



Updates on China's Gaokao - National College Entrance Exam

(Information as at December 2024)

China's National College Entrance Exam, also known as *Gaokao*, is a set of tests taken by year 12 students in Mainland China. The Gaokao score determines whether or not students will be able to study in their preferred university or college in China and it is also recognised by many overseas Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Gaokao was first launched in 1952 and has undergone several reforms with the latest round initiated in 2014.

This policy update provides insights into the relationship between the Hukou system (namely China's Household registration system) and Gaokao as well as an update on Gaokao reform progress.

Gaokao and Hukou system

More than 12.9 million¹ Chinese students sat Gaokao in 2023 for placement into higher education. The test is administered at the provincial level and higher education institutions (HEI) accept students based on pre-determined quotas for each province/municipality. The quota for each institution is calculated using a complicated system that involves consideration of the population and development level of each province/municipality, and the location of the institution. To gain a better understanding of how HEI placements and entry scores are determined, it is useful to know the unique relationship between Gaokao and China's household registration system, also known as Hukou.

HEI placements will in theory give priority to students with Hukou of the same location as the institution. This means, students with Hukou from a province or municipality with more universities will usually have a better chance of getting into those universities, and often with lower Gaokao scores compared to students from outside the province. To reduce the disparity caused by unbalanced regional development, regions in western China with lower levels of development and limited access to quality education resources, such as Qinghai, Tibet and Xinjiang, have been given more central-government support on Gaokao scoring and enrolment quotas. But students from provinces in the mid-east regions with large populations and fewer higher education resources, such as Hebei, Henan, Shandong and Anhui, are still faced with fierce competition in Gaokao and for entry into higher education.

Using the second round of Double First-Class (DFC) universities² as a reference for the top 140 universities in China (see Table 1), Beijing had only 65,000 Gaokao test takers in 2023, but it is home to 34 of the top universities in China, or a quarter of the DFC universities. In contrast, Hebei, the

province with the seventh-most Gaokao exam takers in China and approximately eight times the number of test takers in Beijing, has no top colleges and universities. Shandong and Henan share a similar challenge. This means a student in Hebei, Shandong or Henan needs to score much higher on Gaokao to have a chance of being accepted into one of the top universities in Beijing than a student with Beijing Hukou.

Therefore, "Gaokao migration" has been adopted by some families to gain an advantage in the highly competitive higher education placement process. "Gaokao migration" refers to the phenomenon of families and students relocating their Hukou from a highly competitive province (ie. one with a larger number of test takers) to a less competitive province in order to obtain an advantage in Gaokao. The Chinese government has committed to crack-down on practices such as 'Gaokao migration' as part of ensuring fairness in Gaokao, particularly during the latest Gaokao reform.

This disparity in access to higher education places may also prompt some students from densely populated cities with lesser higher education institutions to consider alternatives for senior secondary school such as studying abroad.

Gaokao reform progress

The latest round of Gaokao reform was piloted in Shanghai and Zhejiang in 2014, and has been gradually rolled out across the country by groups of provinces since (*refer to Table 2*). According to the State Council's Opinions on Gaokao reform issued in 2014³, the reform aims to reduce disparity, promote all-round development of students, and strengthen the talent selection process.

Under the reform, students are given more flexibility with subject choice. Besides the three compulsory subjects (Chinese, Mathematics, Foreign Languages), they no longer have to choose between being streamed into either "science based" or "liberal arts based" exams – instead, they are able to select three electives from the subjects of their choice that match their career prospects, from both the science and liberal art group subjects (Physics, History, Biology, Chemistry, Politics and Geography⁴). This is known as the "3+3" model.

In 2018, the third group of provinces initiated their Gaokao reform and introduced another testing model known as the "3+1+2" model. This model sees students, in addition to taking the three compulsory subjects (the "3"), choose between either Physics or History (the "1"), and then another two electives from Biology, Chemistry, Politics and Geography (the "2"). This model emphasizes the inclusion of Physics and History subjects as pre-requisite for university study and was adopted by the fourth and fifth group of provinces, which respectively initiated their reforms in 2021 and 2022.

With the different models in Gaokao, provinces also use different sets of Gaokao test papers. In 2023, there were seven sets of Gaokao test papers used (*refer to Table 3*). Though Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin have the flexibility to design their own test papers, there is a growing trend that more provinces are adopting nationally uniform test papers.

Apart from offering flexibility on subject choice and test papers, a range of measures have been implemented since 2014 as part of or in support of Gaokao reform, including offering more attempts at certain subjects throughout the course of senior high school; reforming the evaluation framework for Gaokao; introducing the Strong Foundation Program and streamlining pathways between vocational education and higher education.



