Abstract/Proposal for Open Impact Conference 2019

C6 (Emerging themes in ODL for new frontiers/mixed)

Sino-African Cooperation in Higher Education: an exploration of ODL opportunities and challenges

Africa and China are fast growing emerging economies demanding the support from strong education systems and sufficient human resources. Open Distance Learning (ODL) contributes to lifelong learning and plays a significant role in developing a learning society for sustainable development (Yang, 2008; Gaba and Li, 2015). In the light of a wide range of cooperation between China and Africa in many sectors and the existing strong Sino-African relationship, this paper explores the international cooperation between Africa and China in the higher education sector, especially in the area of ODL. Based upon secondary sources of information and an African scholar's six months' consultancy practice of providing academic training in Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs), this paper will shed light on the development of ODL in Chinese HEIs with a focus on academic professional development. The paper will argue that ODL is crucial for emerging economies' sustainable development. Factors such as political, technical and socio-cultural features play a crucial role in the development and effective implementation of ODL. By exploring the potential opportunities and identifying related challenges, this paper will contribute to the understanding of developing mutually beneficial partnerships between African universities and Chinese HEIs within the wider picture of Sino-Africa relationships.

Keywords: Lifelong learning; Educational technology; Academic professional development; Sino-African cooperation; Sustainable development

Introduction

> "Obtaining a quality education is the foundation to creating sustainable development. In addition to improving quality of life, access to inclusive education can help equip locals with the tools required to develop innovative solutions to the world's greatest problems."
>
> (UN Sustainable Development Goals – Quality Education)

China and Africa are both fast growing economies in need of educated workforce to support their social, economic, technological and human development (Jegede, 2012; Gaba and Li, 2015. However, formal education cannot sufficiently meet the demand of the economy and respond to the countries' rapid development (Mwapachu, 2010; Jegede, 2012; Gaba and Li, 2015). In contrast to formal education, Open Distance Learning (ODL) is flexible and accessible and involves "multi-learners, with multi-modes, by multimedia, at multi-levels and for multi-purposes" (Wei, 2010, p.49). ODL opens learning opportunities, promotes a learning society and contributes to the preparation of a workforce needed to support sustainable economic development (Jegede, 2012; Wei, 2010).

Many African countries focus on the development of the formal education system which includes building schools, colleges and universities to ensure proper education systems in order to meet the countries' development needs (Jowi, 2012; Mwapachu, 2010). There are positive developments in Africa's higher education sector, for instance, Africa now has about 800 universities and over 1500 institutions of higher learning ((Jegede, 2012). At the same time, ODL courses have been provided by some well-established universities in some countries such as the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the Zimbabwe Open University (Gunga and Ricketts, 2007). However, the African continent currently has the world's fastest-growing

university-aged cohort and the growth is expected to double by 2050 (Gu, 2017). For example, the number of students in secondary education in Tanzania jumped from 345,000 in 2003 to 2 million in 2010 (Mwapachu, 2010). It poses a great challenge to ensure that all the young people graduating from high school can access university-level education (Mwapachu, 2010; Jegede, 2012; Gu, 2017). In addition, apart from the issue of young people having access to post-secondary education, many countries in Africa are also faced with the challenge to provide lifelong learning opportunities to the people (Unwin et al., 2010). This makes it necessary to explore different means such as ODL for equipping a large population of Africa to access higher education and opportunities for lifelong learning.

Similarly, there has been a growing demand for higher education in China, for instance, its enrolment rate of higher education has increased from 10.5% in 1999 to 25% in 2010 (Ding et al., 2010), yet the number of people who had received Higher Education in China was only 1/20 of its total population in 2005 (Ding et al., 2010). Facing the strong learning demand, the Ministry of Education (2010, p.9) specified its goals which are to: "modernise education, bring a learning society into shape and turn China into a country rich in human resources by the year 2020". At the same time, the national government increased its spending in education, at an average annual growth rate of 21.58% and reached 4% of GDP in 2012 (Wen, 2013). Moreover, the allocation of educational resources was given priority to rural, remote, poor and ethnic minority areas for the improvement of fairness in education (Wen, 2013). As part of China's educational strategy, the development of ODL in China was catapulted by political, social and economic reasons (Gaba and Li, 2015). ODL has played an important role in Chinese Education development and in constructing a learning society (Gaba and Li, 2015).

