Chapter 2
China

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Introduction

For the last four decades, distance higher education has played a very important role in China for knowledge and human resource development. This chapter presents a holistic view on the development of distance higher education in China with focus on the 21st century online higher education.

Distance education has always been an important part of the Chinese higher education system. Although the objectives vary somewhat from one time period to another, the main function of distance higher education is to provide Chinese people with access to knowledge. The present Chinese government regards current online higher education as an important way to promote lifelong learning and build a learning society. The *National Education Plan* (MOE, 2010) states that developing online higher education and ICT can meet the diversified and personalized learning demands of the public and contribute to the construction of an open and flexible lifelong education system. The student group of online higher education is diversified, including college-age youths, farmers, workers, the elderly, the disabled and the ethnic minority groups.

Brief History of Distance Higher Education

The history of distance higher education in China can be traced back to the late 1940s. It can be divided into three phases, according to the main types of transmission technology. The first phase (before 1979) is correspondence education, through the medium of postal communication; the second phase (between 1979 and 1998) is

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radio and television education, making use of video and audio recordings, radio and television; the third phase (from 1999 until the present) is online education, using the Internet as the main medium of teaching and learning.

In 1999, the Ministry of Education (MOE) launched a pilot project entitling four campus-based universities (Tsinghua University, Zhejiang University, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, and Hunan University), which had shown progress in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education, as well as the Central Radio and TV University (CRTVU)—now known as the Open University of China (OUC)—to offer diploma/degree programs in the so-called 'modern' distance education mode. This can be regarded as the beginning of online higher education in China.

Between 1999 and 2003, the MOE approved 68 universities to participate in the pilot project for online higher education. The CRTVU was the only Chinese university fully dedicated to online higher education. Among the selected campus-based universities, most were in Project 211, which is a project initiated in 1995 by MOE with the intent of constructing 100 national key universities and raising their research standards.

Since 1999, the above mentioned 68 universities have been the main providers of online higher education in China. As a result of their relentless efforts, China's distance higher education sector has entered into an era of burgeoning development. Distance higher education has made major contributions to the transformation of higher education from an elite system to a popular system. For example, the CRTVU, founded in 1979, is the largest and most influential distance higher education institution in China. According to an investigation conducted by the Strategic Office of the CRTVU (2010), from 1979 to 2009, it had a total of 7.2 million graduates, representing 24% of the total number of higher education graduates over the same period.

Scale and Funding of Distance Higher Education

Scale

The scale of distance higher education has increased year-by-year in China. As of 2017, there are over 2,900 higher education institutions, and the number of enrolled students has been on the rise, particularly in the past decade, with the rapid popularization of the Internet and growing demand for continuing education.

