

Internationalization of Chinese open universities

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Internationalization
of Chinese OUs

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Abstract

Purpose – In 2019, the goal of developing a world-class open university through different stages was put forward by the Open University of China (OUC), which indicated that internationalization for Chinese open universities came to the agenda. However, international activities of open universities are different from those in conventional universities, and how to fulfill the goal of internationalization is a main issue faced by educators in Chinese open and distance education arena. This research aimed to identify ways of internationalization for the OUC system.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey was employed as a tool to get feedback from target audience. A questionnaire was released to academics, management staff and researchers to the 44 provincial open universities. A total of 501 samples were collected. Among them, 332 were from academics, which accounted for 66.27%, 152 were from school-level directors and 17 were from university-level leaders.

Findings – By analyzing the data collected in the survey, the study proposes four recommendations to fulfill the goal of internationalization for Chinese open universities and these include strengthening top-level strategies, building up professional teams, sharing learning resources and delivering upper-level programs.

Research limitations/implications – The targets of this research were all staff at different levels in the central and local institutions; no students were included in the research. Therefore, this did not reflect a picture from the student perspective, and this will be improved in future research.

Originality/value – Since the establishment of the OUC in 1979, there has been no clear and systematic pathways for the development of internationalization of Chinese open universities. This research proposes a theoretical framework of internationalization for open universities and suggests a direction for future development.

Keywords Open universities, Internationalization, International cooperation and exchanges, Theoretical framework

Paper type Research paper

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Background

Founded in 1979, the Open University of China (OUC) is a national system with 44 provincial open universities and nearly 4,000 learning centers (Ministry of Education, 2020). As of May 2021, the number of enrollments in the OUC system was 4.88 million (The Open University of China, 2021). In terms of student number, the OUC is no doubt a mega university coined by Sir John Daniel (Tait, 2018). In 2019, the OUC released its 30 years' strategic development framework, and one of the goals is to build it into a world-class open university through three steps. Internationalization is one of the pathways to achieve this goal. This was the first time for the OUC to declare its internationalization strategy since 2012 when it was founded based on China Central Radio and TV University (CCRTVU). In September 2020, the Chinese Ministry of Education approved to develop the OUC into four platforms, one of which is a

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platform of international cooperation (Ministry of Education, 2020). This means that internationalization for the OUC came to the agenda on the national level.

The OUC has conducted many international activities since its inception. For example, staff exchanges were implemented in the past 40 years, and internationally collaborative projects were explored and tested. During coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the OUC was awarded 2020 UNESCO Information and Communication Technology Prize for assuring learning continuity. The OUC was ranked No 1 in nearly 80 competitive projects from 45 countries and 10 non-governmental organizations. This demonstrates that the OUC has its strengths in competing in the international arena as an open and online provider.

However, internationalization of open universities is different from that of conventional ones in China. One of the main factors representing internationalization is international students on campus. Obviously, there is a lack of such factors in open universities. In the past, people focused more on conventional universities when discussing internationalization of universities. Academics rarely conducted research on internationalization for open universities. In order to bridge the gap for open universities and offer an insight for policymakers, this research proposes a theoretical framework based on the historical account of international cooperation and exchanges of the OUC system in the past 40 years and the literature review of higher education internationalization theories. A survey was employed to dig out global demands and recommendations are proposed for policy-makers in the field of Chinese open and distance education (ODE) according to the analysis of the research results.

Internationalization history of the OUC system

In order to develop a reasonable theoretical framework of internationalization, it is necessary to look back at what the OUC accomplished in the past regarding international activities. The American educator of comparative studies Philip Atbach argues that education internationalization is a kind of specific policies or measures responding to the global trend by a nation, an education system or an institution (Zhou, 2013). From this argument, the OUC, formerly known as CCRTVU, taking the Open University UK as an example and being established when open universities were fashionable worldwide in the 1970s, was a symbol of Chinese higher education internationalization, reflecting and demonstrating that Chinese higher education was actively responding to internationalization of ODE.

Internationalization of the OUC system has experienced three steps since its establishment. Details are as mentioned in the below paragraphs:

The first step was from its establishment to 2001. As a newly founded organization featuring distance education, CCRTVU mainly studied the experience and practices from other overseas open universities such as sending scholars abroad or inviting academics from abroad to give seminars. These were the primary ways of contributing to earlier internationalization. The feature of this period was staff training and learning experience.

