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A Critical Evaluation of Educational Tracking Under the Capability Theory: The Instrumental Rationality of Subject-Based Banding System in Singapore and the Freedom Paradox of the A-level System in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

In contemporary educational reforms, educational differentiation has emerged as a global response to students' diverse learning needs. However, national systems interpret this goal through different logic. This article compares Singapore's Subject-Based Banding (SBB) system with the UK's A-Level system to explore how institutional design achieve the goals of individual and social development. SBB, focused on ability alignment and efficiency, enhances educational options and learning adaptability through dynamic diversion, but potential implicit stratification still constrains equity. A-Level emphasizes interest-driven and free subject selection, expanding students' personalized development space. However, the disparity in socioeconomic resources and the biases in college admissions result in inequitable access to genuine opportunities. Drawing on Sen' s capability theory, the study examines how freedom of opportunity, process, and outcome are expressed within each system and their implications for students' capabilities and social mobility. The analysis reveals that Singapore faces a contradiction between the efficiency dominance of selection and the diverse development of students, whilst the UK perpetuates inequality under the pretext of freedom. This article advocates that educational reform should strike a balance between instrumental rationality and humanism, providing a new perspective for global educational policy research.

Keywords: Comparison of Education System, Educational Reform, Subject-Based Banding, A-Level, International Education

1. Introduction

Educational Differentiation is a key mechanism in the secondary education system as a means of responding to student diversity, and different countries have different focuses in institutional design about it (Eikeland & Ohna, 2022). Singapore's Subject-Based Banding (SBB) system emphasizes ability matching and pursues educational efficiency by dynamically adjusting the difficulty of subjects. The A-level system in the UK allows students to choose 3-4 subjects freely, emphasizing the exploration of interests and reflecting individualized development. The two models respectively illustrate typical efficiency and freedom orientations.

Theoretically, Nussbaum and Sen (1993) define a capability as "a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being." Walker and Unterhalter (2007) further emphasized that capability is manifested as an individual's opportunity and freedom to achieve a valuable life. In educational contexts, this kind of freedom can be divided into three categories: freedom of opportunity (diversity of course selection), freedom of process (autonomy of learning experience), and freedom of outcome (possibility of future development). This article assumes that the core criterion for evaluating the educational diversion system lies in whether it expands students' feasible abilities.

Existing studies have respectively explored the advantages and limitations of the two systems. Tan (2024) argues that Singapore's SBB system exemplifies a pragmatic perfectionism, meeting the diverse learning needs of students. However, the contradiction between fairness and elite management makes it premature to assert whether SBB will benefit low-achieving students in the long run. Abrahams (2024) emphasizes that A-level helps students "Keep the Options Open," but Sheldrake (2016) warns that free subject selection may bring risks and inequality. In short, while both systems increase flexibility, they still have structural limitations.

Therefore, this article will conduct a literature analysis to compare SBB and A-Level, examine the tension between efficiency and freedom, and discuss the profound impacts on students' feasible abilities, social equity, and social mobility.

This article focuses on the following research questions:How do the SBB system in Singapore and the A-Level system in UK, respectively, influence students' freedom of opportunity, process, and result under the capability framework? What are the institutional characteristics of the different capability results produced by efficiency-oriented tracking systems and liberal-oriented tracking systems? How much have these mechanisms actually reduced or perpetuated social inequality?

The study's contributions include: first, re-examining the educational diversion model from the perspective of capability theory; second, exposing the institutional conflicts that exist between humanistic concern and instrumental rationality in different social contexts; and third, offering a fresh comparative viewpoint and improvement suggestions for global education policies.

2. Methodology

2.1. Search Strategy and Data Sources

This study adopts a structured narrative review approach. Google Scholar was used as the primary search platform due to its broad coverage of education policy research and grey literature, while Scopus was consulted as a supplementary database to ensure academic rigour.

For literature related to Subject-Based Banding (SBB) and A-Level reforms, the search period was limited to 2010–2025 in order to capture contemporary policy developments. No temporal

restriction was applied to foundational theoretical works on the capability approach and related conceptual literature.

