



The Life of "Internet Colleges"

# Policies, Problems, and Prospects of Online Higher Education in China

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**F**or the past two decades, China's economy has grown rapidly, averaging an astonishing 9 percent every year.<sup>1</sup> One result of this growth has been the demand for more and better educational opportunities at the postsecondary level. In response, the Chinese government, which holds a tight control over its highly centralized education system, introduced a number of drastic measures to expand access to postsecondary education,<sup>2</sup> including the formation of "Internet Colleges"—or *wangluo xueyuan*, in Chinese. These colleges, which are units within existing universities, are dedicated to offering postsecondary-level educational programs online. Other than the China Central Radio and TV University (CCRTVU), they are the only institutions approved by the government to offer online postsecondary education.

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The Internet College initiative was a bold experiment for the Chinese education system, and as such, it has gone through a number of changes and modifications since its inception. These changes and modifications partly reflect the government's struggle to strike a balance between tight regulation and flexibility, between tradition and innovation, and partly reveal the current social, political, economical, and educational realities in China with regard to online education. Thus, an examination of the short evolutionary path of Internet Colleges in China can provide a glimpse into the larger aspects of online higher education in China.

### The Grand Experiment

In China, which has no independent accreditation system, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People's Republic of China serves as the agency that manages all aspects of all postsecondary education—in fact, of all educational institutions. Although in recent years the central government has devolved some of its power to provincial governments, it retains the authority to set national policies and guidelines for all higher education institutions and to monitor their quality. The government sanctions who can offer what courses and degrees, which courses and content must be included in a degree program, how many students an institution can admit annually, and what criteria an institution should use to admit students. Only authorized institutions can grant degrees and diplomas, and only authorized institutions can offer degree programs beyond associate degrees. Thus, although higher education institutions can use technology to support the instruction of their existing students, they cannot offer online programs that lead to a degree without the explicit approval of the MOE.

In 1998, as a way to expand access to higher education in China and in response to national political leaders' call for more uses of technology to enhance education, the MOE approved four universities to offer online programs through a new entity: the Internet College. This decision was part of the MOE's Modern Distance Education Initiative, which was

a direct response to the *Action Plan for Invigorating Education toward the 21st Century*, a massive national roadmap for educational reform in China.

The decision to approve universities to offer online degree programs was an unprecedented move, one with significant implications for higher education in China for a number of reasons. First, it broke the monopoly of CCRTVU in distance/online higher education in China and allowed other players onto the field. CCRTVU, founded in 1978 as a branch of the MOE, remains under direct leadership of the MOE today. For more than twenty years, it was the only player in distance and online education. Second,

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this decision formally recognized the potential of online education for offering quality educational opportunities. Third, this decision granted more autonomy and flexibility in admissions and in students' educational experiences. It permitted the approved universities to decide how and how many students they would admit into their Internet Colleges and what courses they would offer. Lastly, this decision allowed the approved universities to collect fees and tuitions, which meant more financial autonomy for the universities. Nevertheless, the MOE made clear that this was an experiment.

Given the increased flexibility and autonomy, as well as the potential for added

revenue, there was tremendous interest among universities to establish Internet Colleges. By the year 2000, the number of experimental universities had reached thirty, in addition to CCRTVU. Encouraged by early successes, the MOE issued a policy document titled *Several Comments on Supporting Some Universities and Colleges to Set Up Experimental Online Education Institutions and Distance Learning*.<sup>3</sup> The *Comments* affirmed the previous approval of the thirty-one universities and set forth explicit guidelines for operating online programs. The *Comments* officially authorized online education as a legal approach to acquiring postsecondary education.

In addition, the *Comments* announced the launch of an experimental project to allow an even larger number of qualified institutions to offer online programs. The MOE reiterated the criteria for approving additional institutions: they must be well-established colleges or universities with a high-quality teaching staff, excellent network infrastructure, abundant online teaching resources, extensive and successful experience in using technology, and a detailed and convincing plan for the future implementation of online education. These programs would be approved for four to five years. As part of the experimental project, these institutions would be granted substantial autonomy, allowing unrestricted enrollment (including full-time students), institution-based entrance examinations instead of the national college entrance exam, local decisions on program areas, flexible durations of programs, and MOE-approved degree issuance. The *Comments* also included plans for the periodical assessment and evaluation of these programs so as to collect evidence for adjusting policies in a timely manner.