The second step began from 2001 to 2011, when China entered the World Trade Organization, which moved higher education back onto the international stage. Based on the experience of the first stage, CCRTVU deepened its international cooperation and exchanges. For example, after 2002, it collaborated with the British Council and British Broadcasting Company to offer an English Language program to Chinese adult learners. After 2007, it provided three short courses together with the Open University UK, namely *Online Tutorial*, *Learner Support* and *Course Design*, to Chinese ODE practitioners in the CCRTVU system, conventional universities and ODE companies. The internationalization feature of this period was introducing qualified resources.

The onset of the third step could be traced from 2012 onwards and continued till date, transforming to the OUC era. Since China maintained a much closer relationship with the world during this period, the Chinese government promulgated a series of policies related to

higher education internationalization such as *the Belt and Road Initiative*, *Chinese Education Modernization 2035*, etc., which are friendly to ODE. The OUC has been actively working together with some universities along the Belt and Road to offer Chinese language to workers in local Chinese companies. Some overseas partners came to visit the OUC for the experience as a mega university. The internationalization feature of this period was sharing expertise.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the internationalization of the OUC system has been gradually making progress.

Literature review

Though the word *internationalization* is comparatively abstract, there are several statements of its meaning, among which the most widely used is the definition from Knight (2003) at the University of Toronto, Canada. She proposes that internationalization at the national/sector/institutional level is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education. International Association of Universities proposed the following definition: “[Internationalization of Higher Education is] the international process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (International Association of Universities, 2020). In China, Professor Liu Daoyu systematically defined higher education internationalization and claimed that for realizing internationalization the educational concept should be updated, academic quality should be competitive, the educational methodology should be open and educational resources should be shared (Liu, 2004).

Though there are definitions of internationalization, in reality, people are confused with internationalization and international activities. For example, some people simply claim that having international students is a kind of internationalization for a higher education institution, other misunderstandings include offering English language or other international programs, receiving international students or sending students abroad, establishing a partnership with overseas organizations by signing agreements, and so on and so forth (De Wit, 2011). When compared with the definitions, it is not difficult to see the difference between open universities and conventional ones.

Statistics show that over 95% of the public-funded universities in China formulated a global development strategy (Ma and Li, 2014). They are entering the stage of internationalization through implementing a variety of international activities. However, there is a lack of theories of internationalization for open universities both in and out of China, and people in the OUC system always take international activities as internationalization. To achieve internationalization, it is imperative to set up a theoretical framework for open universities.

Theoretical framework for the internationalization of Chinese open universities

To facilitate the OUC to fulfill its commitment in developing internationalization in a systematic way, based on the above literature review and its international cooperation and exchanges in the past 40 years, it is proposed that the OUC system’s internationalization strategy should focus on the national and institutional levels. At the national level, a policy and theoretical framework should be set up as guidance; at the institutional level, the OUC system should integrate international and intercultural qualified elements into its teaching, management, research and services so as to improve its education quality and further build its internationalization capacity and cultivate its learners with an international vision. International cooperation and exchanges are ways to this destination. The following chart

shows the theoretical framework of a full picture of the OUC system's internationalization process:

Methodology

Research questions

Guided by the above-discussed theoretical framework, the research aimed to find pathways for the OUC system to fulfill its internationalization commitments. Therefore, teaching, management, research and services were considered, and questions related to these four areas were generated:

- (1) Do you have an international office in your university? If no, why?
- (2) What are the demands for internationalization from the perspective of teachers?
- (3) What are the demands for internationalization from the perspective of students?
- (4) What are the demands for internationalization in the aspect of learning resources?
- (5) What are the demands for internationalization in the aspect of research?
- (6) What are the demands for internationalization in the aspect of services?

Research approach

Subjects. As there were no students on campuses in the OUC system, the international cooperation and exchanges in the past usually took place among staff including academics, managing staff and researchers. These groups of staff were more aware of international activities than others. Therefore, participants in this research included academics, school-level directors and university leaders from 28 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. The age of the targets participating in the research were mainly from 36 to 45 followed by those from 46 to 55. Below is the age coverage of the target:

Method. This research employed the form of a descriptive survey. An online questionnaire titled "Demands for the Internationalization of the OUC System" designed by the research group was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was conducted through an app called Questionnaire Star, which was sent to the 44 institutions and was filled in anonymously. A total of 501 samples were collected. Among them, 332 were from academics, which accounted for 66.27%, 152 were from school-level staff and 17 from university-level leaders. The app released the results automatically.

