# Longitudinal impact of visiting scholarships on the professional practice of scholars from China

An eSTEeM project

*Mark Endean & Daphne Chang*

## 1. Introduction

> *The Open University (OU) has always welcomed a wide variety of visiting academics and values the contributions which can be made by them. We encourage the appointment of such individuals, including non-academic specialists working with OU academics in areas such as research impact and enterprise.*
>
> Open University (2017)

Staff in academic and academic-related posts at other higher education institutions worldwide have been welcome at the OU since its founding in 1969. The University publishes policy and guidelines (Open University, 2017 and Open University, n.d.) covering the purposes of and arrangements for such visiting scholarships. Implicit in these documents is the suggestion that such visitors are a normal part of university life and that the university benefits from their presence and the work they undertake.

Although little is said specifically about benefits to the institution, nothing at all is said about how the visitors themselves, others around them and their home institution benefit. The work reported here represents an attempt to identify and document the effect engaging in a visiting scholarship has on the individuals concerned.

The particular scholars chosen for the study were all from China. Not only were these scholars easily identifiable as members of the distance learning (DL) communities in China, with whom the OU has had a long relationship, but the cohort constituted what is probably the largest group of scholars who share at least one common characteristic.

In evaluating the impact of an experience on an individual, the time dimension is of utmost significance. We aimed to bring to light both the short term effects that might have been established relatively easily at the time of the visit and longer term impacts, by engaging as participants in the study scholars whose visits took place over a range of time from the recent past to many years ago. Undertaking a longitudinal study may be complex but the passage of time enables individuals to give meaning and attribute value to their past experiences. Such longitudinal studies allow for informants' experiences to accumulate, enabling them to focus on reflection.

Among other goals (see Section 4.2) we hoped the outcomes of our study might guide the University towards a strategy for international scholarly exchange and collaboration to replace the *ad hoc* approach embodied in the policy documents cited above. By evidencing personal and institutional benefits to be gained on both sides from scholarship visits, we anticipated being able to start a debate within the OU that could lead to more outwardly-focused staff development.

The work reported here is the product of interviews conducted with a sample of former scholars, exploring the longitudinal impacts of their visits on the scholars, their institutions and their wider communities in China. The number of interviewees was determined primarily by the investigators' time and the logistical issues surrounding conducting the interviews face to face.

Although many of our goals have so far been achieved, there is still much valuable work that could be done with former scholars, particularly by widening the sample of scholars to include smaller institutions more remote from Beijing. Moreover, we have been unable to date to undertake the parallel study of impact on our institution arising from hosting scholars and we are unaware that it has yet been attempted at the OU. In the absence of a complementary perspective, our findings provide support for the view of the OU as benefiting the DL sector worldwide by hosting scholars, without ourselves gaining from the experience. Our own personal experience and our interactions with scholars and their supervisors supports a fuller picture but, without hard evidence, such ideas remain merely assertions.

The report begins with brief profiles of the investigators, outlining our respective backgrounds that uniquely qualify us to engage in this investigation. Section 3 outlines the organisation of distance learning provision in China, providing the context for the scholars who participated in our study.

Section 4 details our approach to the investigation. Our findings are set out in Section 5 followed by conclusions. Finally, we provide some suggestions for follow-on studies.

## 1.1. Acknowledgements

# 2. Investigators' backgrounds

## 2.1. Daphne Chang

Daphne Chang is a social anthropologist. She was born in Taiwan and has lived and worked in the USA, Kenya, Cameroon, India and Japan and the UK. Daphne started working for the Open University in 2000. She was an AL for 9 years, prior to becoming a staff tutor in 2009. One of Daphne's research interests is the impacts that Chinese migrants have on Africa's development.

## 2.2. Mark Endean

Mark Endean's association with the Chinese distance learning communities began in 1999 with his supervision of a visiting scholar from the Central China Radio and Television University (CCRTVU). The scholar eventually went on to complete an MPhil

based on their study that involved students from both CCRTVU and the OU. They also introduced Mark to other provincial RTVUs (PRTVU) and as his network of contacts in the RTVU system widened, Mark was able to visit and learn about the PRTVUs in Shanghai, Xi'an and Nanning (Guangxi RTVU).

With his growing network of contacts in China, Mark started sharing information and experience with colleagues with responsibility for China in Open University Worldwide (the wholly-owned subsidiary of the OU that sits within the Business Development Unit). That led to further connections with Chinese DL providers outside the RTVU system and subsequently to invitations to speak at meetings in China on aspects of distance learning such as quality assurance, credit transfer, student support and learning design.

Since 2010, Mark has regularly contributed to briefing and training activities provided commercially by Open University Worldwide to clients from China. He is now part of the core team of facilitators for the 'Learning Design and Course Creation' workshops that, since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, have been presented online to our Chinese partners.

# 3. Context

Adult education has played an important role in modern (post Imperial) China with distance learning (DL) being an important mode of delivery. McCormick (1992) identified three aspects of distance learning that accord strongly with Chinese educational policy, specifically under the rule of Mao Zedong (1949 – 1976). These are independence of learning, access, and combining work with education. Writing during the period in which China was 'opening up', economically, to the West, McCormick points out that the third of these, work-related learning, was just as important to the economic development of China under the reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping (1978 – 1989) as it was politically during the Mao era.

McCormick goes on to distinguish between three different 'systems' of DL, self study for external examinations, correspondence education, and the Radio and Television Universities (RTVUs). It is the RTVUs and their successors, the Chinese Open Universities, that provide the context for this study.

