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# **A comparative report between China's International Understanding and Global Competencies and similar foci in specific curricula in England**

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## Introduction

This report compares national policy approaches to competency-based education in China and England in relation to the following overarching themes:

- global education development goals and competencies
- underpinning ideological, societal and cultural influences

From this, the report focuses on how, from a set of core competencies (CC) one of 18 sub-components, International Understanding (IU) is developed within English tuition in China. It compares explicit IU development in China with implicit Global Competency (GC) in the English curriculum, focusing on the following drivers of implementation:

- teacher understanding and implementation of the competencies
- curricula and textbooks

This report therefore compares espoused values and implementation approaches within IU in China and GC in England as well as their links to global citizenship education worldwide. In England, the spirit of these competencies is, in the most part, embedded into the primary school curriculum, rather than explicitly taught, as each primary school can follow its own curriculum, usually within the framework of the national curriculum.

Whilst there have been previous comparative reports on the Chinese and English education systems, this report provides further understanding of the extent to which language teaching adheres to, and promotes, the values of each system. Strengths, limitations and future challenges of both systems will be identified, from which recommendations for practice development will be made in relation to IU/GC teacher training and development.

## The emergence of global education development goals and competencies

Competency-based education has been fostered globally since being initially developed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2005). In 2018 the OECD added the assessment of Global Competence (GC) based on its GC Framework to its Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2018). The OECD (2018, p7) define GC as:

the capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development.

Mansilla and Wilson (2020) summarise these as promoting employability, cross-cultural respect and collaboration. However, in its initial outing, the GC international comparative assessment has not yet achieved the international participation of the more established literacy, maths and science aspects of PISA. Within the United Kingdom (UK) and China, only Scotland, Hong Kong and Macao opted to enter the GC aspect of PISA (OECD, 2020).

Over the past five decades, countries have become more integrated into a global economy by the process of globalisation which has led to increasing interconnectedness. There is a consensus that from the 1990s there has been rapid development in information communication technologies and in the internationalisation of economies and capital resulting in unprecedented and far-reaching economic, political and cultural changes (Burbules and Torres, 2000; Brown, Lauder, et al., 2008). National governments across the world, including the UK and China, have had to confront the forces of globalisation and neo-liberal policies which have fundamentally influenced domestic markets and economies in a rapidly changing global economy. They have recognised the importance of human capital fostering the development of their workforces through new knowledge and skills to be able to compete effectively in a rapidly changing global marketplace (Brown and Lauder, 1996). More recently, Zheng (2020) identifies counter-globalisation movements, such as the rise of populist leaders, have challenged these norms and therefore sees the development of global understanding within education as vital to counter this tendency.

Deng and Peng (2021, p83) argue that globalisation, increased competition and rapidly developing technology have transformed the requirements of education:

Reading, writing, arithmetic (the 3Rs), and subject knowledge are not enough for a 21st-century global knowledge society; the goals of education have shifted to encompass broader skills or competencies.

This has been recognised in the development of education frameworks from international organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the OECD as well as in countries such as China's 2016 CC (Ministry of Education, 2016, cited in Deng and Peng, 2021, p84). Zhao (2020) demonstrates how this development has taken place over many years, arguing that the initial inspiration was the OECD's 1997-2003 multi-disciplinary academic-led project and subsequent report: *The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies* (DeSeCo) Project (OECD, 2005). From this, Zhao (2020) argues that China's CC development has been informed by international bodies such as the OECD, the European Union (EU), UNESCO as well as individual countries seeking to gravitate their national education systems around a set of generic competencies.

For a successful life and well-functioning society, the OECD assumes that a young person should develop some key competencies that are necessary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It defines a competency (which is generally synonymous with competence) as:

more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual's knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating. (OECD, 2005, p4)

Zhao (2020, p473) argues that the implementation of these is justified on the grounds of rapidly developing technology, globalisation, international cooperation and economic need:

To educate the young generation to adjust to these global changes, competence becomes a new 'mantra' of education in our age, but in a much broader spectrum of the educational field than it was in the 20th century.

Similarly, the United Nations (UN) (2022, p1) consider that:

Achieving inclusive and quality education for all reaffirms the belief that education is one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development.

