

To: DKU Faculty and Learning Innovation Fellowship (LIF) Committee
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Subject: Overview of *Gaokao* and Chinese High School Education
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Understanding how Chinese students learned in high school can inform teaching and learning at DKU. The primary goal of most Chinese high schools is to provide an education so that students can continue their studies in post-secondary institutions. In most cases, this means scoring high enough on the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, or commonly known as *Gaokao*. While fully recognizing that any generalization is fraught with the danger of making assumptions, this memo aims to provide an overview of *Gaokao*, its implications, and the broader Chinese high school education that evolves around the exam.

1. Diversity within *Gaokao*'s uniformity

Created in 1952, *Gaokao* represents the Chinese government's effort to move away from the political nature of university admission to one that is more meritocratic. Since then, more than eight million people take the entrance exam every year and the overall score of *Gaokao* is the sole criterion for tertiary education admissions. The exam itself is not uniform across China but is coherent and standardized on a provincial bases. Each province determines *Gaokao*'s procedure (date/time/duration) and subject (academic subjects, maximum scores, exam score threshold for admission). Furthermore, high schools' education budgets and teaching quality differ from province to province. Consequently, it is important to recognize the variety within the uniformity that *Gaokao* represents.

Implications for DKU:

- In accordance with DKU's admission requirement, all incoming Chinese students have taken *Gaokao*. However, it is critical to recognize that students had different experiences with *Gaokao* even though they all completed (and did fairly well) on the exam.
- For students in poor and rural parts of China, performing well on the *Gaokao* is the *only* way for social mobility and oftentimes the *only* hope in the future well-being of the entire family. For example, a student from a rural village in Gansu would have had a drastically different experience in high school compared to a student from Shanghai.
- While it is important to keep in mind the differences in students' geographic area and socio-economic status, it is also important to utilize Chinese students' personal experiences in classrooms. In the common core course "China in the World," for example, the role of money/finances in *Gaokao* preparation is a microcosm of China's income and geographic disparity as well as its intergenerational consequences. As such, the diversity of Chinese

students' experiences with Gaokao can be a great teaching tool and Gaokao is not necessarily a hurdle to DKU's liberal arts education.

2. Gaokao's Two Track System and High School Education's Academic Segregation

Chinese literature, mathematics, and foreign language¹ are required for all students in Gaokao but the subject tests differ based on a two track system. Students choose one of two academic tracks after their first year in high school: either social-science/humanities or STEM/natural-science. This decision not only determines what exams they will take for Gaokao, but also dictates the academic subjects they study for the next two years in high school². Those who choose the social-science orientation will take political science, geography, and history; students in the other track take physics, chemistry, and biology. The Gaokao exam at the end of high school reflects the pre-determined academic tracks and students will take subject tests in their respective areas. The system is criticized for academic segregation because once students make their decisions at such a young age (when students are mostly 15-16 years old), they spend the next two years taking classes in exclusive disciplines and no longer explore the other three subjects. And in most cases, the decision decides which version of the Gaokao they will take two years later as well as their college majors and potential career path.

Implications for DKU:

- Incoming Chinese students will be experts in their respective tracks. The academic rigor of science/math classes in Chinese high school is much more advanced than those in the US. The challenge for students and teachers is not necessarily arriving at the "correct" answer, but the integration and synthesis of knowledge. This can be particularly challenging for students who have had limited exposure to the other academic track.
- In terms of major declaration, Chinese students may feel compelled to choose a major that aligns with their high school academic tracks. While we shall have compassionate understanding of high school's inertia, it is also important to highlight opportunities to "step out of their comfort zone" and explore other subjects and disciplines.

3. Three Years of High School Education that Centers on Preparing for Gaokao

Given that Gaokao is the only criterion for college admission, students and their families see high school as a three-year preparation journey for Gaokao. Similar philosophy runs in high schools since most high schools (their funding, reputation, leadership, teachers) are evaluated

¹ The foreign language requirement is English in most provinces with the exception of some minority provinces.

² Chinese high schools run on a three-year system compared to the four-year one in the US.

based on students' Gaokao scores. As a result, teachers usually complete all lectures/content material in the second year and dedicate the final year to Gaokao preparation. The first two years of high school are therefore saturated with course content that is designed to be completed in a three-year period. Teaching and learning style also align with the goal of succeeding in Gaokao. Teachers emphasize contents that are more likely to occur on Gaokao and assessment for learning outcomes is mostly in exam-format (i.e., very little projects, presentations, portfolios). In the last year of high school, most students will spend a minimum of twelve hours at school (7am to 7pm) with additional classes on weekends and shortened holidays. There are round after round of mock exams in addition to monthly exams that allow students and teachers to predict Gaokao outcome. Classes in the last year of high school essentially become a repetition of mock exams, teachers go over exams, then more mock exams. Students will also spend more time studying when they're not in school because senior year is considered the "sprint" of the three-year journey. A day in senior year in different parts of China can be found on <https://www.zhihu.com/question/55683312>.

Implications for DKU:

- Three years of Gaokao preparation is exhausting and students are used to the notion of studying for the sake of doing well on exams. The concept of a syllabus and grading based on different criteria (e.g., participation, projects, exams, etc.) will be novel to most Chinese students. Be cautious to assume that Chinese students understand the function of a syllabus and take time to go over important sections in class. Be especially clear with grading criteria and exam score does not solely determine GPA.
- In terms of classroom dynamics, Chinese students are not used to discussions or challenging teachers in class. Please refer to Don Snow's memo, which provides excellent recommendations on this topic.
- In terms of note-taking, Chinese students are experts on transcribing and copying notes, but not familiar with strategic note-taking. Dedicate some time at the beginning of class (perhaps when going over the syllabus) to recommend note-taking tips and explain if lecture slides will be shared publicly. Similarly, students almost never use laptops in Chinese classrooms, be sure to mention laptop policies and expectations as well.

4. Extracurriculars & Ongoing Reforms in High School Education and Gaokao

While Chinese high schools have heavy emphasis on Gaokao preparation, there are also electives and extracurricular opportunities. PE, arts, music, and dance classes are offered in most high schools as well as mandatory exercises during recess period. Many high schools have sports clubs, debate teams, and annual events such as sports day, arts festivals and periodically sports tournaments. Many schools recently require naptime after lunch and early release time at 4pm instead of 7pm. Additionally, the Chinese government has implemented reforms and

experimentations on Gaokao and high school education. The two track system was abolished in five selected provinces (Beijing, Tianjin, Shandong, Jiangxi, Hainan) since 2017 and other provinces introduced elective subjects to Gaokao and high school curriculum.

Implications for DKU:

- Encourage all students to participate in extracurricular opportunities. Some students may have been more active than others in non-academic engagements in high schools and advice from professors carries a lot of weight.
- Gaokao and Chinese high school education are constantly evolving. While the incoming class of Chinese students is largely excluded from recent reforms, high school graduates in 2020 will have completely different experiences with Gaokao and their high school education. It is important to understand the Chinese students' past, but it's more important to channel history effectively to advance teaching and learning at DKU. Gaokao is not synonymous with one-size-fits-all, and Chinese students, like students anywhere in the world, share the diversity, intrinsic motivation, and the unquenchable thirst for knowledge.