Terms of Reference

Qualitative Study on Out-of-school Adolescents in China

Assignment Title	Qualitative Study on Out-of-school Adolescents in China
Requesting Section & Unit	Education
Physical Presence	No need to travel to UNICEF office but may involve travelling to selected provinces to collect data and to Beijing for stakeholder reporting/verification.
Expected Contract Start Date	03 June 2024
Expected Contract End Date	31 May 2025
Contract Functional Area	Programme Management
Distribution of Bid	Local

1. **Context and Purpose**

Out-of-school adolescents (OOSA) are young people aged 10-19 who have either never started or dropped out later from the formal education. As documented by UNICEF, over 250 million adolescents worldwide were not in school due to challenges such as poverty, disabilities, migrant status, and gender.

Over the past two decades, Chinese government has achieved a remarkable reduction in OOSA with the universalization of compulsory education and a significantly improved access to senior secondary education (including secondary vocational education and technical training). Specifically, the retention rate over 9-year compulsory education has boasted to 95.5% (2022), and the attendance rate of senior secondary aged children was 92.4% (2020). However, in a nation as populous as China, a 4.5% (i.e., approximately 749,000) incompletion still represents a significant cohort of children who were enrolled but did not complete the compulsory education. Correspondingly, a 7.6% unattendance rate indicates a considerable number of senior secondary aged children who were not attending any level of education, with a much lower attendance rate among rural adolescents aged 19 (i.e., 58.2%). With 2020 census highlighted a significant decline in school attendance rate since the age of 15 (compared with younger children), approximately 3.16 million children aged 15-17 were out of school.

Date back to the past two decades, OOSA has been explained mainly by the low quality of Chinese public education, especially in rural areas and lower-tier cities. Challenges mainly included insufficient funding, inadequate facilities, outdated curricula, and poor teacher training. To mitigate these barriers, Chinese government has implemented many practices with public expenditure on education substantially increased. Apart from the nine-year compulsory education policy that ensures free tuition for all students over six nationwide , the dropout control policy issued in 2017 has further consolidated the retention rate of the compulsory education. Meanwhile, Chinese government has expanded the vocational education since 2012, with the major reform in 2019 enrolled additional 4,133,000 students over the past three years. In general, these efforts reduced the rate of OOSA in China.

However, despite the strong institutional guarantees for compulsory education and the expansion of vocational education, dropout remains an issue in China with a significant phenomenon

nowadays. "Self-abandoning" culture and boredom of schooling had been increasingly reported as factors for students' hidden dropout. Decreased educational expectations has also been increasingly reported among rural or low-income Chinese parents. Therefore, critical questions arise spanning over both the lower and upper secondary education phases: Why do adolescents aged below 15 remain outside of the compulsory education, despite the strong institutional guarantees for compulsory education in place? Why do adolescents between 15-19 didn't progress to post compulsory education despite of favour government policies?

This assignment defines the initiation of a qualitative study and aims at selecting a proficient research team dedicated to thoroughly examining, profiling, and comprehending the dynamics surrounding out-of-school children and adolescents through the secondary education phase in China. The purpose of study is to strengthen UNICEF's understanding of the issue to inform programming design and implementation in China, targeted at enhanced support for the education and skill acquisition of those OOSAs.

Gaining a deeper understanding of these issues is also vital for UNICEF's projects in China with the strategic focus to improve equity and access to quality education. UNICEF's vision is to prepare young individuals into active and contributive citizens, bridging secondary education and vocational training to employment opportunities and entrepreneurship. By infusing skill development throughout the educational journey and secondary vocational training, and broadening alternative educational avenues for OOSAs, we aim to equip young people with the skills required for both life and their future careers.

2. Objective

The primary beneficiaries of this study should be UNICEF and its government partners. Under its partnership with China's education and human resource authorities, UNICEF China is now envisaging novel and specific programme designs to help address the out-of-school challenges, as a timely response to reduce out-of-school adolescents and prepare them with equitable and equal education opportunities. To achieve this, UNICEF is looking forward to work with a reputable research institute on a qualitative study to:

1) Document the profiles of OOSAs.
2) Establish the barriers that drive or keep them out-of-school.
3) Provide a broad evidence basis for policy recommendations, distil action points that can potentially lead to the development of high-quality interventions.