### The Outcomes

This experimental project enjoyed dramatic growth. By 2006, the MOE had approved 66 conventional universities to offer degree programs online. These universities had established more than 6,000 learning support centers around China, offering 8,557 online courses for 153 majors in 10 disciplines, and had a total enrollment of 3 million students.<sup>4</sup> However, there were some ups and downs in the

TABLE 1: UNIVERSITIES AUTHORIZED TO OFFER ONLINE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

YEAR	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Number of Universities	67	68	64	63	66

numbers over these six years (see Table 1). For quality reasons, the MOE stopped the programs in some universities. The other noticeable development trend is the shift from offering full-time degree programs that were essentially the same as those in conventional universities toward offering programs for adult and continuing education and in-service training.

The growth of online higher education in China has been accompanied by concerns and has encountered some significant problems. Some of these concerns and problems are rooted in the cultural, political, economical, and technological realities of higher education in China. Others reflect the struggle between tradition and innovation.

#### Accessibility and Cost

China's technology infrastructure is insufficient to support extensive online programs on a large scale. Although the number of Internet users in China reached over 100 million by the end of 2005,<sup>5</sup> this is only a small fraction (less than 10%) of the country's total population. And these Internet users are mostly concentrated in the more developed, large cities. Whereas the online programs are intended to target those who may not have access to higher education, these potential students are more likely to reside in smaller cities and in rural and remote areas, especially in the western part of China. Given that there were only about 41 million computers connected to the Internet in 2005,<sup>6</sup> most of China's Internet activities are likely occurring in Internet cafes, not necessarily the best places for taking online courses. Even where access is available in remote and rural areas, the bandwidth is often so low that it cannot support video and audio transmission, seriously limiting what can be included in online courses.

In addition, by Chinese standards, the cost of Internet access is not negligible. Dial-up remains a primary means for access in most of China beyond the few large cities. The user has to pay both Internet

service fees and phone charges. Broadband access, where available, is not cheap either. For example, in Beijing, twenty-four hours of Internet usage cost about 230 *yuan* RMB, equal to approximately one-tenth of the average monthly salary in Beijing.

#### Quality and Prestige

In China, the quality of online education is generally perceived to be low, and online programs are viewed as less prestigious than on-campus programs. A number of reasons account for these perceptions. First, the admission criteria and process for online programs are considered to be less demanding because, unlike conventional programs, online programs do not have to use the national College Entrance Exam, the gold standard in China to judge a student's qualification for admission. Online programs can also have multiple rounds of admission each year, whereas conventional programs can have only one, thus giving the impression that online programs have less-rigorous admission standards. In a sense this is true, because online programs adopt the philosophy of "wider entry and narrower exit," meaning less demand at admissions but tougher requirements for graduation. Moreover, in the desire to recruit more students, and hence more revenue, some universities maintain extremely low admission standards or do not use any entrance exam. Online programs have a much higher acceptance rate: around 70 percent. Thus, online programs are often viewed as a choice only for those who are unable to gain admission to on-campus programs.

Second, the quality of instruction is questionable. Quite often, since most of the universities approved to offer online programs must have already been suc-

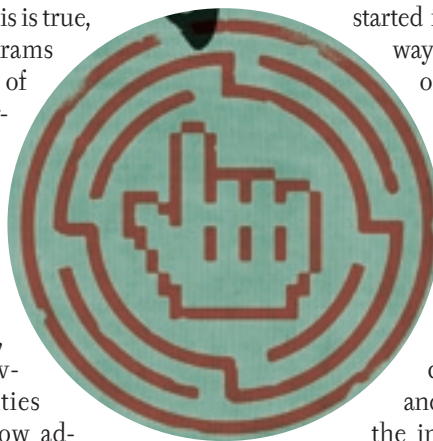
cessful and prestigious, they do not consider online programs to be part of their core business. Thus, it is not necessarily the most qualified staff who are assigned to teach online. Or often a lecture delivered to on-campus students, who are apparently better prepared academically, is recorded and directly broadcast to online students, without any consideration of their interests and capabilities. As a result, quality suffers.

