



Changes to China's continuing education

(Information as at January 2024)

Continuing education has been part of China's formal higher education since the early 1950s and has served as a means of offering alternative educational pathways to individuals unable to commit to full-time higher education programs.

In 2022, China initiated reform of its continuing education sector intended to align it with the evolving needs of the workforce, as well as strengthening the regulatory framework and supervision of the sector to enhance education quality. However, while digital transformation is high on the agenda, programs that are delivered entirely online may not be able to continue going forward.

Continuing education

Higher education in China is separated into “**regular higher education**” and various forms of continuing education. Regular higher education refers to the traditional pathway whereby students complete higher education programs through full-time study. **Continuing education**, which accounts for roughly one quarter of higher education capacityⁱ, is various forms of full-time or part-time education, including online educationⁱⁱ, adult higher education, higher education self-study test, and open education. Continuing education is usually offered by regular Chinese higher education institutions to cater for groups of people who require skills uplift but are not in the position to take on full-time regular higher education.

It should be noted that graduates from the regular stream usually receive two credentials upon graduation – a certificate of graduation (The award) and a degree certificate (The degree), but those from the continuing education stream usually only receive the degree certificateⁱⁱⁱ, with markings on the certificate stating the form of continuing education program.

Some employers require that graduates provide both award and degree qualifications from full-time programs when seeking employment, and this has caused a long-held mindset that continuing education qualifications are second choice to a regular higher education qualification. This is usually not a concern for working professionals who are seeking further education to enhance their skills or qualifications to advance in their careers.

The 2022 reform

In 2022, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) issued an implementation plan for the reform of continuing education courses that issue a qualification on completion.^{iv} The reform will see the

previously separated forms of continuing education merge to become “**Adult continuing education**” starting from 2025.

This reform aims to provide clear and rigorous standards and quality assurance mechanisms for continuing education. The change aligns with broader educational trends in China, shifting the focus from scale expansion to standardised, high-quality development.

Higher education institutions are being encouraged to offer courses in their areas of expertise where they align with the country’s workforce needs. State-affiliated high performing institutions are welcome to design small-scale courses in specialised areas, while higher vocational institutions are encouraged to design and offer courses in key manufacturing industries, modern servicing industries, and areas in need for rural development.

The reform highlights the importance of promoting adequate use of online education by utilising digital technology. This includes asking higher education institutions and education agencies to design high-quality educational courses and resources to share and potentially trade in a market-driven approach.

Additionally, the reform will explore the potential of offering Chinese qualifications in continuing education abroad, aimed at enhancing China’s global standing in the sector.

Online education in continuing education

Online learning has been integrated into continuing education since the late 1990s as part of a pilot initiative implemented at 68 Chinese higher education institutions. In 2022, China enrolled 17.35 million students in higher diploma and undergraduate courses, of which 2.8 million were enrolled in the “online education” stream.^v

This latest reform marks the formal conclusion of the pilot phase for online education, as it becomes an integral part of the comprehensive reform of adult continuing education.

However, according to the reform agenda, face-to-face learning (including practical instruction components) should in theory account for at least 20% of the total teaching hours of the program. Institutions are encouraged to design interactive activities to engage students and enhance their learning experience.

Based on this change, programs delivered entirely online, which was feasible during the pilot phase, may not be able to continue under this arrangement in the future, and programs will likely need to include blended online and face-to-face delivery.

Conclusion

China’s latest reform for continuing education is part of the country’s comprehensive higher education reform. The plan marks a significant change from the previously fragmented paths within the sector, streamlining them into a unified and cohesive system. The reform places emphasis on standard setting and quality assurance, which aligns with the broader trends in China’s education reform of steadily shifting from a quantity to quality focus.

For further enquiries, please contact the [Education and Research Section](#) of the Australian Embassy in Beijing.



ⁱ Ou, Mei, and Xu Cheng. “高等学历继续教育改革将带来什么(What Will the Reform of Higher Education Continuing Education Bring?).” Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 18 Aug. 2022, www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/202208/t20220818_653608.html

ⁱⁱ Sometimes referred to as web-based education.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some programs allow students to apply for an award certificate by passing a certain grade and/or submitting a thesis paper, but this is not the majority.

^{iv} 教育部关于推进新时代普通高等学校学历继续教育改革的实施意见 (the Ministry of Education’s Implementation Opinions on Promoting the Reform of Academic Continuing Education in General Colleges and Universities in the New Era). Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 17 Aug. 2022, www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A07/moe_743/202208/t20220816_653132.html

^v “2022 年全国教育事业发展统计公报 (2022 National Education Development Statistics).” Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 5 July 2023, www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_fztjgb/202307/t20230705_1067278.html

