Open University China Visiting Scholars
CODE – Impact Report
February 2025

Goals and Overview

This report evaluates the experiences of the two Open University China (OUC) Visiting Scholars with CODE during the 2024-25 academic year, focusing on the impact of their four-month placement. The visiting scholars were interviewed, and their supervisors provided feedback via email.

Both scholars described the placement as transformative, gaining deeper insights into lifelong learning, online distance education, and innovative teaching practices. They emphasised the crucial role of their supervisors in supporting their research and helping them navigate challenges such as language barriers and adapting to new academic expectations. The collaborative and inclusive environment at CODE was key to their positive experience.

The report also highlights recommendations to enhance the programme, particularly by expanding networking opportunities and fostering longer-term collaborations beyond the placement period.

The Visiting Scholar Programme

The Centre has been receiving Visiting Scholars and continues to invite potential applicants to consider visiting scholar opportunities. In the leaflet available on the website, the Centre suggests supporting "research, applied research, evaluation, capacity building, upskilling, programme/short course development and training" in the different areas of the expertise of the Centre. CODE offer opportunities for visiting scholars to spend a short (four weeks) or medium (three to six months) period.

During the academic year of 2024/25, the Centre received two visiting scholars from China for a period of four months. Regarding the supervision allocation, typically, the selection process is initiated by a message to all the Fellows (there are currently around 45 CODE Fellows from across the University of London federation members) with a call to show interest in supervising the new VS. The scholars were allocated two supervisors each (Appendix 1).

Methodology

This report explores the impact of the placement on OUC visiting scholars, focusing on their understanding of online distance education, for instance, their specific research projects, and their broader professional practice. It also examines the new approaches they intend to adopt in their work as a result of their experience.

The two visiting scholars (Figures 1 and 2) were interviewed online via Microsoft Teams on 10th January 2025, just before the conclusion of their placement with CODE. Details of the interview questions can be found in Appendix 2. Additionally, feedback from their supervisors was gathered via email between 18th and 20th January 2025, providing further insights into the scholars' progress and contributions.

Figure 1: Associate Professor Xiaoyan Fu presenting during the Fellows meeting (October 2024); Hybrid mid-term presentation (Nov 2024) and final presentation (Jan 2025) in the Senate House

Figure 2: Dr Qingsong Xie presenting during the Fellows meeting (October 2024); Hybrid mid-term presentation (Nov 2024) and final presentation (Jan 2025) in the Senate House

Impact of the placement

1. Overall experience

The placement experience has been overwhelmingly positive, offering valuable personal and professional growth. One VS described it as *"fantastic and a great experience for me, both personally and for my research."* The opportunity to study lifelong learning in the UK provided

deep insights into local culture, educational structures, and government-led initiatives. The VS added: *"Coming to the UK gave me the opportunity to deeply understand the local culture, educational systems, and how the government carries out lifelong learning initiatives."* Exposure to various aspects of lifelong learning, including primary education, higher education, apprenticeships, and vocational training, has been particularly enlightening. One VS said, *"This journey has provided me with a lot of insights,"* reinforcing the transformative impact of the placement.

The placement also presented some challenges, particularly with language adaptation. One VS shared, *"I encountered several challenges, especially the language barriers. In China, I hadn't spoken English for a long time, so when I came here, I had to adapt to using English actively in academic discussions and daily life."* Despite these difficulties, the support from supervisors and other colleagues made a significant difference. *"When I had questions or discussions with scholars, they were patient and understanding, even when I made grammar mistakes. I'm very thankful for that."*

Additionally, access to academic resources was a major advantage. *"I also made full use of the university's library and online resources. In China, we cannot use Google or Google Scholar, so accessing these resources here was invaluable for my research."* These experiences enhanced academic growth and contributed to personal and professional development.

