of running the HEE system is significantly lower than that of financing campus-based higher education.

Money spent by individuals for exam registrations, tuition, and study materials, and that invested by the community in running the assistance programs, has formed the major portion of the financing. Different sectors of the workforce also complement the small direct public financing of the HEE by largely contributing their own non-state educational resources and expenditures into supporting the exams and the exam-related assistance programs. When the HEE academic assistance is given, the already existing capacity is used to its maximum. The existing school buildings, the available facilities and libraries in schools and work places, the university professors and teachers are put to use by the HEE learners and assistance givers. Thus, the scattered educational resources are reorganized into a new and unique education form, a higher education system based on external learning and national exams. As compared with that of regular universities, the government saves a lot of money in graduating an HEE student, because money required by students' housing, formal

educational infrastructures and special facilities at regular campuses are not necessary.

On the HEE students' part, the private expenses on exams and the related studies are comparatively low. For about half of the HEE students who do not attend any fee-paying assistance programs, necessary fees for exam registrations and books are almost negligible. The assistance program attenders also have a variety of choices in getting academic help with various fees. Since regular universities began to claim full tuition fees from their students after the mid-1980s, fees as needed by the HEE long term assistance programs are even lower and, therefore, make a university degree more generally accessible. Besides, the HEE system has offered China's work force an opportunity to learn without having to be away from their jobs, which is financially effective and suitable for both individuals and their work places as well.

The HEE authority promulgates that HEE curriculum development should be based on the employment market needs and/or the specific requests from the workplace, instead of replicating the available regular university offerings. This demand is partially realized by the flexible nature of the HEE design of new exams in terms of the relatively short lead time involved. By 1996, the HEE offerings amounted to 240 short-cycle and normal university specialties, with over 1,000 subjects available.

The basic pattern of public courses, foundation courses and specialty courses, however, still falls in line with those required by regular universities. Although students can choose majors freely, their choice of exam subjects within each chosen major is limited only to specialty courses, which account for only 20 percent of the course load. Choice is more limited in some provinces, where the variety of HEE majors is small, since the development of programs is unevenly distributed among regions.

There can be no doubt at all that the HEE offers the most open education system in China, so far as provision of degree specialties and exams is concerned. The existence of the system has eased the high pressure of competition for regular university entry, since it has given another choice to many who were, or are, not satisfied with their attained educational background and/or occupational situation. Before the HEE, all forms of higher education, correspondence education included, were restricted by some sort of exams and prerequisites. Theoretically with the HEE, however, any member of society who wants to get a university degree has equal access to higher learning. The theory of a life-long education for everybody in the society has been embodied in this national scale educational innovation because the HEE students cover virtually all social categories divided by age cohort, sex, occupation, social status, educational background and residential area.

The concept of “openness” (of access and entry), however, has to be understood within a context that individual adults have the right to education and societies have an obligation to provide educational opportunities (Neil ed. 1981: 37). In the HEE’s case, total open entry does not guarantee equal access to the examinations, nor to the educational resources. Rural peasants, the largest population group in China for example, are only slightly represented in the HEE’s student composition. Having realized this restriction for rural peasants, some researchers have suggested that the countryside could become a large source of future HEE students, but many difficulties and barriers remain. Firstly, peasants have little motivation to study for a higher educational degree, since the present economic situation allows the poorly educated peasants to get rich through hard manual work. Some may have the aspiration to get into a regular university in order to stay in cities after graduation. Since a degree through self-studies can not bring them an urban residence ID, the HEE does not have the same attraction as regular universities do among the rural population. Secondly,

so far, no HEE examination centres or working offices have been extended beyond the county level, so that it is extremely difficult for people in the rural villages and towns to get exam information and study materials, or to take exams. The urban-based academic assistance programs and their advertisements, the user fee policies of these programs based on quality and duration, the lack of attention paid to the educationally less well-prepared students, etc., make it more difficult for the originally disadvantaged people to succeed in this system.