Indicators. Based on the theoretical framework discussed in [Figure 1](#) and the international activities reviewed in the three steps in the past 40 years, the questionnaire included 4 elements, 8 indicators and 59 items covering areas from the establishment of the international office, international activities, why no such activities to future demands. The participants made a choice from those 59 items, which showed demands for future directions (see [Table 1](#)).

Results

RQ1. Do you have an international office in your university? If no, why?

The research findings show that 83.43% local open universities had no independent international office. Generally, the president's office managed international affairs (if there was) in the institutions without an international office. Four provincial open universities had vocational education colleges which were responsible for international affairs, and eight local open universities had absolutely no international affairs.

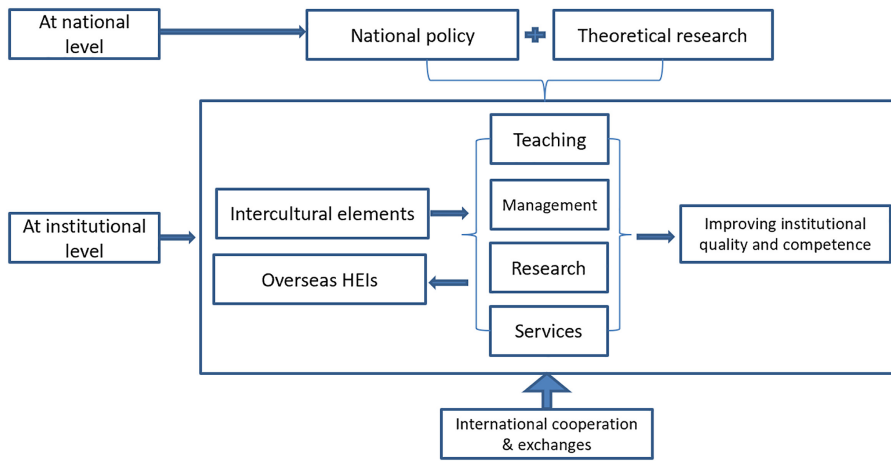


Figure 1.
A full picture of the OUC system's internationalization process

| Elements | Indicators | Items |
|------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Management | International office | 1 Independent office 2 Affiliated to other departments 3 No international affairs |
| | Dedicated team | 1 Independent dedicated team 2 Part-time team with other functions 3 No dedicated team |
| Teaching | Teachers | 1 To train teachers through overseas training, attending international conferences, working for international associations 2 To invite foreign academics or experts to work in local institutions |
| | Student exchanges | 1 Intercollegiate student exchanges 2 Summer or winter camp 3 Register to study a single course with overseas universities 4 Study in $N + 1/2^p$ program |
| | Learning resources | 1 Promoting Chinese cultural courses 2 Introducing qualified courses from abroad 3 Jointly develop tailor-made courses |
| Research | Research | 1 To launch a joint research project with international colleagues 2 To publish papers on international journals 3 To hold an international conference inviting academics to discuss a joint research project |
| Services | Information technology | 1 Development, application and training for an internet-based technology 2 Development, application and training for mobile technology 3 Development, application and training for English teaching tools |
| | Jointly international projects | 1 Short-term non-degree certificate projects 2 Degree projects |

Table 1.
Indicators of international development of the OUC system

Figure 2 shows that nearly half of the provincial open universities had no international affairs because of three main reasons, and the first one is that they had no proper projects; secondly there were no dedicated teams to conduct and expand international affairs; last but not least, they needed support from the OUC headquarters. As this is a multiple choice question, some participants chose more than one answer, this is why the results are overlapped. The following pie chart demonstrates the distributions of the reasons (see Figure 3):