Online work, online learning and online life have become an indispensable part of life for the Chinese people for the last few years. President Xi (2014) remarks that China should aim to be not only a big Internet country, but an Internet powerhouse. China Internet Network Information Center (2017) reveals that from 2000 to 2017, the Internet penetration rate in China surged from 1.7% to 54.3%, and the number of Internet users increased from 22.5 million to 750 million. It is more than half
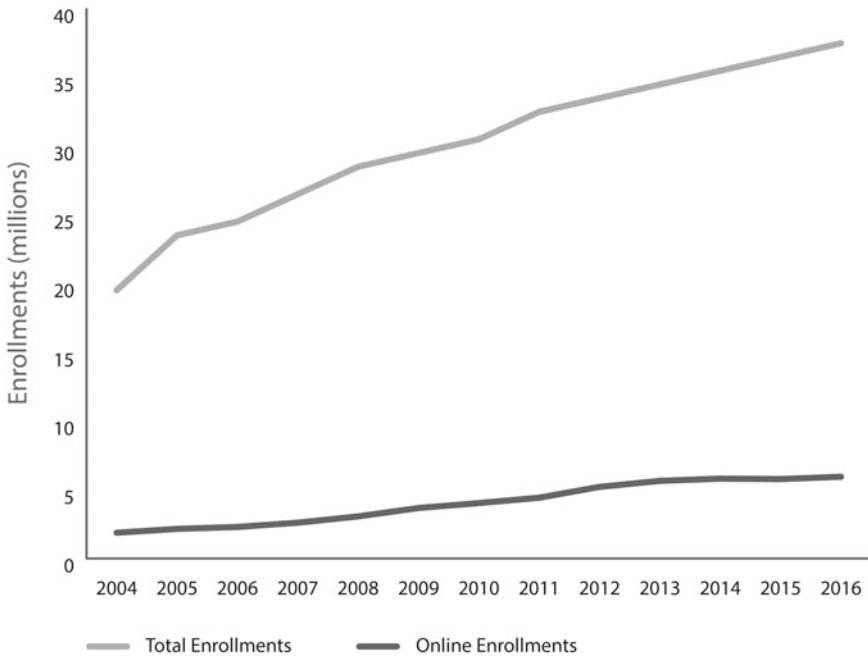
Fig. 2.1 Enrollment of online higher education in higher education system between 2004 and 2016 (million). *Source* Ministry of Education Website (http://www.moe.edu.cn/s78/A03/moe_560/jytjsj_2016/)

of the total Chinese population and constitutes the biggest group of Internet users around the world. And it provides a good basis for extending and facilitating online education.

There is an ongoing need for education in China. Li, Yao, and Chen (2014) point out that since 2004, China has become an ageing society and the ageing population will increase rapidly in the next 20 years. And with the improvement of security, medical insurance and pension services for the elderly, their demand for leisure education will grow and cannot be satisfied by campus-based universities. At the same time, the urbanization is accelerating, which raises the integration problems of farmers' work and life in urban areas. The National Bureau of Statistics (2015) shows that the percentage of the total population living in urban areas in China increased from 36.2% in 2000 to 56.1% in 2015. This urbanization process requires significant provision of continuing vocational training for farmers, in order to enhance their livelihood opportunities.

According to the statistics issued by the MOE (2016), the enrollment of online higher education in China has increased from 2.37 million to 6.45 million between 2004 and 2016, as it is shown in Fig. 2.1. And the share of the student number in the entire higher education system has risen from 11.9% to 17.4%.

Funding

The funding for distance higher education in China comes from two main sources—-government grants and revenues such as students' tuition fees, charges for non-degree education and training, etc. An investigation by Yang (2014) into the 2012 OUC funding shows that, students' tuition fees constituted about 70% of all the OUC's revenues, and regarding the funding for the local open universities such as Beijing Open University, the government grants accounted for 30%, students' tuition fees 40% and other revenues 30%. It should be mentioned that the students in online degree education do not receive the government allocation like the students enrolled in offline full-time degree education. Many scholars, such as Zheng (2014), have conducted research into the funding issue and appealed for equal rights of different types of higher education students to grants from the government, but so far, this issue has not been resolved.

Distance Higher Education Institutions

Dedicated Distance Education Institutions and Campus-Based Institutions

The online education enrollment in these two systems—open universities and campus-based universities-differs. Figure 2.2 shows the changes of enrollment in these two systems between 2004 and 2015.

China's MOE (1999) states that the main factors that enabled the first four campus-based universities to offer online courses are that they enjoyed high educational standards and quality, had a good academic reputation, a well-defined operating plan, corresponding organizational infrastructure, staff, essential facilities and funds. At the beginning, Tsinghua University was the only one allowed to enroll online students nationwide. Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications was only allowed to enroll students studying online in the posts and telecommunications sector, while Hunan University and Zhejiang University were only supposed to offer online courses within the provinces in which they were located. But soon, these universities were all allowed to enroll online students nationwide with the permission of MOE.

The online student number of the campus-based universities differs. The MOE (2015a) reports that, in 2014, Dalian University of Technology, Chongqing University, Beihang University, Jilin University and Central South University were the top five in terms of online student number, each with over 30,000 students studying online in degree programs.

