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## HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS

### Global Drivers, Global Pitfalls

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What is holistic admissions? In the U.S. context, holistic admissions means evaluating academic credentials in the context of the opportunities an applicant faces in their family, high school, and neighborhood (Bastedo et al., 2018). But we must recognize that this is an ideal type. Even among professional admissions officers, there are views of holistic admissions in simpler and less well-defined terms. These can include simply considering all components of the application, including grades, tests, extracurricular activities, recommendations, and personal statements; or considering what the applicant has to contribute as a whole person to the university or college community. Amid a cacophony of differing policies across institutions, and holistic admissions remains largely a confusing, opaque black box for the American public.

Internationally, it is far more accurate to say that holistic admissions *practices and policies* are diffusing far more widely than is generally recognized, even among higher education experts (Bastedo, 2022). Existing inventories of admissions policies are rare, and when they do exist, often rely upon dated, stereotyped, or inaccurate reflections of admissions that exaggerate the role of national, standards-based examinations (e.g., Edwards et al., 2012; McGrath et al., 2014). These inventories also tend to simplify the reality of admissions by ignoring crucial differences among institutions or institutional types. Admittedly, the constantly changing nature of national and institutional admissions policies can make providing an accurate reflection of admissions policies very challenging. China, Korea, and the U.S. are particularly bad cases in this regard, as admissions

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policies and practices have changed repeatedly – sometimes annually – in recent years.

Holistic admissions pathways can impact quite a substantial number of students, even in countries that are widely believed to use exclusively algorithmic or examination-based methods for centralized admission. In Australia, where an algorithm called ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) is used, nearly 60% of university students gain admission through non-ATAR pathways (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). Under China's Independent Freshman Admission Program (IFAP), at the top 15 Beijing universities, 30% of applicants received some form of special consideration, and at the top three universities in Beijing, 25.5% were admitted through IFAP (Wu, 2017). In 2019, about one-quarter of all students in Korea were selected through holistic admissions (H. Kim, 2024). Whereas once the holistic, alternative admissions track at Sciences Po in Paris admitted a relatively small number of students from specific high schools (Sabbagh, 2002), today an updated alternative process is simply how all students are admitted to the elite institution (see Chapter 8). In Japan, holistic admissions pathways are well established in hundreds of institutions; about 40% of students at private universities are admitted through a principal recommendation pathway, and about 15% of students nationwide are admitted through holistic pathways, with a goal to ultimately increase admissions through these pathways to 30% (Ishikura & Kawashima, 2018; Yonezawa & Akiyama, 2015).

Yet there is also a retreat from holistic admissions in some countries as a backlash to pervasive concerns with holistic admissions policies and practices. In China, the IFAP admissions track was scrapped entirely in 2020 and replaced with the far more focused (and less holistic) Strong Base Program that focused preferences on national strategic priorities (Li & He, 2023). In Korea, the Ministry of Education has reduced the types of evidence that can be used in the holistic admissions track year by year, progressively eliminating consideration of extramural awards, extracurricular competitions, patents, publications, recommendations, and essays (see Chapter 5). And holistic admissions pathways remain publicly controversial in nearly every country where they have been implemented, including the U.S. (Bastedo, 2023).

Thus, although holistic admissions varies quite widely across different country contexts, there are surprisingly common drivers behind the adoption of these policies, and surprisingly common pitfalls that are driving backlashes against these policies, leading to rollbacks in many countries. This chapter seeks to provide a framework for understanding these common drivers and common pitfalls that are faced in countries from China to Chile. Although holistic admissions can be a key policy lever to address

the failures of examination-only admissions systems, holistic admissions practices have blind spots of their own which must be addressed to meet the policy goals of countries that seek to adopt them.

## Holistic Admissions: Four Common Drivers

### *Shadow Education and Student Wellbeing*

Examination-based admissions systems have become notorious for their deleterious impacts on student mental health. In these systems, students often engage in draining, years-long preparation for national college examinations, resulting in higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (e.g., Beck et al., 2024). In addition, the need for special exam preparation feeds entire industries of “shadow education” focused on tutoring, cramming, and test-taking skills (Lee & Shouse, 2011; Baker & LeTendre, 2005). These issues have often led countries to consider holistic admissions policies as an alternative to examination-only systems.

In Korea, for example, the Suneung (College Scholastic Ability Test) and the intense college admissions system in South Korea have had a significantly negative and demonstrated impact on students’ mental health (Lee, 2018). The Suneung is a grueling eight-hour standardized exam taken once a year. Public sentiment indicates that the Suneung has overburdened students, with a survey showing that 53% of Grade 10 students felt high levels of academic stress, rising to 71% for Grade 12 students (Seo & Bae, 2024; Wang & Lee, 2015).

This pressure and excessive focus on the exam contribute to many mental health problems for Korean students (Choi & Park, 2013). The life pattern dictated by the college admission system often involves students spending most of their days and nights in school and then going straight to private institutes or tutoring classes for many hours, sometimes very late, leaving them with little time to talk, play, and interact with friends and family members. This burden can result in emotional instability among applicants and the dehumanization of high school students. Reportedly, approximately 90% of Korean students feel unhappy, and the effect of the college admission system is known to be particularly significant in relation to these educational issues (Choi & Park, 2013).

Moreover, the high-stakes, high-stress nature of college admissions, heavily influenced by the Suneung, is widely attributed by Koreans as one of the reasons contributing to the highest rates of teenage suicide among OECD countries (Wang & Lee, 2015; Kang et al., 2024). Sources report that about 12% of adolescent suicides are due to depression associated with school results. The persistent intensity of competition, often fueled

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by a strong “education fever,” means students often feel powerful pressure to devote extensive time to shadow education activities, well beyond their real value to students.

Cram schools are also a notable feature of the educational landscape in China, specifically in the context of preparing for the *Gaokao*. These schools involve students spending considerable time, at least a year, intensely preparing for the exam (Chiang, 2018). Notoriously, students in *Gaokao* cram schools often study well into the night, leaving little time for anything but exam preparation. As in Korea, cram schools have been linked to low student well-being and high rates of student suicidality. The presence and intensity of these cram schools have contributed to the *Gaokao*'s reputation. Notably, some high-performing elite students may not heavily rely on external cram schools, potentially because their school-based preparation is sufficient and they have limited time outside school. The preparation provided by cram schools, and increasingly the focus within the general high school system, is characterized by a strong emphasis on examination-oriented knowledge and test-taking preparation.

In France, the educational landscape for elite professions differs significantly from many other countries, with the *Grandes Écoles* serving as the primary channel for education in fields like Engineering, Management, and Politics, rather than universities (Buisson-Fenet & Draelants, 2013). Admittance to these prestigious institutions is highly competitive and follows a specific pathway. The first stage of this process involves gaining entry into a post-secondary preparatory class, known as a *classe préparatoire aux Grandes Écoles* (CPGE). These CPGEs provide a selective two-year training program designed specifically to prepare students for the rigorous competitive examinations (*concours*) required for admission to the *Grandes Écoles*.

