

CHINA

Universities told to stagger opening dates

Spring semester to start online for some students due to epidemic risks

By ZOU SHUO
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The Ministry of Education has asked universities to stagger their spring semester opening dates and make preparations for online schooling.

In a recent notice, the ministry said universities should make early plans for the spring semester after fully considering the COVID-19 epidemic situation and their teaching schedule.

They should prepare enough equipment, conduct emergency drills and strictly implement epidemic prevention and control measures, the ministry said, adding that all people and items entering universities must be checked.

Universities should also conduct routine nucleic acid tests on key groups of people and the environment and frequently sterilize and disinfect important venues, it added.

Wang Dengfeng, head of the ministry's department of physical, health and arts education, said the ministry has asked all universities to fully restore normal classroom teaching for the spring semester with effective epidemic control measures in place.

Local education authorities can make adjustments to opening dates based on their epidemic situation, and universities in medium- and high-risk areas need to delay the opening of the spring semester, he said at a news conference.

Education authorities and universities should make preparations to start online teaching whenever necessary, he said.

Teachers and students at all universities should report their health conditions, whereabouts and contacts to their university every day during the winter vacation, he added.

At least 16 universities in Beijing have announced that they will

postpone the start of spring semester activities on campus for several weeks and resort to online teaching in the meantime.

Beijing Jiaotong University said in a notice that while the semester will open on March 1, the first three weeks will be conducted online.

Offline teaching will start on March 22 and students will be able to return to campus in batches from March 16 to 21, it said.

Beijing Normal University will start the new semester online on Feb 22 and students can only return to campus after March 16, it said.

Students who need to return to campus early can apply to return on Feb 21 and 22 after getting approval from the university and showing a negative nucleic acid test result obtained within the previous three days, it said.

Sun Chang, 22, a senior student at Beijing Jiaotong University, said she has gained a great deal of experience in online schooling after spending the whole spring semester last year studying online due to the epidemic.

Teachers and students have established efficient communication channels online and Sun said she didn't think she missed much through online learning.

Zhao Yixuan, a senior student at University of Science and Technology Beijing, said although the university has delayed offline teaching by three weeks from March 1 to 22, he does not feel it will have much impact.

"I can write the graduation dissertation at home and the decision was made to ensure the safety of students," the 23-year-old said.

"Many graduates were unable to return to school last year and three weeks is nothing, as long as I can have a proper graduation experience."

Spring job fair



People congregate at a job fair on a square in Xianju county in Taizhou, Zhejiang province, on Wednesday. The first recruitment fair of the year in Xianju, it attracted more than 100 companies offering nearly 3,000 positions in industries including services and manufacturing.

WANG HUABIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Colleges cater to stay put students

By ZOU SHUO

On Lunar New Year's Eve, Zhao Tianyang, a senior student at Renmin University of China, put up a pair of couplets and calligraphy depicting *fu*, the Chinese character for good luck, on her dormitory door.

"It's my first time spending the holiday away from home, and rituals need to be preserved," the 24-year-old from Jilin province said.

Zhao wrote the *fu* herself along with her wishes for a smooth graduation process in the new year. The couplets were written by calligraphers at an event organized by the university to celebrate the Little New Year, which usually occurs one week before Spring Festival.

With the country encouraging people to stay put during the year's most important traditional Chinese holiday to contain COVID-19 risks, college students in China who remained on their campuses found new ways to celebrate the festival with classmates and faculty and with their families online.

The number of students spending the holiday on campus was expected to quadruple this year compared with an average year, said Wang Dengfeng, a senior official with the Ministry of Education. Universities and colleges were asked to implement antivirus measures, ensure students' well-being, and provide

for their study and leisure needs during the holiday, he said.

Luo Jianhui, director of the department of student affairs at Renmin, said 1,181 students chose to stay on campus during Spring Festival, and the university took measures to make sure the students could enjoy a safe and unforgettable holiday away from home.

As Chinese people traditionally hold a family banquet on Lunar New Year's Eve, university canteens provided free, specially designed meals that night and the next day for all students remaining on campus, he said.

The university library, classrooms, sports facilities and hospitals stayed open during the winter vacation, and all students received free mobile phone data packages and gifts, he said.

Zhao said her gift package, which she received before Spring Festival, included snacks, soft drinks, a calendar, an ox doll and some epidemic prevention and control materials.

"All the arrangements make me feel at home, and it feels good to feel the warmth of the school and have people care for us," she said.

After ordering hotpot takeout and collecting a free meal from a university canteen, Zhao celebrated Lunar New Year's Eve with one of her roommates, watching the *CCTV Spring Festival Gala* on an iPad.