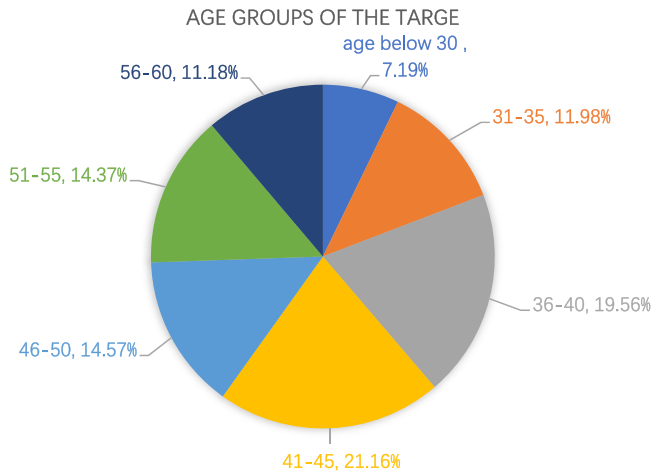


Figure 2.
Age group of the target

The reasons for no international activities

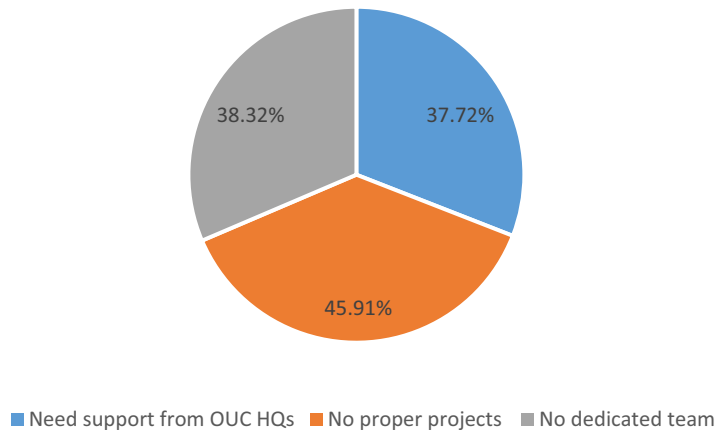


Figure 3.
The reasons for no international activities in provincial open universities

RQ2. What are the demands for internationalization from the perspective of teachers?

Table 2 shows that teachers in the OUC system embraced internationalization and they hoped to be involved in the international activities, such as short-term visiting study, overseas training, attending international conferences and building their English/Chinese language capacity. There was a demand in having foreign experts training either online or offline. Besides, teachers would like to teach in overseas educational institutions or work in international organizations.

RQ3. What are the demands for internationalization from the perspective of students?

Adult students were different from campus-based students and they normally had no opportunities to study abroad or conduct academic tours internationally. Therefore, students in the OUC were not invited to participate in this study. Below students' demands were identified by academics and management staff according to their experience with students.

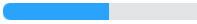
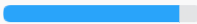


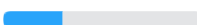
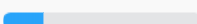
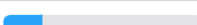
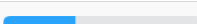
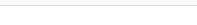
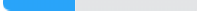
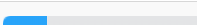
| Items | No. of participants | Proportion |
|--|---------------------|--|
| A. English/Chinese language capacity building | 267 |  53.29% |
| B. Short-term visiting study | 448 |  89.42% |
| C. Overseas training | 324 |  64.67% |
| D. Attending international conferences | 307 |  61.28% |
| E. Teaching abroad | 149 |  29.74% |
| F. Working in overseas institutions | 103 |  20.56% |
| G. Working in international associations | 99 |  19.76% |
| H. Foreign experts training online | 184 |  36.73% |
| I. Foreign experts give short-term instructions domestically | 182 |  36.33% |
| J. Recruit foreign teachers (over 1 year) | 111 |  22.16% |
| K. Other suggestions | 20 |  3.99% |
| Numbers of filling in this indicator | 501 | |

Table 2.
Teachers' internationalization demands in the OUC system

From their points of view, students in the OUC system should focus on intercollegiate cultural exchange programs, participating in summer or winter camps and studying a single course from overseas universities. Participants also mentioned that there was a smaller number of students expressing their wishes to learn $N + 1/2$ program. Having international students is not a strong pursuit at the institutional level from this research (see Table 3).

RQ4. What are the demands for internationalization in the aspect of learning resources?

Table 4 identifies the areas of the demands for learning resources. Qualified overseas courses and resources, Chinese cultural courses, jointly developing degree courses and resources and constructing tailor-made courses with overseas institutions were preferred.

RQ5. What are the demands for internationalization in the aspect of research?

Table 5 presents a few ways of conducting international research. Implementing joint research projects with overseas partners was their first choice. Publishing research papers in foreign journals ranked the second. Participants also expressed their wishes to attend international conferences and share their research outcomes, and implementing institutional-level research was of interest. The following is the list of the research internationalization demands:

RQ6. What are the demands for internationalization in the aspect of services?