The role of CPGEs is central to the French model of elite selection. The rigorous and intensive nature of the two-year preparation period reinforces the prestige and desirability of the *Grandes Écoles* (Darchy-Koechlin et al., 2015). While entry into the *Grandes Écoles* relies on the *concours*, which are considered a cornerstone of the French republican ideal of meritocracy, access to the CPGEs themselves is a critical initial filter. Access to elite high schools, particularly those with their own preparatory classes, can play a significant role in students' ability to enter CPGEs and thus access elite education (van Zanten, 2025).

Moreover, the experience of attending a CPGE is perceived as a difficult but essential rite of passage by many French students (Darchy-Koechlin et al., 2015). Some national students may even resent international students who bypass this preparatory stage, feeling they did not have to “suffer through it” to gain admission to a *Grande École*. The selection process

itself can thus be a significant source of stress and perceived unfairness. The high-stakes nature of initial selection into post-secondary pathways, including the demanding CPGE route, contributes to student anxiety before even entering these programs.

In the U.S., participation in test preparation for the SAT, ACT, or AP exams varies significantly by background (Buchmann et al., 2010). Students from higher-income families and those with better-educated parents are more likely to engage in costly forms of test prep, such as private courses and tutoring. Racial and ethnic differences are also apparent: Black students are more likely than White students to use various forms of test preparation, and Asian Americans, particularly East Asian Americans, show high rates of participation in private courses or tutoring. Factors like discussing college plans and SAT preparation with parents, and aspects of the high school environment, such as the prevalence of AP courses, are also associated with using more “elite” forms of test prep (Park & Becks, 2015), suggesting that access is tied not just to individual financial capital but also to community socialization and habitus. However, the effect of test preparation on SAT scores is debated; while commercial services claim large gains, prior research has often found more modest increases, around 10–20 points for math scores and 5–10 points for verbal scores (Park & Becks, 2015).

Retaking the SAT is another common strategy to increase scores, pursued by roughly half of all test-takers and even higher percentages of applicants to selective institutions. Current college admissions practices, especially the widespread use of superscores (combining highest section scores across attempts), provide strong incentives to retake the test as it can only improve a student’s competitive position. However, disparities exist in retake rates: low-income students are 21 percentage points less likely to retake than high-income students, and students of color are 9 percentage points less likely than white students (Goodman et al., 2020). Applicants with higher family incomes, better-educated parents, and higher self-reported ability or class rank are more likely to retake, even when controlling for initial scores. The score increases gained from retaking the SAT are significant enough to lead to substantial improvements in college enrollment outcomes: retaking the SAT increases the probability of enrolling in a four-year college by 13 percentage points on average, partly by shifting students away from two-year colleges and by including students who would not have otherwise enrolled (Goodman et al., 2020). Overall, in the U.S., engaging in often expensive test preparation can offer key benefits to students who wish to attend post-secondary institutions that either require or advantage students who take the SAT, ACT, or AP exams (Rosinger et al., 2024).

### *Access and Equity*

Examination-based systems also create significant barriers to access and equity, particularly for underrepresented students. The competition in examination-based systems is often fierce, with higher-SES, racially privileged, and less vulnerable students often well positioned to compete effectively in a winner-take-all market (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Shavit et al., 2007). In these scenarios, holistic admissions can be positioned as a means to provide more equitable paths to admit students across varying geographic and socioeconomic contexts.

In Chile, the educational system exhibits high levels of socioeconomic segregation, particularly visible in the K-12 school structure, which includes public schools, subsidized voucher schools (private with public funding), and non-subsidized private schools (Gallegos Mardones & Campos-Requena, 2021). Vulnerable students are predominantly concentrated in public and subsidized schools, while non-subsidized private schools are considerably more expensive and cater to higher socioeconomic levels (Barrios Fernández et al., 2024). The impact of this segregation extends into higher education access, where there are significant differences in enrollment rates by income quintile; for instance, in 2013, the highest income quintile had a net higher education access rate of 57.5%, compared to only 27.4% for the first income quintile (Santelices et al., 2018). Students from elite private schools, often seen as proxies for elite social capital, are disproportionately represented in the most selective university programs at institutions like the University of Chile and the Catholic University of Chile. This pattern of access contributes to the intergenerational transmission of social capital and elite positions.

A primary challenge for equitable access to Chilean higher education stems from its heavy reliance on standardized national admission tests, such as the University Selection Test (PSU), which evaluate subject area knowledge. While intended to correct socioeconomic effects, the PSU has been criticized for increasing economic segregation and discriminating against the most vulnerable students (Gallegos Mardones & Campos-Requena, 2021). Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and private schools benefit from greater and better opportunities to prepare for these exams. In contrast, public and vulnerable schools may cover a smaller proportion of the curriculum due to various factors, including less qualified teachers and administrative inefficiencies, leaving their students at a disadvantage on these tests. Empirical evidence shows a positive and significant effect of family income on PSU scores, with the gap widening for higher income quintiles compared to the lowest (Gallegos Mardones & Campos-Requena, 2021). This reliance on test scores makes the admission

system highly inequitable, as socioeconomic variables directly influence both the type of education received and subsequent test performance.

As discussed previously, the system for accessing elite higher education in France, centered around the *Grandes Écoles*, significantly impacts social stratification and inequality. Unlike standard universities, which historically offer open access to *baccalauréat* holders, the *Grandes Écoles* are highly selective and access to CPGEs, particularly the most prestigious ones, is heavily influenced by the student's home high school. There is a significant role for "school-linking processes" in shaping access to French elite education and contributing to social closure. Students from privileged backgrounds benefit not only from cultural heritage but also from access to specific, elite high schools. These feeder high schools offering preparatory classes are central to elite pathways, and the analysis of admissions files from major CPGEs reveals that students from high schools with specific characteristics are more likely to be admitted (Buisson-Fenet & Draelants, 2013). Factors influencing admission decisions go beyond just academic marks, incorporating context effects like class rank and size, and "linking effects" such as the principal's evaluation and the influence of the feeder school.

Beyond CPGE entry, the competitive examination (*concours*) for the *Grandes Écoles* can also exhibit social bias. The *concours* is unfavorable to students from certain social categories, impacting their chances of success regardless of academic level, and social origin and gender can combine to negatively affect selection probabilities. While the oral exam phase might mitigate some social bias, reaching that stage remains a hurdle. Institutions have attempted to address this inequality through alternative pathways, such as the *Conventions Éducation Prioritaire* (CEP) scheme at Sciences Po, designed to increase the proportion of disadvantaged and "diverse" students (Goastellec, 2008; Sabbagh, 2002; van Zanten, 2025). CEP represented a significant departure from the traditional competitive exam and has provided benefits to students who might not have otherwise accessed elite education. However, the CEP scheme also enrolled a heterogeneous group, and later changes giving more weight to academic records reduced the proportion of lower-class and minority students admitted through this route. Thus, this overall system of selective access, filtered through CPGEs and competitive exams, and reinforced by school-linking processes, has contributed significantly to the reproduction of social elites in France.