"Although there was only two of

us and the screen is much smaller, there was comfort in knowing that my family was also watching the gala," she said.

Many Beijing universities found ways to create entertaining, safe and warm environments for students during the holiday.

Peking University launched a 24-hour hotline, designated contacts and arranged one-on-one chats for students and teachers staying on campus during the festival, it said.

Beijing Jiaotong University also offered gifts and free meals on Lunar New Year's Eve to students and asked teachers and student counselors to keep in touch with students, the university said.

Wei Jiayi, a PhD candidate at Renmin from Shanxi province, said he chose to stay on campus to write his dissertation. He kept a very busy schedule during the winter vacation, doing research and reading literature during the day and exercising at night.

"It's just the normal school life for us doctoral students. Nothing changes," said Wei, 27.

Wei said teachers and student counselors talked with him often to see if he had any needs, and he participated in various activities organized by the university to celebrate the Spring Festival holiday.

"My parents sent me some local food, I held video chats with them via WeChat every day," he said.

Growth: Jobs considered possible target

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"This base-effect-driven high growth rate would not reflect the real condition of China's economy. The government therefore can consider not setting a growth target this year that could distort normal economic policymaking," Kang said.

Moreover, global uncertainties in pandemic control and economic recovery linger, reducing the necessity for China to set a GDP growth target as well, Kang added.

A central bank expert recently said it is advisable for China to not use GDP growth targets as a way to evaluate local governments' performance, thereby avoiding officials from setting high targets and piling up debt.

China should instead use employment stability and inflation control as the main targets of macro policy, which is a common practice

in many market economies, Ma Jun, a member of the People's Bank of China's monetary policy committee, said at a seminar in January.

But other experts said abandoning the GDP target this year is not appropriate as it is hard to find alternative indicators to guide policymaking, especially given the lack of comprehensive statistics for employment.

Most provincial regions in China have disclosed their expectation targets of gross regional output growth for 2021, with the figures being at least 6 percent year-on-year, according to media reports.

While it remains to be seen whether the country will forgo the GDP growth target this year, experts said China's economic recovery is well on track, on the back of rallying consumption, recovering investment in the manufacturing sector, and resilient export growth.

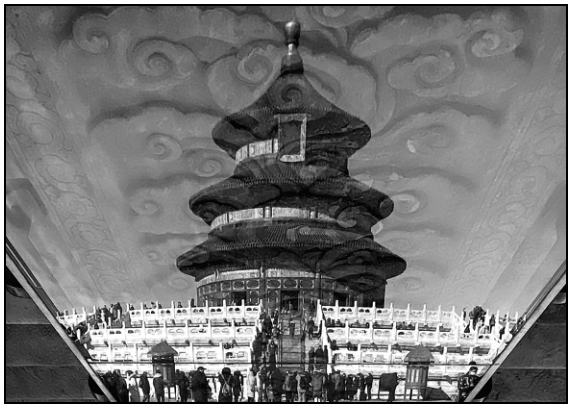
Cheng Shi, chief economist at ICBC International, said the earlier containment of COVID-19 will help China maintain its edge in exports for some while, contributing to the country's economic rebound this year. The International Monetary Fund has projected China's GDP growth to hit 8.1 percent this year.

The latest figures from the European Union's statistical office have pointed to the resilience of China's exports, as the EU's exports and imports from China both increased last year despite the pandemic.

China became the EU's main trade partner in 2020, with the bloc's imports from China up by 5.6 percent year-on-year to 383.5 billion euros (\$462.5 billion) while exports are up by 2.2 percent to 202.5 billion euros, Eurostat said on Monday.

Xinhua contributed to this story.

Free attraction



Tourists visit the Temple of Heaven, reflected in glass, in Beijing on Tuesday. The capital opened 10 popular tourist attractions, including the Temple of Heaven, free of charge during the Spring Festival holiday to meet the leisure needs of people who stayed put in the city to reduce COVID-19 transmission risks.

LIU PING / FOR CHINA DAILY

BRI: Status can be changed via environmental protection efforts

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The coalition will also conduct pilot programs to gain information on how to further develop green solutions for future Belt and Road Initiative projects.

International financial institutions often classify projects based on their environmental impact in order to improve environmental risk management. Without a similar system for all outbound investment, the Chinese government can only impose weak restraints on the environmental behavior of enterprises operating abroad, Li said.

Due to the absence of such a system, many enterprises involved in

the BRI have yet to develop adequate environmental risk management procedures, he said.

