
Associated conference: “Yes we can!” - Digital Education for Better Futures (EDEN 2023 Annual Conference)

Conference location: Dublin City University (DCU), Dublin, Ireland

Conference date: 18-20 June 2023

How to cite: Mao, Y., & Lee, K. A Systematic Review of Chinese Students’ Online Learning Experience in Higher Education 2023 *Ubiquity Proceedings*, 3(1): 423-427. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/uproc.118>

Published on: 27 October 2023

Copyright: © 2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

UBIQUITY PROCEEDINGS



<https://ubiquityproceedings.com>

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF CHINESE STUDENTS' ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Yiyi Mao and Kyungmee Lee, Lancaster University, United Kingdom

Correspondence: Yiyi Mao: y.mao11@lancaster.ac.uk

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic prompts an increasing number of university students to engage in online learning (OL). China is one of the countries that have experienced a radical shift in this sense. Before the pandemic, the online mode of university study was not recognised as a legitimate educational experience in China; thus, a small number of Chinese students engaged in online study. Subsequently, there is a relatively incomplete understanding of their OL experiences. Given the exponential expansion of OL in China during the pandemic, it would be a timely effort to synthesise knowledge on Chinese students' OL experiences. For that purpose, the present paper presents the results of a systematic literature review of 34 published journal articles concerning Chinese students' online study. The results give a deep insight into Chinese distance higher education from students' perspectives and call for more studies on the implications of relevant policy and cultural dimensions on Chinese students' online study journey.

Keywords:

Online learning; higher education; Chinese students; systematic literature review

Introduction

While Chinese higher education (HE) has a long history, lasting 3,000 years, distance higher education in China started late on a small scale. However, it is uptaking across China and is fast-increasing. The number of HE institutions providing distance online education programmes has increased from 4 universities in 1998 to 86 universities, including six open universities in 2021. During this period, a range of issues have been reported, such as inadequate technology infrastructure and professional support (Chen et al., 2016; Ting et al., 2018). Without having a chance to address those issues, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increasing number of Chinese college students participating in online learning (OL). The Ministry of Education (2020a) reported that 3.5 billion college students were involved in distance learning during the pandemic. As a result, more issues come up, such as low completion rates and decreased student motivation (Liu et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021). In such a climate, a small group of researchers have investigated Chinese students' OL experiences (e.g. Chen et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there is a lack of in-depth understanding of Chinese students in online distance learning contexts, corresponding to the relatively short history of online distance education in China. Consequently, such a knowledge gap has created unhelpful stereotypes, assumptions, and biases against online Chinese students (Lee and Bligh, 2019). Therefore, it is a timely attempt to conduct a systematic review to display the current status of the scholarship in this field. The present authors have collected and reviewed the relevant literature to provide a deep insight into Chinese students' OL experiences—both perceived benefits and challenges in their experiences. The review aims to identify a gap in the literature that can be a useful departure point for future research and offer some practical recommendations for HE institutions and online distance educators to better design their online programmes.

The following research questions drive this review:

- Q1. What are the geographical landscape, theoretical framework and research methods represented in previous studies?
- Q2. What are the main topics of the previous studies?
- Q3. What statements about Chinese students are represented in the previous studies?

Methodology

Using Scopus, the largest database of peer-reviewed literature (www.scopus.com), the authors selected 34 published journal articles from 177 items, with a strong connection to Chinese students' OL experiences. With the assistance of ATLAS.ti, a coding framework was developed, including the features of the selected studies, main topics, and characteristics of online Chinese students in the selected papers. The following part will present the results.

Results and discussion

The features of the selected studies

Among the 34 articles, more than half of them ($n=18$) focused on investigating Chinese learners' domestic online learning, with a handful of scholars ($n=14$) targeting overseas Chinese students' online study. Two publications compared the differences in online learning behaviours between Chinese students and students from other countries. In respect of theories used in the selected papers, theories related to learning and learners were most frequently adopted by previous scholars (26%, $n=11$). Then theories about culture and knowledge construction (24%, $n=9$) and technology-related theories (19%, $n=8$) were used in some selected articles. Notably, over a third of the studies did not explicitly mention any particular theories (31%, $n=13$). In addition, there was a good balance in methodological approaches (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research) in the selected articles, with the quantitative approaches ($n=14$) used more frequently than the other two. However, there was a great variation in the authors' selection of specific research designs. The majority of researchers ($n=22$) employed a case study design in their studies while some scholars ($n=8$) selected a comparative design and cross-sectional design. Few scholars ($n=4$) adopted an experimental design and an action research design.