In South Korea, certain types of high schools and their associated contexts contribute to inequality in college access. This is closely linked to the stratified nature of the high school system and disparities in resources and opportunities. High schools are highly stratified, notably into government-funded general academic high schools ("non-exam schools") and selective

“exam schools,” such as foreign language, global, science, and autonomous private high schools (see Chapter 5). Admission to exam schools is competitive, based on entrance exams and middle school grades, and students from these schools often come from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. These exam schools provide students with more plentiful, specialized educational opportunities and resources compared to non-exam schools, as well as stronger preparation for the Suneung. This early selection and difference in resources translate into stark disparities in admissions outcomes. Students from exam schools, which constitute only about 10% of all high schools, are disproportionately represented at the country’s most selective universities, like the SKY universities (Seoul National University, Korea University, Yonsei University), with over half of admitted students sometimes coming from these secondary schools.

This unequal access is further exacerbated by the role of socioeconomic status and access to resources, which are often concentrated in certain types of schools or locations. Higher-SES parents are more likely to guide their children into exam schools, and family background and neighborhood characteristics, including the local infrastructure for private education, significantly influence college admissions outcomes. A key factor is the “concerted cultivation” of children by wealthier families, which includes utilizing private tutoring resources. Moreover, monthly expenditure on private education for college preparation is significantly higher in the capital area (Seoul) and in affluent districts within Seoul compared to regional/rural areas (Kim et al., 2014). This reliance on private resources, particularly concentrated around selective schools or in wealthy areas, gives students from these backgrounds an edge in admissions by helping them navigate complex processes and prepare for the notoriously difficult Suneung exam.

### ***Creativity, Entrepreneurship, Leadership, and Innovation***

College entrance examinations are often seen as fostering student conformity and compliance, while undermining students’ engagement in the soft skills that are often critical to success after schooling – creativity, entrepreneurship, leadership, and capacity to innovate. In the U.S., for example, there has been deep interest in assessing “non-cognitive skills” in the admissions process by using instruments, tests, and rubrics to discover motivation, persistence, resilience, help-seeking, or other positive characteristics (Hossler et al., 2019; Sternberg, 2010). As there is often a weak correlation between test results and these crucial soft skills, holistic admissions can be poised to assess and select students based on these capacities that are missed in academic examinations.

China's admissions policies, particularly the traditional *Gaokao* and the broader system it underpins, have often been seen to contribute to increased conformity among students. The historical foundation of the *Gaokao* is based on a single, one-time test score, and this standardized academic test is the prerequisite for entering almost all undergraduate institutions. The system has a strong focus on easily measurable aspects of knowledge and neglects many competencies that cannot be assessed by standardized tests. Moreover, this strong emphasis on a single, high-stakes examination leads to the prevalence of exam-oriented education in primary and secondary schools. Thus, the system was often criticized for potentially depriving students with special talents who may not excel at standardized exams and for producing students who achieve high scores but may not necessarily achieve well in softer skills such as leadership or perseverance. This focus on excelling within a narrow, standardized framework inherently encourages conformity to the demands of the test rather than the exploration or development of diverse skills and individuality.

Furthermore, the externally oriented and high-stakes educational system led by the *Gaokao* contributes to a tunnel vision of exam preparation. Striving for success in exams has dominated Chinese students' lives, crowding out the time and energy for developing an identity or intellectual life. One study found that before taking the *Gaokao* and selecting their university major, a large percentage of 12th-grade students did not know their true interests, what major or career would fit their potential, or the types of activities that matched their character (Yu et al., 2016). Students were thus less likely to act upon their interests and personal values, thereby further failing to satisfy their need for autonomy. The adaptation to this controlling system can shape "controlled personalities," leading young people to continue seeking controlled environments after *Gaokao*, potentially manifesting in seeking bureaucratic civil service jobs or favoring popular, non-self-determined majors like business/management.

In Australia, some admissions processes seek to identify skills related to creativity and innovation, particularly when relevant to the intended course of study. Portfolios, for example, are noted as being effective methods of evaluation when appropriate to the course, such as in disciplines like creative arts (Blyth, 2014). There is evidence that portfolio applications can be an effective means of identifying student potential and improving diversity of participation, especially for under-represented groups (Palmer et al., 2011). Additionally, studies have suggested that the ENTER score, a precursor to the ATAR, was not a good predictor of performance in fields like creative arts, reinforcing the utility of alternative assessment methods like portfolios in such areas (Blyth, 2014).

Australian admissions also look at broader “life skills” and personal attributes associated with success at university and desirable characteristics for a student cohort. These can include personal and professional attributes like motivation, resilience, organization, and planning skills, which are assessed by tests such as CASPer (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). Volunteering and community service are explicitly considered in programs like the Australian Catholic University’s Early Achievers’ Program and La Trobe University’s Aspire Program (Harvey, 2014). Demonstrated motivation and community contribution are also factors for Federation University Australia’s Regional Early Entry Program. Attributes such as self-regulated learning, conscientiousness, realistic self-appraisal, and coping skills have been linked to university success. These personal characteristics can be assessed through methods like interviews, portfolios, application essays, and referee reports, although the predictive validity and efficiency of interviews and essays can vary in the Australian context (Blyth, 2014). Prior workplace or community sector experience often plays a significant role in selection for coursework for postgraduate study, requiring qualitative judgement from institutions. Additionally, special consideration schemes may be available for individuals with non-academic achievements, such as elite athletes or performers (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2016).

In the U.S., it is now widely acknowledged that the focus on extracurricular activities – and more broadly, considerations of appropriate character and personality – were used to address the “Jewish problem” at Harvard, Princeton, and other Ivy League colleges during the 1920s and thereafter (Karabel, 2005). Based simply on academic accomplishments, Jewish students gained remarkably in their admission to elite colleges, causing concern among college leaders for the displacement of the traditional White, Protestant, upper-class student body. This was seen as a direct threat on the legitimacy of elite colleges and their place in American society, and admissions practices that incorporated these characteristics were an adaptation to this threat.

As to character and personality, admissions officers had very explicit preferences about the men they wanted to admit. They wanted masculine vigor over “delicate, literary types” or “sensitive neurotics”; no “greasy grinds” or “Quiz Kids” were to be preferred (Stampnitzky, 2006, pp. 455–6). More formally, admissions officers were to prefer students with the appropriate “character, personality, capacity for leadership, maturity, stability, motivation, athletic activity, and background” (Stampnitzky, 2006, p. 469). Although the focus on masculinity may have waned, the desirability of these broad elements of character has been largely institutionalized, even as the connotations of these terms change over time.

There is clearly a cultural system in the U.S. surrounding extracurricular activities, and that system differs substantially by socioeconomic status. Extracurricular activities are far more important to elite college admission than they were in the 1970s (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Park et al., 2025; Posselt et al., 2012). Low-SES students rely disproportionately on organized, public institutions for opportunities to participate (Bennett et al., 2012). For high-SES parents, extracurricular activities are part of standard child-rearing practices that contribute to personal development. This can be seen perhaps most clearly in Annette Lareau’s seminal ethnography, *Unequal Childhoods* (2003), which documents how different values, knowledge, skills, and child-rearing practices – specifically the concerted cultivation among high-SES parents – yield very different outcomes for children across the SES spectrum.

Finally, we now see some evidence that participation in extracurricular activities at elite colleges is being connected to elite labor markets in law, banking, and management consulting (Rivera, 2011). Hiring committees seek to build “a fraternity of smart people” who will be witty, lively, and active co-workers who fit the ideal, elite college type. These people pursue their passions during their off time, are well-rounded, and have the drive to balance a real social life with nearly impossibly demanding work schedules. They also highly valued sports associated with high social class, such as lacrosse and crew, over those that are “widely accessible” such as football or soccer. These are all seen as being connected to leadership and perseverance, the kinds of soft skills that American colleges seek to cultivate beyond intellectualism or academic achievements.

