

Chapter 3

China—Commentary



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This chapter provides an inside account and perspective on higher distance education in China. The chapter unfolds in three parts—introduction to distance education in China, Chinese national open university (OU) network, future developments of distance education in China, to outline a detailed description of the changing practices of correspondence education to more open and flexible learning via the Internet.

In Part 1, opening with the history of distance education in China, the chapter progresses through its goals, mission, scale, funding sources, and finally points out the problematics of quality assurance of distance education with glimpses of the regulatory frameworks and policy supporting distance education in China. The problems rooted in both internal quality assurance and external quality supervision and evaluation were identified. The discussions of internal and external quality assurance in this part are consistent with a large body of related research concerning quality assurance of distance education. Apart from examining quality assurance from the internal and external perspectives, quality in distance education can be interpreted differently for policy makers, institutional administrators, teaching staff, and students (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, & Belawati, 2011), many of these various problems which have occurred in quality assurance run counter to the conditions called for to meet the fast-growing demand of online provision (i.e. quantity over quality). If the directions of change to meet the challenges to be faced by distance education continue to ignore these problems, it is hard to be optimistic about the contribution of higher distance education to the discussion of widening access to higher education as well as to develop the lifelong learning society in the long run. We can only hope that efforts will be sought to make the critical policy decisions soon.

In Part 2, a rather detailed description of Chinese national OU network is presented. Given that China has the largest open and distance learning network in the world (Wei, 2010), the format spotlights the importance of the history, development

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and future of Chinese OU network. Adding to the authors' discourse, I would like to further point out that China's Radio & TV Universities (RTVUs) in China have long been designated "second-class" education with high inertia, problematic goals, and disordered management, as the primary and historical mission of RTVUs is to reduce educational costs for a large number of adult learners at the college level. In this historical context, China's open universities were established to shift from their earlier mission of providing mainly second or sole chances to gain qualifications to reposition themselves to work toward a more open and flexible learner-centered learning system. They are described as "new-style" universities with Chinese characteristics and are commissioned to be open to all members of society, in order to build a knowledge economy in China and to further the international movement in distance education. The strength of open universities lies in their learning support services, which are operated primarily by online tutors (Tait, 2003). Nevertheless, newly established open universities in China have not developed the granular role definition of online tutors (Li, Zhang, Yu, & Chen, 2014). There is lack of detailed documentation on the competencies required of tutors. This missing detail poses a considerable challenge to specifying the roles of tutors, the competencies required of those roles, and the expected proficiency levels for each competency. This challenge derives from the complexity of the RTVUs system. Not only does the system entail a tier of universities, colleges, work stations, and teaching and learning centers, but the consequences are also difficult to describe and more difficult to interpret. Furthermore, the rapid reforms implemented in open universities introduce additional challenges in defining the role and its corresponding competencies. Intertwined with both traditional values and the new missions of open universities, the roles and competencies of tutors are ambiguous and contested (Li et al., 2017).

In Part 3, The problems were identified as new challenges for the future development of distance education in China, such as the competition between conventional universities and open universities to enhance their online provision and the little recognition of the quality of online learning versus traditional learning experience in higher education. Although OUs and conventional universities are to some extent different in nature, we need to situate the interpretation of their online provision under the national framework of "education informatization", which is equivalent to "ICT in Education" in a Western context. This national framework does not only provide guidance to upgrade information infrastructure in educational settings, but also puts forward the approaches to enhance education modernization, personalization, diversification, lifelong learning and internationalization (Yuan, 2013). Education informatization is seen as a strategic plan that China adopted to accelerate education modernization by implementing education informatization in all types of education at all levels. By 2020, a fundamental, informatized education system for all types of schools at all levels in the city and the countryside shall be completed so as to improve the modernization of educational resources, instructional design and teaching and learning strategies. "Internet Plus", which is proposed by premier Keqiang Li in 2015, is now widely used to create a new growth engine and to promote transformation in economic and social sectors. According to the action plan, China will push forward the integration of the Internet and education, fueling its expansion

from face-to-face tuition to open and flexible online learning. On the way to meet the goal in the strategic plan of education informatization, the new “Internet Plus” policy will to a large extent boost the current online provision both in OU networks and conventional universities. Although facing great challenges that are presented in the chapter, China is now facing great opportunities to upsurge the development of distance higher education.

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