Discussion

Overall, we can conclude that the OL experiences of Chinese students have been relatively under-researched, as the small number of selected articles demonstrates. Especially given the large higher education system in China (also a large number of Chinese overseas students worldwide), 34 is a somewhat disappointing number when it comes to the studies concerning Chinese students' OL experiences at Chinese universities and foreign universities. This might be related to Chinese education policy. Until the pandemic, during which all face-to-face educational provisions were banned, the Ministry of Education (2020b) in China did not recognise distance learning as a legitimate medium of study. Due to the lack of government and social recognition of distance education degrees, Chinese students were unwilling to participate in distance learning programmes, leading to a lack of relevant research. Even though Chinese students have been allowed to stay in China during the pandemic, attending online courses offered by foreign universities, at the moment of the present review, there is still insufficient research outcome reporting Chinese students' online learning experiences.

While some of the reviewed articles use theories to guide their investigation, it is worth being aware that there are also a good number of studies investigating Chinese students' OL experiences without utilising any relevant theories. This is worrying because the low use of theories in relevant studies results in poor assumptions about online international students. Bligh and Lee (2020) argue that theory can facilitate researchers effectively challenge their prejudices and taken-for-granted presumptions to interpret and fathom the social phenomena under investigation in a more meaningful and comprehensive way, thereby advancing the technology-enhanced learning (TEL) field and its scholarship. Thus, it can be especially recommended to employ a range of theoretical frameworks to examine Chinese students' behaviours and attitudes in online learning contexts.

Regardless of being well-balanced across the methodological approaches, a case study design is disproportionately employed by the majority of previous studies when it comes to specific research design. Yin (2009) believes that the case study method helps researchers effectively explore a complex social phenomenon and the dynamic cause-and-effect relationships underpinning the phenomenon. The 22 studies provide meaningful knowledge and understanding of online Chinese students and their experiences, yet the scholarship can benefit from utilising more diverse research designs. As Gorard (2013) criticises earlier, case studies often focus on collecting a limited dataset to simply and conveniently describe a concerning case, which aligns with major limitations (i.e., the limited data scope, small sample size) displayed by the selected papers (Cheng & Ding, 2021; Mikal et al., 2015). Therefore, future research can employ diverse research methodologies with

extended scopes of data and topics, aiming to establish a complete account of Chinese students' OL experiences.

Focused topics of the previous studies

Even though the body of literature on Chinese students' OL experiences is not large, there is a diversity of research perspectives on the topic. Research on Chinese learners' OL experiences, whether for local students or overseas students, primarily concentrated on students' attitudes towards online classes ($n=19$), followed by students' perceptions of a range of OL technologies ($n=15$) and activities ($n=15$). Ten studies concerned how Chinese students learned specific learning subject knowledge online, with half of them focusing on language learning experiences. An equivalent number of scholars ($n=10$) explored various cultural matters that emerged in Chinese students in a cross-cultural OL context. Some researchers ($n=7$) assessed Chinese students' online learning strategies. A small number of individual studies examined Chinese students' online learning performances ($n=5$) and influencing factors ($n=5$).

Discussion

Evidently, the main topics of the selected papers are various. Here, students' attitude towards online learning is the spotlight in the reviewed publications. The previous studies provide conflicting explanations of Chinese students' perceptions of different aspects of online learning. Although Chinese students are generally satisfied with their OL experiences, they hold a conservative attitude toward the fully online and distance learning mode (Zhou et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2009). This may simply be caused by Chinese students' unfamiliarity with online learning (or familiarity with on-campus learning), given that online distance education has been a relatively new phenomenon in China (Andersson & Grönlund, 2009). Therefore, the research on online Chinese students still needs more dynamics. We have also noticed that none of the previous studies looked into the impact of national and institutional policies that shaped and influenced Chinese students' online study experience. Given that a lack of government and social recognition of distance education has led to the slow development of online learning in China and the low participation rate among Chinese students in online HE, it may be necessary to investigate the impact of policy changes on students' online study experience, especially in the context of the post-pandemic.