In light of the educational demands faced by China and Africa and the existing strong Sino-African relationship in many sectors, this paper explores the international cooperation between Africa and China in higher education, especially in the area of ODL. This paper seeks understanding for the following questions:

- How is the development of ODL in China?

- What is the current China-Africa cooperation in Higher Education?

- What may be the opportunities and challenges to Sino-Africa cooperation in ODL?

Research Method

To address the research questions, a literature review was conducted employing different search engines such as Open University library search, Google Scholar. A range of key words such as "lifelong learning", "Sino-African cooperation" and "Open Distance Learning in China and Africa" were used to filter and narrow down the number of papers to be reviewed. Both Chinese and English academic sources as well as government websites and reports were consulted to facilitate an understanding of the background and context of the Sino-African relations considering its political, economic and social dimensions.

At the same time, a small-scale qualitative study was conducted by one of the authors, an African scholar, who spent a total of six months working at a Chinese University as a consultant in academic professional development between 2018 and 2019. The African scholar was contracted by one of the universities in Zhejiang Province, East China, to provide training to a consortium of university teachers drawn from six universities in Zhejiang province. A wide spectrum from new to experienced teachers with different discipline backgrounds participated in the training, seeking to enhance their knowledge and skills in teaching and learning at higher education level. The course was taught by the African scholar over a period of three months

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from September to December in both 2018/19 and 2019/2020 academic years. The African scholar also participated at some national conferences focusing on teaching and learning in China and this helped to broaden the understanding of the issues around teaching and learning in higher education in Chinese context including the development of ODL.

During the course of providing consultancy services at a Chinese University, the African researcher conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with teachers who were attending a continuous professional development course. He also interviewed a retired professor who has been working actively with the Ministry of Education to support the provision of online teacher training programmes across the country. In total, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted adhering to the BERA ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004). The participants were free to participate or withdraw at any time during the study (Hennink et al., 2011). No real names of the participants are used in the project for confidentiality and anonymity (Cohen et al., 2011; Israel and Hay, 2006). The interviews were not recorded, yet observations and notes were taken during each interview to capture the important points made by the interviewees. The interviewees were able to articulate their experiences of participating in different ODL courses in China including the benefits and challenges associated with the massive open online courses (MOOCs). The use of semi-structured interviews facilitated the teachers to share their experiences including feelings and emotions about the use of ODL courses (Merriam, 2009). Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse and report the key patterns in both secondary data and interviews in order to address the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results

The Development of ODL in China

The ODL system in China began with the establishment of the Radio and Television University (CRTVU) in 1979 which was modelled on the UK's Open University system (Wei, 2010). The purpose of establishing Radio and Television Universities is "…a strategic choice for expanding higher education, upgrading the scientific and cultural level of the masses, as well as having a larger number of professionals" (State Council, 1979, p. 1). The ODL system in China has been through three different stages in its development, adapted to the Chinese context (Wei, 2010; Gaba and Li, 2015; Ding et al., 2010). The three stages (see Table 1) include a single-mode distance teaching university network (1979-1985), dual-mode distance teaching universities (late 1980s – 1990s) and dual-track distance teaching universities (1999 to 2011) (Wei, 2010; Li, 2014).

Table 1 The Development of ODL in China

	1979-1985 A single-mode distance teaching university network	Late 1980s – 1990s Dual-mode distance teaching universities	1999 – 2011 Dual-track distance teaching universities
Educational Policies	• CRTVU as the headquarter focusing on curriculum development • 28 RTVUs as study centres • In partnership with local HEIs for the use of resources	• Decentralisation of the national educational system • under the direct leadership of their local government with power over the enrolment, programme provision and certificate issuance at the provincial and civic levels • Large-scale construction and purchase of RTVU campuses	• Replaced the concept of 'distance education' by 'modern open and distance education' • Embracing the education technology, distance education and open learning
Curriculum Development	• CRTVU focusing on curriculum development, • Limited to the engineering and social sciences disciplines	• More than 200 courses were developed and revised. • Audio-cassettes and video-cassettes as a key component of the new study package.	• More than 500 courses • Satellite broadcast system • Development of China Education and Research Network