Search keywords are conducted based on the following three thematic dimensions:

- Group1 (SBB in Singapore): Subject-Based Banding in Singapore, Subject-Based Banding, SBB Singapore, education reform Singapore.
- Group2 (A-Level in UK): A Level England, Sixth form and a level, A Levels, A-level subject selection, linear A-level reform.
- Group3 (Capability): capability approach in education, education inequality, education tracking system.

2.2. Tiered Screening and Eligibility

The literature selection process followed the logic of the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, adapted to the specific requirements of this comparative policy analysis. The screening was conducted through two distinct filters:

Tier 1: Policy Recency and Relevance Filter

To ensure the analysis focused on current and policy-relevant developments, the scope was restricted to literature published after key reform milestones: the 2015 Linear A-level Reform in England(UK) and the Subject-Based Banding (SBB) reform in Singapore which was officially released in 2019. A preliminary screening was conducted on the first 100 records of each core search string, resulting in 98 relevant literature.

Tier 2: Substantive Content and Eligibility Screening

A full-text review was then performed. This study further refined the inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the depth of the discussion.

The Inclusion Criteria required that sources: (i) provided a substantive analysis of the SBB reform in Singaporean secondary education or the A-level system in England; (ii) offered insights into institutional design, tracking mechanisms, or assessment models; and (iii) addressed core themes such as student choice, capability formation, pathway flexibility, or assessment pressure. Sources were excluded if the diversion systems were only mentioned as background information without any substantive targeted analysis or were duplicate versions of previously identified work.

This second tier led to the exclusion of 65 records, and 31 core academic literature was finally included. Notably, due to the recent implementation of Full SBB in Singapore, empirical studies on student outcomes remain limited as the first cohort of students has yet to graduate. To bridge this empirical gap and provide a critical appraisal of official policy narratives and implementation progress of the two tracking systems, 8 additional official policy documents and reports from the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE), the UK Department for Education and the website of UCL were incorporated. This resulted in a final corpus of 39 sources for the comparative synthesis.

2.3. Thematic Coding

To ensure the transparency and replicability of the cross-national comparison, all included literature and policy texts were analyzed using a unified coding framework. To effectively operationalize the Capability Approach within the corpus, evidence from both the UK and Singapore was mapped onto three dimensions of "Substantial Freedom". The core indicator of freedom of opportunity is whether students have a genuine space for educational choices

(including subjects and difficulty levels). The core indicator of freedom of process is whether students can lead the learning pace. The core indicator of freedom of outcome is whether the system restricts the future path of students' development. The specific operational indicators and typical sources of evidence are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification and operationalization of coding

Coding dimension	Operationalization	Typical evidence examples
Freedom of opportunity	Degree of autonomy in subject selection. Restrictions on subject combinations. Flexibility in selecting cross-difficulty modules. Identification of "hidden" subject barriers or prerequisites.	SBB subject selection and streaming rules. A-level subject choice regulations. Russell Group universities subject requirements
Freedom of process	Extent to which assessment models (linear vs. tiered) allow students to lead their learning pace Opportunities to adjust learning progress and pathways Fixed or dynamical adjustment on pedagogical content	SBB dynamic assessment models UK A-level curriculum core and objectives Ofqual evaluations on linear examinations
Freedom of outcome	Reversibility of streaming/tracking decisions. Direct impact of secondary streaming on future major/career choices. Alignment between tracking mechanisms and HE admission Cultivation of transferable skills	Singapore MOE reports on mixed-stream materials. UK Higher Education Access Research Curricula for Critical Thinking and transferable skills.

3. Singapore's SBB System: Institutional Framework for Primacy of Efficiency

3.1 Institutional Design: Instrumental Rationality for Competency Matching

Policymakers in Singapore have long regarded human capital as a major resource (Ho & Lee, 2022). Therefore, Singapore's education diversion policy has always been ability-oriented, fully embodying the instrumental rationality of maximizing efficiency. Since the 1980s, students in secondary education have been classified into the Express Stream, the Normal Academic Stream (‘NA’), and the Normal Technical Stream (‘NT’) based on their primary school departure examination results in order to achieve individualized teaching (Heng, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2024). Students were fixed in the four-year (express stream) or five-year (NA) academic track and technology (NT) tracks at an early age, labeled with invisible social tags (Chua & Seah, 2022). Children's ability development and physical and mental health in Singapore have suffered greatly as a result of strong academic elitism and an examination culture. It was essential to take the education reform and adjustment.