The myths of Chinese cultures and Chinese learners

Generally speaking, the previous authors seldom used positive statements describing the characteristics of Chinese students and culture. In terms of cultural dimension, Chinese traditional culture was often described as authoritative ($n=8$), competitive ($n=3$), and face-saving ($n=3$), while it placed importance on collectivism ($n=8$) and harmony ($n=4$). Many scholars appraised Chinese education as teacher-driven instruction ($n=5$), authoritarian ($n=1$), achievement-focused ($n=4$), and spoon-fed education ($n=1$). Some authors showed rather neutral attitudes toward Chinese education, focusing on content-based instruction ($n=3$) and fundamental skills training ($n=3$). Conservative and silent students tended to be the dominant representation of Chinese students ($n=10$), followed by being afraid of losing face ($n=4$) and avoiding conflict ($n=2$). Five studies included positive statements about Chinese students' characteristics that Chinese students tended to be diligent, adaptive, and holistic learners. Likewise, an article complimented Chinese students genuinely searching for new knowledge. Nevertheless, there have been a greater number of negative statements about Chinese students' learning behaviours—being passive ($n=9$), pragmatic, and utilitarian ($n=6$), and seldom asking for teacher guidance ($n=9$). A lack of critical thinking among Chinese students was also mentioned in three studies.

Discussion

One admits that the small number of empirical studies, the monolithic research design and the limited theories used in the studies of Chinese students' OL journey have led to misconceptions about Chinese traditional culture along with the emergence of stereotypes and prejudices. Here, most studies attribute the negative aspects of Chinese culture and education to their traditional root in Confucianism. This notion is uncritically applied by some scholars (e.g. Nield, 2004; Du, 2016). Subsequently, Chinese students' characteristics and learning behaviours are also negatively regarded as the outcomes of such cultural and educational characteristics (e.g. Law et al., 2013; Windsor, 2021). Online international Chinese students are also considered in a fragile position when it comes to cultural adaptation (Yong, 2021). Although some other characteristics such as conforming to norms, pursuing high standards in their work, and valuing academic success are not necessarily negative traits, such

statements are devised rather negatively in the reviewed articles. The stereotype of Chinese students as being conservative and silent is commonly observed across the reviewed articles, which we have found worrying. It is because these discourses disregard the diversity of cultures and student groups. Lee and Bligh (2019) question how these scholars were able to verify that the investigated Chinese students were from the same cultural background. They criticise these deficient narratives that fail to provide online educators with a balanced and sophisticated perspective. Most damaging, these narratives may strengthen online tutors' prejudices about different races and/or nationalities (ibid). Therefore, it is suggested that online learning studies should be conducted without presumptions about students' cultural backgrounds in case stereotypes and prejudice emerge.

Conclusion

This paper systematically searches, selects, and reviews previous research concerning Chinese students' online learning experience. Based on the review results, the present authors of the paper have argued that there is a significant gap in our understanding of Chinese students' online learning experiences. The gap has been driven both by the historical backdrops of the development of online distance education in China and by a range of limitations of previous studies. Most studies focus on Chinese students' attitudes towards online learning, but those studies do not investigate the impact of Chinese national and institutional policies on such attitudes. Especially the fast-changing government policies on online and distance education since the Covid-19 pandemic deserve some careful examination as they are likely to create both short-term and long-term effects on Chinese students' engagement with online learning. Perhaps more importantly, the present authors note that the characteristics of online Chinese students are considered predominantly negative, creating unhelpful and problematic stereotypes of Chinese students that fail to capture diversity among the large group. This calls for more in-depth and comprehensive research efforts in the field of online and distance education.

