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Mainstreaming Chinese in the public education secondary sector: issues and challenges

Panel: Chinese language teaching in primary and secondary schools in Europe

The teaching of Chinese has grown exponentially around the world in the last 20 years. Expansion has happened across all education sectors. This paper addresses one aspect of this expansion: the teaching of Chinese in secondary education. On foot of many recent initiatives around the world, it is now possible to take stock, draw inferences and look forward. Drawing on the example of one country (Ireland) and referencing work from elsewhere, the paper seeks to pinpoint some key issues to be addressed.

Evidence of effectiveness in Chinese teaching at second level shows mixed results. A general consensus is that, without a strong focus on strategic planning, successful mainstreaming and upscaling of Chinese will continue to prove challenging. While all language learning has to be planned (Lo Bianco 2016, Cummins 2014), effective Chinese language teaching requires a higher order of effort: planning cannot be left to chance or market forces.

Among a broad range of factors, some stand out as critical: the need for strategic leadership from national authorities, developing teacher capacity and much-improved coordination of research and practice.

As well as fixing high-level aspirations for the teaching of Chinese, national leaders have to implement on the ground. Increasingly crowded curricula, the place for Chinese and other languages, the role of proficiency benchmarks, time allocation policies are just some contested.