Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on International Law and Legal Policy
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37380

From Targeted Eligibility to Universal Inclusion: The Transformation Logic of Scotland's Free School Meal System and Its Lessons for China

Xingyi Li

School of Politics and Public Administration, Northwest University of Political Science and Law, Xi'an, China
zsb2275@163.com

Abstract. Against the backdrop of governance dilemmas in China's compulsory-education student nutrition subsidy policy, particularly the substantial administrative resources consumed by precise eligibility verification and the psychological pressure experienced by beneficiary students, this paper adopts welfare delivery theory and inclusive welfare theory as the analytical framework. Using literature review, policy comparison and semi-structured interviews, it systematically analyzes the transformation logic of Scotland's free school meal system from eligibility-targeted mode to universal inclusive mode. It sorts out the policy evolution and unpacks the administrative, fiscal and governance drivers behind the transition. The study finds that Scotland has effectively addressed the drawbacks of the traditional eligibility-targeted model through innovative measures such as phased coverage expansion and non-differentiated welfare delivery. On this basis, without increasing fiscal pressure and grassroots burdens, China may draw on relevant experience to build a step-by-step optimization path featuring short-term procedural improvement, medium-term local pilot programmes and long-term institutional upgrading. This could help improve student nutrition policies, reduce administrative costs, and advance educational equity.

Keywords: free school meals, eligibility targeting, universal welfare, welfare delivery, student nutrition subsidy

1. Introduction

The Rural Compulsory Education Student Nutrition Improvement Programme constitutes a key institutional arrangement in China for guaranteeing nutrition subsidies for compulsory education students, advancing educational equity and fostering the healthy development of adolescents. After years of grassroots implementation, the programme has covered over 37 million rural compulsory-education students across 1,631 counties in 28 central and western provinces, making it China's largest-scale livelihood project for child nutrition security. Nevertheless, a host of pressing problems have emerged in its implementation. On the one hand, the eligibility verification process consumes substantial administrative resources. On the other hand, some students with hidden hardship fail to receive subsidies due to inability to produce official certification documents, further

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37380

exacerbating the imbalance in resource allocation. These issues impair the policy's practical implementation effect and carry potential negative impacts on minors' mental health. Hence, systematic research is needed to explore optimisation pathways. Scotland has achieved the transition of its free school meal system from eligibility targeting to universal inclusion, offering vital references for China. Following this transition to universal provision, Scotland's free school meal programme has generated empirically supported evidence and lessons: it covers more than 360,000 students and has delivered quantifiable outcomes in school-meal participation rates, dietary quality, household burden alleviation and child poverty reduction. Specifically, uptake of free school meals among primary school pupils rose by 22 percentage points; students' fat and sodium intake at lunch decreased; and beneficiary households saved an average of £450 per person per year. Taken together, these findings indicate progress towards several policy goals, including improved nutritional health, greater educational equity, and reduced household financial hardship. This research pursues three objectives: to unpack the internal drivers and core innovations of Scotland's universal free school meal policy across administrative, fiscal and governance dimensions; to construct a context-specific, step-by-step optimisation path for China featuring short-term procedural improvement, medium-term local pilots and long-term institutional upgrading; and to develop locally-adapted reform insights for improving China's student nutrition guarantee policies.

2. Literature review and theoretical foundation

2.1. Domestic research and international research

Existing domestic studies on student nutrition subsidies are mostly situated within pedagogy and social security scholarship. They fall into two main strands. The first strand focuses on digitalised precise identification, advocating for data-port integration between civil-affairs and education authorities to identify disadvantaged students via big-data technologies and improve subsidy targeting accuracy. The second strand centres on the policy's health benefits, quantifying how nutritious school meals enhance students' physical fitness and classroom engagement. A small number of studies discuss equity issues of the policy from a macro perspective within the theme of equal access to urban-rural public services [1]. Overall, notable gaps persist in existing scholarship: few papers systematically calculate grassroots administrative costs arising from eligibility verification, public notice and appeal procedures [2]; insufficient attention has been paid to implicit policy losses caused by labelling effects in meal-service arrangements [3]; in-depth discussions on the feasibility and supporting administrative-reform pathways for locally-adapted universal meal-supply pilots remain scarce. Research on welfare-delivery-process optimisation from the perspective of public administration is relatively limited.