## 3.1. Development of the RTVUs

The main providers of distance education at HE level in China, in terms of student numbers, are the institutions formerly designated Radio and Television Universities. A proto-RTVU was established in Shanghai in 1960 serving the municipality through a blend of broadcast and face-to-face teaching activities in local study centres throughout the city. Operations ceased at the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, after which higher education in China was disrupted for a decade.

Subsequently, a nationwide system of distance education was established based on a Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU) in Beijing and 44 'Provincial' PRTVUs (rising later to 45), one in each of the provinces of China and in the city-level provinces such as Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an, Tianjin and so on.

It is important to see the RTVUs as nodes in a network, with their roles and the relationships between them changing in strength and nature as political engagement with education has changed over time. The role and focus of CCRTVU itself is directly determined by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Beijing, and successive Presidents, including the current (2020) appointee, have previously served in the Ministry.

Each PRTVU serves in part as an outpost of CCRTVU but also serves the educational, political and economic needs of its designated catchment area, through the provincial education committee. A proportion of the curriculum offered by each PRTVU is provided by CCRTVU, with the actual proportion varying over time. The remainder is developed by the PRTVU according to local requirements.

The transformation since 2010 of six of the RTVUs into 'Open Universities' is the manifestation of a shift in political involvement in education. By designating them Open Universities, Beijing OU, Shanghai OU, Guangdong OU, Jiangsu OU and Yunnan OU have been given greater autonomy and are now significantly less dependent on the RTVU network and the former CCRTVU, now designated the Open University of China.

## 3.2. Other DL provision in China

Starting in 1998, the MOE declared its intention to foster 'modern distance education' (MDE) in China, by which it meant online distance education (Wang & Crook, 2006). The Ministry accredited, over the following few years, a total of 68 online colleges based in existing universities including CCRTVU. That number has remained constant since the early 2000s but it is reasonable to speculate that the 'online pivot' arising from the Covid-19 pandemic will prompt a policy shift in the Ministry towards more widespread use of online learning throughout higher education.

## 3.3. Chinese DL provider relationships with the OU

The relationships between important DL providers worldwide develop through and are fostered by their membership of various regional and global bodies.

OUC in its previous incarnation as CCRTVU was a longstanding member of the major global DL networks, such as the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE), the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and so on. Its relationship with the UK Open University extends as far back as its early years, with OU staff involved in documenting the evolution of the RTVUs (Hawkridge & McCormick, 1983) and later engaged through projects funded by the World Bank and UNESCO (Hawkridge, 1990).

Scholarly exchanges between CCRTVU and the OU began early on in the growing relationship. Robert McCormick of the then OU School of Education spent time at CCRTVU in 1981 and 1982 in order to research distance education in China and his work formed the basis for his doctoral thesis submitted in 1992 (McCormick, 1992). The earliest record available to us of a scholar from CCRTVU visiting the OU dates from 1998 although there may have been others before them. We were fortunate enough to include the first recorded scholar in our survey. Although they were technically based in the University of London, they spent some time in the Regional Centre in Cambridge and at Walton Hall.

As the other 67 online colleges have matured, some of them too have chosen to send scholars to the OU for varying periods and these are listed below. There is no record,

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however, of a consistent reverse flow of scholars from the OU to these providers in China. The one possible exception is reported in Endean (2012) and relates to a period spent at the online college for East China University of Science and Technology.

Soon after the year 2000, a structured programme was established in CCRTVU to identify and promote visiting scholars to the UK, with a number being allocated to the OU. Funding is provided jointly by the China Scholarship Council (CSC) and the Sino-British Fellowship Trust. Applications are invited from throughout the RTVU network and up to five preferred candidates are selected from those who apply. Research proposals and CVs are then forwarded to the OU so that suitable supervisors can be identified.

The process of recruiting supervisors was largely conducted through personal contacts within the OU up to around 2015. In 2020, it was adopted by the University Scholarship Steering Group, partly in response to the preliminary findings from this investigation.

# 4. Methodology

## 4.1. Identifying suitable participants

A list of past scholars from China was obtained from the former Visits Coordinator, Babette Oliver, whose work started in Communications and then transferred to Open University Worldwide, which was later merged with the Business Development Unit. This was an informal record of our visitors from China and further information was added through conversations with supervisors of former scholars and through correspondence with the scholars themselves. A summary list is included as Appendix 1; it remains incomplete.

The geographical distribution of the known locations of the scholars listed is indicated in Figure 1.



*Figure 1      Geographical distribution of former Chinese visiting scholars by number of scholars.*

It quickly becomes apparent from the map in Figure 1 that the major concentration of former scholars is in Beijing, with another cluster in Shanghai. The remainder are distributed in small numbers in other cities and provinces in Eastern and Central China. We therefore decided to focus our attention on the Beijing and Shanghai clusters. A plan was initially put in place for a visit to Beijing in May 2018. An opportunity arose in November 2018 for a second visit to China, which allowed further participants in both Beijing and Shanghai to be included.

## 4.2. Research questions

We set out to attempt to answer two questions:

1. How did the scholars benefit from their time at the OU?
2. What influence did the scholar have on their 'community' after their visit?

These two questions potentially identify effects that the scholarships have had on the scholars and their communities. There is also the reverse perspective: how the OU

benefits from welcoming and supporting scholars. Within the scope of our investigation, however, we have not yet had the capacity to investigate this question. It remains for others to explore.

Also at the back of our minds was the possibility that some common characteristics of successful visits might emerge, allowing us to specify more accurately how a visit should be set up and managed to increase its likelihood of success.

Interestingly, as will be detailed later in the report, organisation of the scholarship programme has been taken over by the University's Scholarship Lead since the work encompassed by this report was completed. The new arrangements are designed to foster a closer alignment between the scholarship goals of the University and those of the visiting scholars.