Delivery methods	- Organised into classes of 40 each to watch television programmes in the classrooms - Face-to-face group tuition	- RTVUs were provided with cassette players for students to listen or watch - Group tuition	- Online resources and other additional materials accessible from campus computer laboratories or from home computers - Emails, teleconferencing, discussion forums and chatrooms including instant messaging programmes
Student body	- Adult workers passed the CRTVU entrance examination were given paid study-leave by their employers, to study on full-time basis - Free viewers and listeners who did not sit the entrance examination, but were allowed to study part-time on a single course basis	- Number of adult learners studying full-time dropped - High school leavers studied on full-time basis using the same materials as the part-time students	- Part-time ODL for adult learners - Full-time vocational and technical education to new high school leavers as vocational colleges

At the first stage, the Central Radio and Television University (CRTVU) was set up as the headquarter focusing on curriculum development and the programmes were limited to the engineering and social sciences disciplines at that time (Wei, 2010). Twenty-eight provincial Radio and Television Universities (RTVUs) were responsible for enrolling students and organising the teaching and learning activities including the awarding of certificates (Wei, 2010). They worked in partnership with local conventional higher education institutions hiring their staff on part-time basis and using facilities on their campuses (Wei, 2010). During this stage, a national television network was set up to facilitate the delivery of courses and programmes by talking heads of professors from the traditional universities which would be

broadcasted by China Central television (CCTV) (Wei, 2010). Enrolled students had to pass entrance examinations, be given paid study-leave by their employers, and study on full-time basis (Wei, 2010). They were put into classrooms to watch the programmes broadcasted on television or supported through face-to-face group tuition which was well received by both students and teachers as this was part of Chinese culture (Wei, 2010). On the other hand, the real distance learners had to follow the lectures on their own with no additional support due to staff shortages at local RTVUs (Wei, 2010). ODL was clearly adapted to the Chinese contextual reality from the very first stage of its development.

In 1986, with the decentralisation of the national educational system, local RTVUs moved out of the campuses of traditional institutions and became independent dual-mode local distance teaching universities "by offering education to both working adults and high school leavers" (Wei, 2010) under the direct leadership of their local government (Wei, 2010, p.51). In the meantime, the CRTVU undertook a large-scale course development project in collaboration with traditional universities and provincial RTVUs. More than 200 courses were developed and revised. Television and radio programmes were converted into audio-cassettes and video-cassettes as a key component of the new study package. The local RTVUs were provided with cassette players for students to listen or watch if they had no access at home (Wei, 2010). However, as most of the self-study packages were unable to provide the needed guidance and support for students, local RTVUs had to provide group tuition to provide a bridge for the separated teaching and learning activities. The student body saw a drop in the number of adult learners studying full-time as economic changes in the 1990s affected employers' willingness to continue to give their workers paid study leave. The working adults were also unable to fit in the schedule of the television programme broadcasting. It was a turning point in the development of ODL in China as the RTVUs had to start thinking about ways of supporting

part-time students studying at a distance (Wei, 2010). On the other hand, the high school leavers studied on full-time basis using the same materials as the part-time students (Wei, 2010). In the daytime the RTVUs "looked the same as other regular colleges, and in the evenings and at weekends they were more like adult higher education institutions with working adults attending group tuition" (Wei, 2010, p.52).

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the Chinese government started promoting the idea of continuing education, lifelong learning and open learning with the view to improve the quality of the nation (MOE, 1993 cited in Wei, 2010). When the International Council for Distance Education changed its name to the International Council for Open and Distance Education in 1999, China replaced the concept of 'distance education' by 'modern open and distance education' reflecting the developments in the Chinese context where emphasis was now being placed on embracing the education technology, distance education and open learning. Many RTVUs have become dual-track institutions of higher learning with approval from the MOE which means RTVUs not only provide part-time ODL for adult learners but also offer full-time vocational and technical education to new high school leavers as vocational colleges. The advent of technology has made it possible for the provision of more interactive support in ODL. For instance, during the early years of the new millennium, the CRTVU combined the satellite broadcast system and China Education and Research Network for the delivery of ODL (Wei, 2010). This helped the different stakeholders including teachers and students to access online resources and other additional materials for more than 500 courses from their campus computer laboratories or from home computers (Wei, 2010). In addition, communication between teachers and students has been enhanced using technology applications such as emails, teleconferencing, discussion forums and chatrooms including instant messaging programmes commonly used in China such as QQ (a social media platform). These developments are helping to facilitate the transition in

pedagogy, from teacher-centred to student-centred approach in ODL provision (Wei, 2010). The higher education graduates of CRTVU reached 7.2 million from 1979 to 2009 contributing approximately 24% of the total Higher Education graduates (Liu, 2009).

