

Discussion of “Meritocracy and Its Discontent:
Long-run Effects of Repeated School
Admission Reforms” by Mari Tanaka, Yusuke
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Summary

The authors make use of a series of natural experiments (i.e., a series of regime changes in Japan's school admissions system) to shed light on the impact of the school admissions system on various outcomes, especially:

- (1) The geographic distribution (by birthplace) of students at elite schools
- (2) The geographic distribution (by birthplace) of successful individuals.

Main Findings

Centralized admissions led to:

- (1) Urban residents (by birthplace) crowding out rural residents from the top schools
- (2) Urban residents (by birthplace) crowding out rural residents from the upper echelons of society.

Overall Evaluation

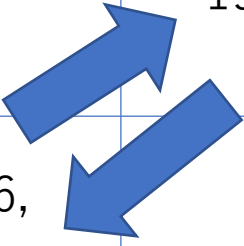
- Excellent paper.
- The authors are to be commended for exploiting an unusual series of natural experiments and for finding, inputting, and analyzing massive amounts of data from multiple sources creatively and competently.
- My main quibble is with how to interpret or frame the results.

Reforms of School Admissions Systems

- The problem with the prewar reforms of the school admissions system is that more than one dimension was changed at the same time:
 - A transition from decentralized to centralized admissions occurred at the same time as a transition from single-application to multiple-application.
 - This makes it impossible to measure the impact of each dimension separately.

Taxonomy of School Admissions Systems

	Centralized admissions	Decentralized admissions
Single-application		1902-07, 1917-18, 1926-27
Multiple-application	1886-1901, 1908-16, 1919-25, 1928-45	



Reforms of School Admissions Systems

- The biggest problem with the centralized admissions system, according to the Ministry of Education, is that high-ability students who missed getting into a top school by one point will not be able to attend any school at all, which is “not only a pity for them, but also a loss for the country.”
- However, this problem will arise regardless of whether or not the admissions system is centralized or decentralized as long as it is a single-application system.

Reforms of School Admissions Systems

- Thus, I suspect that the impact of single-application vs. multiple-application matters much more than the impact of centralized vs. decentralized admissions.
- And if this is true, the authors are, in effect, measuring primarily the impact of transitions between single-application systems and multiple-application systems and vice versa, NOT the impact of transitions between centralized and decentralized systems.


Reforms of School Admissions Systems

- Thus, it would be better if the authors framed their discussion in terms of single-application vs. multiple-application systems rather than in terms of centralized vs. decentralized systems.

A More Recent Natural Experiment

- Better yet, the authors should analyze the impact of a reform in which only one dimension was changed so they can measure the impact of a single dimension.
- One example is the 1987 reform that allowed applicants to apply to two or more national or public universities for the first time. The admissions system was a decentralized system both before as well as after the reform; the only change was the change from single-application to multiple-application.
- Thus, it is possible to accurately estimate the impact of changing from single- to multiple-application.

Taxonomy of College Admissions Systems

	Centralized admissions	Decentralized admissions
Single-application		~1986 
Multiple-application		1987~

A More Recent Natural Experiment

- Until 1986, students could not apply to (for example) both the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University in the same year because their examinations were held on the same day.
- This benefited Kyoto University because students who were smart enough to get into the University of Tokyo but were risk-averse and didn't want to risk not being able to go to college at all chose to apply to Kyoto University instead.

A More Recent Natural Experiment

- Starting in 1987, entrance examinations for national and public universities have been held on 2 (or actually 3) dates (A-nittei, B-nittei, and C-nittei), and the Ministry of Education forced Kyoto University to choose a different date from the University of Tokyo. (However, the Faculty of Law refused to follow this directive.)
- Thus, it became possible for the first time to apply to both the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University in the same year.
- This hurt Kyoto University because many students applied to both universities, and if they were accepted by both, virtually all of them chose to go to the University of Tokyo.

A More Recent Natural Experiment

- Moreover, this reform presumably led to the same phenomenon found by the authors—namely, that high-ability urban residents crowded out rural residents from the top schools.
- But this reform is a much cleaner natural experiment because only one dimension was changed at the time of the reform, so I strongly recommend analyzing the impact of this reform instead of the impact of the prewar reforms.
- Furthermore, you might be able to exploit the difference in strategies between the Faculty of Law and all other Faculties at Kyoto University.

A Proposed Extension of the Paper

- As the authors repeatedly point out, the findings they obtained arise only because “high-ability students are located disproportionately in urban areas.”
- In other words, their findings would not have been observed if there were no regional differences in the distribution of students by ability.
- I would like to know why there are regional differences in the distribution of students by ability (in particular, why there are more high-ability students in urban areas).

Why More High Ability Students in Urban Areas?

- ① Is average IQ higher in urban areas?
- ② Is the average quality of public schools higher in urban areas?
- ③ Are there more high-quality private schools in urban areas?
- ④ Are cram schools or private tutors more available or of better quality in urban areas?
- ⑤ Is the average educational attainment of parents higher in urban areas?
- ⑥ Are there more books in the homes of urban residents?
- ⑦ Is average parental income higher in urban areas?

Policy Implications

- Shedding light on why there are more high-ability students in urban areas will make it possible to develop policies that would attenuate or eliminate regional differences in the distribution of students by ability.
- And if this can be done, the biggest drawback of multiple-application systems can be eliminated, making multiple-application (meritocratic) admissions systems the clearly dominant admissions system.

Final Verdict

An excellent paper.

However,

- (1) It needs to be re-packaged (framed differently)
- (2) A number of interesting and promising extensions are possible.

Thank you very much for your kind
attention.

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