Theoretically, the total open entry of students does not necessarily mean an undermining of the quality of the exam passers. Right from the beginning, the HEE policies promulgated that credentials gained through self-study and the related external exams should be equivalent to those from regular colleges and universities, judged by the same educational purpose and the standards of evaluation. To set a proper standard of exam papers, unified national and provincial question banks have been established. Seeking innovation in its course offerings, the system does not replicate the majors or curricula readily available in regular universities, but the standard of learning, the course load, and required courses for similar majors remain the same. Although the HEE participants are apparently offered a very lenient entry, they are then required to endure hard work and tough exams for academic survival and success. The graduates, however, owing to their different prior educational attainment and individual capabilities, vary in their ability to deal with academic studies and in solving actual problems.

The roughly 5-7 percent yearly graduation rate at the registered short-cycle courses level (yearly graduate versus yearly registrants) shows an astonishing contrast with the yearly graduation rate of 99-100 percent of all regular universities in China. Without adequate learning methods or sufficient academic aid, many students, the majority of whom were already ill-prepared in their

academic studies, end up dropping out after successive failures in exams. The continuous low pass rate and completion rate have generated ambivalent opinions from educators and the general public. Some take pride in the strictness of these examinations, regarding the low graduation rate as the indication of the trustworthiness of the examinations and the high quality of the HEE graduates. Others, however, associate the high drop-out with open entry, which they believe is inappropriate. The basic irony remains that those educationally less-prepared students are expected to learn independently.

To correct the low exam pass rate and graduation rate has always been the grave concern and the constant task of the HEE central, as well as provincial-level, managements. The examination authorities' efforts at raising the pass rate of certain subjects often led to changes in the subject examination plan, and alterations in the related study books. The frequent changes make life difficult for both the academic assistance teachers and those students who need to retake certain subjects. Trying to stay informed of changes in the exam plans and to get the newly revised guide book at short notice has presented difficulties for examinees. Although more students with a relatively high prior educational attainment, such as second degree earners, are joining the HEE and, although many assistance programs regarded as of high quality are available today, there does not seem to be any obvious increase in the students' course exam pass rate over the years. It seems safe to say that the HEE student population is not short of exam instrumentalists, as is also true in other aspects of China's educational system.

Established at the beginning of a dynamic economic reform, the HEE examinations have allowed individuals and the community to become widely involved with this learning system. After the examinations were initiated, the innovators were soon to find that various academic assistance

courses, programs and schools appeared and mushroomed in the exam pilot localities on a fee paying basis. As early as 1983, the HEE organizers realized that a unique educational link was formed between self-study and state-administered examinations. By offering the exams, as well as guiding and monitoring academic assistance programs brought on by these exams, the HEE has stimulated learning and academic teaching centred around the examinations among the general public. Just as what the HEE Provisional Regulations have put as one of its main tasks, the whole system is not only to “select” but “to produce and select socialist talent”.

In addition to students’s self-studies, the educational function of the HEE is largely realized by the academic assistance within the community. Contemporary urban China is booming with numerous academic programs and schools run by different sectors of the work force, public universities, societies, and individuals. Stimulated by the HEE, NGO-sponsored universities came into being and expanded to its present scale of more than 800 in number. Various delivery methods are being employed, including TV/radio broadcasting, correspondence and face-to-face teaching. A huge part of the urban population is involved in this national learning environment. Virtually speaking, the HEE assistance has permeated every walk of Chinas’ urban society.

Published sources vary in their appreciation of how well assistance programs are functioning. Many applaud that the HEE presently has a highly positive system of academic assistance, others are more critical by saying that illegal practices are out of control of the HEE administration. Much more empirical research needs to be done in this area. Problems associated with the HEE academic assistance of the effort at raising the pass rate, as discussed in Section V, could be a way of reinforcing within the public the perception of HEE graduates as second rate university graduates. Whether or not any actual individual graduate from the HEE or from a regular university are equal

in understanding and educational quality is still an open question, not only because of the insufficient empirical research, but also the social construct of difference between the two systems. No doubt, there is much room for improvement, as well as further research, on the HEE academic assistance programs.

