Centre for On-line and Distance Education

Visiting Scholar Report 2023

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Executive Summary

This report describes, and reflects on, the placement of three colleagues from Open University China (OUC) as visiting scholars at the Centre for Online and Distance Education (CODE), University of London, between February and June 2023.

The three visiting scholars, supported by the Sino-British Fellowship Trust, chosen after an extensive selection process were:

LIU Chang from Guangzhou Open University, China who joined CODE seeking to research '*The Impact of Heutagogy (self-determined learning) on Encouraging Learner Agency of Adult Learners'*. Chang was supervised by Dr Philip Powell (CODE Fellow and professor emeritus Birbeck, University of London) and Dr Anita Walsh (professor emerita, Birbeck, University of London).

LIU Ning who works at The Open University of China sought to investigate '*Teacher Professional Learning Influenced by the Intelligent Technology from the perspective of the Complex Dynamic System Theory (CDST): An Empirical Study Focused on the Learning Needs and Approaches'*. Ning was supervised by Dr Jonathan San Diego, (CODE Fellow and senior lecturer, King's College London) and

Dr Maylyn Tan (CODE Fellow and Head of Academic Development at Singapore Institute of Management Global Education).

MA Tengfei from the School of Education, the Open University of China wanted to research '*An empirical study on professional identity of teachers engaged in distance education*'. Ma was supervised by Dr Norbert Pachler (CODE Fellow and Pro-Vice-Provost: Digital Education, and Professor of Education at IOE, UCL) and Dr Michele Milner (CODE Fellow and Director of Learning and Wellbeing at the Royal Veterinary College, University of London).

Feedback from the scholars, from the supervisors, from the CODE leadership and the sponsoring body demonstrates the value and success of this programme. Suggestions for improvement and enhancement have been identified.

Background

The CODE visiting scholars were supported by the Sino-British Fellowship Trust (SBFT). SBFT is a grant-making charity which provides support to UK and Chinese academics and postgraduate students for study, conference and other research visits between UK and Chinese academic institutions.

The SBFT awards grants from institutions for academic staff or students to help academic staff and postgraduate students:

- at UK academic institutions fund travel and living costs while they undertake research or study visits to China.
- academic staff and postgraduate students at Chinese institutions to fund visits to the UK.
- in their study of Chinese languages.

CODE has hosted visiting scholars from China for several years. The Covid pandemic delayed the arrival of this cohort of visiting scholars and so their time in the UK was out of the normal sequence. Subsequent discussion has confirmed that the best time for visiting scholars to come to the UK is from February to June and this pattern will be adopted going forward.

The visiting scholar programme is part of CODE's work with the Open University China which has developed since 2018 in three areas:

- Visiting Scholar placements
- Staff development and capacity building – CODE co-delivered training to 350 teaching staff in 2021-23
- Scholarly collaboration

Scholar Programme

From arrival, the visiting scholars became part of the Centre for Online and Distance Education and were invited to all the Centre's activities. In addition, an extensive programme of activities was designed to ensure the visiting scholars gained a deep insight into the operation of on-line and distance education at the University of London and within the Federation Members. Activities undertaken by the visiting scholars who joined the Centre between February and June 2023 included:

- Joining CODE Fellows meetings
- Meeting with colleagues from across the University of London including Vice Chancellor Prof Wendy Thomson CBE.
- Meetings and practical activities within the University of London that included the video suite and learning designers
- Meetings with professional service staff at the University to explore how they support the on-line and distance education student population including careers, student well-being, staff development, and student voice
- Visiting University of London Federation Member Institutions, Kings College London, and UCL
- Individual meetings with CODE Fellows and other leading practitioners in on-line and distance education
- Digital Education Reading club
- Regular meetings with Linda Amrane-Cooper and the supervisory teams.

In addition, the scholars took part in many CODE activities including:

- Navigating the Future CODE project workshop, 8 March 2023
- Assessment integrity training for colleagues at University of London Recognised Teaching Centres, 10 March 2023
- Developing strategy, policies, and quality assurance structures for Open and Distance Learning centres in a workshop delivered for the Nigerian National University commission, 21-24 March 2023
- 17th International Research in Distance Education conference, 28-29 March 2023
- Visit by Dr LI Kam Cheong, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, 12 May 2023
- CODE Fellows meeting workshop on publications, 16 May 2023
- Experience in Digital learning webinars, 20 April and 1 June 2023.

The visiting scholars were matched with supervisors who had appropriate research experience and they met with their supervisors regularly and actively engaged in developing their projects and refining their aims and objectives. The scholars all engaged deeply with relevant literature reviews, methodological developments, and analysis activities. As their work developed, the three visiting scholars presented their research projects on two formal occasions, and their work was praised by those present who also provided feedback on progress and future development.

Midpoint presentation, 27 April 2023

The visiting scholars presented their project plans to date in a University of London event, which included Pro Vice Chancellor Prof Mary Stiasny OBE, the combined supervisory teams, CODE Fellows and CODE Director, Linda Amrane-Cooper.

