

Despite relatively low government expenditure on education (creeping up over the last two decades from around 2.8 percent to 3.8 percent of GDP¹), China is now managing to deliver nine years of basic, compulsory education to the overwhelming majority of Chinese children.

Coverage is still patchy in some of the most remote rural and typically minority nationality areas, such as vast and sparsely populated stretches of Tibet and Xinjiang. Furthermore, children who accompany their rural migrant parents to urban areas generally face discriminatory fees as well as social prejudice in state schools (although practice varies considerably between localities, with some local governments working much harder than others to integrate migrant children). Most children of migrants therefore attend private (*minban*) “migrant schools” that have much poorer facilities than state-run city schools and that in some cities have had to contend with considerable administrative hostility and interference.

Nevertheless, by the beginning of the 21st century basic education was “basically universalized” across the great majority of the national territory.² Policies introduced in 2006 to waive “miscellaneous fees” for poor families seem likely to ensure sustained high attendance overall. Early childhood education (pre-school, kindergarten) is also extensive: basically universal in cities, and developing steadily in the more prosperous rural areas.

The last two decades, and especially the years since 2000, have also seen a steep rise in the number of youngsters completing senior high school and the number entering tertiary education. In 1987, according to Chinese government figures, there were 2.468 million senior high school graduates, tripling to 7.883 million in 2007. Entrance into higher education over the same period rose sixfold, from 0.617 million to 4.186 million students. Some of the growth in numbers is explained by population growth, with a 1990s bulge of teenagers born in the 1970s before birth control was introduced.

EDUCATION: MORE EXTENSIVE BUT LESS EQUAL

By Nick Young

In short, the proportion of Chinese youth able to access high school and college education is higher than ever before.

Yet this expansion has primarily benefited urban youngsters.

From 1999 to 2002, the proportion of urban children entering senior high school rose from 55 percent to 74 percent; whereas in rural areas the proportion rose from 19 percent to 29 percent.³

More youngsters than ever before are also studying overseas. Official figures show that in 1987 just 4,700 students went abroad to study at college level; by 2007 this had risen to around 150,000. In addition, some of China’s most prosperous families are now sending their children abroad at a younger age, to attend high school or to learn English. A handful have managed to bypass administrative restrictions and enroll their children in elite, international schools in Beijing and Shanghai—a booming market that big-brand English “public” schools such as Eton, Harrow and Dulwich have entered in anticipation of the day when formal restrictions on accepting Chinese students are lifted.

MARKET INEQUALITIES

If China’s education system is now more extensive than ever, it has also become more stratified, with facilities and resources concentrated in urban areas. In the period 1980-2000, although net government funding for education increased substantially, as a proportion of China’s total education expenditure it declined from 75 percent to 54 percent—with the remaining 46 percent coming from steeply rising user fees and charges.⁴ (This closely mirrors what has happened in the field of health care; both systems have been quasi-privatised). “Miscellaneous fees” that primary and junior high schools charge (except to the recently exempted, poorest pupils), and the tuition fees now charged by all senior high schools, vocational training schools, colleges and universities, are a major barrier to poorer families. Some evidence even suggests that, although a higher proportion of rural students than ever before are now completing basic education, the proportion who

progress up the system to university is lower (especially in the case of women students) than a decade ago.⁵

At the same time, state resources remain heavily skewed towards better-off places and institutions that serve better-off people. Most government expenditure on education comes from local governments, and richer cities and provinces are naturally able to invest far more than inland and western provinces. That pattern is replicated at sub-provincial level, with expenditure concentrated on provincial and prefectural capitals, which dispose of far greater resources than county and township governments. Rural governments in western provinces often find it hard even to cover basic wages for their teachers. Moreover, fully 31 percent of state spending goes to higher education, which the central authorities are very keen to expand, but from which only a minority benefits.⁶

Thus, typically, the kindergarten and primary school attached to a province's most prestigious Normal University represent the apex of basic educational provision, and charge proportionately high fees. Later, parents will pay up to USD 10,000 in entrance fees (along with yearly tuition fees) to elite, state high schools that have a good university entrance record. Less privileged urban children attend less well-endowed state schools—which still imposes a heavy financial burden on their families—and are more likely to enter the workforce at eighteen or go to second-rank universities and colleges. Many rural children will have trouble progressing beyond junior high school, and most of those who do so will go to vocational schools to learn trades. Most children of migrant workers either stay home with grandparents in a depopulated village or attend the scruffy *minban* schools that (with very few exceptions) as yet receive no state support.

Finally, it is important to note that primary and middle schools are themselves largely oriented towards preparing students for public examinations and university entrance, with much less emphasis on the educational needs of those who are likely to receive only a few years of schooling. This means that rural students in poorer areas are doubly disadvantaged: they are less likely to be able to afford a university education, and the basic schooling they do receive is not necessarily the most

useful preparation for the lives they are going to lead.

Ethnic minority students whose mother tongue is not Chinese are additionally disadvantaged by negligible investment in the bilingual education methods that would be necessary for them to compete with native Chinese speakers on anything like an equal basis.

Thus, rural graduates from nine years of compulsory state education have generally achieved basic literacy and numeracy (and this is more than many of their parents achieved); but they often lack the skills and knowledge of the world that that they will need to thrive—and, quite probably, to migrate—in China's complicated, changing context.

Notes

1. Carel J. Dalman and Jean-Eric Aubert, *China and the Knowledge Economy: Seizing the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2001); Mei Hong and Wang Xiaolin, *China's Budget System and the Financing of Education and Health Services for Children* (Beijing: UNICEF and the National Working Committee on Children and Women, Nov. 2006).
2. UNESCO, "Education for All: The Year 2000 Assessment Final Country Report of China," 2000, <http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/countryreports/china/contents.html>.
3. China Development Research Foundation, UN Development Programme, *China Human Development Report 2005: Development With Equity*, p. 48.
4. China Development Research Foundation, UN Development Programme (note 4), p. 52.
5. For example, citing data from *Gender Gap in China: Facts and Figures* (World Bank, ADB, 2005, draft), China Development Brief's Special Report: *Yunnan Situation Analysis* (2005, can be downloaded from <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com>), found that: "In 1982 . . . 46.8% of young, rural women in Yunnan were illiterate, only 1.6% went to high school, and only 0.06% went to university. By the time of the 2000 census, the illiteracy rate among young (16-24) rural women had declined to 8% but only 1.06% went to high school and the number attending university had been statistically reduced to zero."
6. Mei Hong and Wang Xiaolin (note 1).