Suggestions for future improvements and research

Although the examinations still draw many participants nowadays, the HEE has to constantly face the challenges of raising the pass/graduation rate, attracting future students, and at the same time keeping the examination academic quality high. There might be two extreme scenarios concerning the number of future examinees. First, if the HEE significantly raised the exam pass rate by reducing the evaluation standard so as to attract more students, the intentional dilution of academic standards will eventually lead to an undermining of the value of the HEE credential and end in the self-destruction of the system. Second, if the HEE kept the present strict examination practice and continued to ignore the high drop-out rate, more and more students would be deterred by the examinations, and the HEE would eventually end up losing many participants. To avoid both of these extremes and to work out an efficient, as well as feasible, future development plan are the immediate challenges with which the system's workers and researchers have to contend.

Certain problems need to be addressed. First of all, the HEE was intended to be operated on a national basis. The system has so far failed to live up to this commitment as it is largely urban-based and presently only around 1 percent of the student population are peasants living in rural China. How to extend the present urban-based HEE examinations to the vast rural areas represents a huge challenge to the future development of the system. Some researchers (NSC 1996: 350; Ren 1990:174) have suggested that the HEE publicity campaigns, aimed at drawing more young people

from the rural countryside, need to be launched, and policies be adopted to attract this population. Test examples have already been conducted. In order to encourage young peasants to take the exams, the Jiangsu provincial government has guaranteed that peasants who can earn a short-cycle university degree and above can get an urban dweller's ID, the passport to urban-based employment.

An urban dweller's ID might be a great attraction for young peasants to learn, but the economic development of the rural countryside also requires local expertise and technology. The educational standard, the level of technology and management of the local rural cadres need to be raised. With the development of the market economy in the countryside, large numbers of peasants are moving into service sectors, many of whom go to nearby towns and cities to seek employment. To enhance the management ability of rural cadres and the employable skills of peasants, HEE specialty areas need to be added in Agro-economics, Rural Enterprise Management, Public Health, Environment etc. to cater to the needs of rural areas.

On the one hand, it is true that without raising the educational standard of the vast population in the countryside, there will not be a significant rise in the overall educational qualification of China's adults. On the other, one of the consequences of pulling in large numbers of peasants to take the exams might be an even higher drop-out rate, since rural examinees are often educationally ill-prepared for studying at a higher educational level, due to the uneven urban-rural distribution of scarce resources. Further research is indicated in regard to the specialty offerings, educational deliveries, the financing of studies, and specialized remedial academic assistance policies which might be required to suit the special circumstances in the rural countryside.

The rural targeted specialty design for the HEE can be made more suitable to the rural standards of attainment by broadening the focus from academic degree programs to emphasize

tertiary vocational training. Investigative exam plans can be designed to test students for vocational certificates or diplomas within certain lines of study, as required by local rural employment market needs, emphasizing rural economic and social development.

In addressing the lack of the educational delivery and resources in the countryside, special academic assistance programs geared to rural learners can be investigated, co-sponsored by local TV educational channels, exam-administering institutes, and overseen by the provincial exam administrations. A more rural-based exam office might be set up under the provincial examination committees if need be. This could be pioneered, for example, by offering academic assistance of a one-way specific tutorial program broadcast on the local TV educational channel, while parallel correspondence teaching assistance is offered by the local exam administering institute to offer two-way academic contact between rural students and university teachers. At the same time, more community education centres can be set up in the densely populated rural townships and areas. In these rural education centres, teachers and other facilities such as TV sets, videos, books could be made more available. Training courses could be given to rural teachers by regular universities in order to strengthen the academic assistance in the rural countryside.