International scholars have conducted long-term evaluations of universal free school meals in Scotland, some U.S. states, and multiple EU member states, producing abundant quantitative empirical findings covering changes in pre-post-reform administrative expenditure, student meal-taking rates, academic performance and public policy satisfaction [4, 5]. Literature examining universal free-school-meal reform in Scotland's devolved governance context dissects the governance conditions for policy roll-out and yields mature empirical conclusions. These findings support comparisons between Chinese and international policy outcomes and help address the constraints arising from limited access to field research data outside China [5].

Still, existing international research has certain limitations. It does not fully account for the underlying institutional differences across jurisdictions [4]. Most international findings are rooted in the fiscal capacity, social-welfare traditions and devolved governance systems of high-income

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37380

economies [6]. While drawing on its evaluative frameworks and practical experience, local adaptation to China's national context is indispensable [7]. Meanwhile, traditional means-tested welfare relief models are universally associated with heavy administrative burdens and institutional losses. Procedures such as eligibility checks, periodic reviews and appeal handling continuously consume grassroots human and material resources and readily trigger welfare stigma and social labelling [8].

2.2. Core theoretical tools

Welfare delivery theory focuses on the process through which welfare resources are channelled from governments to intended beneficiaries. It analyses administrative efficiency, operational losses and group sense of gain across verification, distribution and supervision links [2]. This paper employs the theory to compare two welfare-delivery pathways: eligibility-targeted mode versus universal-inclusion mode. It identifies redundant procedures embedded within traditional verification systems and explains how universal provision streamlines administrative workflows.

Under eligibility targeting, welfare delivery presupposes rigorous household economic status assessment. This process devours considerable administrative resources and risks excluding some hidden vulnerable groups and generating under-coverage [4]. By contrast, universal inclusion removes cumbersome means-testing procedures and delivers unconditional welfare supplies. It can compress administrative workflows, lower institutional operating costs and enhance policy fairness, accessibility and targeting performance [5].

Inclusive welfare theory opposes selective relief models with rigid eligibility thresholds. It advocates framing foundational survival resources such as child nutrition security as equal rights for all school-age individuals and mitigates class segmentation and social stigma embedded in welfare institutions [9]. The theory helps explain the underlying value logic of Scotland's transition to universal free school meals and highlights the potential governance benefits of universal provision in enhancing perceived policy fairness and reducing social tensions [4].

Scotland's practice illustrates that unified access to free school meals for all students, by removing differential subsidy arrangements, eliminates campus status divisions, raises parental and student policy satisfaction and reduces social controversies stemming from labelling [4, 10]. Such universal provision reflects the core principles of inclusive welfare theory by promoting social integration and educational equity through the reduction of labelling and welfare stratification [5].

Nevertheless, universal provision advocated by inclusive welfare theory does not equate to boundless high-level universal welfare. Rather than mechanically copying Western welfare paradigms, this study draws selectively on inclusive welfare theory while considering the public-welfare nature of China's compulsory education. It primarily adopts the theory's core principles of reducing stigma and safeguarding children's developmental rights, rather than replicating Scotland's fully universal provision model. Fiscal sustainability and policy targeting are both weighed to fit the institutional context of China's Rural Compulsory Education Student Nutrition Improvement Programme [7, 11].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37380

3. The transformation logic of Scotland's free school meals: from eligibility targeting to universal inclusion

3.1. Evolution of policy transition

Key milestones mark this transformation. In 2014, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 was enacted. In 2015, the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Regulations came into force, launching pilot implementation. Universal meal provision was trialled in selected localities for P1-P3 (Years 1-3 of primary school), marking the shift from eligibility verification toward limited universalism.