To address this problem, Singapore piloted the Subject-Based Banding (SBB) system in 2014 and fully implemented it in 2024 (Ho & Lee, 2022). There are three major features of SBB. Firstly, implement subject stratification (G1-G3), allowing students to choose different difficulty levels in different subjects for combined study. Secondly, it emphasizes diagnostic assessment and allows students to flexibly adjust the level of the subject based on their learning performance (Heng, 2022). Thirdly, it pays more attention to career orientation and provides learning paths related to future development. For instance, a student who performs poorly on

the Primary School Leaving Examination but has exceptional English talent can study English at G3 along with other subjects at G1 or G2. He can also choose to change the mathematics from G2 to G3 if he performs better on assessments.

In recent years, Singapore has assigned 28 pilot schools to lead and support the full implementation of SBB after 2024(Ministry of Education, 2019). In these pilot institutions, students spend approximately two-thirds of their curriculum time on subjects based on their individual levels, while the remaining one-third is spent with their form classes on common curriculum subjects. These subjects are Art, Character and Citizenship Education, Design and Technology, Food and Consumer Education, Music, and Physical Education (Ministry of Education, 2019). The Ministry of Education (2019) pointed out that this kind of shared learning experience creates a valuable environment for students, allowing them to communicate with each other, build meaningful friendships, and appreciate different viewpoints. Furthermore, this approach serves to mitigate the risk of "labeling" that often arises in traditional academic streaming.

3.2 Evaluation of SBB

SBB provides more freedom of development for students. From the freedom of opportunity, by using precise diversion, it avoids "one-size-fits-all" teaching through precise diversion and customizes courses. It grants middle school students the flexibility and choice to study specific subjects at different levels, enabling more students to benefit from a wide range of course combinations and perform at their best (Tan, 2024). An individual can be stretched in one subject with peers who also have a better aptitude and interest in that while studying for another subject that merely covers the foundations (Ho & Lee, 2022). Students' capabilities to delve extensively into their preferred subjects have been secured, effectively eliminating the constraints on their future development space imposed by earlier academic failures. From the freedom of process, students' learning flexibility is completely considered by the SBB method, which gives them the freedom to choose subjects that are more or less challenging depending on their learning conditions.

Additionally, the minister of Education stated that compared with traditional schools, students in pilot schools have a broader and more diverse circle of friends and hold a more positive attitude towards their peers from different backgrounds (Ministry of Education, 2025). Teachers and school administrators have also noted that students feel more in control of their studies and have a greater motivation to overcome difficulties, which is in line with the idea promoted by capability theory. According to Peppin Vaughan (2015), schools should not only help students develop their individual learning skills, but also provide them with opportunities to develop other skills and abilities such as exploring tolerance, understanding, empathy. He highlights that capability also includes students understanding the lives of different socio-economic groups and how various elements of society work together, as well as experiencing the challenges and benefits of democratic systems on a micro level. The freedom of outcome is also guaranteed, which is attributed to the all-round development of education, providing learners with different interests and levels with the opportunity to succeed at school. According to Jang and Wong (2024), this represents a shift toward an inclusive meritocracy system. It also fits to the ultimate purpose of competency theory, which is to enable diverse learners to have the freedom to choose a lifestyle that they value (Walker, 2011).