However, inclusion and quality are not specifically defined within its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) SDG4 (2000-2030) (UN, 2022, p1), specifically:

- By 2030, ensure that all children complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes.
- By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

These two UN goals have some resonance with initiatives set out in the *Education in the Belt and Road Initiative* (British Chamber of Commerce in China, 2019), as follows:

- China is willing to go to greater efforts to develop education exchange and cooperation and advance the development of girls' and women's education. (Pang Lijuan (n.d) cited in the British Chamber of Commerce in China, 2019, p42)
- The 'Education Action Plan' calls on China's education companies to 'go global' through a number of different means including cooperating with foreign partners to run institutions and programmes. (British Chamber of Commerce in China, 2019, p26)

These initiatives are analogous with the CC underpinning moral and Chinese values and its concept of IU which have been influenced by the OECD's GC Framework (OECD, 2018). Zheng (2020, p738) argues that international understanding of education represents "cross regional, cross-ethnic and cross-cultural understanding are the basis for promoting world peace and security" to counter anti-globalisation. These can be integrated into many subjects taught such as sociology and history, but in primary school the most suitable and convenient place for this is in English Language Teaching (ELT). The CCs have 3 aspects (cultural foundation, independent development and social participation), specified as 6 literacy sets (humanistic literacy, scientific literacy, learning literacy, health literacy, responsibility and creativity) with 18 sub-components, including IU (Wang, 2019). Based on this guidance, CC in English (subject) were developed in 2018. English CC emphasise 4 abilities (language ability, thinking ability, cultural understanding, and learning ability).

## Historical background of movement towards competency-based education in China

The People's Republic of China is the world's largest education system, with 260 million young people supported by 15 million teachers (Pan, 2016, p9). Participation in PISA commenced in 2009 in Shanghai, with further expansion to four parts of China, representing 233 million people in 2015 (Pan, 2016 p8). According to Pan (2016, p12), "The Chinese government assigns a high value to education. It holds the belief that education is the basis of national development and modernisation" with the National Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) providing the central guidance for education reform at all levels.

Specifically, there has been considerable development and growth in the number of primary-aged children in school since 1949 (the inception of the People's Republic of China), when only 20% of this age group attended school (Ministry of Education, 2018) to full primary education today. This increase has been driven by China's educational reforms such as the *Law on Compulsory Education* (1986) and more recently the government's move to make 3 years of pre-school universal by 2020 (Pan, 2016). The latter reform aligns with the United National Development Programme's (UNDP) target of enabling free access to pre-primary school for all (UNDP, 2022). Primary school is for ages 6-11 years, with compulsory junior education to 14 years (Pan, 2016, p10). However, 95% of students continue to 17 years, representing a massive development since 2005 when only 40% progressed (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2005; 2015, cited in Pan, 2016, p10).

Historically, Chinese education is teacher-centred and textbook-driven with both the teacher and the text regarded as authoritative sources of knowledge, as Zhao (2020, p474) argues:

For decades, despite the policy of the education for all-round development of the young, China's basic education had actually been dominated by knowledge-based education since the 1980s, evaluating students only by means of written tests and examinations on each taught subject.

Potts (2003) argues that authoritarian values of Confucianism which continue to influence Chinese education, has entrenched a traditional approach to learning dominated by passive transmission and uncritical assimilation of knowledge, even though in many of Confucius's analects on learning, the importance of 'thinking' and 'questioning' is deemed important. Mansilla and Wilson (2020) add that that intensive rote learning, hard work and diligence required for examinations reflect Chinese cultural views of education being a struggle to be endured on a path towards perfection. Deng and Peng (2021, p85) concur, demonstrating how this has led to a knowledge-based approach to curriculum and assessment:

Confucian morality gradually became collectivist and politicised, affecting policy formulation and thus forming an exam-oriented culture, which stresses the cultivation of virtue and competencies through knowledge accumulation and humanistic literacy. Thus, 'education for morality' became 'education for knowledge', that is, education should teach knowledge first, especially solid, systematic knowledge.

They argue that the accumulation of knowledge became valued more than thinking skills as the latter could lead to individual egotism which is a state to be avoided within Confucian philosophy. Indeed, Deng and Peng (2021, p85) therefore argue that, traditionally:

Education in China is strongly influenced by Confucian culture, in which individuals belong to the community and should serve it and their family, society, and country. In this culture, morality is the fundamental goal of education, taking precedence over skills.

Mansilla and Wilson (2020, p5) note that although the one-child policy has been removed, many families still adhere to this, with parental and educator concern about potentially creating

entitled “little emperors [...] a generation of children who are more focused on their personal needs than on the needs and wants of others.” Therefore, the CC emphasise duty to society rather than the individual and so align with a Chinese historical context of education supporting social and moral excellence with the aspiration of giving “rise to better future societies” (Mansilla and Wilson, 2020, p6).

