

GAOKAO IN CHINA: A REFORM CONUNDRUM

WU Yiyi & PING Xiaojuan

EAI Background Brief No. 1146

Date of Publication: 15 June 2016

Executive Summary

1. *Gaokao*, the Chinese national university entrance examination, has become the footlog bridging thousands of young Chinese with tertiary education opportunities. About 5.7 million people took part in the 2015 *gaokao*, generating a record-high of 75% admission rate.
2. *Gaokao* test takers have been increasing by the year after the exam was reinstated in 1997 following the 10-year Cultural Revolution which replaced *gaokao* with “free admission with recommendation”. *Gaokao* witnessed restoration and multifaceted reforms between 1977 and 1998, and reform has been deepening.
3. As a talent selection tool, *gaokao* has vital impact on Chinese society. *Gaokao*’s authoritativeness, (relative) equality and impartiality have enhanced the social mobility of thousands of aspiring Chinese.
4. *Gaokao* remains a phenomenal event as it is a bridge for the hopefuls, with irreplaceable functions, and measurable and (relatively) straightforward administrative process.
5. The “*gaokao* economy” has generated income for high schools, tutoring agencies, printing houses, catering services, lodging houses and logistics companies, and etc. The three-day exam (often 7-9 June) frequently yields banners/posters/campaign slogans that convey motivational, sometimes hysterical, messages in the media.
6. Meanwhile, underhand businesses, forged scores and test-taker impersonation cases have emerged under the profit drive.
7. Several Chinese provinces and autonomous administration zones (e.g. Shanghai, Beijing, Zhejiang and Guangdong) have implemented various reforms and pilot experiments to deal with such malpractices.

8. The biggest challenges that *gaokao* reform faces include institutional problems, equality concerns, technical, transition and evaluation problems, and selection dilemmas.
9. The new wave of *gaokao* reform, advocated by the *Advices on Higher Education Examination* in 2014, marks the biggest and deepest in recent years, setting a clear direction for the top design of educational reform in China. It strives to ensure *gaokao* equality, establish a rigid supervision system, reinforce the assessment procedure for students and etc.
10. Tertiary education in China today is less vital for facilitating social mobility, but still plays an important role in one's career advancement. The "*gaokao* phenomenon" is thus likely to linger for a fairly long period in China.
11. An "effective *gaokao*" should be able to propel elementary education, examine secondary education, scientifically and impartially select suitable talents for tertiary education, and nurture especially innovative talents. Before a well-designed alternative is developed, a gradual adjustment to *gaokao* is necessary.