In 2012, the national government established the Open University of China (OUC) using the operational guidelines of the CRTVU. The OUC is designed to be open to all members of the society in China including adults, school-aged students, the elderly, farmers, the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups and it provides practical-oriented formal tertiary education and non-formal education (Li, 2014). Currently, ODL in China is further developed and covers different levels of education for a large audience attracting people from both public and private sector (Gaba and Li, 2015). It is also worth noting that several courses are being designed and delivered using ODL based on the market demand. Apart from the OUC, a number of universities in the country are also providing different online courses, the MOOCs, which can be accessed by any member of the public. Some of the eminent universities such as Tsinghua University and Peking University are among those that are actively providing MOOCs. For instance, Tsinghua University provides courses in both Chinese and English making it possible for non-Chinese speakers to benefit from the courses (see: www.xuetangx.com). The teachers who participated in our study were positive about the online courses provided by different universities and commented that:

> *"I'm interested in the accredited online courses like my course. It's useful for me to learn the advantages of the accredited courses and then introduce the good/useful videos/lecture notes to my own students" (Interviewee A)*

> *"It is good for me and the students to see what happens in other classes at the top Universities in the country" (Interviewee B)*

In addition to the excitement of being presented with ODL opportunities, the interviewees mentioned some of the challenges such as the excessive workload which inhibits the engagement with the online courses.

ODL for Academic Professional Development (CPD) in China

> 4.C By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states (UN Sustainable Development Goals – Quality Education)

The Ministry of Education (MOE) in China coordinates the provision of online Academic Professional Development Courses. It is generally difficult to find documented information about these courses, especially in English. However, one of the authors of this paper participated in delivering one of the online workshops that was delivered to university academics in 2018. We had an opportunity to interview some university teachers, including Professor Jimmy (not his real name) who is actively involved in the online Academic Professional Development Training Programme. Professor Jimmy indicated that the MOE provides online courses to support the continuous professional development of teachers at different levels including university and school teachers. Selected experts in teaching and learning and specialists from various fields of study are chosen to design those online courses and workshops. All the courses and workshops can be accessed easily by all the academics using their university accounts. With additional payment for the courses, they could get more support, that is, to have synchronous and asynchronous interactions online with the course providers as well as obtaining a certificate at the end of the course. Alternatively, university

academics can simply access the online material free without gaining a certificate. This was welcomed by teachers:

> *"I really appreciate the fact that one can study for free and get some useful ideas to improve own practice. If you want to receive a certificate, you can pay a nominal fee for the courses but no need to pay if you just learn by yourself without extra online support from the experts." (Interviewee C)*

Occasionally, the MOE organises workshops which run over three days, usually from Friday to Sunday where university teachers can either attend physically or virtually. As indicated earlier, in 2018, one of the authors of this paper participated in a similar workshop. The workshop was hosted by a university in Henan Province, in the North of China and different speakers were arranged by the MOE. The workshop was attended by more than one hundred university teachers in person while more than 2000 teachers from different parts of the country followed the proceedings of the workshop online over the three days period. Those who participated in these programmes are largely positive and express satisfaction about the benefits of these opportunities in enhancing their teaching practice. However, not everyone is able to benefit from the face-to-face interactions as the workshops are held in places that might require long distance travelling. The MOE changes the workshop venues every year in an effort to ensure that university teachers from all the different provinces can have a chance to attend in person.

Sino-Africa Cooperation in Higher Education

> 17.9 Enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the sustainable development goals, including through

North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation

(UN Sustainable Development Goals – Partnerships

for the Goals)

The cooperation in Higher Education between China and Africa started as early as 1956 when the newly established People's Republic of China initiated diplomatic ties with Egypt which led to the exchange of eight students and teachers between the two countries (Gu, 2017). The exchange of students has continued to grow over the years, with a rapid increase in the number of African students in China in the 21st century (Gu, 2017). According to China's Ministry of Education (MOE) (2017), between 2005 and 2015, African student numbers in China rose from 2,757 to 49,792, a 35% average annual increase (see Figure 1 below). This dramatic growth can only be explained with the related understanding of Chinese government policies and education strategies, such as the Forum on China and Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the 20 + 20 cooperation plan by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China.