The future lifeline of the HEE remains how to further develop and readjust the program offerings. The downfall of the Imperial Civil Service Examinations had a lot to do with the increasingly narrowing coverage of the exam contents over the last two dynasties. Two major changes in the exam contents and requirements occurred in these Imperial Examinations. The first was the addition of a calligraphy test; the other, and more importantly, was the adoption of a fixed eight-legged format for the essay writing, in which classical knowledge in certain fields had to be presented. The result was that only the ability to memorize knowledge presented in a certain fixed

textual format was emphasized by the exams and expected from the potential officials. Today, although there is a large variety of HEE majors for students to choose of their own accord, students' choice on course subjects inside any intended major is very limited, since the number of selectable courses is very small. In light of this, changes could be made in the HEE exam question format to cover critical analysis and more exam procedures that test practical work should be included.

More cross-disciplinary courses could be added in the HEE curricula as selectable courses, since present employment market needs encourage more all-around trained personnel, rather than people with expertise only in a narrow field. At the same time, the number of required public courses and foundation courses might be made more interdisciplinary and be reduced in number so that students would have more choice on optional courses related to work skills. At the short cycle level, more applied courses could be emphasized, and the highly theory-oriented subjects could be moved to the normal level. Special attention focussed on stabilising the frequent changes in the year to year examination requirements and regulations, as reflected by changes within policies and designated study books, is urgently needed to reduce the confusion of the examinees.

We can see that the evaluation of HEE students' qualification is totally based on a certain number of written exams and a final graduation test or assignment. There is danger of encouraging rote knowledge within these examinations, rather than to examine students' overall critical and/or application ability. However, the problem of rote knowledge cannot be significantly changed within the HEE system alone without a national overall educational reform, since to study by rote for written exams is deeply ingrained in the teaching mode within China's primary and secondary school system. Therefore, not much can be done in the short run in the preparation of HEE exam papers to effectively solve the problem. The tendency toward rote memorization of texts will take at least 10

to 15 years to overcome, since it has to start with the preparation of primary and secondary teachers.

What can be done inside the HEE in order to raise the education quality toward a critical and practical approach, as well as to correct the low exam pass rate, however, is to strengthen the quality of the academic assistance programs. Firstly, the current program sponsors enjoy much freedom in running their school. In the future, when granting licence to new schools or re-licencing the existing schools, the HEE management might experiment with separating programs by different specialty areas. Through powerful regulations, only those prospective schools which show academic strength and physical resources within certain fields of study should be granted a licence to practise. For example, a foreign language training school would have to exhibit the availability of language expertise through a competent teaching staff, and have available audio facilities or a language lab. A computer programming school would possess or have easy access to up-to-date computers. Students would then be encouraged to choose from these specialty academic assistance schools, so that foreign language majors could receive more training in the practical use of the language on a day to day basis. Technology students could thus gain an opportunity to use the required lab facilities. As the same time, careful empirical studies will need to be launched by the HEE research committee on how well these specialty assistance programs function, as compared with schools which give less specialized academic assistance.

Secondly, for the many specialties in science and technology, practical experiment centres could be set up in various locations by the HEE administration, as well as the academic assistance sponsors to offer students more opportunity to do required experiments. Field study can be organized periodically in local universities and factories where experiment facilities are available.

Thirdly, a larger number of assistance programs are required within the community to help

more students. Regular university teachers can continue to teach in these programs. Written correspondence assistance can also be employed in the self-study journals and newspapers to reach more self-learners.

With regard to the various illegal practices within the HEE academic assistance, separate central independent surveillance, evaluation, and inspection bodies can be organized within the HEE management to oversee all aspects of the HEE practice, including the quality of academic assistance programs and the fairness of exams. Experimentation with effective measures to stop cheating and test-oriented practices, which might undermine the quality of learning, can be undertaken.

As a national open learning system centred around the state-administered examinations, the HEE is still in its infancy, and it might be too soon to evaluate its overall impact on China's educational environment in the long run. But it certainly carries a strong message to the mass of Chinese people that the highest possible level of knowledge is not reserved for a certain part of the population to learn at a certain stage in life. What the HEE shows to the average person is that a post-secondary education is open to all people of all age groups, and can be learned by various means and methods. With this message, all sectors of Chinese society are more or less involved in this self-directed open learning system. Chinese society is thus changing into a more wide-spread learning society based on certified qualifications and personal aspiration, as well as national economic needs.