3. Methodology

Seven Dimensions of the Exclusion Model and Demographic Scope

UNICEF employs the seven-dimension exclusion model of the Global Out-of-School Children Initiative (OOSCI) to categorize OOSAs within each specific context of education exposure (Figure 1). The model categorised OOSA into 7 groups from childhood to teenage. As depicted by the framework, there are two types of education exclusion– failure to enrol in school and risk of dropping out. Although the institution of compulsory education can substantially alleviate the risks associated with failure to enrol in the compulsory education (DE1, DE2, DE3, and DE4),

completely eradicating the risks associated with dropout and transition failure (DE4, DE5, DE6, and DE7) poses a much more complex challenge. This is partly due to the covert nature of these risks, which can often be concealed by limited data availability.
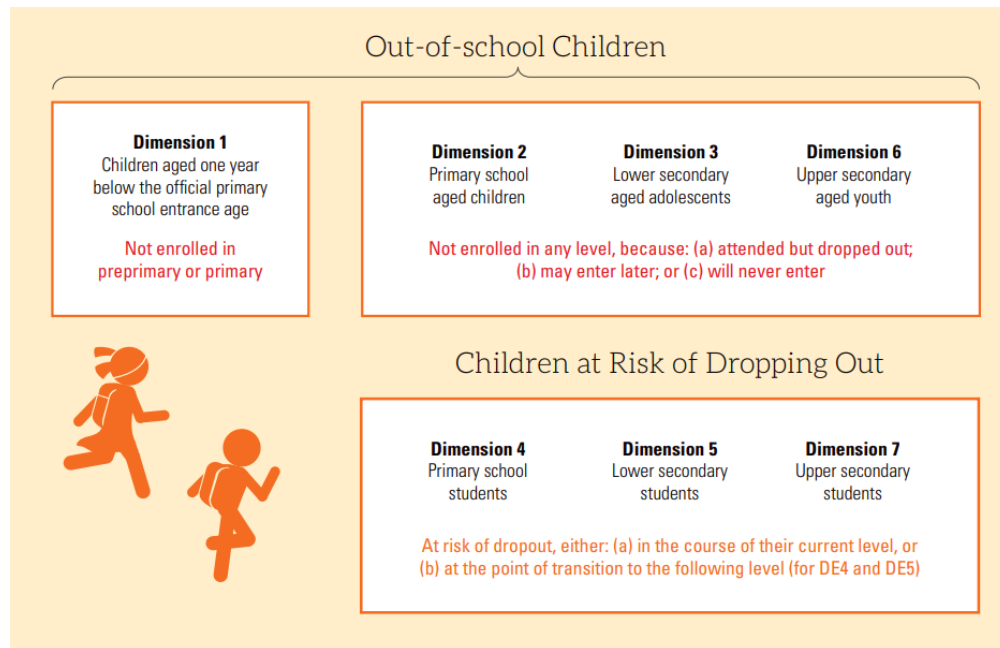

Figure 1. The Seven Dimensions of Exclusion

As depicted by the framework, there are two types of education exclusion– failure to enroll in school and risk of dropping out. Although the institution of compulsory education can substantially alleviate the risks associated with failure to enroll in the compulsory education (DE1, DE2, DE3, and DE4), completely eradicating the risks associated with dropout and transition failure (DE4, DE5, DE6, and DE7) poses a much more complex challenge. This is partly due to the covert nature of these risks, which can often be concealed by limited data availability.

Study Questions
This study intends to shed light on five types of adolescents, spanning Dimensions 3 to 7 (age 12 to 19 in China's context). Through this comprehensive and in-depth profiling, we aim to unravel not only the educational trajectories of these children (girls and boys), but also the critical educational decisions and aspirations of them and their families. To do so, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

In relation to the overall out-of-school issue over the secondary education:
      1) Who are the out of school adolescents (in Chinese context)?
      2)What are the primary barriers preventing (re-)entry into formal secondary education?
      3)What alternative learning pathways do OOSAs in China typically pursue once they face insufficient access to formal secondary education?
      4)What ongoing efforts are being made at school and community levels to mitigate the negative implications of dropout and the risks associated with it?