Figure 1: Growth rate of African student enrolments in Chinese Universities

Growth Rate of African Student Enrollments in China

Between 2005 and 2015, the number of African students in China rose from

2,757 to **49,792**

2005   **2,757**
Students

2015   **49,792**
Students
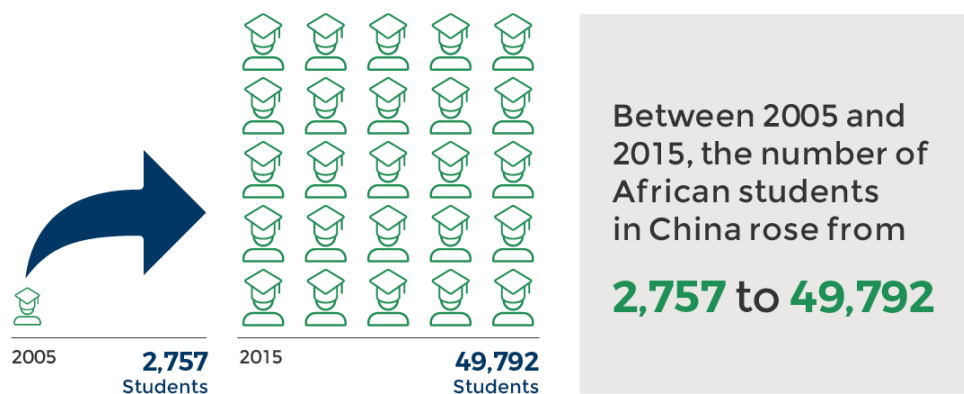
Source: Chinese Ministry of Education cited in Gu (2017)

The establishment of the Forum on China and Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 seeks to consolidate the existing relationship between China and the African continent to face the emerging global challenges (Ojo, 2016). Higher Education is one of the main focal points for the FOCAC and several initiatives have been implemented (https://www.focac.org/eng). For instance, between 2010 and 2014, the Chinese Government provided 33,866 scholarships to African students. In 2012, FOCAC rolled out the African Talents Programme which sought to train 30,000 African professionals in China between 2013 and 2015 and a total of 18,000 students were given Chinese Government scholarships. In 2015, at the 6th FOCAC ministerial conference in Johannesburg, Chinese President Xi Jinping provided additional 30,000 scholarships for African students and 2000 postgraduate and doctoral slots at top Chinese institutions including visits to China for 200 African scholars and 500 African youths. In the same vein, in 2018, at the 7th FOCAC ministerial conference in Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced plans to further increase aid to African students with an additional 50,000 scholarships and 50,000 training opportunities for seminars and workshops in many disciplines. At the same conference, China pledged to train 1000 high-calibre Africans and to continue to support the development of the existing Confucius Institutes and classrooms in Africa. The Chinese Universities are continuing to increase the number of scholarships for African students, for instance, in 2016, eight Chinese universities agreed to reserve places for 1000 students from Ghana every year.

At the same time, in 2009, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China launched the 20 + 20 cooperation plan which involves the establishment of one-to-one partnerships between 20 Chinese and 20 African higher education institutions. Currently, the programme has established partnerships in seventeen African countries and some Chinese Universities participating in the programme are Peking University, East China Normal University and Jilin University (Gu,

2017). The Sino-Africa relations have seen the provision of some African studies at some Chinese Universities including Peking University's Centre for African Studies, Zhejiang Normal University Centre for African Education Studies, and Tianjin University of Technology and Education Centre for African vocational education studies (Gu, 2017).

In an effort to internationalise higher education, between 2010 and 2020, the Chinese government set out to recruit 500,000 international students with 150,000 of them enrolled on degree programmes (Gu, 2017). According to the MOE, by 2015, significant progress was made with the country hosting 397,635 international students and 12.5% of these were African students. To demonstrate China's commitment to higher education exchange with Africa, numbers of African students are continuing to increase annually. One of the authors of this article worked at a Chinese University in the Zhejiang Province between 2018 and 2019 and each time he visited Zhejiang Sci-Tech University, he met new African students from different countries including Zimbabwe, Malawi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Benin, Liberia, Zambia, Burundi, Sudan and South Africa. The International Office in the Zhejiang Sci-Tech University confirmed that in 2018/2019 academic year the university had enrolled a total of 1257 international students and 315 of these were from African countries. Most of the students are doing undergraduate studies while some of them are enrolled on postgraduate courses including Master's and PhD programmes. For the students enrolled on undergraduate programmes, they use Chinese language as the medium of instruction, hence, they must learn Chinese prior to embarking on the degree programmes. At a recent international forum of higher education organised by China's Association of Higher Education, speakers from different Chinese Universities shared details about increasing numbers of African students enrolled in their universities and this includes some of China's top Universities such as Peking University, Tsinghua University and Zhejiang University that are recognised globally.