## Conceptualising competencies within Chinese education

In response to the global challenges identified by the OECD and other international organisations (Zhao, 2020), China has sought to transform its education system with a series of major reforms, with its newly revised Chinese compulsory education curriculum in April 2022 (MoE, 2022) being the most recent. Reforming the curriculum has been regarded as an effective way to change classroom practice historically influenced by Confucianism and to influence student learning to meet the needs of the ever-changing world. This is a substantial change in the underlying educational philosophy and practices under which China's education system has previously operated. It attempts to reflect a more holistic approach to education (Wang, 2019) and aims to cultivate students' 21st century skills - in China this is known as "he xin su yang" (Core Competencies, CC). However, Zhao (2020, p478) questions the translation into English, arguing that 'competency' does not accurately capture the ambition of the project:

In the Chinese language, Suyang literally stresses the level of knowledge and morality, but has less meaning regarding the ability to do something, or capacity to fulfil a kind of task, which the word competence mainly refers to. Furthermore, Chinese scholars define Suyang as "necessary characters and key abilities that students should possess" which also extends the meaning of Suyang in Chinese. However, when they retranslate Suyang into English, they still use the term "competences"<sup>i</sup> to express it, which puts both Chinese teachers and international colleagues in confusion.

Therefore, given the depth of aspiration in the CC, attributes may be considered as being a more appropriate term. Nevertheless, the competencies focus on three elements: cultural (humanistic, scientific knowledge and spirit), autonomous development (learning to learn, cherishing life and sound personality) and social participation (social responsibility, national identity and hands on skills and innovation abilities).

Whilst examination-led education may have been the historical focus of Chinese education, the 2016 reforms (which preceded the most recent in 2022) sought to address this in terms of adapting to the changing global demands of education. As Lin 2016, p3, cited in Deng and Peng, 2021 p85) asserts, the driver was "To improve national strength and win in the fierce global competition" and, as such "China needs to formulate a key competencies framework for student development that reflects national conditions and current needs." Zhao (2020, p475) concurs, arguing that:

competences are important not only because they are key to an individual's successful life but also because they are necessary for maintaining and developing national competitive power on the world stage. Realizing this, the central government felt the need to introduce this 'international' notion to Chinese public education, to elaborate it and advocate it.

One of the key features of the new 2022 Chinese National Curriculum (MoE, 2022) is the emphasis on cultivating students' core competencies as the main goal in compulsory education and notably the shift towards Academic Quality Standards replacing the former Examination Scope.

This rationale of reforming education to compete in the global economy is also found in English education. Successive UK governments have articulated the link between education and the economy such that the relationship between education policy and economic policy is inseparable (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). Many examples can be discerned in policy documents, statements and political speeches. A significant statement of policy in the Department for Education's (2010) *The Importance of Teaching*, a key document given the extent to which its proposals have subsequently been enacted. This white paper exemplifies of how education is regarded as a key driver in the UK for national economic growth:



What really matters is how we are doing compared with our international competitors. That is what will define our economic growth and our country's future. The truth is, at the moment we are standing still while others race past. (Cameron and Clegg in DfE 2010, p3)

## Challenges facing the core competencies

The reforms to education in China have inspired innovative actions in some schools and met with considerable support (Deng and Peng, 2021). However, they argue that historically, implementation of previous reforms has been hampered by insufficient resources and conceptual ambiguity. Furthermore, they claim previous reforms had limited impact on the overall ethos of Chinese education as they failed to break the strong influence of the knowledge based, high stakes examinations. Deng and Peng (2021) further add that this change has been centrally driven so lacks stakeholder input from businesses, thus making personal development more of a priority than specific work focused skills despite the recognised need to compete in a global economy. Indeed, they highlight that influence of government led values on how moral education is defined, especially following the 2017 government *Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Educational System and Mechanism*, are “at the core of the moral education are the core socialist values, and the moral priority of the Chinese framework is to some extent a political priority”. This is evidenced by Education Ministry official Muju Zhu (2018, cited in Deng and Peng, 2021 p90) who stated:

The most important principle of the Ministry of Education's key competencies-based high school curriculum reform is to adhere to the correct political direction.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education (MoE) (2018, p2 cited in Wang, 2019, p242) makes this clear, that education should be about:

Forming a positive worldview, outlook on life, and values; loving the motherland and supporting the Chinese Communist Party; fostering the fine traditional Chinese culture, inheriting the revolutionary culture, and developing the advanced socialist culture; cultivating and practicing the core socialist values.

Deng and Peng (2021, p92) therefore argue that the frameworks emphasis on:

'moral values' can also be interpreted as a form of politically inclined moral education. These all-encompassing moralised and politicised competencies lack focus and fail to respond to Chinese society's – especially the business community's – concerns about global competition.

Global competition and growth in China's economic position was a vision highlighted by President Xi Jinping in September 2013, when he talked about the “creation of an ‘economic belt along the Silk Road’”, which would, “forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region” (Education on the Belt and Road Initiates, 2019, p12).