For children in the lower secondary age (12-14 years old):

1)What are the risks affecting the transition from primary to lower secondary education? (DE3 and DE4)
2)What are the causes and/or risks of dropout for those who attend lower secondary school? (DE5)
3)What are the barriers that prevent transitioning to upper secondary education? (DE5 and DE6)

For adolescents in the upper secondary age (15-19 years old):
1)What are the causes or risks of dropout for those who attend upper secondary school? (DE7)
2)What are the barriers for re-entry into formal upper secondary education for those who have left school? (DE6 and DE7)
3)What do those have dropped out do? What are their employment characteristics (turnover, sector, compensation, etc.)? What are their skill limitations, both in terms of hard skills and life skills? (DE6 and DE7)

Data Collection
The data is suggested to be collected via interviews, focus groups and case studies, etc. to gather rich, detailed insights into human experiences and social phenomena. The target sample size of OOSAs is suggested to be set at around 30-40 cases, which will require a detailed profile for 6-8 observations from each dimension. The observations shall consider factors such as gender, ethnicity, rural/urban, school levels (as mentioned in the study questions above), adolescents with disabilities, adolescents affected by migrations as well as factors at individual, family, and community level. This ensures a thorough comprehension of the diverse challenges and factors influencing the issue. Furthermore, it is paramount to engage key informants from local education authorities, schools, communities, and parents of OOSAs to enhance triangulation.

UNICEF suggests initiating data collection from 3 to 5 select provinces and extend over an eight-month duration. For example, the 2020 census indicates that Henan, Guangxi, Sichuan, Guangdong, and Guizhou have the most rural children left behind; while Guangdong, Henan, Shandong, Jiangsu, Hebei, and Sichuan have the most migrant children. Among these highlighted provinces, Guangdong, Sichuan, Henan, Hebei, and Shandong also have the largest child population bases. The 2020 census also indicates that Xizang, Qinghai, Yunnan, Shanghai, and Guangdong have the lowest senior secondary attendance rate. The research team can select initial data collection provinces from these provinces of interest but is also encouraged to propose additional destinations with clear rationale-to-select.

4. Key Deliverables and Proposed Timeline

The study comprises three core phases: **inception**, **data collection**, and **final reporting**. The inception report signifies the official start of the project, detailing the planned study activities. In the data collection phase, the team will gather information as outlined in the inception report. Post data collection, a preliminary presentation will be conducted for validation and initial stakeholder engagement. Once feedback is assimilated, a conclusive study report will be prepared with an in-depth and holistic overview of the results, analysis of the key findings, as well as recommendations. This report will be meticulously structured for publication, prioritizing

impactful outcomes, and offering practical recommendations and actionable insights from the findings.

In accordance with this three-phase design, the research team should deliver:

Phase	Deliverables	Elements	Estimated Time
Inception	1. Inception report 2. Toolkits	1. Research descriptive 2. Methodology 3. Literature review 4. Data collection plan 5. Work plan 6. Toolkits 7. Ethical clearance 8. Roster and role	Two months
Data Collection	1. Validation workshop & PowerPoint presentation	1. Primary round of data collection 2. Follow-up rounds of data collection. 3. Validation PowerPoint presentations on data collected, method used, and initial findings.	Four months
Final Reporting	1. Final Report 2. Executive summary	1. Final research report (English and Chinese) 2. Executive summary (English and Chinese)	Two months

5. Qualifications

Qualifications for the team leader
The leader should be able to implement a high-quality oversight of the research and be responsible for the timely delivery of deliverables. To do so, the team leader should be with:
- A master's or preferably doctorate degree in sociology, social science, education, or related fields from a reputable institution.
- At least 5 years of professional experience in leading qualitative research, related to education and education policy, out-of-school children, migrant, gender, child protection, digital learning, or related fields.
- (Peer-review) publications or research reports on out-of-school students, migrant and education, education policy and reform, or related fields.
- Experience in (leading) education related development programmes and projects, particularly with the UN/ in China and other developing country is a distinct advantage.
- Experience in research project management, particularly in a multi-stakeholder setting.

The team leader should be responsible for:
- Designing and implementing the study.
- Recommending core team members; managing the research team.
- Ensuring deliverables and their quality at each checkpoint agreed with UNICEF.

- Maintaining ethical standards throughout the study and obtaining ethical clearance for data collection.
- Articulating and presenting the outcomes of the study to relevant stakeholders.

6. Management and Payment

The awarded service provider will enter a service contract with UNICEF. UNICEF's procedures, ethical standards and requirements on research, studies, and evaluations (hereinafter referred to as RSEs) shall guide and be referred to during the whole process of the service. UNICEF prefers a routine reviewing mechanism to uphold the quality of deliverables and maintain the progress of the project. Subsequently, the evaluation of the institution/team's performance will be based on the quality of produced outputs. Quality assurance checking point will include but limited to:

- Compliance with the established timelines.
- Compliance with UNICEF's RSEs standards.
- Compliance with ethical UN standards related to reporting on children and adolescents.
- Responsibility and communication.