There are many tangible achievements in higher education exchange between China and Africa. Gu (2017) provides a summary of some of the key achievements of the Sino-Africa relations in the field of Higher Education:

- The FOCAC supports academic exchanges, between 2009 and 2015, 34,500 scholarships were awarded

- Through the UNESCO Trust Fund, China has promised US$2 million to support development programmes in Africa (mainly higher education)

- The Chinese government dedicated US$40 million to build Africa's largest University Library in Tanzania

- China has established 46 Confucius Institutes in 32 African countries. They provide language and cultural training to over 36,000 Africans and have offered 951 scholarships

- The 20 + 20 Cooperation plan developed by China's MOE has established partnerships between 20 Chinese and 20 African Universities in 17 African countries

Discussion

Based upon the findings, it is evident that political, technological, economic and cultural factors contributed to the development of ODL in China. Government initiatives led to the establishment of distance learning in China, and education policies play a significant role in the direction of its development, for instance, the central education authority decide whether or not RTVU can enroll immediate school leavers (Wei, 2010). Economic factors, such as the adoption of a socialist market economy policy for promoting China's economic development led to many employers' unwillingness to release adult workers from their work to study at RTVUs (Wei,

2010). Technology and infrastructure also need crucial consideration for the development and implementation of ODL. The influential role of technology has been evident in the change of Chinese ODL delivery mode from watching television programmes in the classrooms to teleconferencing and interactive instant messaging in order to ensure the enhancement of student experience (Wei, 2010). Unwin et al. (2010) pointed out the infrastructural constraints for developing ODL in Africa and the irony of increasing inequalities among learners when only the universities with the best infrastructures in Africa can benefit from the effective use of technology. This is opposite to the underpinning ideas of educational democracy, equity and egalitarianism for ODL (Wei, 2010). With the development of technologies, the provision of ODL in many countries today has been made easier. However, some lessons can be drawn from the model adopted by China in the past when many people had limited access to resources that distance learning is not 'one-size-fit-all', alternative delivery modes need to be developed considering the local contextual reality in order to cope with the restriction of technology and accommodate the needs of learners.

ODL for Chinese university teachers' training has many benefits, such as expanding the knowledge about teaching and learning which leads to improvement of practice, and enhanced student experience. University teachers have the opportunity for networking and learning from some of the best practitioners. Introducing an international dimension in the courses by engaging some speakers from abroad would help to diversify the experience and introduce new ideas that can improve the quality of courses. At the moment, as there is limited information about this ODL programme, it is difficult to evaluate what is working well and what needs improving. It is unclear whether there is any similar ODL programme for university teacher training in Africa. Unwin et al. (2010) pointed out the lack of training and practical experience in the use and implementation of e-learning in Africa after surveying 358 respondents across

25 African countries. The ODL for academic professional development is potentially an area that can be explored further by the Chinese and African Universities to strengthen collaboration, facilitate knowledge transfer and exchange of ideas to enhance teaching and learning practices. Professionals from Chinese Universities can co-design some online courses with their counterparts in African Universities that can contribute to professional development and enrich students' learning experiences.

The relationship between China and Africa is traceable to as early as the 15th Century when Chinese merchants arrived at the continent's eastern coast (Besada and O'Bright, 2016). In the 21st century, many trade agreements have been signed between China and Africa, such as higher education, infrastructural development, technology transfer, institutional building and job creation. The trade between China and Africa increased ten times between 2001 and 2010 compared to the eightfold increase in China's trade with the rest of the world (Wasserman, 2012). By the end of 2013, China's trade with Africa was over US$200 billion (Moyo, 2014; Rotberg, 2014). In addition, between 2000 and 2011, over 50% of China's total foreign aid allocation was given to African countries (Brautigam, 2011). Reflecting on China-Africa relations, Raine (2009, p. 14) stated that, "China, as the world's largest developing country is posited as a natural ally of Africa, the world's largest development continent". Both China and Africa need each other for their own development agendas (Akpor et al., 2013). The establishment of the Forum on China and Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 provide China with an opportunity to establish robust economic, political and social relations with the African continent as a regional partner within the international cooperation framework (Ojo, 2016). Despite the growing economic relations between China and Africa, some critics consider that the active engagement of China in Africa is tantamount to neo-colonialism (Bbaala, 2015) and asymmetrical (Tull, 2006). We concur with Kumpe and Chen's (2014) view that it is essential

for the relationship between China and Africa to be founded on mutual benefit if a long-term strategic partnership is to be achieved.