Third, mismanagement of students has contributed to the poor perception of online programs as well. Quite often, because of the vast distances in China and the limited resources, many online programs rely on other institutions or agencies to manage students at a distance, resulting in a lack of necessary oversight and monitoring of their students. Sometimes, online programs also go too far to ensure their students' success. For example, allowing or even assisting students to cheat in exams was found in several programs, causing those universities to lose their right to offer online programs.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, deep cultural and societal influences are also at play when determining the prestige of online programs. China has a registered permanent resident system known as "Hukou." This system was

started in the early 1950s as a way to limit the mobility of the population and the distribution of resources. Although there have been some peripheral changes in recent years, the system remains powerful. In effect, people can receive education, health, and other benefits only in the immediate community

where they are an officially registered permanent resident. Moving one's Hukou to a bigger and more prosperous city is a well-recognized embodiment of success. Students attending on-campus programs are allowed to move their Hukou to the place of their registered university during the period of the higher education program. Certain employment opportunities also carry the opportunity of Hukou transfer for the student after



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graduation. Therefore, attending on-campus programs is recognized as one of the few opportunities for social mobility. Online programs, however, are not al-

lowed to grant students this possibility. Therefore, even if students in the online programs are taking the same courses and learning the same content as in on-campus programs, the attached value of social mobility awarded by a “true” university education is not present.

#### **Lessons and Policy Adjustment**

Faced with these problems, the Chinese government did not stop the experiment, but neither has it encouraged expansion. It has made several attempts to improve the image and quality of Internet Colleges, including terminating some poorly run programs. More important, the MOE has made several significant policy adjustments along the way. These changes reveal a more cautious and conservative spirit around online education, since they took away some of the important autonomy of Internet Colleges and added more regulation and oversight.

One fundamental change was the MOE stipulation that the diploma for online

programs must be distinguished from the diploma for conventional programs by including “Distance Education” or “Online Education.” Previously, universities were given the autonomy to issue diplomas, and there was no explicit policy regarding the type of diplomas that graduates of Internet Colleges could receive. Many universities thus used this as a recruitment tool, advertising that graduates of Internet Colleges would receive the same diploma as graduates of conventional programs. Students in conventional programs protested loudly, because they had to score much higher in the national College Entrance Exam than did those students admitted to the Internet Colleges. In response to the protests, the MOE changed the policy, in essence admitting that an online diploma is not equal to a diploma from a conventional program.

The MOE has also taken measures to tighten the admission and graduation requirements of Internet Colleges. For example, in 2006, the MOE issued the



“Announcement Regarding Recruitment and Admissions for Online Higher Education,”<sup>8</sup> which states that online programs must submit their recruitment plan and intended number of students for review by the MOE. This document also reiterates that online programs should not use false or ambiguous advertisement and must inform prospective students of the diploma

they will receive. In addition, this document sets clear limitations on the agencies that online programs can use to recruit new students.

Furthermore, the MOE introduced a national exam system for online programs. All students in online programs must take a national exam in common subjects such as college-level math, English, computer basics, and Chinese. This is a significant departure from the previous policy, according to which each institution was allowed to administer its exams.

Finally, the MOE encouraged and issued regulations about the establishment and operation of support centers for distance learning. Due to the vast geographical distances between students and the universities and to the limited broadband access as well as limited resources of Internet Colleges, online programs in China have had to develop local learning support centers close to where their students are concentrated. The centers provide a broad range of crucial services such as recruitment, face-to-face tutoring, student

management, and maintenance of online educational facilities. These local learning support centers can be developed and solely owned by the institute that offers online programs or can be established through contractual agreements with local higher education institutions or other education agencies. In 2005, a national system of learning centers—called “Open”—was established to offer services to all Internet Colleges. This system, a for-profit entity operated by a subsidiary of CCRTVU, currently has collaborative relationships with thirty Internet Colleges and operates more than eight hundred “Open Learning Support Centers” across China. The services of these centers include organizing student recruitment, supervising tutors and students, administering tests, and managing external public relationships. These and other local learning support centers have become so essential to the success of online programs that they are now a prerequisite for offering online programs and the MOE factored them into its evaluation of online programs. The MOE also issued

specific guidelines and regulations regarding their operation.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

The relatively short history of Internet Colleges in China offers a glimpse of the potential of online education in the country and also reveals many of the problems involved in institutionalizing online education in an established system. Some of the problems are universal, such as quality assurance and the perception of quality and prestige. Some are unique to China, such as the direct involvement of the MOE in setting guidelines and regulations about online educational programs (though similar problems could arise in other centralized education systems where the government, rather than the market and the public, plays a major role). We are unable to fully explore here the implications of the lessons we could learn from the short yet very complex history of online education in China. But it is clear that online education remains a hopeful and viable educational platform, especially

for China and other developing countries with limited higher education resources. The vast educational market in China and the potential of online education also present interesting opportunities for foreign higher education institutions. Finally, the role of the government in supporting and regulating innovations is worth serious consideration by other countries. *e*

## Notes

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