As evidence from the pilots accumulated, Scotland expanded coverage in phases. In August 2021, universal provision was extended to Primary 4; in January 2022, it reached Primary 5, delivering non-differentiated free school meals for all pupils from P1 to P5 and benefiting approximately 230,000 primary-school children. Thus, through legislative revisions and grade-phased roll-out, Scotland established a welfare-delivery framework: universal provision for lower primary grades, while eligibility checks remain in place for upper primary and secondary education. This gradual evolution avoids fiscal risks triggered by radical welfare reform and offers a practical reference for child-nutrition-security reforms worldwide.

Scotland's free school meal policy originated as an eligibility-targeted system providing essential nutritional support to pupils from low-income households. Yet alongside socioeconomic development and shifts in public governance philosophies, the model displayed mounting drawbacks: high administrative costs and insufficient social inclusiveness. To address these challenges, the Scottish government began promoting policy shifts from the early 2000s onwards. Through legislation and budget adjustments, free school meals evolved from a selective relief measure into a foundational public service for all eligible school-age children. The reform unfolded sequentially: local pilots for selected age cohorts, gradual expansion toward broader pupil groups, and final institutionalisation of non-differentiated welfare delivery via legislation. This gradual trajectory yields actionable insights for policymakers elsewhere.

3.2. Three dimensions of transformation drivers

3.2.1. Administrative logic: universal provision cuts redundant verification costs

Under the traditional eligibility-targeted model, Scotland's free-school-meal system relied on complex workflows including household-means assessment, documentary submission and cross-agency data validation. These procedures consumed massive grassroots administrative resources and contributed to under-coverage of some hidden disadvantaged students due to information asymmetries. By contrast, universal meal supply greatly streamlined the welfare-delivery chain by removing verification requirements and lowering administrative costs. Research documents significant reductions in labour and operational expenditures after the transition. Some of these savings were redirected to improving meal quality or expanding programme coverage, thereby helping to ease fiscal pressures. Furthermore, universal provision eliminated frequent re-verification triggered by changing household eligibility, boosting administrative efficiency and offering insights for reforms in other public-service domains.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37380

3.2.2. Governance logic: non-differentiated dining eliminates status divisions

By abolishing differentiated subsidy arrangements, Scotland's universal free-school-meal policy generated prominent governance benefits, most notably by reducing discrimination in school dining and improving public perceptions of fairness. Under eligibility targeting, differentiated dining arrangements exposed beneficiary students to labelling risks, psychological stress and peer exclusion. Universal access enables all pupils to receive school meals under identical conditions, effectively countering the negative consequences of status stratification. This improves students' dining experiences, strengthens public trust and satisfaction, and reduces implementation-related disputes. From a broader social-governance perspective, non-differentiated dining provides practical experience for building more inclusive welfare systems and exemplifies trends toward modernised governance.

3.2.3. Fiscal logic: phased coverage expansion smooths budget pressures

Phased roll out constitutes the core fiscal design of Scotland's reform, enabling steady budget transitions and avoiding sharp short-term fiscal shocks. At the pilot stage, rather than selecting sites randomly, the Scottish government prioritised local authorities with robust fiscal capacity and well-established school-meal infrastructure. Early pilots were carried out in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Fife and other jurisdictions, which explored local universal provision ahead of national legislation and accumulated practical experience in canteen operation, facility upgrading and home-school communication. Glasgow, despite its high child-poverty rate, was included as a key observation site owing to its mature school-catering system. Empirical evidence from these early-adopting regions informed the nationwide implementation of the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Regulations 2015 and lowered systemic reform risks. Coverage was subsequently expanded to other local authorities, allowing fiscal resources to be allocated more gradually and efficiently. Meanwhile, government departments adjusted education budgets, with funds previously allocated to eligibility verification and administrative oversight redirected towards meal provision and service improvements. Phased expansion also permitted real-world testing of policy effects prior to wider scaling-up. Such gradual reform mitigates fiscal risks and supplies an actionable blueprint for comparable policy transitions in other jurisdictions.