## 4.3. Information gathering

We adopted a three-stage approach to gathering information from former scholars in order to obtain the widest possible range of responses within the limitations of time and funding.

1. Establish contact and enlist participants

    • to make initial contact by email and WeChat and to brief those who accepted our invitation to participate on the purpose of the study.

2. Complete a 'priming' contact form online

    • to establish baseline information about the individual and negotiate follow-up arrangements for stage 3.

3. Undertake semi-structured interviews

    • to gather qualitative data on each individual's motivation, experience and perspective, and on their perceptions of value and other reflections in the time since their visit.

### 4.3.1. Stage 1

The original information on former scholars provided to us included some email addresses. Some others were known to us through personal contact or could be obtained from the scholars' former supervisors. Similarly, some were contactable through WeChat, which is now the default communication tool within Chinese communities and is preferred over email for most purposes.

Once a schedule had been established for the researchers to visit China, possible participants (those based in or near the planned destinations) were sent details of the project by email and/or WeChat and were invited to participate. The invitations were individually composed and a copy of an exemplar invitation to a small group is included as Appendix 2. Those who responded directly to the invitation were then included as participants in Stage 2.

### 4.3.2. Stage 2

An online questionnaire was designed in Microsoft Forms. A link and a QR code were sent to each positive respondent from Stage 1. The questionnaire is included as Appendix 3.

Responses were exported to Microsoft Excel, allowing quantitative data to be collated and analysed to provide a high-level overview of some of the characteristics of this sample of former scholars. All responses were reviewed and used by the investigators to prepare for the face-to-face interviews.

### 4.3.3. Stage 3

Interviews lasting approximately one hour were arranged with those who volunteered to participate in the study and were available at the same times as the investigators. At the start of the interview, the purpose and goals of the investigation were explained, along with the ethical framework within which the study was being conducted and the rights of the interviewee. A leaflet was provided summarising all relevant details and interviewees were asked to sign a consent form indicating that they had understood their rights and the responsibilities of the interviewers. These documents are included as Appendix 4.

Nine interviews were completed in Beijing in May 2018. A further two former scholars were interviewed in Beijing and three in Shanghai in November 2018. The interviews were conducted in either English or Chinese, depending on the preference of the interviewee.

Each interview was recorded and those conducted mostly in English were transcribed using the current eSTEeM transcription service.

The outline interview protocol is included as Appendix 5.

# 5.Findings

## 5.1. Profiles



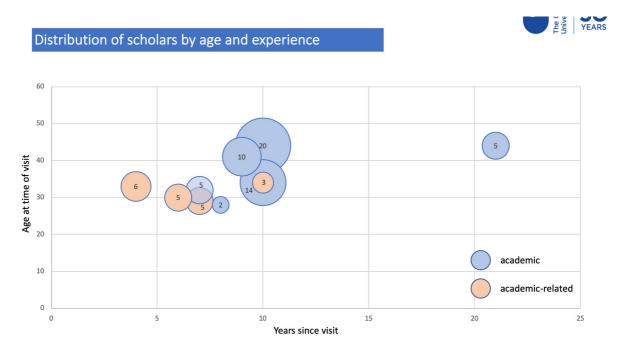Distribution of scholars by age and experience

*Figure 2        Distribution of scholars by age and experience (2019)*

Figure 2 summarises the work-related characteristics of the survey participants from whom sufficiently-detailed responses were received. Their employment status at the time of their visiting scholarship is categorised as either academic (blue circles) or academic-related (salmon-pink circles). The diameter of each circle and the enclosed number show the number of years each scholar had been in post when they visited, which is to say they give an indication of the seniority of the scholar at that time. Placement on the vertical axis shows the age of the scholar at the time of their visit and position on the horizontal axis shows how long ago the visit took place, with more recent visitors appearing to the left.

The gaps in the chart occur for two distinct reasons. To the right, we were only able to make contact with a number of former scholars whose visits were no more than 10 years ago. Scholars from earlier times we found to be inaccessible with the exception of the scholar to the far right, who remains closely associated with a number of the other scholars in our study.

The four-year gap on the left is the result of a hiatus in the funding arrangements for visiting scholars. This has now been resolved and the flow of scholars resumed in 2019.

The very superficial information available to us for this small number of scholars does not support rigorous demographic analysis but it is possible to make a limited number of qualitative observations about how the characteristics of our academic visitors from China have changed over time.

1.  In the more distant past, visitors were primarily academics. More recent visitors have included staff from academic-related backgrounds.
2.  Scholars have been generally relatively junior staff although around 10 years ago there were several more-senior academic staff involved.

More elaborate analysis of our findings might be able to relate specific impacts to the work roles and seniority of the scholars. However, we have treated our participants as a single cohort spanning a variety of characteristics thus:

- 6 male participants
- 8 female participants
- early, mid and late career scholars
- academic and academic-related staff.

## 5.2. Impact

Impact can be seen from three different levels: institutional, national and personal.

### 5.2.1. Institutional impact

All scholars arrived with specific research questions that they sought to investigate. Most of the scholars were given a clear brief from their institutions. Sending employees abroad is an expensive exercise. Official assignments need to be accompanied by official passports to be issued; applicants and the sending institutions are required to go through long and convoluted procedures. Two of the scholars suggested they underwent competitive processes to win the opportunity. When asked why they chose the OU as the destination, there were different answers. Some came because their institution had visited the OU before, some came based on colleagues' recommendation and 80% of our interviewees quoted the OU's reputation in quality and being the world leader in ODL. 2/3 of our interviewees had not been overseas prior to their visits to the OU.