Services' internationalization was embodied in two aspects, one was to adopt cutting-edge technologies and the other was to provide collaborative projects.

Table 6 shows that there was a significant demand in the field of development, application and training of internet-based technologies and mobile technologies; participants also

Table 3.
Students' internationalization demands in the OUC system

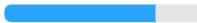
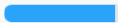






| Items | No. of participants | Proportion |
|---|---------------------|---|
| A. Intercollegiate cultural exchange programs | 371 |  74.05% |
| B. Winter/Summer camps | 273 |  54.49% |
| C. Single courses | 212 |  42.32% |
| D. N+1/2 degree study | 169 |  33.73% |
| E. Tailor-made courses | 137 |  27.35% |
| F. Sending students abroad | 188 |  37.52% |
| G. Recruiting international students | 157 |  31.34% |
| H. Other suggestions | 27 |  5.39% |
| Numbers of filling in this indicator | 501 | |

Table 4.
Learning resources' internationalization demands in the OUC system

| X/Y | A. Chinese language | B. Chinese culture | C. International education for the Chinese language | E. Tailor-made courses | F. Introducing courses from abroad | G. Jointly develop tailor-made courses | H. Jointly developed learning resources | I. Others | No. of participants |
|---------------|---------------------|--------------------|---|------------------------|------------------------------------|--|---|-----------|---------------------|
| A. Teaching | 149(66.07%) | 151(67.41%) | 130(58.04%) | 133(59.38%) | 151(67.41%) | 126(56.25%) | 122(54.46%) | 4(1.79%) | 224 |
| B. Management | 181(72.69%) | 181(72.69%) | 135(54.22%) | 138(55.42%) | 166(66.67%) | 134(53.82%) | 125(50.20%) | 9(3.61%) | 249 |
| C. Research | 20(71.43%) | 21(75%) | 15(53.57%) | 16(57.14) | 13(46.43%) | 17(60.71%) | 19(67.86%) | 1(3.57%) | 28 |

thought that they needed to develop and apply English teaching tools, and training in this field was of importance. English interface teaching platform was needed to improve internationalization.

Table 7 shows that international collaborative projects, short-term projects, collaboration on undergraduate level and certificate programs were needed. It should be noted that more than half of the participants expressed their wishes to implement master-level programs. Participants also identified collaborative fields, and Education, Chinese culture, Business Management and Chinese language were the preferred fields for collaboration.

Conclusions and recommendations

According to the results of this study, the majority of provincial open universities needed support from the OUC headquarters to conduct international cooperation and exchanges to realize internationalization within the system, and some of the open universities had no dedicated professional teams to shoulder this responsibility.

The majority of academics, management staff and researchers from provincial open universities showed their positive attitudes towards internationalization and they

proposed their demands from the perspectives of teachers and students, and in the aspect of learning resources, research and services. This indicated a future direction for internationalization development in the OUC system. The results demonstrated that the proposed theoretical framework of internationalization for open universities in China is


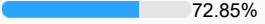
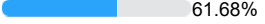
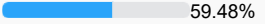

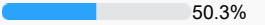
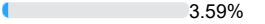
| Items | No. of participants | Proportion |
|---|---------------------|---|
| A. Publishing articles on foreign journals | 320 |  63.87% |
| B. Joint research by teachers of researchers with overseas partners | 365 |  72.85% |
| C. Joint research at the institutional level | 309 |  61.68% |
| D. Holding international conference by institutions | 298 |  59.48% |
| E. Sending teachers or researchers to attend an international conference and share research outcomes | 314 |  62.67% |
| F. Participating in international activities in the field of open and distance education conference, such as AAOU, ICDE | 252 |  50.3% |
| G. Other suggestions | 18 |  3.59% |
| Numbers of filling in this indicator | 501 | |

Table 5. Internationalization for research in the OUC system

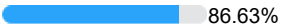
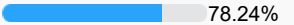
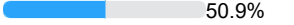
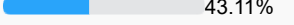
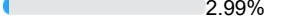
| Items | No. of participants | Proportion |
|---|---------------------|---|
| A. Development, application and training of internet-based technology | 434 |  86.63% |
| B. Development, application and training of mobile technology | 392 |  78.24% |
| C. Development, application and training of English teaching tools | 255 |  50.9% |
| D. The building of the English interface teaching platform | 216 |  43.11% |
| E. Others | 15 |  2.99% |
| Numbers of filling in this indicator | 501 | |