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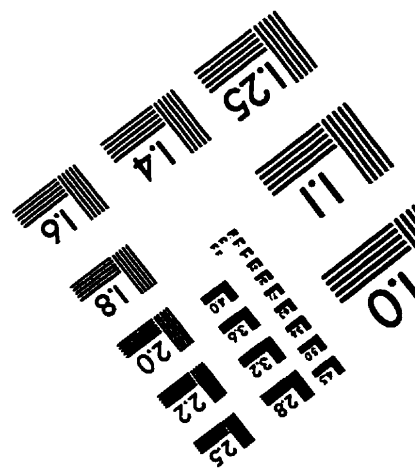
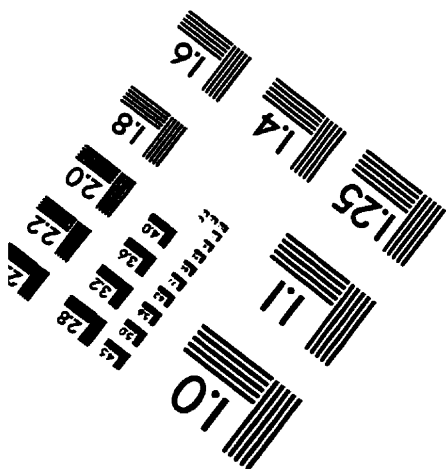
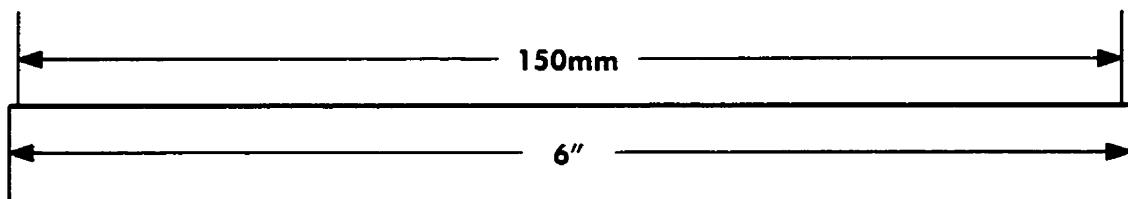
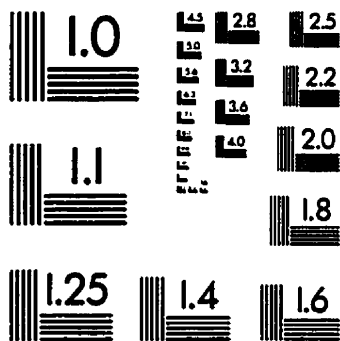
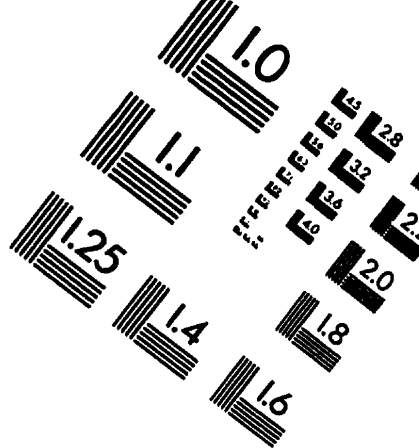
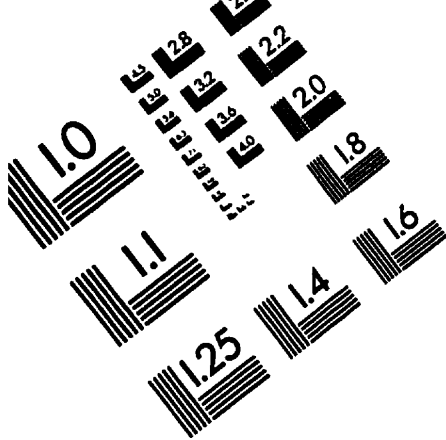
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TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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