

2026

Gaokao

The **National College Entrance Examination**^{[1][2][3][4]} (**NCEE**)

(普通高等学校招生全国统一考试), commonly abbreviated as the **Gaokao** (高考; 'Higher Exam'), is the annual nationally coordinated undergraduate admission exam in [mainland China](#), held in early June. Despite the name, the exam is conducted at the provincial level, with variations determined by provincial governments, under the central coordination of the Ministry of Education of China.

Gaokao is required for undergraduate admissions to all higher education institutions in the country. It is taken by high school students at the end of their final year.

History



A banner on the [HUST](#) campus in [Wuhan](#) congratulates top exam score achievers from the university-affiliated high school

Background

The first Gaokao was held on 15–17 August 1952.^[5]

The Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges marked the start of the reform of National Matriculation Tests Policies (NMTP) in the newly established [People's Republic of China](#). With the implementation of the first [Five Year Plan](#) in 1953, the NMTP was further enhanced. After repeated discussions and experiments, the NMTP was eventually set as a fundamental policy system in 1959. From 1958, the tertiary entrance [examination system](#) was affected by the [Great Leap Forward](#) Movement. Unified recruitment was soon replaced by separate recruitment by individual or allied tertiary education institutions. Meanwhile, political [censorship](#) on candidate students was enhanced. From 1962, the NMTP system was criticized due to its negative impact on the working class; In July 1966, the NMTP was officially canceled and substituted with a new admission policy of recommending workers, farmers and soldiers to college.^[6] During the next ten years, the [Down to the Countryside Movement](#), initiated by [Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Mao Zedong](#), forced both senior and

junior secondary school graduates, the so-called "intellectual youths", to work as farmers in countryside villages. Against the backdrop of world revolution, millions of such young people joined the ranks of farmers, working and living alongside them. ^[citation needed]

In the early 1970s, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman [Mao Zedong](#) reinstated university operations. However, new students were selected through evaluation by a [revolutionary committee](#) rather than through formal academic scores. This practice continued until the [death of Mao](#) in September 1976. In late 1977, [Deng Xiaoping](#), then under [Hua Guofeng](#), the [heir apparent](#) of Mao, officially resumed traditional examinations based on academics, the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, which has continued to the present day. ^[citation needed] In addition to being an important part of university admissions since its reintroduction in 1977, the Gaokao has represented meritocracy in contemporary China and reflected strong cultural values derived from the old imperial examination system. ^[z]

The first such examination after the [Cultural Revolution](#) took place in late 1977. There was no limit on the age or official educational background of examinees. Consequently, most of the hopefuls who had accumulated during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution and many others who simply wanted to try their luck took the examination. The youngest were in their early teens and the oldest were in their late thirties. The examinations took place in the winter of 1977, and the exam questions were designed by each province individually.

A total number of 5.7 million candidates took the national college entrance exam. Initially, only 200,000 people were to be admitted to college. Although the [Ministry of Education](#) eventually expanded enrollment, with admissions being granted to a total number of 272,971 students, the admission rate of 4.8% was the lowest in the history of the [PRC](#).^[8] These students are known as the [Class of 1977](#).

Starting from 1978, the examination was uniformly designed by the Ministry of Education and all the students across the country took identical examinations. ^[citation needed]

However, reforms on the content and structure of the exam persisted, with one of the most salient issues being agency for individual provinces to customize their own exams. The Ministry of Education allowed the College Enrollment Office of [Shanghai](#) to employ an independent exam in 1985, which was the beginning of the provincial proposition. In the same year, [Guangdong](#) was permitted to adopt an independent proposition. Beginning from 2003, [Beijing](#), [Tianjin](#), [Jiangsu](#), and [Zhejiang](#) were allowed to adopt independent propositions. Since then, 16 provinces and municipalities have adopted customized exams. ^[citation needed]

Although today's admission rate is much higher than in 1977, 1978 and before the 1990s, it is still fairly low compared to the availability of higher education in the [Western world](#). Consequently, the examination is highly competitive, causing prospective examinees and their families to experience enormous pressure. For the majority of examinees, the exam is a watershed that divides two dramatically different lives. ^[citation needed]