Deng and Peng (2021, p89) argue that the emphasis on thinking skills of “‘rational thinking’, ‘critical questioning’, ‘courageous inquiry’, ‘reflection’, and ‘problem solving’” represent a strong break from the past towards internationally recognised 21<sup>st</sup> century employability needs. Thus, according to Deng and Peng (2021, p89) the competencies framework goes “beyond the 3Rs and subject knowledge to emphasise skills that are transversal, that is, relating to many fields, including high-order skills and behaviours that enable people to cope with complex problems.”. As such, the framework is regarded as being a holistic development framework rather than focusing on specific skills:

The Chinese framework contains competencies relating to phrases such as ‘humanistic,’

'understanding,' 'concern,' 'aesthetics,' 'spirit,' and 'awareness,' and it considers emotion, attitudes, and values as important elements of the framework. It is a comprehensive competencies framework – concerned with the integrity and completeness of students' capabilities – and it encompasses knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. (Deng and Peng, 2021, p90)

Deng and Peng (2021) suggest there appears to be a strong central determination to implement the competencies framework in China, but the emphasis on morality narrow opportunities to teach other aspects of the framework such as critical thinking and creativity, thus limiting the ability of the reforms to genuinely transform the education system. Classroom teachers are especially exposed to the shortage of teaching materials, guidelines, and training support according to Zhong (2016). Ongoing training is therefore required for teacher progression and understanding of how to develop IU within the CC for primary English. Indeed, Zhao (2020, p478) has concerns about the practical implementation of all-encompassing CC within the education system:

In order to reflect educational ideal of the all-round person, the Core-Suyang framework seems to accommodate so many things that it is difficult to see what is not included in it...If the number of core-competences cannot cover all aspects of wholeness of a person, and hence it is allowed to continue to increase the number of competence items, then it can only lead to imposing more heavy burdens on teachers and students, particularly when these competences are designed into school curriculum in a top-down manner.

### English language teaching within the primary curriculum in China

Pan (2016) summarises education reform since 2001 as attempting to move from a traditional knowledge-based assessment led approach towards a more holistic model. The 2001 New Curriculum Reform highlighted the need to: *“Change from a passive-learning and rote-learning style to an active, problem-solving learning style to improve students’ overall abilities to process information, acquire knowledge, solve problems and learn cooperatively.”* (Basic Education Curriculum Reform Outline 2001, cited in Pan, 2016, p30). Deng and Peng concur (2021), arguing that Chinese education has attempted to make education more focused on practical and creative skills. Zhang (2020) adds that these have, in theory at least, given additional emphasis to the well-being of the child. Zhou (2020, p475) states that: *“the starting point of the current curriculum reform is mainly to realize the educational task of ‘Building Moral Character and Cultivating Humanity’ it put particular focus on educating the young to be an all-round person as the pivot of this reform.”*

The Chinese Ministry of Education (2018, cited in Deng and Peng, 2021, p90-91) illustrates a top-down centralised approach and which emphasises how the 2016 key competencies influence the national curriculum. As such the standards:

- a) clarify the core values and key competencies that students should achieve in each subject
- b) select and reorganise curriculum content
- c) clarify content requirements
- d) establish guidelines for instructional design
- e) provide suggestions for tests and textbooks to implement the key competencies.

The reorganisation affected 20 subjects, giving each one subject specific competencies based around the key competencies (Deng and Peng, 2021). However, they argue that this has been counter-productive as subject specific competencies are narrowed to subject knowledge which then becomes the focus within an assessment-led system (Deng and Peng, 2021, p93). Zhao (2020, p479, 480) also highlights this difficulty, identifying the approach as diverging with many international approaches to competencies which initially inspired the development:

It is to a large extent based on the nature of each subject, hence a limitation for an integrated way of learning or practical problem-solving in a real situation, for example, through a cross-disciplinary approach, or project-based learning approach, which has been designed in many 'international' versions of key-competences. It could be very challenging and even mismatched if every single subject is required to be taught and learned in order to develop a particular kind of core-competence.

Zhao (2020) therefore argues that, although intended to holistically develop the whole child, lists of key competencies at every subject level have the potential to hinder creativity. However, a view that arguably aligns with China's MoE, who, in 2001, issued a document entitled *Guidelines for Promoting English Language Instruction in Primary Schools* mandating the teaching of English language from Grade 3 (Qi, 2016, p3) is that competencies, like learning a language are beneficial for children's educational and broader socio-economic development. Ma (2021, p144) concurs, summarising the reforms as moving the focus of English subject teaching from grammar focused comprehensive language use towards being a means of developing students' qualities and values, cultivating:

students' independent learning, autonomous learning and lifelong learning ability...sense of social responsibility so that students can become talented with patriotic feelings, international vision and world horizon.