However, the system's advantages do not imply that it is free of practical restrictions. First, in an interview with a school that piloted the implementation of SBB in advance, the huge combination of subjects places a great deal of strain on the curriculum arrangement and daily management of schools, which may make it challenging to meet the demands of various groups

(Tan, 2024). One clear issue is the course process. However, most of the stakeholders interviewed said that the benefits outweigh the challenges, whether it is the learning atmosphere of the school, or the students' attendance, behavior and discipline problems, have all improved significantly compared to before. Besides, it is unclear whether the subject grades of G1, G2, and G3 will create new "implicit stratification" or "subject discrimination" despite the official removal of the stream names, particularly in light of conventional societal conceptions. Hardy et al.(2025) and Lim & Tan (2018) jointly emphasized that Singapore's unique meritocratic testing culture has led to long-standing unhealthy competition between students and schools. Due to ingrained meritocracy, some top schools may change from encouraging a blended study environment to schools that only admit G3 students with better academic ability. Eventually, students with varying intellectual aptitudes will congregate at several schools, intensifying polarization and reducing diversity (Heng, 2022).

4. The UK's A-level System: Structural Constraints in the Name of Freedom

4.1 Institutional Design: Humanism of Interest Exploration

The General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-level) is the main qualification examination for students in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland after completing secondary education (aged 16-18), and it is also the core basis for university admissions. This approach emphasises autonomy and specialisation: there is no compulsory subject element and A levels can be taken in any combination desired to reflect the interests (or intended progression) of the student(Jo-Anne Baird et al., 2018). Students typically select 3 to 4 subjects for in-depth study, breaking the traditional boundaries between liberal arts and science. A-levels offer a diverse curriculum of over 40 subjects, encompassing Mathematics, Natural Sciences (e.g., Biology, Physics, Chemistry), Humanities (e.g., English Literature, Geography, History), Applied Sciences (e.g., Computer Science, Economics, Law, Business Studies), and Creative Arts (e.g., Design, Dance, Music)(Department for Education, 2014). This extensive range of options provides students with a broad platform to explore their personal interests and align their educational pathways with their future career aspirations (Davies & Ercolani, 2018).

Regarding assessment models, modular assessments have increasingly given way to linear tests in the UK's A-level exams since the 2015 reform (Ofqual, 2015). Generally, apart from the differences in regulatory authorities, the course selection and assessment models for A-Levels in England, Northern Ireland and Wales are similar. A key distinction lies in Wales, where the AS-level(Advanced Subsidiary level) qualification is kept 40% contributing to the overall A-level grade. In contrast, in England and Northern Ireland, students undergo a terminal assessment at the end of the two-year course that covers the entire A-level syllabus(Ofqual, 2019).

4.2 Evaluation of A-level

The A-Level system design offers students a relatively open learning path and brings several significant advantages. First of all, students' personal development paths are supported by the wide and comprehensive topic range that is no longer limited to traditional foundational courses. A-Level provides students with a high level of procedural freedom through flexible course selections, which is consistent with the humanistic educational philosophy. Students can select fields in which they enjoy and excel, which helps to increase their intrinsic motivation for learning, build a concentrated academic enthusiasm, and foster critical thinking. In addition, the vast range of choices at A-Levels also offers students the opportunity to explore.

For instance, in the longitudinal interviews conducted by Archer et al.(2022) with 18

participants to understand their development trajectories regarding the discipline of chemistry, it was found that although choices are still influenced by the complex generation and operation mechanisms of interactions, students typically choose their development trajectories during the learning process. Additionally, some non-traditional subjects highlight how crucial the development of students' critical thinking skills is to the A-Level system. For example, a subject named Global Perspectives and Research, enable students to conduct critical analysis and reflection on global issues. It not only strengthens transferable skills, including research ability, critical thinking ability and communication ability, but also helps students enhance their civic awareness and sense of responsibility, expanding the social value of education (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2025; Davies & Ercolani, 2018). In comparative education, apart from focusing on whether the institution truly expands individual freedom and choice, the capability approach holds that education should also focus on "valuable functional combinations"(Jules et al., 2021). The free course selection arrangement and the focus on students' transferable skills in many courses in A-Level prove that it expands students' capabilities and promotes their freedom of development.