It should be mentioned that the open universities and the campus-based institutions mainly provide certificates and academic degrees (associate, bachelor). And some campus-based universities offer online master degree programs with the approval of MOE.
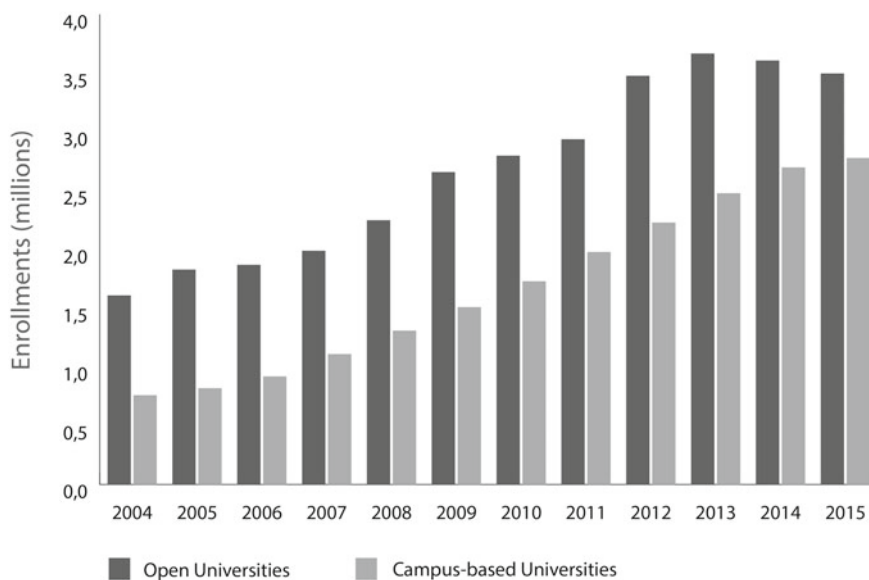
Fig. 2.2 Online education enrollment of Open Universities and the Campus-based Universities, between 2004 and 2015 (million). *Source* Ministry of Education (http://www.moe.edu.cn/jyb_sjzl/)

Public and Private Providers

At present, there are a considerable number and variety of distance education institutions in China (see Table 2.1), some of which are public and some are private. They can be classified by education level and target group.

The open universities and the campus-based universities play an important role in the public distance education sector, offering both degree and non-degree programs.

The private distance education sector, which includes private universities, Internet companies and corporate online institutions named as e-universities, usually provide non-degree programs. They offer mainly vocational and skills training, with more market-oriented courses. Their students have the prospect of gaining industry qualifications or skills certificates.

Regulatory Frameworks and Policies of Distance Higher Education

In China, there is no special legislation on distance higher education, but some education laws relate to distance education. For example, a distance higher education institution is required to comply with relevant provisions in the *Higher Education*

Table 2.1 Distance education institutions in China

Level	Example	Target group	Ownership	Scope of service	Date of launch	Gone public?
Higher education	Open University of China	Adults	Public	Degree and non-degree programs	1979	–
	School of Online Education, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications	Adults	Public	Degree and non-degree programs	1956	–
Adult education	China Distance Education Holdings Ltd.	Adults	Private	Professional certificates	2000	Yes
Various types and levels of education	Koolearn	All groups	Private	Foreign language training	2000	Yes
	Alibaba	All groups	Private	Early childhood education, professional training, etc.	2013	Yes

Law (1998). Li (2007) conducted research into regulations regarding the development of distance education in China, including access, price regulation, quality and information regulation, for which different administrative bodies are responsible. For example, access regulation rests mostly with national or local educational authorities, and price regulation is controlled by local price control authorities.