3.3. Establishing a non-differentiated welfare-delivery mechanism

Scotland's successful transition hinges on constructing a non-differentiated welfare-delivery mechanism that fundamentally reshapes resource allocation under eligibility targeting. By removing application and verification barriers, free school meals came to function as a core public service accessible on a universal basis within the covered school grades, thereby improving administrative efficiency and social inclusiveness. Schools were relieved of burdensome eligibility-check responsibilities and could concentrate on delivering high-quality meals, greatly shortening the welfare-delivery chain. Unified dining arrangements erased visible status disparities among pupils and strengthened policy fairness and public recognition. This institutional innovation also offers valuable references for other public-service reforms, especially concerning trade-offs between administrative costs and social benefits.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37380

4. Optimisation pathways for China's student nutrition subsidy policy in the local context

4.1. Three bottom-line principles for reform

When exploring optimisation pathways for China's compulsory-education student nutrition-subsidy policy, reforms must be rooted in national realities and uphold three bottom-line principles: no increase in fiscal pressure, no heavier burdens for grassroots authorities, and avoidance of fairness-related controversies. These constraints guarantee smooth policy adjustment and implementation. First, China's 160-million-strong compulsory-education student population demands prudent assessment of fiscal sustainability for any coverage expansion or new spending. Second, grassroots education authorities already bear heavy workloads from eligibility screening and periodic reviews; optimisation proposals must not exacerbate administrative burdens, otherwise policy effectiveness will deteriorate. If modest short-term additional fiscal costs arise in local pilots, they should preferably be covered by surpluses from existing annual administrative budgets originally allocated for eligibility verification and cross-departmental data matching, without requesting new budget appropriations. Third, fairness-related controversies pose sensitive risks in nutrition-subsidy implementation. Labelled dining practices may inflict psychological harm on beneficiary students. Optimisation pathways should therefore prioritise mitigating welfare-stigma effects and improving policy inclusiveness and public acceptance.

4.2. Phased implementation pathways

4.2.1. Short-term (1-2 years): optimisation within existing frameworks, no additional costs

Short-term reforms should focus on fine-tuning current institutional arrangements. Measures including abolishing public disclosure of beneficiary lists, introducing unified dining counters, and implementing discreet campus-card top-ups can mitigate status-based discrimination and reduce administrative costs. Abolishing public disclosure of beneficiary lists avoids labelling vulnerable students and reduces appeals and disputes stemming from public notices, simplifying grassroots workflows. Unified dining counters eliminate status-segregated arrangements and foster equal dining environments to ease students' psychological distress. Policy effectiveness may be measured through indicators such as satisfaction scores from student dining-experience questionnaires and complaint rates concerning status stratification on campus. Discreet campus-card crediting solutions conceal beneficiary identities without altering existing fund-distribution mechanisms, while further enhancing beneficiary confidentiality and fairness. Key performance metrics include the frequency of funding-information leaks and the rate of accurate subsidy deposits onto campus cards. These measures incur no extra fiscal expenditure yet reduce implicit implementation losses, laying groundwork for medium- and long-term reforms.

4.2.2. Medium-term (3-5 years): local pilot exploration

In the medium term, local pilots for non-differentiated universal school-meal provision should be launched targeting economically-advanced counties, rural compulsory-education zones and younger student cohorts to accumulate domestic practical evidence and assess policy impacts. Economically-advanced regions possess stronger fiscal capacity and broader public support for universal school meals. Rural areas face acute student-nutrition challenges and stand to benefit considerably from universal provision. Piloting among younger pupils reduces social resistance,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37380

given their relatively underdeveloped awareness of socioeconomic status and high adaptability to school environments. Pilots should evaluate multi-dimensional outcomes including student meal-taking rates, physical-fitness improvements, parental satisfaction and operational costs to comprehensively gauge the feasibility of universal school meals and generate empirical evidence for nationwide scaling-up.