2. Impact on the understanding of online distance education

The placement increased the opportunity to reflect about online distance education, particularly through exposure to emerging technologies and innovative teaching methods. One participant noted, *"My understanding has changed significantly, particularly due to advancements in technology like AI and cloud technologies."* This shift in perspective was reinforced by another, who highlighted how AI is being integrated into pedagogy: *"I learned about using AI to help students improve spoken and written English through online practice tools."* These insights underscored the evolving role of AI in education in enhancing personalised learning experiences. Exposure to generative AI (Gen AI) further reinforced this transformation, with one participant stating, *"I believe it will transform online distance education in terms of course delivery, methodology, and evaluation."*

Beyond technology, the placement also introduced visiting scholars to new instructional approaches that challenged their practices. One VS was particularly inspired by an expert's method of designing teaching plans around topics rather than traditional chapters or units, stating, *"This is different from my usual methods."*

3. Skills gained that can influence broader professional practices

The placement provided the visiting scholars with valuable insights that directly enhanced their professional practices. One VS highlighted the research guidance, stating, *"I gained valuable guidance from my supervisor, especially in narrowing down my research topic and using systematic literature review methods."* Another VS explored innovative course design, sharing, *"I learned about the 'Café Model' for course design, which I found very efficient."* They also gained hands-on experience in addressing plagiarism in online courses*."*

Beyond research, the placement significantly influenced participants' professional growth. One VL emphasised, *"It deepened my understanding of digital literacy and online teaching, inspiring me to continue researching effective strategies to improve teachers' digital literacy."* They also aim to refine and publish their work in English. Another reflected on shifting their teaching approach, stating, *"I plan to move to more interactive approaches."* They now focus more on learning outcomes and will encourage colleagues to adopt new evaluation strategies.

4. How this experience has changed the approach and future actions

The placement has led to concrete changes in participants' professional approaches. One VL shared, *"I plan to change my teaching plan approach, inspired by the experience I mentioned earlier."* Another VS aims to support adult learners by exploring recognition of prior learning.

The placement also broadened participants' perspectives on inclusivity and workplace culture. One VL reflected, *"I've become more aware of the importance of equality and inclusivity in education."* They recognised that students from rural areas in China often lack access to essential resources and are now more committed to addressing these disparities. Another participant noted a shift in their view of professional hierarchies, stating, *"The collaborative culture in the UK, where everyone is treated equally regardless of their position, surprised me."*

Both visiting scholars have clear plans for implementing these new insights.

5. Most valuable aspects to share in their work

Collaboration, inclusivity, and academic support are some of the aspects mentioned by the visiting scholars that they plan to implement and share with their professional network. One participant highlighted the impact of cultural exposure, stating, *"The exposure to UK culture, which emphasises equality and collaboration, was highly valuable."* Another also noted a supportive atmosphere in meetings and interactions, encouraging them to participate in discussions. This experience also reinforced their commitment to inclusivity in teaching.

They also appreciated the mentorship received, sharing, *"The support and expertise of my supervisor were exceptional and helped a lot my research."* Another VS echoed similar

sentiments about the inclusive environment, noting, *"Personally, I loved the atmosphere of equality and open discussions during meetings. Even leaders like Linda were approachable and promoted a collaborative environment."*

Reflecting on the overall impact of the placement, the visiting scholars expressed gratitude for the experience and its influence on their professional growth.

6. Suggestions for improvement

Participants had a positive experience but suggested two ideas as possible improvements. One shared, *"My colleague, who had been a visiting scholar before, assured me that the environment here would be supportive, and she was right."* Therefore, having more opportunities to talk to past visiting scholars is helpful to prepare for the placement.

Another visiting scholar suggested discussing the expectation: "*Setting clear expectations and outcomes at the beginning of the placement would be helpful."* They felt that having specific goals would provide better direction and motivation throughout the placement.

The feedback from the supervisors

Tina

The supervision and collaboration with Tina have been highly rewarding, and her dedication, academic rigor, and responsiveness have made a strong impression. Her ability to meet deadlines, engage constructively with feedback, and produce high-quality work has inspired discussions about future collaborations, including the potential for co-authoring a paper. Oscar expressed his appreciation for the experience, stating, *"This was my first experience co-supervising a visiting scholar, and I extend my sincere thanks to Stylianos for his remarkable leadership throughout the process."* The support and leadership provided by Stylianos were acknowledged as instrumental in creating a productive environment for Tina's research.