Final presentation, Friday 26 June 2023

The University of London hosted an event for all OUC visiting scholars in the UK (nine in total), the supervisors for each scholar and Sino British Foundation trust representatives. The visiting scholars from Open University UK, Leicester University and those at CODE presented their projects and provided an oversight of their experience in the UK.

Review of Experiences

The visiting scholars attended an exit interview with CODE Fellow, Prof Sam Smidt, to provide feedback on the experience and to identify ways in which the placement can be further developed. Feedback was also sought from the supervisory teams and others involved in the programme.

Ning, whose research project focuses on teacher learning, says AI '*plays an important role in education. It is interesting to consider how teachers perceive the role of AI and how AI assists the role of teachers. That's why I take teachers' professional learning especially learning about AI as my academic interest'.* The placement allowed Ning to visit federation members and meet various academics. Ning was '*impressed by the working atmosphere in CODE. All the CODE fellows cooperate and contribute to the development of CODE. They form a loose but tight community. The community is loose because they are from different colleges and with different educational backgrounds. The community is tight because they possess a common aim that is to develop online and distance education'.*

Tengfei, whose area of expertise lies in mental health and educational psychology, was in London for the first time. She identified CODE as a '*very harmonious and warm family with a strong leader, which has very clear goal to move forward, and many CODE fellows are very passionate and friendly and have a strong willingness to keep an open mind, to communicate with others, to share and learn new ideas*'. Her research project centred on the professional identities of early career teachers working in distance education in China. She hopes to support teachers and how they relate to their roles.

Tengfei thought '*the most exciting part will be that through research I could find a better way to improve and to establish a new development programme that could support teachers better in their identity formation*' and that the scheme opened new areas of enquiry, '*the resources CODE provided me made me think more about questions that I've neglected before. The contents are rich and comprehensive, and the forms are very diverse'.*

Chang's research explores ways to keep adults engaged in their on-line learning – a field of research inspired by her role with Guangzhou Open University. She stated '*this research project originated from my on-line modules. Because many of my students are adult learners with full-time work, it is*

difficult for them to balance their works and studies', 'and in the past few years, I have kept on doing some on-line classroom transformation for my students to help them learn better and enhance their online engagement. So, I brought some of my data and research outcomes to the UK to explore deeper insights on this project. What I want to explore is not one specific solution to solve all the on-line teaching problems, but the possible research thoughts and streams to inspire me to update my online modules and provide a better online learning environment for my students'.

Chang says she benefited from close contact with the CODE director as well as her supervisors, '*my supervisors spent a lot of time with me to discuss my research projects. We talked about how to find a more specific research topic, how to extract more on the research title, how to do research design, how to choose the research methodologies etc. Thanks a lot, to my supervisors. I was deeply touched that every time I did my presentation, they always sat behind and supported me*'.

All the visiting scholars felt that their research focus had changed and deepened as a result of their interactions with their supervisors. It took some time, much recourse to the literature, and many discussions to hone down fully the scholars' research topics. The end results were quite different from the initial proposals. As some scholars were new to research, the '*messiness*' of trying to research in the real world was an eye-opener. This led to frustrations, but also to recognition that there are other research methods than quantitative ones and alternative approaches to data collection.

Recommendations

The visiting scholars collectively identified the strengths of the programme included enhanced understanding of on-line education for example assessment, student engagement, learning design and research approaches, and the value of immersion into wider working culture and wider community and different ways of thinking.

The visiting scholars suggested improvements to the experience, including the opportunity to join on-line modules in advance as a student to understand the student perspective; connection with supervisors in advance of coming to the UK; a longer time in the UK, as four months was felt to be too short. In response CODE are now adapting the provision to provide greater induction in advance of arriving in the UK for the visiting scholars. Two new scholars will arrive for 2023-24.

The Visiting Scholars Programme is one of CODE's successes. With the growth in CODE Fellow numbers and the expansion of supervisory capacity, the opportunity to grow the programme exists. This would depend on gaining additional funding from the SBFT or from an alternative source. Given the successes and the links to OUC, it might be that a similar programme funded by OUC could be established.

There is an opportunity for the programme to be replicated with other countries that are seeking to develop or expand ODL. This could run in conjunction with other capacity-building activities.

The development and support of a visiting scholar alumni network would be beneficial in giving visibility to the programme and providing on-going, and also mutual, support to the scholars. The network could support (virtually) streams at the RIDE conference.

Appendix 1

The Open university of China visiting scholars 2023

Visiting Scholar	OUC Institution	Project Title	CODE Fellow team
LIU Chang	Guangzhou Open University, China	The Impact of Heutagogy (self-determined learning) on Encouraging Learner Agency of Adult Learners	Prof Philip Powell, Prof Anita Walsh
LIU Ning	The Open University of China	Teacher Professional Learning Influenced by the Intelligent Technology from the perspective of the Complex Dynamic System Theory (CDST): An Empirical Study Focused on the Learning Needs and Approaches	Dr Jonathan San Diego, Dr Maylyn Tan
MA Tengfai	The Open University of China	An empirical study on professional identity of teachers engaged in distance education	Prof Norbert Pachler, Dr Michele Milner