However, in reality, this "procedural freedom" is heavily regulated by university admissions procedures, social class, and unequal distribution of educational resources, leading to notable differences in students' "capabilities"—that is, the opportunities and choices they actually enjoy. "Freedom of choice" is actually a complex process that is impacted by multiple structural factors. On one hand, although there are numerous nationally certified courses, the choice for students aspiring to enter elite universities has been substantially compressed. This is driven by the admission requirements of the Russell Group and other elite institutions, which specify preferred or mandatory A-level subjects for particular degree programmes (Miller et al., 2012). For instance, according to University College London (2025a), applicants are generally expected to offer at least two subjects from UCL's list of preferred A level subjects. Moreover, specific majors also have special requirements, like the UCL Civil Engineering BEng requires applicants to achieve a grade A in both A-level Mathematics and Physics(University College London, 2025b). Although it can be understood as mechanisms to ensure academic alignment and maintain disciplinary standards, students' learning decisions at A-level will be greatly influenced by these regulations (Goldstone, 2022).

Additionally, students in private schools are benefit from a greater variety of subjects, smaller class numbers, and more detailed college counselling due to the unequal distribution of resources, whereas children in lower socioeconomic groups do not (Abrahams, 2018). The elite class has achieved "maximum freedom" through resources and cultural capital, while the "capability" of the disadvantaged groups has been relatively narrow from the start. Murphy and Wyness (2020) reveal a socio-economic bias in the UK’s predicted grade system: disadvantaged students are more frequently under-predicted relative to their actual achievement. This disparity raises the functional admission barriers for these students, limiting their access to prestigious higher education pathways and their "freedom of outcome".

5. Comparative Analysis: The Dialectical Relationship between Efficiency and Freedom

5.1 The Impact on Students' Capability Development

The influence of the education system on students' capabilities is complex and profound. According to Sen and Nussbaum's capability theory, education should go beyond merely imparting knowledge. It should significantly expand an individual's substantive freedom, and opportunity to achieve a valuable state of existence and function, by its macro design considerations. According to the table, in terms of freedom of opportunity, SBB offers a reasonably precise but limited decision space through ability stratification, whereas A-level provides a wide range of subject selection options, but early specialisation may limit students' future chances (Bathmaker et al., 2013). But there's also research shows that subject-focused upper secondary curricula can strengthen students' preparedness for university-level study by promoting sustained engagement within a limited number of disciplines (Money et al., 2019).In terms of process freedom, although SBB allows for some flexibility in the learning process, Singapore prioritises exam-oriented standards, depriving children of many opportunities for overall development.

Table 2. Comparative features of Capability Dimensions in Singapore's Subject-Based Banding (SBB) system and UK's Post-2015 A-Level System

Capability Dimension	Singapore's SBB system	UK's A-Level system
Opportunity	Subject-level differentiation with constrained choice	Broad subject choice with early specialisation
Process	Flexible adjustment within exam-oriented framework	High autonomy shaped by admissions expectations
Outcome	Efficiency-driven pathways with stratification risks	Unequal capability outcomes linked to social class

Note: This table is compiled by the author based on official policy documents (MOE Singapore, 2019–2025; Department for Education UK, 2015–2025), university admissions guidance, and peer-reviewed literature identified in the structured review. The three analytical dimensions (opportunity, process, and outcome) are derived from the capability approach framework applied in this study. The descriptions summarise institutional design features rather than empirical outcome measurements.

As one of the countries in the world that places the greatest emphasis on critical thinking, the UK has incorporated more identity building and the cultivation of academic enthusiasm into its A-level assessment criteria, expanding the potential of students' capabilities (Bhatt, 2022). In terms of the outcome, both Singapore's efficient matching and the UK's humanism emphasize autonomous provide students with the autonomy to select their future trajectories and the potential for success in their chosen paths, while the opportunities may not be entirely equitable at the individual level. This study argues that the efficiency-driven logic of SBB, through dynamic alignment between subject differentiation and instructional pacing, may strengthen foundational knowledge and support capability formation. By contrast, the A-Level system offers broader scope for self-directed academic specialisation and capability progression. The two tracking models thus represent different moral priorities rather than just superior or inferior designs.