Ma (2021) argues that moving away from traditional teacher centred exercise-based approaches to English tuition has the potential to enable student creativity within language learning as well as engage with the CC. Gimatdinova (2018) agrees that the new focus is on stimulating intellectual growth, flexible and critical thinking. These views are underpinned further by Mo and Luo, (2019, p67) who consider that: "English is the most important foreign language in China's education system." They emphasise how the CC of English cover a broad range of personal development: language, cultural, thinking and learning. Similarly, Ma (2021) argues that the move to a more humanist approach to English learning aligns its importance to that of history and Chinese within the overall education system. However, Mo and Luo (2019) echo criticisms of the overall implementation of CC (Deng and Peng, 2021), contending that teaching and learning over-emphasises memorisation for tests in spite of attempts to reform to the Gaokao university entrance system (Pan, 2016). Ma (2021) further adds that some teachers have struggled to understand how to implement the CC within their English teaching as this involves a less teacher-focused and more activity-centred approach. Mo and Luo (2019, p68) therefore claim that constructing an English cultural environment is imperative to help, "promote interactions between students and teachers, reduce students' anxiety in learning English."

## The context of competency development within education in England

In England, there was a major restructuring of the school system with the Education Reform Act (1988) introducing a national curriculum and national testing system. Since then, reforms to the system have continued relentlessly (Hindmarch et al., 2017). Education has been given greater prominence for economic purposes resulting in policymaking creating widespread systemic and institutional change. The 1988 national curriculum organised the curriculum into key stages:

- Key Stage 1 - Foundation year and Years 1 to 2 - for pupils aged between 5 and 7 years old
- Key Stage 2 - Years 3 to 6 - for pupils aged between 8 and 11 years old
- Key Stage 3 - Years 7 to 9 - for pupils aged between 12 and 14 years old,
- Key Stage 4 - Years 10 to 11 - for pupils aged between 15 and 16 years old, and
- Key Stage 5 - Years 12 to 13 - for pupils aged between 17 and 18 years old.

In 2013, the UK Government launched a wholesale review of the National Curriculum (Hindmarch et al., 2017). This review had been triggered by allegedly poor performance of English students in core subjects, when compared to other countries (DfE, 2010). In 2011, for example, 20% of pupils left primary school having not met the expected standards in mathematics and 18% left without the expected English skills (DfE, 2013a). Despite the growing number of high performing education systems around the world clarifying core academic subjects and giving students time to focus on them, England had been slowly moving away from this approach. The reformed national curriculum shifted the focus back on to core subjects.

All primary school children in England are entitled to a free place at a state school. State schools receive funding through their local government (local authority) or directly from the government. The school curriculum for each state-funded primary school in England can be different but must comprise several elements including the national curriculum. The school curriculum must promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental, and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepare pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities, and experiences after they have left school (DfE, 2014). State-funded primary schools also must have a daily act of collective worship and must teach religious education. All schools should also have personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE), in their school curriculum. So, the national curriculum outlines the core knowledge and then individual schools have time outside of the teaching of the national curriculum to develop the other essential skills needed to be a capable citizen, locally, nationally, and globally.

The reformed national curriculum was written in 2013 and launched in 2014 in England (DfE, 2014). For Key Stage 1 and 2 (The Primary stage of Education) the Compulsory National Curriculum subjects now are:

- English (Literacy)
- Maths (Numeracy)
- science
- design and technology
- history
- geography
- art and design
- music
- physical education (PE), including swimming
- computing
- ancient and modern foreign languages (at key stage 2)
- relationships and health education

Primary schools, alongside, relationships and health education, provide religious education (RE, which parents can ask for their children to be removed from the lessons. In addition to the national curriculum, schools often teach:

- personal, social and health education (PSHE)
- citizenship
- modern foreign languages (at key stage 1)
- sex education - parents can ask for their children to be taken out of the lesson

The national curriculum for key stage 1 and 2 (the primary phase) in England has several elements underpinning the content of the individual subjects. These include inclusion, which enshrines into the national curriculum the need to respond to the needs of pupils and overcome barriers for groups of pupils and individuals. This also includes pupils who do not have English as a first language and pupils who have special educational needs.

Citizenship national curriculum at key stage 1 and 2 (Primary phase) includes learning about being part of a community in a local, national, and global sense and how choices and behaviour can affect local, national, and global issues (DfE, 2015). Whilst citizenship is not compulsory, if it is not explicitly taught as a discrete subject, it will either be taught alongside PSHE education or embedded into other subject areas (ACT, 2022). For example, during English lessons, literacy texts may be used that highlight specific citizenship issues. Therefore, now in English primary schools, the core competencies, including GC are delivered through citizenship either as a discrete or embedded subject area and through the school curriculum. The term 'global competency' has yet to be enshrined explicitly into primary education at a national level in England but is implicitly embedded into the school curriculum.