References

- Andersson, A., & Grönlund, Å. (2009). A conceptual framework for e-learning in developing countries: A critical review of research challenges. *The electronic journal of information systems in developing countries*, 38(1), 1-16.
- Bligh, B., & Lee, K. (2020). Debating the status of 'theory' in technology enhanced learning research: Introduction to the Special Inaugural Issue. *Studies in technology enhanced learning*, 1(1), 17-26.
- Chen, H., Van Reyk, D., Reyna, J., & Oliver, B. G. (2022). A comparison of attitudes towards remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic between students attending a Chinese and an Australian campus. *Advances in physiology education*.
- Chen, L., Lin, S., & Zheng, Q. (2016). Opportunities and challenges of chinese distance education in the 'Internet+'Era. *Modern distance education research*, 1, 3-10.
- Cheng, P., & Ding, R. (2021). The effect of online review exercises on student course engagement and learning performance: A case study of an introductory financial accounting course at an international joint venture university. *Journal of accounting education*, 54, 1-25.
- Du, J. (2016). Predictors for Chinese students' management of study environment in online groupwork. *Educational psychology*, 36(9), 1614-1630. doi: 10.1080/01443410.2015.1036008.
- Gorard, S. (2013). *Research design: Creating robust approaches for the social sciences*. Sage.
- Law, D., Yip, J., Wong, C., & Cheung, M. C. (2013). Enhancing the process of idea generation in Hong Kong chinese university students: The fashion visual merchandising experience. *Art, design and communication in higher Education*, 12(1), 103-121. doi: 10.1386/adch.12.1.103_1.
- Lee, K., & Bligh, B. (2019). Four narratives about online international students: A critical literature review. *Distance education*, 40(2), 153-169.
- Liu, X., Zhou, J., Chen, L., Yang, Y., & Tan, J. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 epidemic on live online dental continuing education. *European journal of dental education*, 24(4), 786-789.
- Mikal, J. P., Yang, J., & Lewis, A. (2015). Surfing USA: How Internet Use Prior to and During Study Abroad Affects Chinese Students' Stress, Integration, and Cultural Learning While in the United States. *Journal of studies in international education*, 19(3), 203-224. doi: 10.1177/1028315314536990.

- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2020a). The total number of students in Chinese higher education reaches 40.2 million, ranking first in the world. http://www.moe.gov.cn/fbh/live/2020/52717/mtbd/202012/t20201204_503482.html. Accessed 10 Apr 2022.
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2020b). New policy for Chinese students studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. http://www.moe.gov.cn/fbh/live/2020/52834/mtbd/202012/t20201223_507111.html. Accessed 10 Apr 2022. .
- Nield, K. (2004). Questioning the myth of the Chinese learner. *International journal of contemporary hospitality Management*, 16(3), 189-196. doi: 10.1108/09596110410531186.
- Ting, S. R., Smith, A. C., & Gomez, E. (2018). E-learning in China: Progress, challenges, and research issues. *Digital transformation and innovation in Chinese education*, 1-17.
- Windsor, R. J. (2021). The effectiveness of an online grammar study scheme for Chinese undergraduate students. *Smart learning environments*, 8(1), 1-14.
- Yang, X., Li, D., Liu, X., & Tan, J. (2021). Learner behaviors in synchronous online prosthodontic education during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. *The journal of prosthetic dentistry*, 126(5), 653-657.
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Sage.
- Yong, S. (2021). A reflective commentary about teaching international non-accounting postgraduates amid COVID-19. *Pacific accounting review*, 33(5), 616-624. doi: 10.1108/PAR-09-2020-0156.
- Zhou, S., Zhou, Y., & Zhu, H. (2021). Predicting Chinese University Students' E-Learning Acceptance and Self-Regulation in Online English Courses: Evidence From Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) During COVID-19. *SAGE Open*, 11(4), doi: 10.1177/21582440211061379.
- Yong, S. (2021). A reflective commentary about teaching international non-accounting postgraduates amid COVID-19. *Pacific accounting review*, 33(5), 616-624. doi: 10.1108/PAR-09-2020-0156.
- Zhu, C., Valcke, M., & Schellens, T. (2009). A cross-cultural study of online collaborative learning. *Multicultural education and technology journal*, 3(1), 33-46. doi: 10.1108/17504970910951138.