The central government formulates and releases policies on the regulation of distance higher education, and local governments make suggestions for implementation and put them into operation. The policies focus on different levels of targets. Some policy documents target the overall development of distance education, such as *Opinions on Developing China's Modern Distance Education* (1998) and *Provisional Regulations of Correspondence Education for Conventional Higher Education Institutions* (1987). Other policies target the organization and operation of distance education institutions, such as *Provisional Regulations for Radio & TV Universities* (1988) and *Opinions of the MOE on Ensuring Successful Operation of the Open*

University ([2016](#)). There are also documents dealing with practical distance higher education programs, such as *Notice of Research Program on Central Radio & TV University's Reform of Professional Training Mode and Pilot Projects in Open Education* (1999).

Several iconic events shaped the development of policies on distance higher education. Firstly, the *Notice on Comprehensive Universities Providing Correspondence Education* was issued in 1956, which marked the beginning of colleges delivering distance higher education through correspondence and evening courses. Secondly, the *Instruction Requesting Report of the MOE and Central Broadcasting Affairs Bureau on Establishing TV Universities* (issued in 1978) marked a new attempt to develop distance higher education via 'Radio & TV' universities. Thirdly, the release of the *Document on Initiating Pilot Programs for Modern Distance Education* in 1999 heralded the onset of online higher education, with participating universities expanded to both Radio & TV universities and campus-based universities. Fourthly, in 2010, the General Office of the State Council released the *Notice on Pilot Reform of the National Education System*, which mentioned the establishment of Open Universities based on Radio & TV universities.

Through years of efforts, China has gradually built up the regulatory framework for distance higher education and implemented policies to guide its development. However, there is still room for improvement in legislation and policy development. For example, there is a need for more formulation of legislation on online higher education, policy planning to guide the development of online higher education, and regulations and guidance on the setup of different types of online higher education institutions and their operation. Although the educational administration department has realized the urgency of further policy formulation and implementation, the process remains slow and needs to be accelerated.

Quality Assurance of Distance Higher Education

Quality assurance is a prominent issue in the development of distance higher education in China, high on the agendas of both the government and institutions. Distance higher education institutions, both public and private, are encouraged to build internal and external quality assurance systems.

To build an internal quality assurance system, distance higher education institutions normally create a set of quality standards, set up a special division with professional staff, develop quality-related strategies and policies, establish procedures and requirements, and conduct institutional quality self-evaluation. For example, Zhejiang University is one of the top universities in China and the first of the four campus-based universities to establish an online college. It formulated quality standards and set up a Quality Assurance Committee as well as a Center for Quality Control and Evaluation. It established a team of full-time professionals, issued guidelines for monitoring teaching quality, and carried out teaching inspection and supervision activities.

All the distance higher education institutions receive external quality evaluation and accreditation. External evaluators include national or local educational authorities, international organizations or industry associations. For example, educational authorities monitor and review quality assurance of distance higher education institutions. In 2001, the MOE initiated a quality review of the CRTVU and 22 local RTVUs. According to the MOE (2002) review report, all the institutions passed the review, with the exception of one local RTVU which was suspended, but passed a second review after one year of reforms. Between 2004 and 2007, the MOE carried out a holistic quality review of RTVUs. The evaluation activities were many and varied, including debriefings, reading materials, examining facilities, reviewing classes, holding a variety of symposiums, inspecting learning centers and so on. According to the MOE (2007a) review report, the CRTVU and 44 local RTVUs all passed the evaluation. At the same time, the MOE (2007b) launched a quality review of the campus-based universities, which all passed the evaluation as well.

Since 2004, it has been compulsory for distance higher education universities to submit annual quality reports to the MOE and undergo annual inspections, which is a government mandate for quality accreditation. Furthermore, there is a voluntary quality review of distance education institutions conducted by the associations, like International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) and International Standardization Organization (ISO). In 2008, Shanghai RTVU applied for and passed the ICDE Quality Review. And in the same year, the Online College of East China University of Science and Technology applied for and acquired ISO 9001: 2000 QMS certification.