### ***Teaching and Learning***

College entrance examinations and admissions algorithms are often criticized for deeply distorting the teaching and learning process in secondary schools. The need for high scores on college entrance examinations easily results in a situation where exam preparation “crowds out” many other important and positive educational experiences. These can include subjects, particularly the arts and humanities, that are not as crucial to success on entrance examinations, but they also include pedagogical techniques, including projects, inquiry-based learning, group learning, or oral presentations that are unrelated to exam preparation. A greater focus on grades and teacher recommendations in holistic admissions can provide additional space to assess and consider these subjects and pedagogical techniques that may lead to greater student and life success.

The Suneung and the competitive college admissions system in South Korea have significantly impacted teaching and learning in secondary

schools, often leading to a distortion of the educational process. The intense focus on a single, high-stakes national examination results in widespread “cramming” and “teaching to the test.” The curriculum and instructional methods have become heavily geared toward preparing students for the Suneung’s subjects, format, and question types, sometimes described as leading to a “distorted state” of high school education (Choi & Park, 2013).

Despite efforts to make the Suneung promote more meaningful learning than its predecessors, it has drawn similar criticism for potentially encouraging rote memorization over deeper understanding or higher-order thinking abilities, even though testing these abilities is a stated objective (Sohn & Ju, 2010). Historically, changes in the college entrance examination system, including those relying on government-administered tests, have shaped what is taught and how, often leading to a focus on rote learning or an overemphasis of specific subjects. While policies have aimed to normalize high school education by relying on standardized tests, many basic educational issues have remained unresolved (Choi & Park, 2013).

In addition, the dual burden of formal schooling and extensive shadow education leaves students with little time for other activities. This pervasive focus on the Suneung and test results shapes not only what is taught and learned but also the overall educational environment and resources (Kang & Kang, 2024). The emphasis on academic achievements for university admission, heavily weighted by examination results, can contribute to a culture where teaching methods become less student-centered (Wang & Lee, 2015). The constant pressure to cover material relevant to the exam can severely limit flexibility and innovation in teaching and result in excessive conformity and compliance among students. Ultimately, the Suneung’s central role in college admissions deeply ingrains a test-driven approach into the fabric of secondary education, impacting curriculum, teaching strategies, and student learning experiences.

Recent Suneung reforms in South Korea aim to improve student learning by removing overly complex “killer questions” that often require knowledge well beyond the public school curriculum (Yeung & Seo, 2023). By ensuring the exam strictly covers material taught in public schools, the reform seeks to redirect student learning toward understanding core concepts within the standard curriculum, reduce reliance on rote memorization for niche questions, and alleviate the excessive competition and financial burden associated with the private education market, thereby promoting a more equitable and potentially less stressful learning environment focused on public education.

The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) significantly shapes both course selection and student strategies, sometimes in ways that may

inadvertently limit educational breadth and the development of a wider range of skills. The ATAR serves as the primary mechanism for comparing students' academic performance across different subjects and schools. Universities publish minimum ATARs for entry, and these cut-offs strongly influence course desirability and perceived quality among students. Students often make choices about their preferred courses based on these rankings, sometimes feeling pressure to select courses with high ATAR requirements to avoid "wasting" their score, rather than aligning their choices with personal strengths, interests, or capabilities relevant to a field (Blyth, 2014). This market signal can distort the selection process, potentially funneling highly capable students into a narrow range of high-ATAR courses like medicine or law (Harvey, 2014).

The ATAR's influence extends to subject selection in the final years of schooling, with students sometimes choosing subjects based on scaling advantages rather than genuine academic suitability or interest in the subject matter (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). Furthermore, the strong emphasis on the ATAR within the schooling system can affect the educational experience itself, potentially impacting student learning and intellectual development. When the system is heavily geared toward achieving ATARs, particularly through assessment in senior years, it can limit opportunities for deeper learning (see Chapter 4). This focus on assessment can lead to narrower teaching and learning approaches, potentially restricting teachers' ability to innovate and diversify teaching practices. Critics argue that this system may not adequately prepare young people for future work, focusing more on assessment tasks than on developing crucial future-oriented capabilities such as resilience, flexibility, and creativity (Jackson et al., 2023). The ATAR reduces the wide range of skills, knowledge, and capabilities students develop over many years of schooling into a single numerical score, which critics contend oversimplifies individual potential and may discourage the development of skills not directly measured by the ranking.

While the ATAR is useful for ranking students based on academic achievement and predicting success, particularly for high scores, its predictive validity diminishes for students in the middle and lower bands (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). A key limitation is that the ATAR does not capture a student's broader attributes and potential beyond their ranked academic performance. Aspects such as creativity, innovation, motivation, resilience, organization, planning skills, and engagement in activities like volunteering and community service are not directly assessed by the ATAR but are increasingly recognized as important for university success and desirable life skills. The emergence of alternative admission pathways, such as considering portfolios, personal attributes tests, interviews, essays, and prior experience indicates a growing recognition that a single academic rank is

insufficient to assess the full range of capabilities and potential that contribute to success at university and in life (Palmer et al., 2011).

## Four Common Pitfalls

### *Transparency*

Holistic admissions policies are often criticized for creating opaque “black boxes” that make it difficult, if not impossible, to understand how admissions decisions are being made. As a result, accusations of unfairness are easy to make and hard to refute. This is particularly true in countries like Korea, for example, where the public is nearly obsessed with the fairness of the college admissions process (H. Kim, 2024). Thus, in these countries, public commentators often fall back upon the simple joys of examinations, where scores are easy to understand and rank, and admission is often simply the result of setting a score threshold and drawing a line.

The Danish higher education admission system is a centralized, national system where application and admission occur at the program level for specific fields of study at particular institutions (Gandil & Leuven, 2022; Nielsen et al., 2024). All applications are processed centrally by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, and applicants rank their preferred study programs, receiving an offer from the highest-ranked program for which they are eligible based on available seats and their rank. This allocation is typically done using a Deferred Acceptance algorithm, which employs two primary pathways or quotas for ranking applicants. Quota 1 is the mandatory default system where applicants are ranked based on their average high-school GPA, derived from central and externally graded exit exams and continuous assessment. Quota 1 cutoffs are publicly available.

Quota 2 offers a voluntary, human-based screening process where applicants are ranked by faculty members based on alternative criteria such as specific high-school grades, admission tests, writing assignments (essays), CVs, and interviews. Programs have some autonomy in choosing these criteria, and while the categories are known, the specific method for translating these into a numeric ranking is often not publicly disclosed. Quota 2 serves as an alternative route aimed at broadening access to higher education based on merit, including for those without a directly comparable GPA, and has been found to be more effective in identifying good program matches, leading to higher program completion rates compared to GPA-based admission (Gandil & Leuven, 2022). Recent research using machine learning models suggests that predictive algorithms could outperform both current GPA and human-based rankings within study programs in predicting degree completion (Nielsen et al., 2024). Unlike

some other Scandinavian countries, Denmark's system does not allow applicants to improve their high school GPA after graduation for ranking purposes, and recent reforms include reducing university seats in certain fields to improve alignment with labor market demand and enhance allocative efficiency (Cohodes et al., 2025).