4.2.3. Long-term (5-10 years): institutional iteration and upgrading

The long-term objective is to incorporate universal school nutrition guarantees into local catalogues of basic public services, establish stable fiscal guarantee mechanisms, and gradually expand universal meal-provision coverage until full access is achieved. This requires systematic institutional restructuring, transforming free school meals from ad-hoc relief into a foundational public right for all school-age children. Local governments should establish dedicated budget lines for universal school meals and optimise internal education-budget structures to ensure efficient and equitable resource allocation. Differentiated pilot models should be rolled out region-by-region with tailored evaluation criteria: pilots in economically-advanced counties should emphasise improvements in meal quality, parental satisfaction and dietary balance; pilots in rural compulsory-education zones should prioritise indicators such as student physical-fitness and nutritional gains, administrative-cost savings and service-coverage rates. Robust monitoring and evaluation systems must be built to conduct regular follow-up assessments based on differentiated pilot outcomes and identify emerging risks. Gradual region-specific expansion controls fiscal pressure while amplifying social benefits, delivering long-run mechanisms to refine China's compulsory-education student nutrition-security system.

5. Conclusion

Scotland's transition from eligibility-targeted to universal free school meals offers important insights for optimising China's compulsory-education student nutrition-subsidy policy. First, welfare-policy reforms should jointly consider administrative costs, minors' mental health and levels of social inclusion. Administratively, universal provision mitigates grassroots workloads by removing onerous eligibility-verification workflows and conserving human and material resources. From a governance perspective, non-differentiated dining eliminates student status stratification, reduces campus discrimination and policy-related disputes, and enhances public satisfaction and support. Furthermore, Scotland demonstrates a feasible fiscal sustainability approach through phased coverage expansion and smoothed budget pressures. Drawing on these lessons, China may pursue optimisation in progressive stages. In the short run, adjustments within existing systems, such as ending public disclosure of beneficiary lists and unifying dining facilities, can mitigate labelling risks and protect students' mental well-being. In the medium run, local pilots of non-differentiated universal school meals should be implemented in economically-advanced jurisdictions and rural compulsory-education zones to generate domestic practical experience. The long-term vision is to incorporate universal school nutrition guarantees into local catalogues of basic public services, build stable fiscal-guarantee institutions and progressively realise universal school-meal provision. This step-by-step optimisation framework will refine China's student nutrition-support policies, lower administrative operating costs and advance social equity and inclusive development.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37380

References

[1] Luo, L. (2011). Equalisation of urban-rural basic public services [Doctoral dissertation]. Hunan Normal University. Changsha. DOI:10.7666/d.y1912403.
[2] Wang, J. (2023). Administrative costs of child nutrition security policy from the perspective of welfare delivery. *Social Security Studies*(2), 78-87.
[3] Zhang, F., & Liu, J. (2022). Labelling dilemmas and governance pathways in the implementation of the rural compulsory education student nutrition improvement programme. *Journal of the Chinese Society of Education*(6), 45-51.
[4] Chambers, S., Boydell, N., Ford, A., et al. (2020). Learning from the implementation of universal free school meals in Scotland using normalisation process theory: Lessons for policymakers to engage multiple stakeholders. *Food Policy, 95*. DOI:10.1016/j.foodpol.2020.101936.
[5] Morelli, C. J., & Seaman, P. T. (2010). Devolution as a policy crucible: The case of universal free school meals. *Poverty & Public Policy, 2*(1), 139-161. DOI:10.2202/1944-2858.1032.
[6] Thane, P. (2024). Poverty and the rise and fall of the welfare state in Britain, 1900 to the present. *Society, 61*, 263-274. DOI:10.1007/s12115-024-00976-8.
[7] Liu, C., Wang, Y., & Dong, L. (2026). From welfare relief to nutritional universalism: Evolutionary characteristics and multidimensional enlightenment of the British school meal programme. *Basic Education Review, 2026*(1), 22-35. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.1672-1128.2026.01.002.
[8] Black, A., & Russell, J. (2018). The administrative burden of means-tested school-meal benefits. *Journal of Social Policy, 47*(3), 521-540. DOI:10.1017/S0047279417000641.
[9] Li, J. (2021). Research on child public-service supply reform from the perspective of inclusive welfare theory. *China Social Security Review, 5*(4), 112-126.
[10] Scottish Government. (2014). *Evaluation of local universal free school meal initiatives*. Scottish Government. Edinburgh.
[11] Duan, Z. (2020). *Fiscal operation mechanism and pilot expansion of the student nutrition improvement programme for rural compulsory education*. Beijing Normal University. Beijing.