In so far as sending institutions are concerned, such an investment was made when they felt innovations and solutions were required for them to go forward. A good example is when institutions were looking for an appropriate platform to deliver their online teaching and learning. Quality assurance/enhancement, learning design, OERs, staff development of tutors and subject specific pedagogy were also popular choices.

In the mid-2000s, scholars visited the OU to understand how we used and designed our VLE (based on Moodle). At the time, many ODL institutions in China were looking for an appropriate platform for their online learning and teaching whereas the OU had had 10 years' experience in using Moodle. These visitors were hosted in LTS. The visitors were interested in the process for module construction – from authoring learning materials, management of versioning of learning materials to rendering of the learning materials. They were also interested in the project management side of the process (including the protection and maintenance of learning materials). After having returned to China, one scholar played a key role in the sending institution's IT restructuring. They designed a new Moodle schema (theme) so that every module in the institution now has the same feel and look. Many IT practitioners in the UK attend international conferences/conventions regularly to update their professional knowledge/practices. As this is not possible in China, one scholar talked about how the experience of visiting the OU was so valuable.

Another scholar utilised what they learned to design an equivalent of StudentHome for their institution. They were mindful to incorporate useful information for students (such as course choices, enrolment procedures and tutorials etc). Prior to the new design, student-facing information was mainly for publicity and marketing. The new version played a key role in facilitating students' learning, which the scholar attributed to a result of their participating in learning design related activities. Upon return, the scholar advocated the importance of a student-centred VLE. They also published journal articles.

Another example of other institutions seeking practical solutions is demonstrated by a scholar who came to understand the principles and rationale behind our modules in PG Dip/Cert in Online and Distance Education. (These modules and qualifications have since been in teach-out – end date 31 December 2021.) When these modules/qualifications were first rolled out, many of our ALs studied them as part of their continuing professional development. These set of modules were licensed to be taught in China. However, when the module materials were translated, many Chinese students did not understand the contexts. This scholar came to try to understand them better in order to adapt them to fit the Chinese context. They came to appreciate the role of staff tutor and noted how disconnected some central academics (especially those with research as their main profile) were from students and teaching. The scholar noted that their experience at the OU has helped them to design a staff development system and develop training modules for teaching staff. They felt this visit generated valuable academic contacts that they would not otherwise have had.

Other scholars also commented on how the OU provided feedback for our ALs, which they deemed valuable and worth emulating. For the scholars who visited regional centres, summer schools, open days, and/or face to face tutorials and had the opportunities to meet some of our ALs and students, they were very impressed by their enthusiasm and dedication. One scholar was keen to note the differences. Tutors at their institution at the time could only answer generic questions with lecture being delivered by academics from other universities. They were impressed that our ALs were subject experts. They were impressed by how a module production team was staffed by a number of academics and project managed by a curriculum manager. Collaboration between academics and support from a project manager (our Curriculum Managers, CMs) was entirely new to them. Since they returned to China, they have noted that the teaching posts have increasingly been staffed by academics with more subject expertise. The scholar herself has been promoted and gained more management responsibility.

The unique nature of how OU colleagues collaborate with each other was commented on by more than one scholar. One scholar commented on how we align each other's efforts and were interested in ensuring the level and content of our modules are coherent and of a certain standard. In contrast most ODL Chinese practitioners work on their own.

Quality assurance/enhancement was a topic of interest for a few of our scholars. They were curious about how we could ensure the quality of our teaching and teaching materials is of a certain and consistent standard. A couple scholars talked about the difficulties of ensuring consistent marking and feedback at their own institutions. They also noted different teaching styles. They felt they would benefit from less didactic teaching. One visiting scholar, who was hosted in the Open CETL, was particularly interested in quality assurance of modules, specifically in different ways to evaluate

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quality. Their immersion was reasonably complete – they established contact with the Quality Office, attended seminars, tutor briefings and residential schools. After they returned to China, they were one of the first to pioneer an online student survey questionnaire in China's open and online distance education sector. They commented that without coming to the OU, they would not have learned how to put together and operationalise a student questionnaire. They were promoted after they returned to China – and made responsible for quality assurance of learning materials for their institution. They learned that quality assurance and student support should not be the responsibility of one or two departments – they should be the collective responsibility of everyone in the institution. The concept of learner support should be more about support rather than providing a service. From speaking to many colleagues within and outside the OU, they came to realise that people have great confidence in the quality of OU production. When they returned to China, they wanted to introduce the concept of quality enhancement rather than 'quality control' or quality assurance. They disseminated what they learned widely by attending seminars, workshops, international conferences and co-authoring a book.

Visiting the OU not only benefited scholars who were mid-career, but also those who were at the start of their careers. One scholar was given the opportunity after they won an open competition. Prior to the visit, they had no experience either as a student or as a practitioner in ODL. They came to the OU and were interested in OER. When they returned to China, they wrote two papers, one of which was about OpenLearn and the other paper was on OER. They were impressed by the VLE for its interactivity. When they returned, they were invited to share their experiences widely. They also helped colleagues who embarked on the journey after them with their preparations. They also felt they became more interested in how their students think. They felt their visit was very short. They recommended good preparation would help visiting scholars benefit more when visits are short. They said if they had another opportunity to visit, they would like to teach their subjects to OU students and see what it was like. They also felt we should open our summer schools up to international practitioners and allow them the opportunity to teach our students.