However, problems remain with both internal quality assurance and external quality supervision and evaluation. In terms of the former, there is room for improvement in the universities' quality assurance ability. It should be noted that although distance higher education institutions claim that they are devoted to building internal quality assurance, many of them still do not prioritize such activities. For example, in the evaluation report of the CRTVU, MOE (2007a) points out that the reform of teaching modes, particularly practical teaching, needed to be reinforced, and the professional development of the teaching staff should be strengthened. As the then-President of Shanghai RTVU Xu (2008) remarks about the ICDE Quality Review, "*ICDE reviewers attached great importance to 'learning', while the MOE focused more on 'teaching', and in fact, 'learning' has a more important role in educational activities, to which China's quality assurance standards should give more emphasis*" (p. 30).

There are also imperfections in external quality supervision, such as inadequate transparency. The government has not found out the effective ways for the release and feedback of quality supervision data, and as a result, the public has no access to complete data, or recommendations from quality reviews. Also, there is no third-party evaluation mechanism, and professionals in the distance education industry have not been able to play a major role in quality supervision. In recent years there has been some improvement, but the progress remains slow.

Open University Network

The Open University (OU) network has a profound impact on the development of distance higher education in China. It is based on the RTVU network which was formed in 1979. At that time, the population of higher education was very small. As Vice Premier Liu (2012) said, the gross enrollment ratio of higher education in 1978 was 2.7%. In order to improve access, after meeting with the then-Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Sir Edward Heath and with the experience of the Open University in the United Kingdom, the then-Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping initiated the RTVU network in China. The RTVU network was a national network, with one CRTVU in the capital city Beijing and 44 RTVUs in provinces and big cities. They worked together to offer associate degree programs of CRTVU. In 2010, to promote online flexible higher education and achieve lifelong learning for all, the central government decided to develop the OU network based on the RTVU network.

Vision and Mission

The OU network carries the responsibility to promote lifelong learning for all in China. It covers one national Open University of China and many local open universities. The OUC is operated by the central government. Since it was formally established in 2012, it has been a national platform of lifelong learning for all and led the transformation and upgrading of local RTVUs to OUs. Local open universities are regional platforms of lifelong learning for all and operated by the local governments. The OU network is dedicated to promoting the enhanced sharing of quality resources and propelling the implementation of the UNESCO "Education 2030" agenda to "ensure inclusive and equitable education".

Organizational Structure and Operational Mechanisms

The organizational structure of the OU network is similar to that of the RTVU network. It is a nationwide open education system.

The OUC is the core of the entire system. It is national-level and consists of headquarters, branches, colleges and study centers. At present, there is one headquarters in Beijing, 44 branches, more than 1000 colleges and 3000 learning centers located in different provinces, cities, counties and villages.

Local open universities are also very important to the entire system. The first five of RTVUs that have been transformed to OUs are Beijing Open University, Shanghai Open University, Jiangsu Open University, Yunnan Open University and Guangdong Open University.

The OUC (2015) and local open universities work closely with each other to promote the OU network. For example, they signed cooperation agreements and co-built the branches of the OUC. As branches, the local open universities take on the responsibilities of their respective regions and coordinate the construction of local colleges and study centers, while focusing on the main mission of the OUC and delivering the OUC programs. As independent universities, the local open universities can have their own strategic plans, enroll their own students and issue their own degrees. But up to December 2016, the overwhelming majority of the OU network had been delivering the OUC programs and conferring the OUC degrees.

It should be mentioned that the OUC is now increasing its numbers of new colleges and study centers through working with enterprises and industrial associations. From 2012 to 2016, the OUC established 11 industry and corporate colleges, including the School of Coal Mining, the School of Social Work, and the School of Logistics. In October 2017, the OUC established the first overseas study center in Zambia, in collaboration with China Nonferrous Metal Mining (Group) Co., Ltd.