The addition of ancient and modern foreign languages at key stage 2 into the national curriculum in 2014 and the fact that many primary schools (albeit in more advantaged areas) teach modern foreign languages at this stage suggests a move towards GC. The UK government does not specify what languages should be taught. The purpose of foreign languages being studied at primary level is to, "liberate from insularity...deepen understanding of the world" (DfE, 2013b, p1). However, concern was raised in the House of Commons (Long et al., 2020) that the main languages taught in primary schools were French, Spanish, and German and the lesser taught languages, such as Arabic, Japanese and Polish were being impacted by the possibility of withdrawal of qualifications at key stages 4 and 5, making them even less attractive to be studied at primary school. The qualifications were retained but there are issues around the quality of teaching of languages at primary level. The European Commission's Flash Barometer Report (as cited in Long et al., 2020) reported that in 2018, 32% of the UK's 15–30-year-olds felt confident reading and writing in two or more languages, compared to 79% in France, 91% in Germany, and 80% as an average across the EU. To counteract the decline in quality and to add to the languages taught, the government has launched the *National Centre for Excellence for Languages Pedagogy* and the *Mandarin Excellence Programme* (Long et al., 2020, p22).

The regulatory body for schools in England is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), which inspects and regulates schools and is a powerful, non-ministerial body. At present Ofsted does not explicitly reference Global Competency in the Education Inspection Framework (DfE, 2019b), which it uses to inspect schools. Organisations, such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA), (2021) have called on Ofsted to include sustainability and global competency into its inspection framework. BERA argues that, until Ofsted focus explicitly on these areas during inspections, then primary schools are less likely to focus on these areas themselves. This is not to say that the Department for Education (DfE) in England has not started to address these issues more explicitly. A policy paper (DfE (2022a), *Sustainability and Climate Change: A Strategy for the Education and Children's Services Systems*, published in 2022, amongst other issues, seeks to address SDGs through education, to empower young people to be 'global citizens' (DfE, 2022a, p7), albeit the focus is more on climate. This follows the UNESCO Education 2030 (2016) response to the lack of teaching of sustainable development. UNESCO (2016) states that 47% of national curriculum frameworks of 100 countries make no reference to climate change.

Primary schools in England tend not to use textbooks and do not have specific textbooks prescribed by the government. In 2014, only 10% of 10-year-olds (key stage 2) had textbooks issued by their school (DfE, 2014). The demise of textbooks appeared to have been driven by the desire to create differentiated lessons and the cost of updating textbooks. Many maths and English classes have schemes the pupils follow but these are usually printed worksheets, rather than a textbook. There are many resources created by different agencies in the UK to develop GC that are used by primary schools, but they tend to be used as individual resources, rather than a scheme to follow. More recently, schools have started to invest in resources that provide them with workbooks and other supporting materials that fit long, medium- and short-term plans in subjects such as Maths and English. Published schemes such as *Maths No Problem* provide schools with plans detailing teaching and learning sequences which are supported by an associated workbook where the children will

record their workings. This is also seen in the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics with published schemes such as *RWI Inc* and *Sounds Write*. Akin to other resources, these provide schools with detailed lesson plans to follow, associated reading materials and booklets for the children to record their work.

To ensure that GC is taught in primary schools in England, Parmigiani et al. (2021, p2) suggest it be addressed in teacher training. They believe that new teachers (including those in England), leave their teacher training courses “unaware of the need for global competence and unskilled to integrate the teaching of such competencies within curricula.” They further state that GC should not be taught ‘implicitly.’ Parmigiani et al. (2021) are conducting research into how to effectively build GC into teacher training across Europe.

In initial teacher training (ITT) for primary and secondary education in England, a new ITT Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019a) has been developed to replace the Framework of Core Content for Initial Teacher Training (DfE (2016). This new framework outlines the minimum entitlement for all trainee teachers and states, “teachers are the key role models, who can influence the attitudes, values, and behaviours of their pupils” (DfE, 2019, p9). However, Parmigiani, et al. (2021) point out that teachers need to have IU and GC knowledge themselves before being able to pass on the knowledge. The research by Parmigiani and colleagues seeks to develop educators who are globally competent themselves and then can develop this in their pupils.

### Levelling up in Chinese and English Education

The SDG4: Quality Education (UNDP, 2015, p1) seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” Many countries struggle to offer equitable education for all and, according to the UN, across the world the Covid pandemic has set education back by approximately 20 years.

In the English Primary system currently 35% of pupils leaving primary school do not meet the expected standards in maths and English (DfE, 2022b, p1). The DfE (2022b) report entitled *How we are Levelling Up Education all over the Country*, found that, in spite of decades of policies to promote social mobility, where people live continues to correlate with education, social, health and well-being outcomes. The report has identified 55 so-called cold spots across England where schools are identified as weaker than other areas to provide targeted support. Part of the levelling up programme is to ensure that by 2030, 90% of pupils will be leaving primary school with the expected standards in maths and English. The levelling up programme repeatedly mentions globalisation, global cities and citizens and global education (HM Government, 2022).