"With different environmental and climatic conditions, some BRI countries have very sensitive ecosystems (to deal with)," he said.

Li said the coalition launched a study on a "greenlight system" to evaluate BRI investments and published a report in December following the completion of the first phase of the study. The report recommended classifying BRI projects into three categories — red, yellow and green, in accordance with their environmental performance.

Projects at risk of causing "significant and irreversible" environmental

damage will be listed as red. Yellow projects are environmentally neutral with moderate impacts, in which any residual harm can be mitigated.

Those with no significant negative impacts and positive contributions to at least one environmental aspect will fall into the green category.

A project's status can be changed through further environmental protection efforts, the report said.

It also suggested establishing an "incentive and punishment" mechanism to guide financial institutions in accordance with environmental risks and impacts.

Li said the coalition will carry out more case studies and look at specific industrial sectors as it tries to

come up with practical solutions for government bodies, financial institutions, enterprises and other stakeholders involved in BRI projects.

However, Li said it will almost be inevitable that infrastructure and energy projects will have negative impacts on local environments.

"Our second phase study will give priority to how to reduce these impacts ... and provide projects of different categories green solutions to address their potential environmental hazards and upgrade their classifications," he said.

Initiated in April 2019 by the ministry and partners from home and abroad, the coalition has more than 150 partners, including BRI

countries' environmental authorities, research institutes and NGOs.

The coalition, which has its secretariat based at the ministry's Foreign Environmental Cooperation Center, was formed at the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

Li said the coalition will also work on environmental management guidelines in key industrial sectors to encourage companies to follow international practices in their overseas investments.

It will also strive to develop evaluation tools that are simple, convenient and easy to execute for companies, financial institutions and other stakeholders.

FROM THE GRASSROOTS

Relocation helps make reunion sweeter

By ZHAO RUIXUE in Jinan
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Liu Chunming, a farmer in Sanhe village, Heze, Shandong province, was looking forward to Spring Festival more than ever this year.

"This year the 11 members of my family were able to gather together in a spacious and well-equipped house to celebrate the festival together," Liu said, adding that he could not have imagined such a sweet life in the past.

Liu's family had lived for generations on a plain between the Yellow River and its dikes, where the river deposits silt when it floods.

During the annual flood season in July and August, the villagers' farmland and houses were at huge risk of flooding, which lowered crop yields and necessitated expensive repairs. Sometimes, the impact could even push them back into poverty.

Data from the Yellow River conservancy authorities shows that over 600,000 people used to live on the river's flood plain in Shandong, which covers 170,200 hectares.

Many had to borrow money to rebuild their houses. Then, as soon as their debts were cleared, the river would flood again.

"My previous house was shabby and small," Liu said. "Although we looked forward to Spring Festival reunions, we couldn't get together because we didn't have enough room."

Liu moved into a new house in September thanks to a relocation project launched by governments in Shandong to protect residents from flooding and lift them out of poverty. The project was completed last year.

More than 600,000 people in the province have relocated to new houses in safer locations, Li Ganjie, governor of Shandong, said when delivering the government's work report at the fifth session of the 13th Shandong Provincial People's Congress this month.

Supported by subsidies from the provincial government, Liu's family paid 146,000 yuan (\$22,600) for two houses of 144 square meters each and another of 72 square meters.

"We have a warmer house, which is not only equipped with a heating system, but was built with thermal insulation," he said, adding that in his old houses, it was colder inside than outside at noon.

Local governments have also built workshops, kindergartens, community service centers and schools in the new communities.

At one workshop, Wang Feng'e was making a blanket late last month.

She said she was initially worried about having to pay more for water and electricity after relocating, but her new job near the community offered better pay, dispelling her concerns.

After practicing how to make blankets for around a month, Wang can now make one in 10 days and earns about 2,000 yuan a month.

Su Liying, who works in the same workshop, gave up her job in an auto parts factory in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, to return to her hometown last year.

"I have a good house to live in and can earn the same as I would working in other cities," Su said. "More importantly, I can accompany my child."

Her 10-year-old son is studying at the primary school in the new community. Every morning, Su and her son leave home together, and she goes to work after seeing him enter school. After school, he goes to the workshop to wait for her to get off work.

"He likes his school. Even during the winter vacation, he wants to play in the school's playground," Su said.

Liu started preparing for this year's Spring Festival after the Laba Festival, which fell on Jan 20. He had four couplets ready for his two sons to decorate their new houses for Spring Festival.

"They live in a good era," he said. "Their lives will be better and better, as the words on the couplets indicate."

Fang Zheng contributed to this story.