While Denmark has long been comfortable with simple, exam-based systems like Quota 1, it is Quota 2 that creates issues with admissions transparency. The potential introduction of advanced algorithmic admission systems introduces further transparency issues, particularly with machine learning models that function as “black boxes” where understanding the prediction process is difficult (Nielsen et al., 2024). While simpler models like logistic regression are more inherently interpretable, deep learning models pose a fundamental challenge for public explanation. Regulatory initiatives, like the EU AI Act, categorize college admissions AI as high-risk, demanding strict transparency and human oversight, making the deployment of complex, high-performing models contingent upon the development of reliable and comprehensible explanations. This creates a fundamental trade-off between the potentially superior performance offered by complex machine-learning algorithms and the need for the transparency and public explanation required for trust, accountability, and effective policy oversight mechanisms.

China's IFAP program introduced a university-specific and multistage selection process based on criteria beyond the traditional *Gaokao* (Wu et al., 2019). This process typically involves application materials, recommendations, university-designed exams, and interviews to assess comprehensive qualities and special talents. However, the admission process was described as complex and “somewhat opaque,” with procedures and criteria mainly designed by individual universities and differing between institutions (Bastedo, 2022). Unlike the highly standardized *Gaokao*, the criteria used in IFAP left considerable room for subjective judgment, contributing to the perception that the admissions process was less transparent compared to the standardized *Gaokao* examination.

Research and public opinion increasingly doubted the fairness and effectiveness of the program. Studies indicated that IFAP admissions tended to favor students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who could leverage resources, social networks, and cultural capital to gain advantages in more subjective evaluations (Wu et al., 2019). For example, interview assessments were found to favor higher SES backgrounds even when written test scores were similar, and recommendations from keypoint high schools, more accessible to advantaged students, played a crucial role (Wu et al., 2019). Critics voiced concerns about potentially opaque and biased selection criteria and processes (Cui et al., 2024). The program was seen

as perpetuating social inequality in higher education, hindering fairness in admission opportunities.

Due to these criticisms and concerns, the IFAP program was ultimately phased out beginning in 2020. It was replaced with The Strong Base Plan, officially known as the Pilot Reform of Enrollment in Basic Disciplines. This national strategy-oriented policy operates in 39 elite universities focused on selecting and training “top innovative talents” in basic disciplines considered vital for national strategic needs, such as high-end chips, software, artificial intelligence, new materials, advanced manufacturing, and national security, as well as certain humanities and social sciences.

The admission process for the Strong Base Plan evaluates students based on their comprehensive qualities and performance in basic subjects (Li & He, 2023). It requires all candidates to take the Gaokao, which must account for at least 85% of a candidate’s comprehensive score, combined with a university-specific comprehensive assessment. There is also a separate pathway for a small number of exceptional candidates with outstanding performance in relevant disciplines, such as winners of national Olympiad competitions. The program generally requires students to commit to their admitted major without the possibility of switching. While intended to identify exceptional students, the Strong Base Plan has faced scrutiny regarding its continued reliance on exam scores despite claims of more holistic evaluation, and potential barriers and burdens for students. For this reason many observers see this new policy as a significant walking back of the move toward holistic review in China as a result of concerns about transparency, corruption, and other issues.

South Korea’s Gogyo Blind policy, introduced to promote equity in college admissions by masking applicants’ high school names and types, aimed to eliminate the perceived “halo effects” associated with selective exam schools (see Chapter 5). However, instead of achieving this goal, the policy created substantial ambiguity in the admissions process. The masked information rarely led evaluators to ignore the high school context; rather, it intensified cognitive biases and prompted admissions officers to unconsciously or consciously attempt to fill in the gaps using available information. Admissions personnel often found this inconsistency exasperating, criticizing policymakers for misunderstanding the essence of holistic review, often feeling their hands were tied in accurately evaluating students holistically due to government restrictions.

Admissions officers navigating the Gogyo Blind policy leaned heavily on easily recognizable proxies found in masked transcripts, such as curricular foci, instructional hours, school-level class averages, and standard deviations to identify the type of high school an applicant attended. The salience of these proxies activated widespread social stereotypes about the

selectivity and rigor of special-purpose high schools. For example, some faculty admitted to elevating class rank categories for applicants from foreign language or science high schools, rationalizing it as a way to account for the policy's limitations and give these stereotypically higher-performing students "due consideration." Additionally, the policy leads evaluators to misattribute raw performance solely to an applicant's individual ability, overlooking the significant influence of school-level resources and opportunities, which is a form of correspondence bias (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017).

The heightened uncertainty also fueled risk aversion among admissions officers, particular faculty reviewers, pushing evaluators to favor applicants perceived as "safer bets." Without detailed contextual information on general academic high schools, admissions officers often gravitated toward applicants from exam schools, whose reputations for rigor reduced perceived risk. This resulted in the policy reinforcing the systemic advantages enjoyed by students from exam schools and disproportionately disadvantaging students from rural and lower-resourced general academic high schools – the very population the policy intended to protect.

### ***Corruption***

In many countries, holistic admissions has resulted in a number of high-profile controversies that have been widely covered in the national and even international media. The additional criteria used in holistic admissions have allowed applicants to create fake or exaggerated publications, non-existent athletic accomplishments, made-up awards, and other forms of fraud that corrupt the integrity of the admissions process. Unsurprisingly, this has led many observers to note that high-stakes examinations make security and fairness far easier to ensure.

The Cho Kuk scandal was a highly publicized controversy involving the daughter of South Korea's then-Minister of Justice. Allegations surfaced that his daughter gained admission to a top university and applied to medical school by leveraging improperly obtained or fraudulent credentials (Bastedo, 2022; see also Chapter 5). Specifically, she was accused of using lead authorship on a paper stemming from a two-week internship arranged by her father, who was a celebrity law professor at Seoul National University, and that his wife had fabricated volunteer award certificates for her. This scandal fueled fierce public debates about the influence of parental socioeconomic status and high school type on college admissions, particularly within the context of holistic review. The fallout included widespread public outrage and weeks of protests in Seoul, ultimately leading to Cho Kuk's forced resignation, and both he and his wife facing indictment.

Cho Kuk was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison and barred from public office for five years.

The scandal had significant implications for holistic review practices in Korea. It intensified existing public criticism that holistic admissions processes, with their more flexible criteria, were susceptible to corruption and favored students from privileged backgrounds who could procure “flashy” extracurriculars or receive help with application materials. In response to the public outcry, the government enacted policy changes. The Gogyo Blind policy, mandating the masking of high school names and types, was introduced alongside earlier reforms specifically to address the backlash stemming from this scandal. Furthermore, to assuage public concerns and increase perceived fairness, the government announced plans to gradually prohibit components like college essays and teacher recommendation letters from being evaluated in holistic admissions. Most notably, the government reversed its previous push to expand holistic admissions and began requiring SKY and other Seoul universities to increase the proportion of students admitted through Suneung-based admissions to at least 40% (see Chapter 5). This marked a significant government crackdown on holistic admissions, directly influenced by the scandal’s exposure of perceived inequities and the potential for abuse.

