THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF CHINA AND CHINESE APPROACH TO A SUSTAINABLE AND LEARNING SOCIETY

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Abstract

As the most populous and second largest economy of the world, China has seen huge changes and emerging needs in social and economic aspects over last few decades. In 2012, the Chinese government decided to establish the Open University of China (OUC) on the basis of Chinese Radio and TV University System for promoting lifelong learning and a learning society. The purpose of this study is intended to provide a case analysis of results of and challenges for OUC. After five years of development, OUC has increased its capacity for promoting lifelong learning including a national wide university network, massive online teaching and learning model, digital learning environment and resources, customized services for special groups and credit bank system. Meanwhile, there are problems and challenges to its current and future development, such as inexperience of quality teachers, the difficulties in quality assurance and credit transfer, insufficient policy support and regulation from government and the growing competitiveness in online education market. It is expected that this study will contribute to understand the way of OUC meeting the emerging needs of a lifelong learning society in China and share its experience.

Introduction

The changing context in China: towards a sustainable learning society

With the rapid development of ICT and the rise of knowledge economy, to build lifelong education system and a learning society has become a common trend and inevitable choice of human society. The Chinese government has begun to promote lifelong learning and a learning society since the beginning of the 21st century. It was considered as one of the key tasks in the Report of the 16th, 17th and 18th CPC National Congress. As a result, State Council (2010) made a strategic plan of education development from 2010 to 2020 and put lifelong learning as a main goal. Under this clear policy guidance, varieties of lifelong learning practices such as the building of learning city, learning community, learning enterprises, learning family, and the launch of the "Lifelong Learning for All" Week have been spread all over the China Mainland.

The establishment of Open University

In 2012, the Chinese government established the Open University of China (OUC) on the basis of Central Radio and TV University (CRTVU), expecting it to meet the diversified and personalized learning demands of the public and contribute to the construction of open and

flexible lifelong education system. (Ministry of Education, 2012). Shortly after that, the OUC put forward its10-year strategy aimed at being one pillar of Chinese learning society and one of the world's top open universities with Chinese characteristics (OUC, 2012). From 2012 to 2017, OUC has made reforms in many aspects, such as organisation structure, education delivery mode, OERs and MOOCs, recognition and transformation of learning outcomes.

The development of OUC from 2012-2017: promoting lifelong learning in China

A national wide university network: the OUC community

The OUC has a different university network from other open universities in the world and conventional universities in China. It is nationwide and within the society. Firstly, it has a vertical section based on different administrative divisions inheriting from CRTVU system which is called headquarter (national level)—branch (provincial level)—college (city level)—study centre (county level) system (Yang, 2014). Secondly, it develops a new parallel section with social partners such as enterprises, industries, cities, and universities (Qi, Ma, & Yuan, 2012). Therefore, a lot of joint colleges are established and the network is getting more and more powerful. According to the annual report of OUC (2017a), by the end of 2016, OUC had set up 1 headquarter, 44 branches, nearly 1000 colleges and more than 3000 study centres, as well as 11 joint colleges with social partners. As a new type of cross-industry and cross-regional university with a service network covering both urban and rural areas in China, up to now, the OUC (2017a) has 3.5 million registered students, of which more than 70% students are from the grassroot level, 55% located in the central and western ethnic minority border regions.

Online teaching and learning model: Six-Network Integration

After the research on promoting online learning behaviour and outcome, the OUC (2015) created a Six-Network Integration teaching and learning mode to ensure and enhance the quality of education delivery. The six key factors to quality online education are online learning space, learning courses, teaching team, learner support, learning assessment and management, which called Six Networks. Among them, the network learning space is the basic element, the online learning course is the core element, and the other four are the supporting elements. The Six Network is both relatively independent and mutually supportive, and it is a specific structure. They together formed an ODL model. From 2012 to 2017, OUC has made great progress on developing of every network and the Six-Network Integration Model gained the first prize of teaching achievement of Beijing city in 2018 and is selected to compete for national level prizes.

Digital learning environment and resources

The OUC is promoting in-depth integration of technology and education. As president Yang Zhijian (2013) said, the OUC is taking a cloud-road-terminal model for utilizing the new information technology. It works with Alibaba Group to set up a cloud platform for teaching and management, works with the network operation enterprises to build different roads for delivering the services, and works with communication terminal product enterprises to produce

OUC learning terminals for receiving the services. All of these support millions of simultaneous visitors and billions of personal accounts for online learning, forming a nationwide digital learning environment that satisfies learners' autonomous learning needs. In order to make learning more convenient and solve the problem of the uneven distribution of quality educational resources, the OUC cooperated with other colleges and universities, vocational schools and social education institutions established the National Digital Learning Resources Centre to share tens of thousands of courses, free-to-use lectures, a digital library and special learning websites that are open to the public.