Education Provision and Enrollment

The OU network offers a variety of degree and non-degree programs. In spring 2017, the OUC (2017) offers 30 bachelor programs, 109 associate degree programs and hundreds of non-degree programs. However, the OU network currently does not provide master or Ph.D. programs.

The OU network operates on a large scale in terms of student numbers. According to an OUC (2016) report, the total enrollment number of the OU network reached 3.59 million (1.05 million undergraduate students and 2.54 million associate degree students) in 2015.

The disadvantaged groups are the main target of the OU network. A report of the OUC (2017) shows that more than 70% of the students are from the grassroots level, 55% located in the central and western ethnic minority border regions. Of the OUC student population, 200,000 are rural students, 120,000 military personnel, 270,000 ethnic minority students, and 6,000 disabled students.

Educational Resources Development

One of the key characteristics of the OU network is providing quality educational resources. It works together with the conventional universities, enterprises, industries, associations and Internet companies to make and distribute educational resources to all Chinese people. The OUC (2017) established the National Digital Learning Resources Center, and cooperated with other colleges and universities, vocational institutions, and social educational institutions to establish 247 sub-centers, exploring and shaping an operational mechanism for the agglomeration, construction, and

sharing of resources. By the end of 2016, the center had more than 50,000 high-quality educational resources. Besides that, to meet the fragmented learning needs of adults, the OUC (2017) has developed 30,000 free-to-use five-minute lectures at the digital library and special learning websites.

Delivery Model

For the in-depth integration of modern information technology and open and distance education, President Yang (2013) of the OUC named the delivery model of the OU network as "cloud-path-terminal" model. There is a "cloud platform" providing all the educational resources and online services, and several "paths" (satellite television network, Internet service provider, virtual private network, mobile network) delivering resources and services to various learning "terminals" (cloud classroom, television, mobile phone, computer, iPAD) for learners. For the OUC (2017), from 2012 to 2016, it has completed the construction of 314 cloud classrooms that integrate the comprehensive functions of multimedia, recording and broadcasting, as well as interactive video classrooms. The cloud classrooms have covered all the major cities in Gansu province, and the Xinjiang Uygur and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Regions, along with some other central and western regions. It also has researched and developed the "OUC Pad" and "OUC App" that have been put into pilot use among the students.

"Internet+" Degree Education

The OU network is the main provider of online higher education now in China. Shanghai Open University (2016) adopted the blended learning model and began to provide face-to-face as well as online teaching and learning services for the students. Based on the students' learning behavior and learning outcome, the OUC created a "Six-Network Integration" learner development model to ensure and enhance the quality of degree education. The six key factors to quality online education are online learning space, core curriculum, teaching team, learner support, learning assessment, and management. ICDE (2017) states that the OUC focuses on the quality of learner development and open online learning spaces for tens of thousands of teachers and millions of students, with customized services for migrant workers, college students as village officials, employees of large-scale enterprises (such as McDonalds), the disabled, military personnel and others.

Non-degree Education

With the development of the Chinese economy and society, people's learning needs have become more diversified and personalized. Degree education is unable to satisfy their needs for continuing education. The OU network also provides non-degree education opportunities and services for on-the-job staff, migrant workers, the elderly, and community residents. The leader of the group for building lifelong education system in National Education Advisory Council Mrs. Hao (2017) comments on the OU network that to provide services for lifelong learning for all is one of the most important characteristics of Chinese open universities compared with other countries' open universities. Beijing Open University (2017) developed "Lifelong Learning Platform for Capital Women" together with Beijing Women's Federation. The OUC (2017) has established an open university for the elderly, developed a website for elderly education, and planned to build a national demonstration center for health and artistic pension service experience to explore a new model of education for the elderly.