Another junior academic was keen to learn how the OU delivers tuition, how an online tutorial works and how we design learning materials. During their visit, they had weekly contact with their supervisor and met colleagues in the same field. They learned how to be an AL, how to design assessments and how to mark assignments. The scholar felt what they learned at the OU was formative. What they learned was new to them as a new academic and they felt it was very influential in terms of developing their own practices. They returned and led on designing learning activities and assessments. They integrated case studies and open questions for their students. They also incorporated more opportunities for them to discuss and work in teams. Their students were encouraged to think. Their modules were seen as exemplars and they had shown colleagues how to design learning activities and deliver tutorials. They wrote tutor guidance, which was not their institution's expectation. At the time of the interview, they managed 10 staff and would like to come back to the UK to learn how to manage teaching staff. They said prior to their visit they had no model as to how to deliver online and distance teaching and had no understanding of an acceptable standard. As a result of the visit, they returned to their institution with a good understanding of these areas.

They felt they had improved as a practitioner. Their time at the OU was like a formal education that gave them structure.

Course design and development and the VLE were the main interests to some. One scholar noted the study calendar in a module. Their institution organised learning materials according to their types. During the visit, they found the idea of organising learning and learning activities week by week at the OU very interesting. When they returned, they reorganised the institution's learning materials on the VLE and introduced the study calendar. Since their trip, they had been promoted. At the time of the interview, they were responsible for introducing learning design to their staff. They said the visit to the OU had not only helped them to progress career wise, it had also broadened their vision and outlook. They attributed their abilities and confidence in presenting papers in international conferences to their visit. They had since led many initiatives at their institution.

One scholar who was interested in the VLE attended a summer school in Bath and had an opportunity to meet members of the OU Student Association during their visit. This was a valuable experience. Since returning to China, this scholar had worked in different departments. They said when they encountered difficult tasks, they would look at the OU's experiences and other colleagues' experiences when coming up with solutions.

Sadly, not all scholars' experiences were as productive as they could have been. This was primarily as a result of a mismatch between the scholars' expertise and that of the supervisor. One of our interviewees wished to learn how we teach maths. Unfortunately, they were allocated to a supervisor in a completely unrelated (non-numerate) subject area. They spent four months with us. They did however make contact with two Maths professors at the time and managed to see a few examples of maths modules. Their takeaway impression was that the OU communicated with our students well. They felt we understood our students' needs and requirements better than their home institution. Since they returned from the UK, they said they always try to teach their students following the examples they found at the OU. Even though they could have had a better-suited supervisor during their stay, they were very glad of the opportunity and have advocated other colleagues visit the OU.

### 5.2.2. National impact

Many interviewees had produced books, journal articles and conference papers to cascade their learning within their departments, faculties, schools, in China, regionally and internationally. On that basis, one can argue that China's ODL sector has become more outward looking. Out of our interviewees, two scholars who have created long lasting national impacts attributed their successes to their visits.

One of the scholars was instrumental in introducing open and distance learning to China when they returned to China in the late 1990s. They came to the UK for one year and were mainly hosted at a face-to-face university in London. This was their first experience in formulating a research question independently. During their stay, they visited the OU (amongst other institutions) for three months and collaborated with a number of OU staff. They were particularly impressed by the quality of our student support. After returning to China, they continued to collaborate with UK colleagues in developing joint projects and translated academic articles into Chinese. As their career progressed, they were able to initiate institutional collaborations in a much more senior capacity. They

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talked about the value of being a visiting scholar. They developed an appreciation of diversity and differences whilst in the UK. They promoted international exchanges and encouraged more junior colleagues to visit the OU so as to understand the OU's operations and how we provided tailored support to our students. When more junior colleagues visited the UK, they put them in touch with their academic contacts. In a world of learning made 'mobile' with the help of technology, they felt ODL institutions in China would benefit from sending practitioners to learn how better to design learning materials and facilitate teaching to suit non-traditional students (i.e. those who are disabled, unemployed and military personnel) and the OU was a good place for that. The interviewee also kept abreast of how the OU developed online learning and teaching after their return. They expressed warm feelings towards the OU: "…whenever I met with the scholars and experts from the Open University, I think it's like seeing a member of my family…". The interviewee talked about the generosity of the Sino-British Fellowship Trust. Without their financial assistance, many collaborations/exchanges would not have happened.

Another example of influence came from a scholar who visited the OU as part of the Open CETL programme and has since become a renowned academic in online work-based learning and vocational education. When they first visited the OU, they were a PhD student and interested in quality assurance of online and distance education. During their CETL time, they visited the UK twice (each visit lasted 4 months). The scholar said they chose to visit the OU because it was renowned in online education and because of its quality. Being part of the CETL had a great influence on their career development and the decision they made in their research. Whilst at the OU, they were exposed to quality supervision, which included 90 minutes reporting each week. After their visit, they published a few articles to discuss how the OU assures its quality and how it compares with other universities. During their visit, they came to realise that a direct comparison of the quality of online education between the UK and China was not possible because the contexts varied considerably. By extension, the trajectory, style, approach and methodology of how the UK develops its online education could not be copied by China. They felt China should develop its own path. They reviewed OpenLearn materials and observed that there was a gap in providing for continuing professional development, which was a field that they went on to develop their expertise in. Their work has been influential in this area in China. When asked what their focus would be if they were given another opportunity to visit the OU, they said they would like to understand how the OU tackles employability and teaches professional skills when producing modules.