Payment will be divided against the agreed deliverables upon satisfactory acceptance by UNICEF and its partner.

Payment	Deliverable
25%	• Inception reports and toolkits
35%	• Completion of data collection • Validation PowerPoint presentations on data, method, and initial findings
40%	• Final report (both English and Chinese version) • Final executive summary

7. Proposal and Proposal Evaluation

Interested institutions are invited to submit a proposal (Technical and Financial) based on the Terms of Reference. The proposal language can be either in English or Chinese (in case a Chinese version is submitted, there must be an English executive summary outlining the key methodologies).

The proposal should consist of two separate proposals.
Technical Proposal, including:
- Understanding of the objectives and its relevance to Chinese context
- Description of the proposed methodology and technical approach for the assignment
- Work plan with timeframe for deliverables
- Portfolio of the institution/team with examples of previous work on similar projects in the last 5-10 years.
- List of core members with profiles and intended role of each team member, preferable with individual CVs.

Financial Proposal (Budget) shall include, but not be limited to:

- Price schedule with expert fees breakdown on individual fee rates, number of working days by category and by individual
- Estimation of direct expenses. Please only include expenses directly occurred by the research team (for example, research team transportation, accommodation, travel allowance). These will be reimbursed based on actual expenditure upon mutual agreement.

Where possible, please use the following table in preparing the price schedule. The format includes specific examples under expert costs and expenses, which may or may not be applicable – they can be changed to reflect the actual needs of the project.

PRICE SCHEDULE				
DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY/ITEM		NUMBER OF STAFF	UNIT RATE	ESTIMATED AMOUNT
1.	EXPERT COSTS			
1.1	Desktop research			
1.2	Services in field			
1.3	Data analysis and reporting			
2.	OUT OF POCKET EXPENSES			
2.1	Travel (transportation and accommodation)			
2.2	Per diem allowances			
2.3	Communications			

*Continue separately as necessary

Proposal Evaluation
Each proposal will be evaluated against a weight allocation of 70 for the technical proposal and 30 for the commercial (financial) proposal. The total maximum obtainable points are 100.

Technical components (total of 70 points)
- Overall response-10 points
  - Overall understanding of assignment and completeness of response-5 points
  - Overall concord between ToR requirements and proposal- 5 points
- Proposed methodology and approach -30 points
  - Relevance and quality of proposed research methodology and technical approach including consultation strategy-20 points.
  - Project timelines and workplan for delierables-10 points

- Experience and qualifications of institution and key personnel-30 points
  - Institution profile (establishment, facilities, personnel, financial capacity)-5 points
  - Professional profile of team leader and core experts/team members, highlighting relevant project and academic experience including recent publications, and intended role in the assignment- 15 points.
  - Quality of personnel and suitability for the assignment - 10 points

Financial component (total of 30 points)
- Proposals passing the minimum technical pass score (49 points-70% of the maximum points obtainable for technical proposal) will continue into the financial proposal evaluation.
- The lowest price proposal will be awarded the full score assigned to the commercial proposal.
- The recommendation for award of contract will be based on the best combination of technical and financial score.
- The evaluation team will select the proposal, which is of high quality, clear and meets the stated requirements and offers the best combination of technical and financial score.

8. Ethics

Given that this study involves data collection from children and adolescents, based on UNICEF Procedures on Ethical Standards of Research, Evaluation, Data Collection, and Analysis (2021), an external ethical review is needed. This review should be conducted during the inception phase and be utilized to justify ethical considerations in aspects such as data collection plans, toolkits, data management, etc., prior to undertaking any concrete data collection activities. The ethical review will serve as an essential check to protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of the adolescent participants, particularly given the sensitive nature of some out-of-school issues.

Wherever applied, the research team shall also adhere to UNICEF's policies and guidance on child safeguarding and the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA).

Annex 1: Global Out-of-School Children Initiative (OOSCI) Operational Manual
Annex 2: National Bureau of Statistics of China, UNICEF China, UNFPA China. (2023). What the 2020 Census Can Tell Us About Children in China.
Annex 3: UNICEF's Booklet for Research, Studies, and Evaluations
Annex 4: UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis (2021)