Table 6. Internationalization for information technology in the OUC system




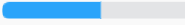
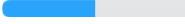
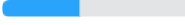

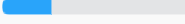
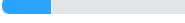
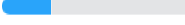
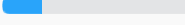
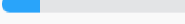
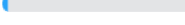
| Items | Sum | Proportion | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|--|--|
| A. Education | 302 |  60.28% | |
| B. Chinese culture | 290 |  57.88% | |
| C. Business management | 283 |  56.49% | |
| D. Computer | 255 |  50.9% | |
| E. Chinese language | 240 |  47.9% | |
| F. Chinese medicine | 202 |  40.32% | |
| G. English language | 205 |  40.92% | |
| H. Machine manufacturing | 129 |  25.75% | |
| I. Chinese economics | 127 |  25.35% | |
| J. Civil engineering | 125 |  24.95% | |
| K. Other languages | 104 |  20.76% | |
| L. Chinese politics | 98 |  19.56% | |
| M. Others | 16 |  3.19% | |
| Numbers of filling in this indicator | 501 | | |

Table 7.
Fields of international
collaboration for the
OUC system

highly in line with practical needs. It can be a guide for open universities to develop their international activities.

Based on the results of this research and its conclusions, recommendations from two aspects are made:

First of all, management should be enhanced in order to fulfill the internationalization commitment of the OUC system.

(1) To strengthen top-level strategies in the OUC system

The so-called top-level design is to use the method of systematic theories and strategies to focus on all aspects of a task or a project from an overall perspective, so as to concentrate adequate resources and achieve goals efficiently and quickly (Wang, 2013). Influenced by the turbulence of today's globalization patterns, major strategic adjustments domestically and the development needs of higher education institutions, Chinese higher education should develop world-class higher education theories with Chinese characteristics (Wu, 2020). The OUC also keeps up with the pace of the international trend, aiming to arm itself with world-class standards. In this context and according to the research results, the OUC headquarters should make international development plans under the strategy of internationalization to guide the system.

(2) To build up a professional team with innovative ideas

Internationalization is an important indicator of measuring the running and efficiency of a higher education institution (Jing, 2020). Dedicated teams are the premise and foundation of this process. To fulfill this commitment, several aspects need to be considered. First of all, an

international office in the provincial open universities which have no such administrative functions should be set up. A professional team should be built up in the headquarters to give trainings for provincial open universities on a regular basis with the aim of building internationalization capacity for academics, managing staff and researchers. The central and local institutions should set up an incentive mechanism to evaluate the performance of each institution with a view to activating internationalization.

Secondly, considering the feasibility in the current international context, learning resources could be shared and upper-level programs could be developed so as to meet the needs of learners with diverse background.

(1) To explore multiple ways of sharing learning resources

It should be noted that the OUC system mainly learned experience from abroad in the past. With China becoming more and more open in the global context, especially when the Belt and Road Initiative was launched in 2013, many partners from overseas came to visit the OUC for how to manage a mega university. The international cooperation and exchanges since then have been focusing more on sharing learning resources to overseas partners, such as Chinese culture, the Chinese language, just to mention a few.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the OUC has been actively responding to the national call of disrupted classes, undisrupted learning with the use of information technology to provide free learning resources to 5,091 million learners and 7,331 institutions. It has proved that the OUC has the strength of sharing open educational resources to the rest of the world. To fulfill the commitment of internationalization, the OUC system can share its qualified learning resources to its overseas partner institutions.

(2) To deliver upper-level degree programs

Since the Open University UK, the first open university in the world, was established in 1969, there are more than 100 open universities globally (COL, 2017; Contact North, 2020). Researchers in the OUC conducted online research showing that more than 30 open universities in those developed countries and regions delivered upper-level degree programs, such as Master's degree and Doctor's degree programs as of 2020. The representation of academic excellence is clearly visible in some open universities. However, the OUC can only deliver bachelor degree programs, which shows a gap between the OUC and overseas open universities. To offer upper-level degree programs is a necessity to provide educational services and to meet the demands of learners with diverse background.

The participants of this research were all staff at different levels in the central and local institutions; no students are included in the research. Therefore, this does not reflect a picture from the student perspective, and this will be improved in future research.

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