### 5.2.3. Personal impact

All the visiting scholars we interviewed produced academic outputs after their visits. 90% of them gained promotion and took on more responsibilities and management duties. Being exposed to how the OU innovates, producing teaching materials, delivering tuition and supporting its students and ALs provided them with a good starting point for devising solutions for their own institutions. Visiting scholars also felt their opinions were valued more because of their visits to the OU. Many scholars practised what they had learned at the OU and felt the financial investments their institutions made were returned handsomely. A number of them cited their teaching styles as having changed as a result – they welcome students asking questions, they understand the importance of discussions/dialogues in teaching and encourage independent enquiry in their

students. They also appreciated the importance of scaffolding and making teaching materials as explicit as possible. For those who had since moved on to more management roles, they found the interventions they introduced still valued and the materials they wrote in use widely. They saw the opportunity of visiting the OU as transformative in terms of their career development and personal growth.

One informant described herself as a frog sitting at the bottom of a well. In a well-known Chinese fable, the frog could only see a very small part of the sky and from a very limited perspective. The higher the frog moves up the walls of the well, the more sky it can see. The experience of having spent some time in the OU was described as having the opportunity to climb halfway up the well – and the scholar was enabled to have a much wider perspective as a result. This scholar was part of the Open CETL. They particularly praised the care they received from the CETL. Visiting the OU was described like opening a window by another scholar – the visit gave them an opportunity to know herself better and gain more confidence. After the visit, they know they can work and live well in unfamiliar environments and be successful.

In addition to gaining more confidence in themselves and as academics, becoming more independent, being able to travel on their own, the autonomy of deciding where to go, and the experience of being in a more diverse environment were all cited as part of scholars' personal growth.

The pleasure of and the ability to travel made a real impression on many scholars. The restrictions on travelling abroad for pleasure have been loosening for Chinese nationals since 2000s. Due to economic prosperity, more and more people are able to leave the country. However, for 80% of our scholars, the opportunity to visit the OU was the very first time they were able to go abroad. Perhaps because of this, the impact of the trip on them at a personal level was felt deeply. One scholar was amazed by how differently people from different cultures think. It was a great opportunity to get a sense of such differences. Two scholars thought the concepts of personal space and privacy were alien and very difficult to understand. They cherished the opportunities for sightseeing, which some of them had very little experience of within China (domestic movement was overseen by the government for decades). Scotland seemed to be a popular destination for short sightseeing trips. A scholar said it was a revelation to them that rural areas could be clean, well connected with good amenities (although this observation could be hotly contested by some Scottish residents). A couple of scholars commented that they had made a commitment to support their children to study in the UK when they are older because of how they themselves had benefited from being here. One scholar commented that it was an exceptional experience for them. They had never travelled much before they came to the UK. The trip symbolised an achievement for them personally – they travelled alone, coped with a new institution in another country and lived their life in a different culture.

The Sino-British Fellowship Trust was mentioned by nearly all the scholars. Not only does the Trust make a financial contribution for their visit, it also continues to be interested in their endeavours after the visits, which was very much appreciated.

All scholars kept abreast of changes happening at the OU and asked many informed questions during the interviews. The warmth towards the OU and interest in us has not diminished throughout the years.

# 6. Conclusions

International scholarship exchange is seen and practised as a type of academic professional development. In the context of our research, sending institutions perceived the OU to be the leading exemplar amongst ODL institutions. They sent their staff to understand our innovations, seek solutions and find ways/methods to improve their institutions. We have found the sending institutions had not been disappointed – new technology, improved processes, better teaching practices and raised institutional profiles were fruits of these visits.

On a personal level, the scholars we interviewed share all the benefits/merits of international student exchange reported in the literature (e.g. DeGraaf et al, 2013, and Streitwieser et al, 2012). They were able to articulate ways in which they had gained personal growth. Clearly, their visits to the OU gave them considerable advantages in career progression. Although expensive, this research has shown that international scholarship exchange is possibly one of the most effective/impactful types of academic staff development.

The OU were perceived to provide innovation and solutions for the sending institutions. Furthermore, the practices that the scholars observed from their visits were seen as a benchmark for excellence. We were humbled by how highly the scholars valued their visits to the OU and amazed by the tremendous impacts that our scholars had achieved.

The one negative note in our conversations with former scholars centred around the importance of assigning them to a suitable supervisor. Now that a new procedure is in place for managing scholarship visits, the background and outlook of the supervisor must take a high priority if the most is to be gained on both sides from the visit.

Although we were not able to carry out systematic data collection from the supervisors of our interviewees due to time constraints, informal conversations with supervisors suggests they too gain at a personal level from the scholars' visits. However, we are concerned that there is little evidence of the OU benefiting systematically from these visits.

The scholarship policy (Open University, 2017) suggests that the OU values the contributions that can be made by visiting academics. However, apart from hosting them, we found little evidence to suggest what 'value' means and what the OU gains from such visits. It seems the OU has missed an opportunity to be a learning organisation in this context. Without being more reflective and reflexive, it is unlikely the maximum benefit from hosting visiting scholars will be materialised.

This research provides some evidence to suggest that other ODL institutions understand our global reputation. Can we say the same of them and what do we do to maintain our reputation?

## 6.1. Unintended outcomes

As a result of our findings, our initially inward-looking study revealed the profound influence the OU has had on a number of distance education communities in China and

has triggered several initiatives to promote new inter-community collaboration. Among these to date have been:

- An invitation from Shanghai Open University (SOU) to the OU to join the UNESCO UNITWIN distance learning network, managed by SOU.
- A bid (unsuccessful) to the British Council's UK-China Belt and Road Initiative Countries Partnership Fund in 2018.
- A delegation from SOU to the eSTEeM Annual Conference in 2019 with a special session organised around internationalisation of scholarship.
- A joint colloquium with University of London Worldwide and Leicester University, both concurrent hosts with the OU of scholars from OUC in 2019, accompanied by a commitment to further collaboration in connection with visiting scholars. Sino-British Fellowship Trust were in attendance.
- The adoption by the PVC (RES)/IET of the future management of visiting scholars from OUC in collaboration with the leads from all the OU scholarship centres.
- A programme to invite 20 international scholars to the OU in May 2020. This call received 45 applications from all over the world. Unfortunately, this event had to be postponed due to the COVID pandemic. We aim to resume it as soon as it is feasible.