In 1970, less than 1% of Chinese people had attended higher education, and less than 1/1000 of the population of China was admitted to universities. In the 1970s, 70% of students who were recommended to attend university had political backgrounds reflecting the political nature of university selection at the time. At the same time, the undergraduate course system reduced the time from 4 years to 3 years. According to incomplete statistics, from 1966 to 1977, institutions of higher learning recruited 940,000 people who belonged to the worker-peasant-soldier group. ^[citation needed]

For most provinces, the National Higher Education Entrance Examination is held once a year; however, some provinces hold examinations twice a year, with the additional exam referred to as the Spring Entrance Examination. Prior to 2003, the National Higher Education Entrance Examination took place in July every year. It now takes place every June. This move was made in consideration of the adverse effects of hot weather on students living in southern China and possible flooding during the rainy season in July. Partial Provincial administrative units determine the schedule of the exams on 7 and 8 June. ^[citation needed]

After 2022, some provinces have instituted reforms to remove extra points for [ethnic minorities](#) and students who participated in athletic and extra-scholar activities.^[9] The changes have been gradually rolled out to 5 different groups of provinces, and have been finally implemented completely as of 2025.

2006 Gaokao

In 2006, a record high of 9.5 million people applied for tertiary education entry in China. Of these, 8.8 million (93%) took the Gaokao and 27,600 (0.28%) were exempted ([保送](#)) as these students demonstrated exceptional merit in the quality of their work and understanding of the academic subjects. Out of the 9.5 million applicants, 5,460,500 (57.48%) were admitted to universities or colleges. Everyone else (700,000 students) took other standardized entrance exams, such as those designed for [adult education](#) students. ^[citation needed]

2017 Gaokao

In 2017, 9.40 million students took the Gaokao, 7 million of whom were admitted into colleges or universities.^[10] The percentage of first-class admission (Yi Ben; 一本), considered to be good universities in China, varied from 9.48% to 30.5%,^[11] with the lowest admission rates in [Henan province](#) and [Shanxi province](#), at less than 10%. ^[citation needed]

Below are the changes of the exam scope from 2016 to 2017 (in most areas of China, where the students use the Nationwide Exam Papers in Gaokao):

Chinese

- All the exam contents are set into compulsory examination scope.

Mathematics

- Elective Course 4–1 (Selection of Geometric Proof) is removed from the elective examination scope.

Foreign Language

- No changes.

Physics

- Elective Course 3–5 is changed from the elective examination scope into the compulsory examination scope.

Chemistry

- Elective Course 2 (Chemistry and Technology) is removed from the elective examination scope.

Biology

- Topic 3 (Tissue Culture Technology of Plants) is removed from the elective examination scope of Elective Course 1 (Biotechnology Practice).

Political Science

- No changes.

History

- Elective Course 2 (Democratic Thought and Practice in Modern Society) is removed from the elective examination scope.

Geography

- Elective Course 5 (Natural Disasters and Prevention) is removed from the elective examination scope.

2018 Gaokao

9.75 million students attended Gaokao on 7–8 June with 7,909,900 (or 81.13% of the total attending students) being successful in being admitted to colleges or universities.^[10]

2020–2022 COVID-19 postponements

On 31 March 2020, China's Ministry of Education announced that the 2020 Gaokao would be postponed by one month, moving the national dates to 7–8 July because of the [COVID-19 pandemic in mainland China](#).^[12] Students took the rescheduled exams under epidemic prevention measures such as temperature checks, mask wearing, and staggered entry.^{[13][14]}

Although the exam returned to its usual early-June slot in 2021, [Shanghai](#) deferred its local sitting of the 2022 Gaokao to 7–9 July after a city-wide outbreak—the first such delay since 2020.^[15] Year 2022 saw a record 11.93 million registrations nationwide, represents an increase of 1.15 million people compared to 2021, setting a new record high.