

Pilot program to nurture science talent

Strong Base Plan will replace universities' independent enrollment schemes

By XU WEI
xuwe@chinadaily.com.cn

China has decided to encourage more elite students to study science subjects as part of broader efforts to bolster the country's capacity in science and technology innovation and ease talent bottlenecks in sectors such as computer chip and software design.

The Ministry of Education said on Wednesday that it has launched a pilot education program that will allow 36 top universities across the country to select high-caliber students who excel in basic disciplines and are willing to serve the country's major strategic needs.

Under the program, known as the Strong Base Plan, the universities will focus on enrollment in majors such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, philosophy and the study of ancient handwriting.

It also pinpoints sectors such as high-end computer chip production, software, smart technologies, new materials, advanced manufacturing and State security as pivotal in moving the program forward.

China has been the world's largest importer of computer chips for the past few years. The country imported over 44.5 billion chips in the first 11 months of last year, up 32.6 percent year-on-year.

In a speech delivered at an annual ceremony in Beijing on Jan 10 that honored distinguished scientists, engineers and research achievements, Premier Li Keqiang said that the reason behind China's lack of competitiveness in independent innovation was its weakness in basic research.

He pledged stronger and more stable fiscal support and an improved evaluation and incentive mechanism so that researchers and scientists could focus on their projects without distractions.

"The expedition to explore the unknown will not be like a walk in the park, and we need to respect rules and tolerate failures, so that our researchers can roam freely and try daringly," he said.

The new program will replace independent enrollment schemes used by universities as an alternative admission method to the national college examination, or *gaokao*.

An official with the Ministry of Education said in an online statement explaining the new program that the independent enrollment schemes had faced a number of problems and challenges over the years, with some students providing fake application materials and some colleges failing to come up with reasonable evaluation standards for applicants.

The new program is intended to better promote education equality and ensure fair opportunities for applicants and to guide high schools to prioritize student's all-around training, the official said.

The program will include a host of



SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

new education methods. Those enrolled in the program will be offered top-notch conditions for their studies, such as a mentor tutoring system, higher chances of being recommended for graduate school and be given priority when applying for scholarships and government-sponsored overseas studies.

The plan also urges key State laboratories, cutting-edge science centers and centers where resources from different sectors are combined in pursuit of innovation to

give the students roles in their research.

A database for monitoring students' personal development will also be established to refine the plan and its training model.

Zhang Zhiyong, a professor with the China Education Policy Institute at Beijing Normal University, said the Strong Base Plan will enable higher education institutions to evaluate students in a more comprehensive fashion.

He said it requires colleges to take

into account the performance of applicants in their college entrance exams as well as their independent evaluations during the enrollment process.

The new program is also groundbreaking in that it stipulates that colleges must explore methods such as exams, interviews and practical operations to test the students' abilities in analyzing and solving problems, he said.

Zhong Binglin, a member of the National Advisory Council on Education, said the implementation of the

plan is intended to address talent shortages in sectors of major significance nationwide and showed colleges they must take the initiative to adapt to social and economic developments.

He said the fairness of universities' independent enrollment schemes, rolled out 16 years ago, had long been questioned.

"The new program has standardized enrollment procedures and establishes a stronger mechanism to ensure fairness," Zhong said.

Policy digest

More reform urged in State-level new areas

The General Office of the State Council issued a guideline on Friday, asking provincial authorities and State Council departments to deepen reform of State-level new areas.

The areas should insist on bolstering the real economy, speed up efforts to reform their management systems, and become more open and competitive in the international market, the guideline said.

The authorities should also develop the areas at a reasonable pace and in an environmentally friendly manner, and must not expand the areas excessively, it said.

The areas should prioritize quality development of manufacturing industry, make breakthroughs to develop key technologies, and nurture their own main industries.

Among measures to bolster those main industries, the authorities should encourage the areas to upgrade traditional industries, nurture quality companies and attract leading manufacturing companies at a faster pace.

The authorities should support the new areas in speeding up their development of strategic and emerging industries and blockchain technologies, and develop young, fast-growing "gazelle" companies that are globally competitive.

They should also introduce major industrial projects to the areas.

The authorities should enhance the areas' capacity for technological innovation, the guideline said, and construct powerful platforms to nurture innovation.

It also requires improvement of rewards to and protection of innovation, and lays out suggestions to attract talent and support startup companies.

The authorities should improve the ways the areas are being run, and can grant more powers to the areas, the guideline said, adding that they should "foster a first-class environment for doing business".

Companies in the areas should become more competitive, the guideline said. The authorities should encourage them to resort to advanced methods of management and follow internationally accepted trade practices and high-end standards.

The areas should also provide more convenient procedures for investment and trade.

The authorities should make sure the areas make scientific development plans and follow them through. They should also work on developing smart cities and improve infrastructure and public facilities in the areas.

China began establishing State-level new areas in the 1990s. The areas serve as platforms for carrying out the country's major development strategies and take on important tasks to promote reform and opening-up.

Such areas include the Pudong New Area in Shanghai, the Binhai New Area in Tianjin and the Nansha New Area in Guangzhou.

WANG QINGYUN



POLICY RESPONSE

Customs meets clearance target two years early

By WANG QINGYUN
wangqingyun@chinadaily.com.cn

Several ministry-level departments, including those responsible for customs, commerce and public security, responded recently to issues of public concern.

Simpler procedures benefit importers and exporters

China's customs-clearance time shortened dramatically last year, meeting a target set by the State Council two years ahead of schedule, the General Administration of Customs said on Jan 13.

The country's import-clearance time was reduced to 36.7 hours in December, down 62.3 percent from 2017. Export-clearance time was slashed to 2.6 hours, down 78.6 percent from 2017.

China's import and export firms also saw the number of items requiring customs declarations dwindle to 105, down from 229 in the past.

The authorities have simplified clearance procedures and cut customs fees over the past two years.

In October 2018, the State Council,



China's Cabinet, asked customs authorities to cut the time it took to clear goods in 2017 by half by the end of 2021.

The country has long been committed to creating favorable conditions for businesses by reducing customs clearance time, supporting cross-border e-commerce and promoting diversification of export markets. China ranked 56th last year in the ease of trading across borders, a jump from 65 in 2018, according to the World Bank's Doing Business 2020 report.

Upgrade for outsourcing services sector

The Ministry of Commerce and seven other ministerial-level bodies have issued a guideline to help the

country speed up the upgrading of its outsourcing services industry.

The guideline, posted online on Jan 14, said that by 2025, the industry should become an important channel for China to bring in advanced technologies and step up in global value chains, and it should include more high-end digital businesses.

The guideline laid out six major tasks for provincial authorities, including speeding up the digitization of outsourcing services, promoting outsourcing services in key areas such as drug research and development, design and accounting, and strengthening the nurturing of talent.

China offered more than \$88 billion of offshore outsourcing services in 2018, making it the second-largest provider that year, Xian Guoyi, head of the ministry's Department of Trade in Services and Commercial Services, told a news conference on Friday.

Xian estimated that the figure for last year was about \$95 billion, and said that outsourcing services play an important role in China's efforts

to improve the quality and efficiency of its manufacturing industry and beef up its innovation capacity.

Pilot vehicle management projects planned

Some provinces will carry out three pilot reform projects for vehicle management starting March 1, the Ministry of Public Security announced at a news conference on Jan 14.

One aims to grant electronic certification for vehicles through an online platform for traffic safety services that was developed by the ministry and is run by local traffic police departments, or through its smartphone app.

That would reduce the number of paper certificates that vehicle owners and drivers need to obtain, and they will no longer have to stick some certificates on their vehicles.

The second involves the points deduction system for driver's licenses and could exempt drivers who have violated traffic laws from some point deductions if they take part in traffic safety courses.

The other pilot project aims to

enable parties involved in traffic accidents to obtain reports online or go online to see what stage the report is at.

Financial support for rural families in focus

The Ministry of Civil Affairs and the National Bureau of Statistics have issued a guideline for local authorities to assess more accurately the financial conditions of rural families to make sure those who receive government financial support for sustaining basic living standards are those who really need it.

As part of the country's efforts to eliminate absolute poverty this year, the guideline, publicized last week, sets out specific indicators for assessment, including a family's income, property and necessary expenses.

It said local authorities can also use other indicators to determine if a family is hiding its income or property. For example, they can review the family's water, electricity, gas and phone bills to see if they significantly exceed those of an average family.

Xinhua contributed to this story.