# 7.Future work

At the time of writing, it remains for us to share our findings from this study with our survey participants and their home institutions, and with the funding bodies.

If resources are available, the study can also be extended in a number of ways:

- The first priority is to conduct interviews with former supervisors of visiting scholars and other colleagues who provided support to them.
- A more comprehensive view of longitudinal impact will be gained from interviewing additional scholars, including those who have visited the OU since 2015.
- There is much to be gained from expanding the target participants to those who have been visiting scholars at other UK HEIs.
- Similarly, we are aware of schemes whereby UK university staff are able to spend time in China and the impact these opportunities have is worthy of study.

# 8.References

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# Appendix 1

| Home institution | Number of scholars | Starting year | Most recent visit year |
|---|---|---|---|
| Beijing Normal U | 1 | 2008 | 2008 |
| Beijing Open U | 4 | 2009 | 2011 |
| CCRTVU[1,2] | 18 | 1998 | 2009 |
| E China Normal U | 1 | 2008 | 2008 |
| Open University of China[2] | 12 | 2011 | 2020 |
| Peking University | 2 | 2008 | 2008 |
| Shanghai Jiaotong U | 7 | 2008 | 2013 |
| S China Normal U | 1 | 2010 | 2010 |
| Zhejiang U | 2 | 2010 | 2010 |

[1]China Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU) became the Open University of China (OUC) in 2010.

[2]CCRTVU/OUC manages a programme of selecting and sponsoring staff to make scholarship visits to the UK, which is open to staff working in all of the Provincial Radio and Television Universities (PRTVUs). The origins of the aggregate number of scholars shown here are various and include CCRTVU/OUC in Beijing.

# Appendix 2

Example invitation messages, identifying characteristics and personal details redacted.

### Initial individual contact

*Dear XXX, I hope you are well. I am coming to YYY next week and I hope it will be possible for you to spare an hour for me and a colleague to come to talk to you about your experience at the OU as a visiting scholar. It is part of a research project we are doing about visiting scholars. If you think it is possible for us to meet either on Wednesday or Thursday, please let me know and I will send you more details of the project and what is involved.*

### Follow up message making arrangements for interviews

*Dear Friends, my colleague Daphne and I … are looking forward very much to meeting you all in YYY on Wednesday. We will need 40-50 minutes with each of you separately to talk to you about your experience as a visiting scholar. XXX, I think you have agreed to see us at 10 o'clock. Is it possible for you to work out a timetable so that we can carry out all three interviews in the morning? Or will it be better to go on into the afternoon? We can be available all day so we are happy to fit in around what is best for you. There are two things which we would like you to do before we meet, if possible. First I am going to send you a leaflet introducing the project which I would like you to read. It sets out what the project is about and what you volunteering to take part means. [It tells you that] Daphne and I have to conduct our research according to strict rules which protect you and your identity. The second thing, if you possibly can, is to fill in a short online form with factual information. You can find the form here https://forms.office.com/??? or you can follow the QR code I will send after sending this message. Thank you in advance and see you on Wednesday.*

# Appendix 3

## China visiting scholars information

Thank you very much for agreeing to contribute to our project.

This is a simple questionnaire to collect up-to-date information about you. This is in preparation for interviews to be conducted in China as part of the project you have previously agreed to take part in. If you would prefer not to respond to any particular question, please leave the answer blank.

The information you provide will only be used for the purposes of our research. It will be held in strictest confidence and not shared with others.

Reports or other published documents based on our research findings will not include any information that could be used to identify you as an individual. Any data we collect that identifies you as a person will be completely destroyed no later than 2 years after the completion of the project.

1. Your name

   Enter your answer

2. Your current age

   Enter your answer

3. Your gender

   ◯ Female

   ◯ Male

   ◯ Prefer not to say

21

4. Your place of birth or hometown

Enter your answer

5. The approximate start and end dates of your visit(s) to the Open University.

Enter your answer

6. Your Open University supervisor(s)

Enter your answer

7. Your research topic during your visit to the Open University

Enter your answer

8. Your job title and responsibilities at the time of your visit to the Open University

Enter your answer

9. Your current job title and responsibilities

Enter your answer

10. The approximate date that you started working for your university

Enter your answer

Submit

22

# Appendix 4

Information leaflet

+44 1908 274066

# The Open University

The Open University is a university established in the UK by Royal Charter. In addition to our world-leading distance education provision, we design, carry out, and analyse, research studies in the scholarship of learning and teaching.

## The Research Team

Mr Mark Endean (马克•恩丁)

Senior Lecturer

Dr Daphne Chang (张敏芳)

Staff Tutor

School of Engineering & Innovation

The Open University

Walton Hall

Milton Keynes

MK11 1AF

UK

# Our responsibilities to you

- **We ensure your safety**: all our researchers carry photographic identification. The project has been reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC/2018/2894/Endean)

- **We guard your privacy**: your participation will be treated in strict confidence in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act and the EU General Data Protection Regulation. Your contribution will be used for research purposes only. Nobody will be individually identified in the final report.

- **We respect your wishes**: participation in the study is voluntary and you are not obliged to answer any questions you do not wish to.