Students in China have also exploited loopholes involving patents and inventions to gain an unfair advantage in the highly competitive college admissions process, particularly through programs like the now-reformed IFAP. This program was initially designed to allow universities to recruit students with special talents who might not excel in the standardized *gaokao* exam. However, it became susceptible to manipulation. Some parents and students sought to bolster applications by acquiring patents, sometimes for inventions of dubious originality or those primarily developed by adults, to meet the criteria for special talents (Bastedo, 2022). This practice was driven by the perception that holding a patent could significantly increase a student’s chances of being admitted to elite universities or gaining bonus points. Other students engaged in outright bribery. In 2015, the admissions director of Renmin University confessed to receiving more than \$3.6 million in illegal bribes for admissions to Renmin through the IFAP program (Forsythe, 2015).

In the U.S., the Varsity Blues scandal, exposed in March 2019, was a high-profile undergraduate admissions scheme involving wealthy parents who bribed athletic coaches and faked test scores to secure admission for their children at elite U.S. universities (Korn & Levitz, 2020). The scheme was orchestrated by Rick Singer, who used a for-profit college preparatory business and a non-profit charity to disguise bribes as donations. This “side door” method guaranteed admission, in contrast to the “front

door” (legitimate) or “back door” (through large donations not guaranteeing admission). The scandal implicated over 30 parents and affected institutions such as Yale, Georgetown, Stanford, UCLA, and the University of Southern California (USC). The widespread media coverage of the scandal garnered national and international attention, including a Netflix documentary, revealing practices such as bribing college entrance exam administrators and submitting falsified athletic abilities and test scores. To many, the scandal confirmed the perception that the college admissions system is unfair, undermining faith in the system and reminding the public that wealth and connections provide significant advantages in U.S. admissions (Bastedo, 2022, 2023; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). This was also affirmed by state-level scandals in Illinois and Texas, where high-profile figures gained undue influence in public universities’ admissions decisions (Harris, 2022).

The scandal had significant implications for the discussion around holistic admissions. While holistic review is sometimes promoted as a means to increase fairness, particularly for low-income and minoritized students, the Varsity Blues scandal exploited subjective areas within the system, particularly the athletic recruitment process, which previously allowed coaches significant autonomy in flagging recruits with little oversight (Korn & Levitz, 2020). Research indicates the scandal resulted in a short-term decrease in applications, a small negative effect on the enrollment of Black students, and a drop in low-income students receiving Pell grants at affected universities (Reddy & Chan, 2024; Rooney & Smith, 2019). Perhaps surprisingly, there was no impact on alumni donations, yield, or student quality (Rooney & Smith, 2019). These findings suggest that students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, may be sensitive to information about high-profile scandals, whereas wealthier households are more inured to scandals, particularly those connected to wealth and influence.

### ***Complexity***

The number of factors included in a holistic review process leads to steady complaints about the complexity of admissions policies, compared to relatively simple examination-based systems. The labyrinthine complexity of university admissions systems across nations can be a troubling paradox: practices designed to create opportunity frequently generate anxiety, inequity, and controversy. The use of interviews, personal statements, predicted grades, and confusing algorithms all creates an operational complexity that disproportionately burdens marginalized students. Thus across national contexts, this complexity has provoked radical proposals

and even experiments of admissions lotteries (Baker & Bastedo, 2022; Stegers-Jager, 2018; Zwick, 2017).

Issues of admissions complexity are particularly salient in the English context (see Chapter 10). Studies highlight the significant role of predicted grades in the UK university admissions process, noting that the vast majority of applicants submit predictions rather than final examination results. Universities then make offers conditional on achieving specified grades, which leads to an extra layer of complexity for both students and admissions officers. Research indicates that these predictions are often inaccurate, with notable differences between predicted and actual grades, and disadvantaged, high-achieving students are particularly susceptible to having their grades under-predicted (Murphy & Wyness, 2020; Wyness et al., 2023). There is ongoing debate about moving to a post-qualification system where applications occur after results are known, but concerns exist that this might harm disadvantaged students who benefit from the current system's over-prediction, which may encourage them to apply to more selective universities. Furthermore, regardless of predicted grades, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to apply to Russell Group universities. Additionally, about one-third of applicants receive what are called "conditional" unconditional offers – a confusing term that means students are only guaranteed to be admitted to their first-choice institution regardless of their A-level results (Fazackerley, 2019).

Interviews are another assessment method used in university admissions, particularly integral to the process at highly selective English institutions like Oxford and Cambridge (Zimdars, 2016). These academic interviews often aim to evaluate an applicant's academic ability and potential beyond their grades, focusing on critical thinking and problem-solving by presenting candidates with unfamiliar questions or concepts to see how they process information. While proponents suggest interviews offer a chance for applicants to shine regardless of background, studies raise concerns about their reliability and potential for bias, including unconscious bias and homophily, where selectors may favor applicants who are socially similar to themselves (Mountford-Zimdars & Moore, 2020). It can be challenging for selectors to assess innate ability or potential separately from the advantages conferred by an applicant's background, such as exposure to literature or prior coaching.

The personal statement also plays a notable role in the U.K. The primary purpose of these essays is to allow applicants to describe their interests, experiences, skills, and suitability for their chosen programs, aiming to showcase aspects of their potential not fully captured by academic grades alone (Zimdars, 2016). Essays are often used to reveal an applicant's personal story, intellectual style, and potential contributions to the university

community. Studies raise significant concerns about the fairness of using personal statements, indicating that applicants from more advantaged educational backgrounds may possess greater social and cultural capital and receive better guidance, equipping them to “play the admissions game” more effectively than less supported candidates (Jones et al., 2019). Furthermore, research into the predictive validity of personal statements for future academic success has yielded limited or negative results, with some studies finding no significant link between essay content or scores and subsequent academic performance, and issues around inconsistent scoring have also been noted (Wyness, 2017).

In France, the centralized access procedure to higher education, known as Parcoursup, was introduced in 2018 to replace a system criticized for randomly assigning students (Sursock, 2024). Despite the intention to offer more and better information to prospective students, Parcoursup immediately drew criticism for organizing a disguised selection process. The algorithm underpinning Parcoursup was particularly controversial, accused of mainstreaming an opaque selection process in a system where, historically, any holder of the *baccalauréat* was expected to be accepted to a French university (Musselin, 2004). This perceived opacity and inherent selectivity were seen by many students as violating the spirit of *égalité* (equality) and the ideals associated with the events of 1968 (Touraine, 1971). This fundamental challenge to the long-held principle of open access contributed significantly to the widespread discontent and anti-Parcoursup protests that took place across France in 2018 and 2019.

Beyond the ideological concerns about selection and opacity, the sheer complexity of the Parcoursup process itself has also fueled controversy and student anxiety (Bastedo, 2022). The system included a vast list of undergraduate programs, with applicants able to apply to many, but each requiring a separate file (Sursock, 2024). Navigating this intricate application process can be very onerous, and studies have highlighted that students from marginalized backgrounds were notably less likely to receive help or access independent information beforehand. This disparity in support exacerbates the burden of the complex system, leading many students to find the process stressful and unfair. Similarly, the complexity of the admissions process at Sciences Po, which is particularly holistic in its orientation, has led to complaints because it circumvents the *concours* and engages in positive discrimination, which remains highly controversial (see Chapter 8).

