

Education in China

China has a total educational population of over 320 million, a quarter of the total population, including 190 million students taught by 7 million teachers in over 700,000 basic education schools, and 3 million full time undergraduates in 1,050 institutions of higher education. The best schools in eastern urban centres could hold their own by any international test. Poor inland provinces to the West will be characterised by dilapidated, under-equipped village schools with under-qualified teachers which will not cater for all the catchment area's children. The country's premier universities have facilities of which any university would be proud - at the bottom end of the market Higher Education (HE) institutions perform at well below tertiary standards. There is a 65% dropout rate between primary and lower secondary (Junior Middle School) education, and a further 80% do not make it from junior to senior secondary (Senior Middle School); by the higher education stage the participation rate drops to less than 4% of the age cohort (compared to Indonesia's 10%, Thailand's 20%, Taiwan's 40% and Korea's 50%).

A deeply rooted pedagogical tradition is based on rote-learning and emulation of approved information and role-models, with continuing political education in Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong thought. Growing public dissatisfaction with standards of provision in the state system, especially amongst the newly-affluent urban elite, means that growing numbers of parents are willing to spend many times the average annual income on educating their children in the rapidly emerging non-state sector where 50,000 non-government schools cater for 16 million students. Non-government funded education is increasing. Expensive, fee-paying schools in the large cities are attracting the urban elite, who are prepared to invest substantially to ensure that their (usually) only child gets the best possible start in the increasingly competitive job market. At the other end of the scale, community schools in poor areas, funded by the community and supported by NGOs address some of the problems of providing access to the hard-to-reach.

There is now a comprehensive set of educational laws in China which govern the provision of education, the management structure and roles and responsibilities at each level. There has been an increasing decentralisation of decision making and financing arrangements from the central government to the provincial and lower organs of government. Basic education is generally managed at the county (i.e. sub-municipal) and municipal levels, as is some types of vocational education and adult education. Tertiary education, including tertiary vocational education is increasingly managed at the provincial level. Central government retains an overall policy and guidance role. Aside from the Ministry of Education, there are still institutes of higher education which are managed through line ministries, eg Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Justice, etc. While decentralisation is broadly speaking a good thing, bringing decision making closer to the point of delivery, it also highlights discrepancies in provision, with richer provinces able to provide more resources to education than poor ones. This can initiate a vicious circle where poorer provinces have poorer educated workforces therefore find it hard to attract investment, which keeps them poor. The central government is aware of this and is actively undertaking a shift of central government resources from the richer eastern seaboard to the central and western provinces.

The education system begins at three years old, with kindergarten for three years, primary education for six years, junior secondary for three, senior secondary for three (or vocational training), followed by tertiary education. Kindergartens are available for children in most big cities, and, decreasingly, as part of the provision in old style

state owned enterprises. There are increasing numbers of private kindergartens in the larger cities. Compulsory education begins at 6 years and should be for 9 years, to age 15, the end of junior secondary education. China aims to have 100% completion of 9 years basic education by 2010. While some provinces and municipalities already have 100% enrolment in basic education, the poorer western provinces, particularly those with significant numbers of minorities have a comparatively poor record of enrolment, and particularly retention, beyond the first few years of education.

Senior secondary education is streamed into general education (preparing for university) and vocational education. There is increasing priority being given to the area of vocational education in China, and a number of innovations and reforms are being initiated. There are over 1,100 universities or institutes of higher education in China. Under the "Project 211" programme these are categorised at three levels: local/municipal; national; and world class. The top ranking universities receive additional central funding. There is increasing concern with the issue of quality assurance in Higher Education, and in the area of accountability, particularly to justify additional funding. With increasing devolution of decision making to universities, there is an acknowledged need to focus on strategic management of institutions, and the skills that requires. There is also a drive to develop ways of addressing the target of 15% of school leavers moving to higher education by 2010, including distance and e-learning.

The Chinese education system and Chinese citizens are extremely examinations and results-focused. Examinations are taken at the end of junior secondary school, and at the end of senior secondary school. There is also a separate university entrance examination. Examinations are currently the central measure of 'quality' and success in examinations is a prerequisite for entry to senior secondary schools (or vocational schools) and particularly for university entrance. Given the resource restraints (higher education provision in China can cater for about 5% of the age group, and the demand is between 15-20%), the competition is understandable. However, the relentless examination focus in schools means that the purpose of education is seen as passing the examination, not the developing of knowledge, skills and understanding for their own sake, or for the broader development of the 'whole person'. This has recently been acknowledged by the Ministry of Education, and a new initiative to promote 'quality oriented' education as opposed to 'examination oriented' education is underway. This new focus will involve a fundamental attitudinal change, not only among teachers and students, but among parents and society as a whole, which will be a slow process.

China can boast a significant record of achievements over the 55 years of the People's Republic:

⇒ an increase in educational attainment at all levels:

- illiteracy has dropped from 18.5% in 1978 to 5.5% in 1998;
- net enrolment at the primary level has increased from 20% in 1949 to 99% in 1997;
- 80% of townships and 40% of villages have set up adult/continuing education facilities;
- HE enrolments have grown from 900,000 in 1978 to 11 million in 2003.

⇒ widespread and continuing system reforms:

- decentralisation of educational management;
- changing preferences for secondary level from general to vocational streams so that the latter now accounts for 56% of enrolments;
- increasing autonomy for HE institutions;
- student fees for higher education;

- the dissolution of the 'guaranteed' job for graduates.
- ⇒ significant improvements in educational infrastructure, facilities and teacher development
- increased government funding for education, particularly directed at the poorer provinces;
 - greater non-government funding of education by parents and communities;
 - the development of a national distance learning system through 1000 local radio and television stations nation-wide;
 - improved teacher recruitment, training and remuneration.

Even with this impressive set of achievements, there remain significant issues in education in China. Most notable of these is the disparity in the quality of provision across the country. Even within cities, there is considerable pressure to get into what are perceived to be the 'best' schools. Parents are increasingly expected to contribute to the costs of materials and tuition, even in state schools. The quality of school buildings, of teaching and learning materials, and of teachers varies very widely across China.

The central Ministry of Education formulates policy for devolved implementation at provincial and municipal levels, and in January 1999 the State Council approved an action plan for the revitalisation of education for the 21st century. The Government's key policies and strategies to 2015 include education as one of the key drivers of reform and development. China aims to establish an integrated lifelong learning system (with strong emphasis on information/education technology) which uses quality education to develop China into a knowledge society for the 21st century. This will involve considerably more integration, particularly across the academic/vocational divide, than there is at present. This will involve reforming the curriculum and improving the quality of the teaching force. In addition to increasing access to higher education, there is a strong policy imperative to increase the links between higher education and the world of work, and to develop very strong links between research and industry through incubator schemes and the development of science and technology parks. Through the 211 project there is a strong drive to develop selected HE/research institutes to world-class standards. China plans to leapfrog outmoded technologies and use satellite and PC-based distance education techniques to enhance access, train teachers, and support the introduction of new learner-driven methods encouraging creative thinking and problem solving.

China places a high priority on the development of international links and collaboration at the higher and middle education levels. However, it maintains some restrictions on international involvement in basic education. It plans to persevere in the socialist orientation of education provision at all levels.