As Sino-Africa relations are continuing to grow in strength, one of the key areas that characterise the Sino-Africa relations is the investment in Higher Education. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a significantly important role in ensuring the adequate preparation of individuals who can contribute actively to their communities and societies. China and Africa are both fast growing economies which rely on highly skilled workforce for sustainable development. Both China and Africa understand the pivotal role that education plays in "fostering growth, reducing poverty and boosting shared prosperity" (World Bank, 2017). Despite the rapidly increasing numbers of African students coming to China, the exchange in Higher Education between China and Africa is mainly 'one-way' (Gu, 2017). The 'one-way' model needs to be reconsidered and reflected on and potentially seeking a 'two-way' dialogue should be prioritised where China is not only offering educational opportunities to African students but should also benefit from Africa's rich history and cultural heritage. Taking into account the increase in the number of Africans immigrating into China and Chinese immigrating into Africa, there are about 500000 Africans living in China and up to a million Chinese living in Africa (Besada and O'Bright, 2016). It is crucial for both Chinese and African people to be aware of the similarities and differences across cultures and develop a mutual understanding. Opportunities in ODL, such as building relevant courses with inputs from African scholars would help the Chinese to learn and understand more about Africa, thus enhancing Sino-African relationship via mutual understanding. China has been establishing many Confucius Institutes in Africa and a few Chinese universities (e.g. Peking University) have opened centres of African studies. There is much scope on cultural exchange. It is also time for Chinese and African universities to establish collaborative research projects to facilitate

knowledge transfer and sharing of good practices within the Sino-Africa cooperation in higher education framework.

Reflections and Future Research

Much research and discussion on Sino-Africa relationship has been focused on the political and economic dimensions (Tull, 2006; Ojo, 2016). We did not intend to engage with the analysis of the economic relations between China and Africa, instead, our intention has been to explore the Sino-Africa cooperation in Higher Education, an area that we understand has not yet been sufficiently brought to light.

This paper provides a glimpse of the ODL development in China and Sino-Africa cooperation in Higher Education based upon secondary research and an African scholar's six months' consultancy work in Academic Development Training in Chinese universities between 2018 and 2019. It is evident that the concept of ODL emanated from the western countries and was copied, adapted and continues to experience transformation in line with the evolving characteristics of China (Wei, 2010). Looking at the development of ODL in Chinese context, it can be gleaned that with determination and a clear sense of purpose, it is possible to copy and adapt approaches from the West to suit local contexts.

There are many achievements in higher education exchange between China and Africa. Sino-Africa cooperation in Higher Education needs to be understood within a wider picture of Sino-Africa relationship, taking into account the political, economic, social and technological factors. In higher education, instead of being at the receiver end of scholarships and infrastructural developments provided by China, Africa has its own rich history, culture and knowledge

systems which could contribute to a better understanding between different cultures. ODL is one of the many areas through which African universities can strengthen their relationships with their Chinese counterparts and contribute to a more sustainable Sino-Africa relationship. Furthermore, instead of treating Africa as a homogenous entity, African countries have diverse culture and histories and its heterogeneity needs further understanding when building educational collaborations.

There are many questions that are still waiting to be answered, for instance, how many ODL courses are on African studies (such as African cultural, language, history, geography and tourism) are available in Chinese? How many ODL courses available in Africa are about Chinese related topics, such as Chinese language, cultural, history, and economy? Is there much awareness of Chinese MOOCs in Africa? How many African students are enrolled and studying through the Chinese MOOCs? How many African Universities are developing their own MOOCs? Some MOOCs are built by Chinese and English scholars in both languages (www.xuetangx.com), however, we do not have the information on whether there are any MOOCs designed through the collaboration of Chinese and African scholars.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals – Quality Education 4.7 states that:

> By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Bearing in mind the UN aspirations stated above, both Africa, the world's largest development continent, and China, the world's largest developing country, have important roles to play and much scope to work together for the UN sustainable development goals.

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Shape up or Shape out: The Case of Lecturers Unfit for the Modern Classroom
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