Nevertheless, the expansion or restriction of capabilities cannot be attributed solely to formal tracking design. In England, institutional heterogeneity like the differences between independent(private) schools, grammar schools, and comprehensive schools may significantly influence access to subject breadth and academic guidance. Similarly, while SBB has been standardized across Singapore since 2024, disparities in institutional resources and school

reputations may shape how flexibility is enacted in practice. Ultimately, socio-economic background remains a structural factor influencing students' ability to convert formal opportunities into substantive freedoms.

5.2 The Impact on Social Structure and Social Mobility

In addition to its impact on individual development, the education diversion system also profoundly affects social structure and class mobility. Although the diversion concepts of the two countries have their own tendencies, common evidence indicates that they both find it difficult to avoid the social problem of educational inequality.

Policymakers in Singapore have traditionally considered human capital to be their primary resource. Hence, decisions over educational policies are frequently entwined with economic development and nation-building (Ho & Lee, 2022). This instrumental rationality viewpoint links education and economic progress. Meanwhile, with the influence of Eastern collectivist culture, families generally see their children's education as the key to social status competitiveness. SBB was originally designed to alleviate the excessive competition caused by early diversion, but research has found that its subject classification still maintains the separation between elite schools and non-elite schools (Tan, 2024). For example, the societal bias against G1 and the pursuit of G3 level not only adds to the strain on the family but may also result in a reallocation of educational resources across various socioeconomic groups. This may be strongly tied to Singapore's long-standing elitist and efficiency-focused educational ideology. Therefore, it will be necessary to wait for several evaluation rounds following its official implementation before determining if SBB can resolve the initial educational competitiveness issue.

In the UK, although the A-Level system emphasizes personalization and interest orientation, social class differences and the gap between public and private education have weakened this ideal. The elite class is more likely to transform the freedom granted by the system into competitive advantages by virtue of resources and cultural capital, while the educational opportunities of the disadvantaged groups are relatively limited, and social mobility is consequently inhibited (Abrahams, 2018). Besides, Newton (2025) pointed that students' subject selection is not only driven by personal interests but also deeply influenced by social and economic conditions and career expectations. Students from lower socioeconomic classes are more likely to take technology or business since they are more employment-oriented, while the wealthy class is more inclined to select STEM or the humanities in order to reproduce wealth or just to follow their interests (Codiroli Mcmaster, 2017). As a result, freedom is actually limited by a number of factors, which further highlights the inequality of education and the division of social classes in the UK.

The similarity between the two countries lies in the fact that, although their systems claim to provide greater freedom, the underlying cultural values and social structures may, through institutional arrangements, transform the cultural capital of the privileged classes into institutional advantages, thereby effectuating 'cultural reproduction.' Such a form of 'formal freedom' in fact conceals 'substantive injustice,' particularly against the backdrop of unequal resource distribution.

5.3 Suggestions for the Future Education Systems of the Two Countries and Their International Promotion

To enhance the role of education in expanding the capability of students, Singapore and the UK still need to strengthen the exploration of the efficiency and freedom of the educational

tracking system. As Nussbaum and Sen (1993) argues, true educational equity lies not merely in access, but in the real freedom to achieve valued functions.

The primary concern of Singapore's SBB system is that its utilitarian logic may result in the neglect of individual differences in development and the problem of social labelling (Chua & Seah, 2022). In the short term (1 to 3 years), the Ministry of Education can adjust the university admission guidelines and evaluation standards to encourage colleges and universities to recognize the comprehensive abilities reflected in cross-level course combinations during the admission process, rather than merely taking G3 scores as the main screening criterion. Universities and secondary schools should jointly release more explicit examples of course combinations and explanations of development paths to reduce the solidification of expectations caused by labeling. In addition, Singapore can draw on the experience of the UK and have the Ministry of Education coordinate to gradually expand practical courses such as digital media, robotics, business management, and creative arts in the secondary school stage, enabling students to explore their interests based on real experiences rather than single test scores. In the long term (3 to 10 years), a continuous policy evaluation and accountability mechanism should be established. The Ministry of Education should regularly release stratified data reports on the implementation effect of SBB, monitor the course flow and further education results of different social groups, to ensure a dynamic balance between the efficiency of the system and the goal of fairness.

