

Abstract

The Chinese ministry of education has announced a major reform in which the nation's annual college entrance exam, the *gaokao*, plays a fundamental role. Titled "Foundation Enhancement Plan," it takes unprecedented steps and resources to select and cultivate talents to feed directly into China's national strategic goals. Thirty-six top-tier institutions are in the pilot group. The toughest admission criteria are in place to select the qualified few who will undergo rigorous learning throughout college and beyond to ensure China's future success.

Unprecedented Talent Program for China's Strategic Goals

Xiaofeng Wan

On January 15, 2020, China's ministry of education announced a major reform involving the *gaokao*, the nation's annual college entrance exam. Titled "Foundation Enhancement Plan" (FEP), the reform aims to pair college education with China's national strategic goals through enhanced teaching in foundational majors such as math, physics, chemistry, biology, history, philosophy, and Chinese paleography. Graduates are pipelined into industries of national interests such as high-end chips, software and artificial intelligence, new materials, advanced manufacturing, and national security, as well as the humanities and social sciences, where top talents have been scarce. Thirty-six higher education institutions will be among the pilot group testing the plan, the same 36 institutions classified as Class A universities under China's Double First Class University Plan initiated in 2015.

The announcement of the plan also marked the end of the Independent Freshman Admission Program (IFAP) implemented from 2003, which allowed elite universities to cherry-pick top talents through a combination of institutional criteria and *gaokao* score.

Through IFAP, successful candidates often enjoyed significant advantages in the admission process, including a lowered *gaokao* score threshold. The program's goal was to help institutions to recruit and enroll students who are talented in a specific area but may not perform as well on the comprehensive *gaokao*. Over the course of the program, universities that made use of IFAP enjoyed significant autonomy in selecting the students whom they wanted, but the subjective component of the admission process often drew criticism over its lack of transparency and, at times, dubious admission practices.

Not merely an admission strategy like IFAP, FEP, given its mission-driven nature, expands beyond the admission process into talent cultivation for years to come. Students admitted under FEP cannot freely choose majors once in college as they would under IFAP. In other words, a student's academic path for all four years in college and subsequent postgraduate studies is sealed at time of admission.

Targeted Students and Admission under FEP

FEP opens its doors to only two types of students. The first type is students who score among the highest on the *gaokao*; the second type is students who have demonstrated extraordinary talent in certain academic fields in addition to stellar performance on the *gaokao*.

Contrary to IFAP, where the process took place before *gaokao* score release, FEP centers on the *gaokao*, as the score will be the main criterion used by participating universities to shortlist students, replacing academic awards such as the Olympiads, research papers, or patents. Universities will combine a candidate's *gaokao* score, the university's own assessment score, and the overall quality assessment score from high school into a composite score. Among them, the *gaokao* score weighs no less than 85 percent of the equation.

Unprecedented Benefits

Students admitted under FEP are granted access to many exclusive privileges: specially designated classes equipped with first-class faculty, abundant academic resources, and small class size; loosened admission requirements for postgraduate studies; access to funded study-abroad opportunities and scholarships; exclusive access to national-level research labs and facilities; and strengthened career services. It is not yet clear how many students will be admitted under FEP each year. Previously, universities were capped at enrolling no more than 5 percent of their first-year class under IFAP.

With IFAP, students were shortlisted based on demonstrated talents through Olympiads, academic research, etc. It undoubtedly gave students in resource-saturated top-tier cities a competitive edge, and further disadvantaged those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly those from rural areas. Under FEP, given the central role of the *gaokao*, students have a relatively equal chance to compete, ensuring a path for more students from underprivileged backgrounds to be considered.

Same Plan, Different Approaches

In late January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly brought Chinese society to a halt for three months. Now that the situation is under control, schools across the country have gradually reopened. Among the first groups resuming on-campus learning are high school seniors who will sit for the now postponed *gaokao* (July 7–8). Universities in the pilot group of FEP have subsequently announced their long-anticipated admission guidelines.

Pilot institutions pour their best resources into their FEP cohorts, promising a tailored academic path for all selected students. On May 7, 2020, Tsinghua University, known for its strong STEM programs, announced its admission plan for this year's FEP cohort. The elite institution created three academic tracks, including foundational science with an academic focus, offering majors in math, physics, and chemistry; foundational science with a pre-engineering focus, with majors in biochemistry and applied mechanics; and foundational humanities, with majors in Chinese paleography, history, and philosophy. Students will be placed in five specially designed academies to hone their skills in their respective fields. A successive undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral studies path is also made available to the cohort.

Thirty-six higher education institutions will be among the pilot group testing the plan.

Peking University, another top-tier university in China, announced its own guidelines on the same day. Similar to the three tracks at Tsinghua, Peking also created three categories, but with visible emphasis on its famed humanities programs, such as history, philosophy, and Chinese paleography, as well as majors in the sciences, physics, math, bioscience, and medicine.

To be shortlisted by Tsinghua or Peking, as well as all other participating institutions, students have to meet the minimum *gaokao* score threshold for tier-1 institutions set for their respective provinces. Students who have extraordinary talents in certain academic areas have in addition to demonstrate at least a second-place award in national contests. The institutional assessment portion is also said to test knowledge well above the syllabus of regular high school classes, even beyond the rigorous *gaokao*. Recorded face-to-face interviews with a panel of professors add additional layers of scrutiny and assessment.

The unprecedented reform and resource allocation signal China's ambition of cultivating talents to be self-sustainable for its own strategic developments. The unusually high admission criteria, however, indicate that only a small number of students will be selected, representing the most brilliant of the country's youth. For these selected few, an arranged path for their four years in college and possibly beyond guarantees a life in security, but one of predictability, too. ▲