Additionally, Oscar suggested exploring *"building an alumni network for Chinese scholars from CODE, particularly those visiting under the OUC programme,"* to strengthen ongoing relationships and foster new collaborations. A reminder was also shared that *"visiting scholars are expected to submit a short report on the outcomes of their project within three months of its conclusion."* This 2,500-word report will undergo peer review and, upon acceptance, be published as part of CODE's occasional paper series.

Qingsong

Qingsong's adaptability and dedication during his time in London were highly praised. Liz described it as *"a privilege to work with Qingsong"* and noted his quick adjustment to a new environment. Despite the rigorous ethics process, he completed it efficiently and proactively engaged in research, conducting interviews with nine of the people she recommended. His thorough literature review and well-developed theoretical framework contributed to a detailed final report, which Liz considered *"worthy of publication"* and a valuable addition to discussions on lifelong learning policy in the UK and innovation in Chinese higher education.

Simon echoed these sentiments, highlighting Qingsong's *"capacity to embrace challenges"* and *"impressive work ethic."* Liz also found the experience rewarding, discussing future collaborations, *"possibly about AI and lifelong learning."* Both Liz and Simon commended his commitment, high-quality work, and enthusiasm for UK culture. Simon added that, based on past experience, Qingsong *"stacked up very well in the growing cohort of our Alumni."* Their reflections underscore his academic contributions and potential for further collaboration.

Overall findings

The placement proved to be a transformative experience, reinforcing the importance of cross-cultural academic exchange in shaping research, teaching, and professional development. Visiting scholars gained valuable insights into lifelong learning systems, digital literacy, online distance education, and emerging technologies like AI, while also refining their research methods and pedagogical approaches. Exposure to a more collaborative and inclusive academic environment encouraged shift towards more interactive, student-centred learning. Notably, the experience increased their awareness for inclusive practices.

Beyond individual growth, the placement highlighted the importance of academic networking. Scholars found immense value in the support of supervisors and experts. While minor improvements - such as clearer expectations and more pre-arrival support from former visiting scholars - were suggested, the feedback is clearly positive and shows a commitment to implement changes in their activity as a direct result of of the placement.

The supervisors highlighted the visiting scholars' strong work ethic, adaptability, and valuable academic contributions. Both demonstrated high levels of professionalism, producing quality research and engaging proactively in discussions. Their work has sparked interest in future collaborations.

Appendices
- **Appendix 1** Visiting Scholars 2024
- **Appendix 2** Interview Questions

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Appendix 1 Visiting Scholars 2024-25

Visiting Scholar	Institution	Period	Project Title	CODE Fellows Supervisors
Associate Professor Xiaoyan Fu	Gansu Open University, China	Set 24-Jan 25	*The Key Elements and Promotion Paths of Digital Literacy of University Teachers under the Background of Digital Education*	Dr Oscar Mwaanga Professor Stylianos Hatzipanagos
Dr Qingsong Xie	Chongqing Open University, China	Set 24-Jan 25	*Research on the Construction of UK's Lifelong Learning System in Digital Age*	Dr Simon Rofe Dr Liz Marr

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Appendix 2 Interview Questions for Visiting Scholars

1. Can you describe your overall experience as a visiting scholar during this placement?

2. How has your understanding of online distance education changed as a result of this placement?

3. What specific knowledge or skills did you gain that were directly related to your project?

4. How has this placement influenced your broader professional practices?

5. Can you share an example of a change or improvement in your professional approach due to this experience?

6. Have your perspectives on any aspect of your own practice shifted? If so, how?

7. What specific actions or changes do you plan to implement in your work moving forward?

8. Are there practices or methods you observed during the placement that you intend to adopt?

9. What were the most valuable aspects of the placement for you personally and professionally?

10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about the impact of this placement on your work or practice?

11. How could we improve the visiting scholar placement? Were there specific challenges you faced that we could improve?

12. Would you be willing to provide a testimonial about the experience, that we could share with others who are interested in a visiting scholar placement with CODE?

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