The core challenge of the A-Level system in the UK lies in the hidden inequality beneath its "freedom" facade and the risk of premature specialization (Sullivan et al., 2010). In the short term (1 to 3 years), the government should increase its investment in public schools' resources for college entrance guidance and establish a standardized subject selection consultation framework, clearly defining the responsibilities of schools and parents in the decision-making process. Universities should further disclose the hierarchical differences in the requirements for admission subjects, distinguish between "required", "recommended" and "open background" categories, and enhance the transparency of information. This can enable students to have more grounds when making free choices, reduce "safe but insincere" choices, and avoid making decisions that are not suitable for their own development due to information asymmetry (Boliver, 2013). In the short term, policymakers need to assess the interaction mechanism between the hierarchical structure of disciplines and social stratification, explore the establishment of interdisciplinary admission channels and delayed professionalization paths, and prevent "formal freedom" from evolving into structural solidification through continuous monitoring of social class data and accountability mechanisms.

These experiences not only offer insights into the domestic system but also serve as models for educational reforms around the world to nurture resilient broader learning environment, which enable students to adapt to various tasks and environments and take advantage of opportunities to reach their individual capabilities. Although they still have flaws, both aforementioned nations have demonstrated a tendency to weaken their high-stakes exams, whereas other countries—particularly China and India—continue to use these exams to decide students' fates, putting a great deal of pressure on them and placing restrictions on a single evaluation criterion. To lessen the negative effects of "teaching/learning for exams" and examine students' abilities more comprehensively, reforms can use more formative assessments in the future, such as coursework, project assessments, and simple individual research. Furthermore, the experiences of the two countries show that the goal of the education system should focus on the expansion of students' capabilities, rather than "maximizing efficiency" or "formal freedom." Policymakers should always consider whether the curriculum and institutional design increase students' substantive freedom. This means that education should not only educate students with knowledge and skills, but also foster critical thinking, creativity, empathy, and the ability to

make reasonable decisions, allowing them to choose and achieve a valuable life path on their own.

6. Conclusion

This study indicates that the tension between efficiency and freedom constitutes the core contradiction of the educational tracking system. Singapore's Subject-Based Banding system has improved the diversity of student development and option freedom within the efficiency logic. Its free space, however, still depends on the evolution of societal conceptions and educational support; otherwise, it is likely to develop into new hidden inequalities. The A-Level system in the UK centers on freedom and interest, expanding the feasible abilities of some students. However, its "humanistic" ideal is more accurately portrayed in reality as "elite freedom" than "universal freedom" because of the impact of social class distinctions and the enrolment mechanism. Both systems have demonstrated the conflict between efficiency and fairness, as well as between humanistic care and instrumental rationality in different social contexts.

According to the capability theory, both nations' systems have increased students' freedom of choice in terms of procedure, outcome, and opportunity. However, this expansion is not equal, as it is influenced by social structure and resource distribution. Future institutional reforms need to further consider how to deconstruct the mechanisms of cultural reproduction that operate beneath the veneer of “formal freedom” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). It is essential to narrow the disparities among students of different social strata in exercising ‘free choice’ while ensuring efficiency. Only in this way can the “freedom” be prevented from degenerating into a constraint on individual development and an instrument of social reproduction and stratification, truly realizing education equity.

The main contribution of this article lies in the following: First, it introduces the theory of capability into the comparative study of educational tracking, revealing the differentiated impact of institutional design on students' capabilities; Secondly, through case studies of Singapore and the United Kingdom, it provides references for the education policies of other countries. However, the limitation of this study lies in the fact that the data basis mainly relies on literature review, and the SBB in Singapore is still in the early stage of implementation, with its long-term impact yet to be empirically proven. Future research can focus on the changes in social mobility following the full implementation of SBB in Singapore in 2024. Comparing the continuity of the capability of students in the higher education stage between the two countries is also a long-term topic.

In conclusion, the fundamental goal of education should be to expand students' substantive freedom to achieve a valuable life. Therefore, the design of the educational system should avoid falling into the single extreme of efficiency and freedom, but rather seek a balance between instrumental rationality and humanistic care.

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