In the U.S., concerns surrounding the holistic admissions process at selective colleges have fomented advocates who want to implement random admissions lotteries. Holistic review, while intended to evaluate applicants broadly, has been described as rife with complexity and a major

source of anxiety for students and families. This complexity is part of the broader landscape of admissions practices at selective institutions, which are criticized for highly privileging overrepresented students through mechanisms like legacy preferences, expensive test preparation and counseling, and athletic preferences. The dissatisfaction and conflict generated by these existing practices, including the intricate and sometimes opaque nature of holistic review, have fueled the search for a simpler, more equitable alternative. Lottery advocates specifically propose lotteries as a panacea to resolve these issues, believing they would greatly ease the process and produce more fair and equitable college access.

Advocates argue that lotteries directly address specific problems in holistic review. For instance, some argue that a lottery would eliminate the need to discriminate among highly qualified applicants based on criteria that may be linked to inequalities, such as extracurricular activities or legacy preferences. The idea is that lotteries can “cut the rot out of college admissions,” increase social mobility, and help colleges “avoid accusations of racial discrimination” (Baker & Bastedo, 2022, p.134. Dalton Conley, for example, suggested a lottery as a solution that would end the “fretting” over college admissions and resolve the debate over whether Asian American students are discriminated against in holistic review (Conley, 2012). The core rationale for suggesting lotteries in this context is the belief that random selection can free the decision process from any personal biases of decision-makers, and thus “disable bad reasons” for selection like racial and class biases. Justice O’Connor, however, rejected a lottery as an acceptable race-neutral practice precisely because it would make the kind of “nuanced judgment” involved in considering factors for diversity impossible (Zwick, 2017).

To determine the potential impact of admissions lotteries, Baker and Bastedo (2022) simulated the lottery process at selective institutions by employing minimum eligibility thresholds based on GPA and/or standardized test scores. The results indicate dramatic and negative potential effects on the participation of students of color, low-income students, and men across nearly all models. Reductions in the proportion of students of color and low-income students dropped to levels below 2% of the class in some models. Conversely, the potential share of enrollment for White and Asian students would dramatically increase. Overall, the study concludes that while admissions lotteries would undoubtedly reduce the complexity of U.S. college admissions, with any minimum academic bars they would not produce more equitable outcomes, and variations resulting from random selection could lead to severe deviations in incoming classes from year to year.

### *Stratification and Inequality*

Although holistic admissions was created in part to address the stratification and inequality created by high-stakes examinations, these issues often persist in countries with holistic admissions pathways, even if inequality has been substantially mitigated. The role of feeder or keypoint schools – high schools that persistently send a disproportionate stream of students to a nation’s top universities – is a consistent theme across country contexts. These high schools can often provide the kinds of extracurricular activities, interview preparation, and access to rigorous coursework, among other things, that can lead to success in a holistic review process. In the U.S., these have been among the main factors that have led to criticism of the test-optional and test-free policies that were largely implemented after the COVID-19 pandemic (Bastedo et al., 2025; Rosinger et al., 2024). As a result, many critics see holistic admissions policies adding complexity and unfairness without addressing the core inequities of college admissions.

Feeder high schools have emerged as a significant factor in the landscape of admissions inequality in Japan, particularly concerning entry into elite national universities. Historically, entry into prestigious institutions like Tokyo University was often funneled through public high schools in metropolitan areas (Albert, 2015; LeTendre et al., 2006). However, reforms implemented in the post-war period, especially starting in the 1960s, aimed to create more egalitarian outcomes within the public secondary system, such as detracking policies. These reforms had the unintended consequence of disadvantaging public high schools in preparing students for the rigorous university entrance exams and placing them into elite universities. In response, academically ambitious students and their parents, often from middle-class families, engaged in a “bright flight,” opting for private high schools that were not subject to the same reforms. These private institutions capitalized on the situation by focusing heavily on preparing students for the national university entrance examinations, tailoring their strategies to maximize success. By the 1990s, a handful of private schools had come to dominate admissions to top universities like Tokyo and Kyoto, creating clear elite pathways (LeTendre et al., 2006).

The strong role of these private feeder schools exacerbates admissions inequality primarily through the mechanisms of access and investment (Takeuchi, 1991). While the university admission system relies heavily on objective entrance examinations, attending an elite private feeder school provides a distinct advantage in preparing for these exams. This preparation often necessitates substantial parental investment, not only in private school tuition but also frequently in supplementary education like cram schools (Baker & LeTendre, 2005). This reliance on resources outside the

public system means that access to the most effective preparation for elite university entry is not equally available to all students, disproportionately benefiting those from families with the means to afford these investments. Consequently, unequal access to the means of achieving high scores via elite private feeders and associated shadow education contributes significantly to inequality in who ultimately gains entry to the most prestigious universities and, historically, who will reach elite career status (Tanaka et al., 2020). Adoption of more holistic review policies in Japan has been intended to reduce these inequalities in status and create a more equitable admissions system (Ishikura & Kawashima, 2018; Rawlins & Ishikura, 2017).

Stratification and inequality in the Chilean educational system have led to the implementation of interventions to utilize alternative admissions pathways (see Chapter 3). The school system in Chile is highly segregated, distinguishing between private, semi-private (with some public funding), and public schools. Students from more vulnerable sectors primarily attend public and semi-private institutions. This segregation means that many students in private schools have access to better curricula and resources, leading to advantages in academic preparation compared to those in public schools, particularly with less qualified teachers, less curriculum coverage, and significant psychosocial issues in public schools. Socioeconomic status strongly influences the probability of achieving strong scores on university admission tests, with a significant positive correlation between family income quintiles and standardized test scores (Gallegos Mardones & Campos-Requena, 2021). Heavy reliance on standardized admission tests, such as the PSU, has generally exacerbated systemic stratification.

In response to segregation and the inequitable outcomes of standardized testing, interventions like PACE (Programa de Acompañamiento y Acceso Efectivo a la Educación Superior) have been introduced. PACE is a preferential admission policy designed to increase access to selective colleges for disadvantaged students that offers guaranteed admission to students graduating in the top 15% of their high school class from underprivileged schools (Santelices et al., 2019). The policy seeks to introduce alternative measures of relative performance that promote greater equity, allowing students with academic capabilities to enter higher education regardless of their socioeconomic situation. PACE students seem likely to persist at strong rates (Santelices et al., 2018), and recent research has shown highly positive labor market effects for PACE participants, particularly women and those who were able to attend the most selective public universities (Carlana et al., 2024). In addition, in Chile, low-income students who obtain admission to the top universities help their children obtain the benefits of more elite status (Barrios Fernández et al., 2024).