Customized services for specialized groups in growing need

The OUC is providing customized services for migrant workers, college students as village officials, employees of large-scale enterprises (such as McDonalds), the disabled, military personnel and others. It has also worked with relevant industries and established 11 industry and corporate colleges, including the School of Coal Mining, the School of Social Work, and the School of Logistics. In order to serve specific sections of the population, OUC (2017a) has established 10 special colleges, including the Bayi School (aimed at military personnel) and the School for the Disabled. According to the OUC (2017b), of all the 3.5 million registered students, 200,000 are rural students, 120,000 military personnel, 270,000 are ethnic minority students, and 6,000 are disabled students.

Credit Bank System for bridging formal, nonformal and informal learning

The OUC is providing formal and non-formal higher education programs. Since 2012, it has started to research and design a model called "Credit Bank" for the accreditation, accumulation and transfer of formal, nonformal and informal learning outcomes. Under the guidance of the MOE, the OUC (2016) has completed a general framework for a national credit bank system with "framework + standard" technical path and carried out pilot work. Up to now, it has organized 55 units, including relevant ministries and commissions, colleges and universities, vocational schools, open universities, training institutions and communities, to be engaged. An alliance for the mutual recognition of learning outcomes has been initiated and established. 1 Learning Outcome Accreditation Centre and 67 Sub-Centres have been established across China. In 2017, the OUC launched an online platform called Online Credit Bank Platform (ICDE, 2017b).

Problems and challenges

Inexperience of quality teachers

Quality teachers is one of the biggest problems that OUC facing. The education level of teachers is low. Research (Yang, 2012) shows that of all the 57,000 full-time teachers, only 12% are postgraduates. The on-the-job training for teachers is insufficient. A majority of teachers are not familiar with distance education and have little corresponding theoretical or practical experience before joining in the OUC, and they do not have adequate and systematic on-the-job training afterwards (Li, 2014a). The social status of teachers is not satisfying. They do not enjoy high social status and influence comparing with research university teachers. This

becomes severer in the hierarchy structure, the lower the worse, which affects the working passion and job attractiveness.

The difficulties in quality assurance and credit transfer

The organizational structure of the OUC is much larger than that of CRTVU. It involves more stakeholders, and education services provided to the society are more diversified and personalized. How to ensure high quality in every aspect of the training of different types of groups is difficult. Credit transfer is another complicated issue. At present, China has not formed national qualification framework and credit transfer framework. As a pilot, the OUC is promoting credit transfer mainly by agreements with some colleges and universities. However, it is still difficult to transfer credits in a wider range, such as with industries, enterprises, universities, primary and secondary schools, and social institutions.

Insufficient policy support and regulation

Regarding of financing, currently, the OUC mainly relies on tuition fees and supplements by grant. Compared with conventional universities, OUC doesn't have national student tuition allocation. And compared with the other Open Universities in the world, the government funding is quite low, which is only 30 million yuan per year (OUC, 2013). Therefore, the infrastructure and teaching conditions of OUC branches, colleges and counties are unsatisfied. Besides that, there are no standards and indicators for the performance of OU in China, and the review and evaluate on the quality improvement is insufficient.

Growing competitiveness in online education market

The OLD institutions in China are now experiencing an unprecedented prosperous period while the market is increasingly competitive, and it covers all education levels, attracts public and private sectors and provides various scopes of services (Gaba & Li, 2015). The iResearch Company (2016) said that from 2013 to 2018 the market scale of online education in China will increase from 83.97 billion Yuan to 204.61 billion Yuan, with an average annual growth rate of approximately 20%. The most powerful private ODL institutions have existed for no more than 15 years, many of which have successful Internet use experience, abundant capital, good industrial chain and powerful technology research background. Following the wave of MOOCs, the conventional universities in China have strived to develop ODL in recent years. For example, in 2013, Tsinghua University, Peking University joined the Edx, while Fudan Univestiy and Jiaotong University joined Coursera. Top nine Chinese universities (C9) formed an alliance for Chinese MOOCs. It shows that the online education market, even in higher education level, is getting more competitive. Prompted by the MOOCs boom, MOE (2015) promulgated the Opinions and Suggestions for Promoting the Construction, Application and Management of MOOCs, which created favourable policy conditions for the orderly development of MOOCs.

Conclusion

The establishment of OUC was considered to be a response to meeting the diverse needs of China's political, economic, social, technological and educational development (Li, 2014b). As an important approach to a sustainable and Lifelong learning society in China made by MOE (2016), OUC has made tremendous difference in last five years after its establishment. For open to people, it is getting more accessible and providing customized education provision to the different group, such as on-job workers, farmers, migrant workers, elders, soldiers, disabled people. For open to places, it is producing more and more online learning resources to the students and more and more OERs to the public. And the resources and learning support can be reached at the workplace, learning centres and home through Pad, laptop, TV and many other ways. For open to method, it is the in-depth of ICT with teaching and learning. The propose of six key factors of online teaching and learning and its practice improving the learning behaviour and outcomes. For open to ideas, the OUC has a bigger and wider university system than before, and its ideas of co-share and win-win of stakeholders shows great potential and adaptive to the holistic promoting of lifelong learning society in China. As a result, ICDE (2017a) gave OUC the Institutional Prize of Excellence for its good performance. But on the other hand, the problems and challenges are still there and needed to be solved. It is related with many aspects like policy support and regulations, capacity building, quality assurance and improving of using ICT.

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