Conclusion

As Gaokao reform is being progressively implemented across the country, it is important to recognise that the reform will remain an ongoing process, aligning with China's national strategies. This is evident in the education-related projects and plans listed above that have been announced in support of or as part of the Gaokao reform over the past nine years.

The intricate relationship between Gaokao and China's Household Registration system, combined with the uneven distribution of tertiary institutions and the sheer numbers of students, indicates that education disparities are likely to persist, impacting students' education choices, including the decision about whether to undertake study abroad as an alternative pathway.

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



Appendix

Table 1: Number of Gaokao applicants and DFC universities in Mainland Chinese Provinces and Municipalities, ranked by Gaokao applicants in descending order (2023)

Province/municipal	Gaokao applicant (2023) ⁵	Number of DFC universities
Henan	1,250,000	2
Shandong	980,000	3
Sichuan	800,000	8
Guangdong	739,000	5
Hunan	648,000	4
Anhui	647,000	3
Hebei	615,400	0
Jiangxi	535,700	1
Hubei	501,000	7
Guizhou	491,000	1
Guangxi	460,000	1
Jiangsu	445,000	15
Yunnan	399,300	1
Zhejiang	390,900	3
Chongqing	337,000	2
Shaanxi	336,798	8
Shanxi	292,268	1
Gansu	247,847	1
Fujian	232,000	2
Xinjiang	226,900	2
Inner Mongolia	211,672	1
Liaoning	196,000	4
Heilongjiang	191,000	4
Jilin	126,711	3
Ningxia	71,672	1
Hainan	70,069	1
Tianjin	69,000	6
Beijing	65,000	34
Shanghai	54,000	14
Qinghai	51,000	1
Tibet	33,000	1

Table 2: Schedule of Gaokao Reform 2014 ⁶

	Year of Launch	Year of Gaokao	Region	Model
1st Group (pilot)	2014	2017	Shanghai, Zhejiang	3+3
2nd Group	2017	2020	Beijing, Tianjin, Shandong, Hainan	3+3
3rd Group	2018	2021	Hebei, Liaoning, Jiangsu, Fujian, Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Chongqing	3+1+2
4th Group	2021	2024	Jilin, Heilongjiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Guizhou, Gansu	3+1+2
5th Group	2022	2025	Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, Henan, Sichuan, Yunnan, Shaanxi, Qinghai, Ningxia	3+1+2



Table 3: Gaokao test papers used by Mainland Chinese Provinces and Municipalities (2023) ⁷

Name of Gaokao paper	Used by (province/municipality)	Drafted by	Model
National Paper I	Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan	National Education Examination Authority (NEEA)	3+X (science & arts integrated) model
National Paper II	Henan, Shanxi, Jiangxi, Anhui, Gansu, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Shaanxi		
New Gaokao I	Guangdong, Fujian, Jiangsu, Hunan, Hubei, Hebei, Shandong, Zhejiang	Chinese, Maths, Foreign Languages paper set by NEEA	Shandong & Zhejiang: 3+3 model Other provinces: 3+1+2 model
New Gaokao II	Liaoning, Chongqing, Hainan	Other subjects set by provincial level Education Examination Authority	Hainan: 3+3 model Liaoning & Chongqing: 3+1+2 model
Self-determined Gaokao test paper	Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin,	Municipal Education Examination Authority	3+3 model

¹ https://www.gov.cn/govweb/lianbo/bumen/202306/content_6885016.htm

² The People's Republic of China, Ministry of Education, *Notice of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and National Development and Reform Commission on the Announcement of the Second Round of "Double First-Class" Universities and Disciplines* (《教育部财政部国家发展改革委关于公布第二轮“双一流”建设高校及建设学科名单的通知》), 11-Feb-2022.

http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A22/s7065/202202/t20220211_598710.html

³ The People's Republic of China, State Council, *The State Council's Implementation Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Examination and Enrolment System* (《国务院关于深化考试招生制度改革的实施意见》), 3-Sep-2014. http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/201409/t20140904_174543.html

⁴ Zhejiang's elective subjects also include Technology.

⁵ The number of Gaokao attendee from each province is based on information published on https://gaokao.eol.cn/e_html/gk/gkrs/. This is not official data and should only be used as a reference tool.

⁶ http://www.moe.gov.cn/fbh/live/2022/54835/mtbd/202209/t20220915_661458.html

⁷ <https://www.gaokao.cn/gaokaoknowanswar?id=-g3eroEBg1W8F-wKrNj9&fromcoop=bdzd>