The *hukou* system, China's household registration system established in the 1950s, plays a significant role in perpetuating inequality in college admissions (Wu, 2017). This system categorizes individuals based on their birthplace and parents' registration status, creating a distinction between urban and rural residents and tying individuals to specific localities. University admissions in China operate largely through a province-based quota system, where the number of students admitted from each province to a university is predetermined (Cui et al., 2024). Critically, prestigious universities, many located in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, reserve a substantial portion of their admission quotas for students who hold the local *hukou* (Jia & Ericson, 2017). This preferential policy means that students with a Beijing, Shanghai, or Tianjin *hukou* have a strong admissions preference and can often gain entry to top universities with significantly lower *Gaokao* scores compared to students from other provinces. This mechanism, embedded within the *hukou* system, directly limits equal educational opportunities across the country (Qin & Buchanan, 2019). The *hukou* system also affects access to advantageous resources earlier in the educational pipeline, as students' chances of attending keypoint high schools are closely associated with their *hukou* status (Wu et al., 2019). This creates an accumulation of advantages for students from privileged *hukou* backgrounds, perpetuating social inequality through the education system.

Group interviews also played a significant role as one of the key stages in the IFAP selection process, often serving as the final selection stage (Liu et al., 2014). The stated purpose of this stage was to explore students' comprehensive qualities (*zong he su zhi*) and special talents that were not adequately assessed by standardized written tests. Criteria for evaluation in interviews could cover a wide range, including scope of knowledge, logic, reasoning, address, manners, passions, and aspirations, aiming to identify innovative and outstanding students. Empirical research indicated that the group interview stage significantly favored students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Wu et al., 2019). Students with higher parental educational levels and those from urban or megacity origins had a statistically significant advantage in passing the interview, even when controlling for their written examination scores (Liu et al., 2014). This suggested that factors like cultural capital and social origin were strongly linked to interview success. This susceptibility to subjective bias and potential manipulation, highlighted by cases of fraud in China and elsewhere, was a key factor contributing to public doubt and criticism of IFAP, ultimately influencing its replacement by the Strong Base Plan (Cui et al., 2024).

**Conclusion: What Is the Global Future of Holistic Admissions?**

Looking globally, we see some clear yet emerging trends. The first is a fairly rapid diffusion of holistic admissions practices and policies across a wide range of countries. Although the U.S. may have largely been the first mover on many of these practices, it would be very inaccurate to say that other countries are simply adopting the American system. It is more accurate to say that countries are adopting certain American admissions practices that they find useful in their national context; the American system is in a sense a toolkit from which institutions and countries are picking and choosing what they find most useful. The toolkit includes the use of admissions officers, grades, test scores, extracurricular activities, special talents, essays, interviews, recommendations, racial/SES preferences, and high school rank. More holistic pathways choose some limited combination of these options, very often combined with a required score on the national, now somewhat-lower-stakes examination. We are also seeing expansion of holistic practices into graduate admissions as well (Posselt et al., 2025; see also Chapter 6).

There are also many country examples beyond those cited here. Hong Kong's system of holistic review is probably the most similar to the U.S. and U.K. in assessing a wide range of high school evidence (Oleksiyenko, et al., 2015; see Chapter 9). Ireland has a Relative Performance Rank that is a contextualized algorithm as well as experiments like the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Trinity Feasibility Study that provide limited spaces for students from low-SES backgrounds (Geoghegan, 2015; O'Sullivan et al., 2019). In Malaysia, 20% of places are reserved for students with the highest extracurricular achievements (Yunus et al., 2015). Taiwan now has an application-based system that models holistic review while sitting alongside a traditional exam-based system for university admissions (Chiang, 2022b; Liu, 2022; Yu & Su, 2024; see also Chapter 7). Even countries with strong examination-based systems, like India, have individual private colleges that use holistic review, like Ashoka and Krea Universities. This does not even count countries who marry race-based affirmative action policies with centralized examination systems, such as Brazil, India, and South Africa (Aygün & Bó, 2021; Moses, 2010; Sehoole et al., 2024).

Despite all this adoption of holistic practices, there is clearly a backlash to these policies underway in some countries. China eliminated the IFAP policy entirely, in favor of the Strong Base Plan, which barely counts as a holistic admissions pathway (Li & He, 2023). The focus in China now seems to be in reforming the *Gaokao* to become more of an algorithmic system that adds non-cognitive factors, including social responsibility,

physical and mental health, ethics and moral behavior, and artistic achievements (Xiang & Wang, 2024). Korea has progressively eliminated nearly all of the components of its holistic review system by banning consideration of extramural awards, extracurricular competitions, patents, publications, recommendations, and essays, in addition to high school context (Byun & Bastedo, 2023; Kang & Kang, 2024). And in the U.S., categorical racial preferences were eliminated by the Supreme Court in 2023, and the Trump administration has recently issued an interpretation of that case that questions the legality of test-optional policies and certain essay prompts (Trainor, 2025). On the other side of the ledger, at least five states (California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, and Virginia) have banned the use of legacy preferences at both public and private colleges (Murphy, 2025).

As this essay suggests, holistic admissions is gaining support, but it has a number of persistent challenges, many of which can never be truly eliminated. The simplicity of a single, high-stakes examination can never be beat, so transparency and complexity are simply the trade-offs of a holistic admissions policy that have to be accepted. Corruption and stratification are another story, and both must be tackled head-on for holistic admissions policies to maintain their legitimacy. Institutions that seek to maintain the autonomy and discretion that come with holistic admissions must be vigilant in designing policies, practices, and accountability mechanisms that constrain the ability of admissions officers and stakeholders from engaging in unethical behavior. Admission to a highly desirable university will always be an invitation for corruption, and it is the role of law, policy, and social norms to prevent natural human tendencies to try to subvert the system (Bastedo, 2009; Harris, 2022).

With impacts on stratification and inequality, it is important to conduct empirical research on holistic admissions practices and policies across a wide range of global contexts. This research has become robust in the U.S. context (for accounts of recent studies, see Poon & Bastedo, 2022). Nearly every element of the holistic admissions process has robust empirical studies examining its impacts, particularly impacts on underrepresented student populations. These include studies of testing, grades, racial preferences, essays, extracurricular activities, athletics, feeder schools, graduate admissions, criminal history use, and many other essential issues. The U.S. has a longer history with holistic admissions and historically has had stronger data systems to support empirical research, but those advantages are rapidly eroding.

Research on holistic admissions impacts in non-U.S. contexts is emergent, but growing in quantity and sophistication. A number of key research studies have been published in just the last two years, many of

which are reported in this volume. In Chile, interventions to use high school rank have been shown to be strongly related to subsequent student success (Carlana et al., 2024). In Singapore, students admitted through discretionary admissions are more engaged in college and have substantially higher post-college earnings than students admitted through traditional pathways (Kamis et al., 2023; see also chapter 11). In Taiwan, a move toward a holistic admissions track seems to benefit young women, who tend to have higher high school grades (Yu & Su, 2024). We need many more high-quality qualitative and quantitative studies – from ethnographic to experimental – in a wide range of global contexts.

Ultimately, for holistic admissions to have its needed impacts, it must demonstrate a positive impact on student success and equality of opportunity. As a result, a contextualized approach – policies and practices that evaluate applicants within the context of their opportunities – is really the only known means to achieve that goal. In the U.S. context, admissions officers that use contextualized, holistic review are far more likely to admit low-SES and low-income applicants (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017; Bastedo et al., 2022). In addition, performance in high school context has been shown to be significantly correlated with success in college, often as well as standardized tests (Bastedo et al., 2023). If holistic admissions is to meet its full potential on a global scale, policies and practices that account for the varying socioeconomic contexts of applicants are truly needed.

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