Although a focus of the government’s attention (Pan, 2016) in China, rural areas continue to lag behind the quality of education in urban areas. One hindrance, from 1958 for children in rural areas, arguably, has been the Chinese household registration (hukou) system which provided residency permits, rendering moving and/or travelling beyond the area of residency difficult for some. Changes to this system in the 1970s and more recently the 2014 reforms have been made with:

China increasing financing for its central and western regions to narrow the educational gap between various areas and do more to renovate rural junior schools in central and western areas and improve the education level in minority regions ... to narrow the urban - rural gap (Ministry of Education, 2016, p1).

Mansilla and Wilson (2020) add that making IU integral to the national curriculum therefore plays a crucial role in providing the opportunity to develop globally required attributes required for a changing world for all children rather than the wealthiest who can afford education overseas.

School tier systems within Chinese cities exist, for example, tier one (inner city); tier two (outer city) tier three (peripheral to a city). Tier one (the more economically advantaged areas) generally has better resources. These resources are often provided by parents thereby making educational equity difficult to obtain. Furthermore, although infrastructure has improved as well as provision of digital resources, Pan (2016) notes that teacher shortages in rural areas is an issue due to limited promotion opportunities. Specifically, though, in the Sichuan area funding has been forthcoming. Wang (2019, p242) concurs, citing a large-scale survey (Cui, 2016b) which found that:

...rural middle schools have poorer performance than urban ones in almost every schooling index, including school curriculum leadership, curriculum planning, teacher engagement, student learning quality, opportunities for learning, social relationships, family support and intervention, and learning outcomes.

As well as China and the UK, income inequality and subsequent unequal life outcomes is a global issue as recognised in UN development Goal 4, to “eliminate gender and wealth disparities” in global education by 2030 (UNDP, 2022).

### Curricula and textbook support for competency-based education in China and England

Within the international movement towards a competency-based approach to education, van Werven et al. (2023) highlight how education systems have specifically sought to integrate global citizenship within their curricula. As with the overall competency-based approach, globalisation provides an important rationale for this, but van Werven et al. (2023) also highlight the need to promote cultural understanding and counter both student and teacher prejudice within what are becoming increasingly diverse classrooms and societies. They demonstrate how GC can be considered from different areas of focus such as politics, morality, economics and the environment. They argue that such activities should avoid stereotyping and promote problem solving/critical thinking skills.

The 2001 reforms made English a mandatory subject from Grade 3, with the 2011 *National English Curriculums for compulsory education* setting national standards for the subject. As illustrated by Mo and Luo (2019, p 67), “English is the most important foreign language in China’s education system.” Mo and Luo (2019) stress how the English CC cover a broad range of personal development namely, language, cultural, thinking and learning. However, Mo and Luo echo criticisms of the overall implementation of CC, arguing that teaching and learning over-emphasises memorisation for tests. They therefore argue that constructing an English cultural environment is imperative to help “promote interactions between students and teachers, reduce students’ anxiety in learning English” (Mo and Luo, 2019 p68).

The most recent OECD snapshot report on education in China (2016, p23) highlighted the importance of textbooks being aligned to expected Ministry standards. Books for use nationally need to be approved through the MoE, with locally used books requiring provincial government approval. Wang (2019, p239) argues that these books are therefore central to the implementation of the CC:

the big idea of core competencies guides the systematic design of curriculum goal, textbooks, teaching, and assessment...Textbooks, as the dominant source of the national curriculum in China, will be subject to reframing and reorganization according to subject core competencies in the next few years...For other subjects, too, both national and local publication agencies in different provinces will need to redesign their textbooks to ensure coherence with the overarching and subject core competencies.



## Teacher professional development in China in relation to the CC

Pan (2016, p28) stresses the value of teaching within Chinese society noting:

Traditionally, teaching has been a very respectable profession in China. In 1985, the government proclaimed 10 September a holiday – annual Teachers’ Day. In 1986, the Law on Compulsory Education pronounced that the entire society should respect teachers.

Pan (2016, p28) highlights various strategies to support teacher development in rural areas such as graduate teaching programmes and a requirement for some urban based teachers to work in rural schools for short periods to share practice. In terms of teacher development, the 1995 Regulations on the Qualifications of Teachers helped to standardise requirements for the profession (Pan, 2016, p18) and more recently performance management has meant it is not necessarily a job for life:

The tradition of permanent employment, what was known conventionally as the “Iron Rice Bowl,” has been challenged by the introduction of teacher contracts. Now teachers must, according to their terms of employment, satisfactorily meet regular inspections and appraisals.

Additionally, teachers from pre-school to secondary/vocational need to re-register certification every five years which involves ethics, physical and mental health evaluations as well as 360 hours of professional development (Ministry of Education, 2013 cited in Pan, 2016, p19). Teachers are also involved in a Teaching Study Group System in every school with regular lesson observations and evaluations, with Pan (2015 p24) arguing that: “These groups play an important role in educational research based on practical experiences.”