Credit Bank

As we mentioned above, the OU network provides 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 and informal learning outcomes. The OUC (2017), under the guidance of the MOE, has completed a general framework for a national credit bank system with "frame+standard" technical path, and carried out pilot work. It has organized 55 units, including relevant ministries and commissions, colleges and universities, vocational schools, open universities, training institutions and communities, to be engaged. From 2012 to 2016, more than 670 accreditation standards had been developed. An alliance for the mutual recognition of learning outcomes has been initiated and established. 67 Learning Outcome Accreditation Sub-Centers have been established across China and 4.3 million personal learning accounts have been created. The OUC (2017) launched an online platform called "Online Credit Bank Platform" on November 10, 2017. It enables millions of learners to study and transfer their learning outcomes, anywhere, anytime.

In the past five years, the OU network has made great strides in reform and development as well as capacity building. It has been recognized by the Chinese society and the world. ICDE (2017) awarded the Institutional Prize of Excellence 2017 to the OUC and praised it for its very significant achievements and contributions to the international community of open and distance education.

Future Development of Distance Higher Education

At present, there is a significant market potential for online education in China. The iResearch Company (2016) predicts 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 scale of online higher education is now expanding. The State Council of China (2014) announced its decision that the establishment of online colleges of campus-based universities is exempt from its approval and the power to approve is handed down to local governments. Now, all campus-based universities can provide online degree education if they have the approval from local governments. Furthermore, with growing personalized and diversified demands of students, the OU network will continue to play an important role in degree continuing education programs and lifelong learning for all in the future. It will continue to be a significant component of distance higher education.

Online higher education tends to blur the traditional boundary between the OU network and campus-based universities, and hence some changes have occurred in the relationship between them. The first is the tendency towards convergence. Campus-based universities have begun to implement a blended learning mode, while the OU network puts more and more emphasis on quality supervision for student support at learning centers. The second is the tendency towards competition. With more flexibility in conducting open and distance learning and growing market demand, campus-based universities have shown increasing enthusiasm for offering online education. Some of them, like Zhejiang University and Tsinghua University, have accumulated rich experience in online education, which is well connected with their campus-based offerings in terms of the delivery platform, course components and teaching faculty, thus gaining a good reputation in society. This situation poses new challenges for the OU network to build capacity and enhance quality, not only at the present time, but also in the near future. It would be advisable for the open universities and campus-based universities to find a balance between competition and collaboration. They have their own strengths and weaknesses which can compensate and complement each other in mutually beneficial ways.

The worldwide emergence of massive open online courses (MOOCs) has had a noticeable impact on distance higher education in China. For example, in 2013, Tsinghua University and Peking University joined Edx, while Fudan University and Jiaotong University joined Coursera. Furthermore, the top nine Chinese universities formed an alliance to offer "Chinese MOOCs", and enterprises—such as the Alibaba Group—have taken part in the co-creation of "Chinese MOOCs". Several universities have launched their own MOOC platforms, such as "xuetangx.com" of Tsinghua University, with an independent construction and operating model. Prompted by the MOOCs boom, in April 2015 the MOE (2015b) promulgated the *Opinions and Suggestions for Promoting the Construction, Application and Management of MOOCs*, which created favorable policy conditions for the orderly development of MOOCs.

On the other hand, several problems with distance higher education in China need to be highlighted. The quality of online education and campus education is considered to be different by policymakers, practitioners, researchers and the public. It is ingrained in people's minds that campus education is the preferred model to produce the best qualified graduates. Students who have obtained their qualifications via online education may face discrimination in employment as well as with regard to their reputation in society. Although the distance higher education sector continually strives to improve the quality of its programs and student support, it remains difficult to make significant progress. It is recommended that the institutions, policy makers and society should all contribute to enhancing its quality, by taking a holistic view. For example, policy makers should consider revising the quality standards for both open distance learning and campus-based learning, making them comparable, and also establishing sound external evaluation and monitoring mechanisms.

Despite many problems, the development prospects for distance higher education in China remain positive. The evidence of growth and demand makes it clear that the online higher education sector in China can look forward to a future of expansion to meet the needs of communities.

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