- **We answer your questions**: we will be happy to answer any questions you may have about the research.

**The Open University** 英国开放大学

# Longitudinal impact of visiting scholarships on the professional practice of scholars from China

A research study supported by:

# eSTEeM
## The Open University centre for scholarship in STEM education

The Open University is leading this research project, exploring the long-term outcomes of visiting scholarships in the UK.

**This leaflet provides further information about the study.**

## What is the aim of this research?

We are exploring the effect that a period spent as a visiting scholar at The Open University can have on the long-term professional development of a scholar.

## What is involved?

We have contacted you as a former visiting scholar. We would like to interview you to discuss your experience as a scholar and your subsequent development and professional practice in your home institution.

What you tell us will help us to develop a broader account of the benefits and challenges of visiting scholarships to share with colleagues, potential scholars and funding bodies.

Interviews will involve a researcher talking to you for about one hour. The interview will be recorded so that we can be sure that we correctly remember everything that you tell us. We will work around you to arrange a venue and time convenient to you for this interview.

## What will I be asked?

We will ask you to talk about the following broad topics:

- The time you spent as a scholar – what challenges you faced; what you learnt etc.
- What aspects of what you learnt you were able to make use of in your work after returning to China.
- Whether there were new opportunities open to you as a result of your having spent time as a scholar.

## Is it confidential?

Yes. Everything that you tell the interviewers will be in confidence. Your personal information will be kept confidential to the research team. It will not be shared with anyone else, including other staff from The Open University, any other university in the UK or China, the Ministry of Education in China, the China Scholarship Council, and the Sino-British Fellowship Trust. We will write a report of the study but no individual will be identifiable from the published results of the research.

## Do I have to take part?

No. We are relying on your voluntary co-operation. No one is taking part in this study who does not want to. Even if you say yes to begin with, you are free to withdraw at any time.

## What happens now?

We will contact you again to ask for your consent to take part in the research and to arrange an appointment to interview you. In the meantime, if you have any queries at all about the study, please contact us.

## What if I have other questions?

If you have any other questions, we would be happy to answer them. Please contact:

**Mark Endean**

**mark.endean@open.ac.uk**

**WeChat: markendean**

Consent form

# Longitudinal impact of visiting scholarships on the professional practice of scholars from China

## Qualitative research consent form

Participant

I confirm that I have read/had read to me the leaflet about this research project, and I understand its content.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, up to final publication of the project findings, without giving a reason.

I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded and a written record produced later. The recording will be securely stored in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act and General Data Protection Regulation.

I understand that anything I say will be treated confidentially and only used for research purposes, in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act and General Data Protection Regulation.

I agree to take part in the *Longitudinal impact of visiting scholarships on the professional practice of scholars from China research* study.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Name of participant | Date | Signature |
| | | |

Name of researcher          Date                    Signature

# Appendix 5

Below is a list of questions that we used to guide the semi-structured interviews:

1. Why did you wish to go to the Open University and when was it?
2. How long was your visit?
3. What was your project about and who was your supervisor?
4. Were you tasked by your manager/institution to investigate this topic or was that your own research idea?
5. What did you learn?
6. When you were with the OU, did you notice anything that your institution could have done differently?
7. When you returned, did you work differently as a result of the visit?
8. How did you disseminate what you learned from the OU? Any academic outputs for example?
9. Were you promoted as a result of what you introduced/changed after your visit to the OU?
10. What did you gain personally from the visit?

# Appendix 6

## Ethics approval

## Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)

From          Dr Duncan Banks

              The Open University Human Research Ethics
              Committee


  Email       duncan.banks@open.ac.uk
  Extension   (6) 59198

  To          Mark Endean, SE&I, STEM

Project title: Longitudinal impact of visiting scholarships on the professional practice of scholars from China

HREC ref       HREC/2018/2894/Endean

Date application submitted: 14/05/18

Date of HREC response:     16/05/18

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This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, has been given a favourable opinion, **by Chair's action**, on behalf of the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee.

As part of your favourable opinion, it is essential that you are aware of and comply with the following:

1. You are responsible for notifying the HREC immediately of any information received by you, or of which you become aware which would cast doubt on, or alter, information in your original application, in order to ensure your continued safety and the good conduct of the research.

2. It is essential that you contact the HREC with any proposed amendments to your research, for example: a change in location or participants. HREC agreement needs to be in place before any changes are implemented, except only in cases of emergency when the welfare of the participant or researcher is or may be affected.

3. Your HREC reference number has to be included in any publicity or correspondence related to your research, e.g. when seeking participants or advertising your research, so it is clear that it has been agreed by the HREC and adheres to OU ethics review processes.

4. Researchers should have discussed any project-related risks with their Head of Department and/or Supervisor, to ensure that all the relevant checks have been made and permissions are in place, prior to a project commencing, for example compliance with IT security and Data Protection Regulations.

5. Researchers need to have read and adhere to relevant OU policies and guidance, in particular the Ethics Principles for Research involving Human Participants and the Code of Practice for Research - http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/ .

6. The Open University's research ethics review procedures are fully compliant with the majority of research council, professional organisations and grant awarding bodies research ethics guidelines. Where required, this message is evidence of OU HREC support and can be included in an external research ethics review application. The HREC should be sent a copy of any external applications, and their outcome, so we have a full ethics review record.

At the end of your project you are required to assess your research for ethics related issues and/or any major changes. Where these have occurred you will need to provide the Committee with a HREC final report to reflect how these were dealt with using the template on the research ethics website -
http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-research/full-review-process
(HREC Final Report form).

Best regards

Dr Duncan Banks, The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee