

**Washington Post**  
May 12, 2006

## **Shrinking Opportunity on China's Campuses**

Government Seeks to Limit Glut of Students Produced By a Booming Economy

By Edward Cody  
Washington Post Foreign Service  
Friday, May 12, 2006; A14

BEIJING, May 11 -- The Chinese government has decided to slow down an explosive increase in the number of college students in recent years, saying the growth has produced bulging campuses, overworked professors and graduates unable to find suitable jobs.

Overpopulation at Chinese universities has emerged as the latest in a string of problems brought on by the country's swift economic growth -- the downside of progress.

Prosperity has enabled more people to buy cars, for instance, but at the price of heavy pollution. Similarly, the number of teenagers whose parents can afford to put them through secondary school has climbed quickly, creating pressure on college slots once reserved for the privileged few.

"The social expectation for going on to higher education has become very high," Li Zhiren, a specialist at the Education Ministry's Higher Education Research Center, said in a recent study.

Although beneficial to millions of families, more-flexible admissions policies adopted at government urging -- to take account of the changes -- have produced an enrollment increase of nearly 500 percent since 1998, bringing to more than 23 million the number of students at colleges and universities across the country.

The promise of a more educated population serves China well as it seeks to modernize and reform its economy to better compete in the world. But as the economy matures and higher education becomes more common, college graduates are now more likely to face unemployment than were their predecessors, whose diplomas nearly guaranteed them a job in business or government.

The official National Development and Reform Commission estimated last week that 60 percent of this summer's college graduates will have trouble finding jobs, sobering news for Premier Wen Jiabao's government. About 4.1 million are expected to graduate, an increase of 22 percent over 2005, the commission said. The current job market can absorb only 1.6 million of them.

"It is hard to create new jobs in large numbers due to surplus production capacity, more trade frictions and the revaluation of the yuan," China's currency, Zhang Xiaojian, vice

minister of labor and social security, told the official New China News Agency. "As a result, it will be less easy to tackle employment pressures."

Chinese students have not shown much interest in opposing the government in recent years, content to enjoy their new opportunities. Large numbers of well-educated but jobless youth, however, could become a political problem for the Communist Party and its monopoly on power, some analysts have said. In effect, the government would not be honoring its end of a tacit compact in which the party justifies its political control by providing a steady increase in prosperity for China's 1.3 billion people, particularly educated urbanites and their children.

The last major challenge to the party, the 1989 democracy movement centered in Tiananmen Square, was mounted mainly by students on campuses in Beijing and elsewhere. In more recent years, farmers enraged by land confiscations have risen up in thousands of protests and riots. But so far they have lacked the intellectual framework and leadership to become more than sporadic local movements.

Wen's office announced after a cabinet meeting Wednesday that the government will seek to lower the rate of university enrollments by revaluing vocational training and high school diplomas, making the need to go on for university studies seem less pressing. The government will also police university administrations more closely to make sure they do not lower standards to bring in additional students as a way to collect more fees and expand budgets, the announcement said.

Different universities in different areas would have to react according to their own circumstances, the cabinet said in a statement posted on the government Web site. But it emphasized that, overall, scaling back enrollment would improve conditions at universities.

"It is also good for gradually solving conflicts and problems in universities, especially to relieve the pressure on graduates in finding jobs," it added.

Earlier attempts to slow the growth in university enrollments have proved largely ineffective, raising questions about whether Wen's latest orders will be enough to alleviate the problems. Bai Youdi, a retired Beijing secondary school history teacher, noted that in the late 1990s her school's graduating class had four sections and now has 13. But she predicted the pressure was likely to taper off in coming years as the children of China's current one-child families reach college age.