The above commitment to ongoing development may enable implementation of the key competencies, though Deng and Peng (2021, p93) remain sceptical, arguing, “most teachers do not have a clear idea of the concept of key competencies, nor are they prepared to teach them. They are accustomed to direct instruction methods rather than to student-centred methods.” Deng and Peng (2021) therefore contend the examination system for higher education (Gaokao) has not substantially changed meaning that teachers (and schools) still be incentivised to focus on subject knowledge (‘teaching to the test’) rather than the broader, more holistic competencies. Wang (2019) concurs that the Gaokao may hinder implementation of the competencies but argues that if high stakes assessments are to be retained, they need to be redesigned to incorporate them in greater depth. Wang (2019, p241) purports:

Both teachers and students want to make sure these competencies are applicable in teaching and eventually measurable in the exams. Yet it is often the case that exam design is not coherent with school learning, particularly for high-stakes examinations like the Gaokao...As for students and parents, there seems to be a dilemma between competencies-based education and exam-preparation education. Parents, students, and even some educators think students could wait until university education to develop the more vague and long-term competencies, as if it is a zero-sum mechanism in which effort and time spent on competencies-based education compromise students’ potential academic performance.

Most often, as noted by Machin et al. (2021), new learning is a slow evolution, and one that is influenced by political diktat and socio-cultural dispositions. Changes to classroom practice and organisational cultural norms require a sustained environment fostered by those creating the change and the time to become encultured. Indeed, Zhao (2020, p479) argues that the complexity of the competencies may stifle teacher creativity and autonomy:



When the extensive list of prescribed competence items is transformed into many detailed curriculum and teaching objectives, there is little space left for teachers' professional judgment concerning what is educationally desirable in a particular educational situation. Teaching by simply focusing on and sticking to an extensive list of competence items does not always work for every student in every time and place, therefore teachers' reflections and professional judgments are always needed. With little space for teachers' engagement in professional judgment about teaching practice, a fragmented teaching process is likely to take place and hence threatens the educating for wholeness.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that primary education has not been strongly re-orientated – an issue which this report has sought to illuminate in relation to English language teaching in Chengdu.

## Conclusion

As has been emphasised in this report, both China and UK governments and policymakers have sought to address the challenges of globalisation specifically in relation to the notion of a global economy, a knowledge-based society and global competition. However, there are clearly difference in the cultural and political context of both countries which have impacted on approaches to curricula and the implementation of IU and GC. China has developed a CC framework which explicitly defines and attempts to integrate the competencies or skills that it believes its students should possess. In England this is less explicit with IU and GC being embedded in the national curriculum, but which are less visible. Although both cite moral values as being at the heart of their national curriculum, China's framework differs from England in that it gives prominence to these as well as more specific guidance in line with its underpinning political ideology. Both countries recognise the value of learning an additional language lies beyond simple communicative utility but in developing a broader range of values necessary for working in an interconnected world. Although writing specifically about China's role for English language learning, the following statement surely also applies more generally to the role of language learning in a globalised world: *"English learning includes not only the learning and mastering of language knowledge and skills, but also the cultivation and improvement of learning ability, thinking quality, and cultural awareness."* Ma (2021, p148)

In order to develop International Understanding in China there needs to be continuing development of the examinations system towards one which values social skills and attributes of the CC as well as ability to retain core knowledge and understanding. Without this, teachers have less incentive to make the pedagogical shift towards more active student-centred learning and holistic development implied by the CC. Whilst some of the authors covered here critiqued the CC for being too prescriptive, perhaps the opposite is an issue within the English system where global competencies are not explicitly stated. This may be changing in part with the DfE's *Sustainability and Climate Change* (DfE, 2022a) white paper although there has been a somewhat patchy record of education green and white papers implementation (Hindmarch et al., 2017) since the largely actioned *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). As with China, what is assessed is what is valued so without more explicit coverage of GC within the English inspection and assessment framework there is limited incentive for teachers to adapt practice. Global education comparisons are not without controversy; with serious questions over their validity, attribution of causation without sufficient consideration of differing national contexts and potential to justify rather than inform policy change (Alexander 2012; Auld and Morris, 2014). Nevertheless, the participation of both countries in PISA indicates that governments value their findings. Therefore, it would be logical for England to participate in the Global Competence assessments as well as the current subject based literacy, maths and science assessments to add to their understanding of students' ability to navigate the world successfully in a post-Brexit 'global' Britain. Similarly, in order to help China understand the extent to which it is able to provide equal

opportunity for students in rural areas in comparison with urban ones, expanding areas engaging with the PISA assessments may help to identify success and further needs within the country as well as providing comparison with the international community.

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<sup>i</sup> The words 'competences' and 'competencies' are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature. For purposes of this report, the authors refer to 'competencies' as per the OECD Competency Framework which displays Core Competencies with the exception for some direct quotations where the cited authors refer to competences and their original spelling has been retained.