

Research on China's Higher Education Delivery Offshore in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract

Offshore education, as an effective way to enhance the international flow of education service and an efficient platform for the higher education interconnection and knowledge sharing all around the world, is a significant part of the “opening-up” strategy of education made by China’s Ministry of Education. However, Chinese universities and colleges which plan to run school offshore are currently facing challenges such as the great changes of global governance, the spread of Covid-19 pandemic, the changes in domestic laws and policies and the greater participation of vocational colleges. This should be attached more importance by researchers and policy makers in order to find an innovative and appropriate mode of international cooperation and exchange in the post-pandemic era. Based on the analysis of definitions of higher education delivery offshore and the theoretical and practical causes of the challenges, Chinese universities should clarify the orientation and direction, attach importance to the development of vocational schools offshore, promote overseas schools to become offshore platform for innovation and international exchange, and enhance the international competitiveness of oversea schools by full advantages of government, universities, enterprises and industry organizations.

Keywords: offshore education, post-pandemic era, higher education delivery, vocational colleges

1. Introduction

Chinese government, universities and society attach great importance to offshore higher education which can be seen as a significant part of the new “opening-up” strategy of education in the opinion piece announced by China’s Ministry of Education (MoE) and other ministries together in June 2020. Offshore education or running schools offshore is an inevitable product of the development of higher education internationalization in a certain stage, and an important way for the international flow of education services. The quantity and quality of overseas schools have become important indicators for evaluating the international development of universities and colleges from different countries. Chinese universities and colleges have gone through the process of sending students abroad, overseas promotion of Chinese language and culture, and introduction of higher education model to the “Belt and Road” regions and countries (Cai, 2021). Chinese central government encourages social forces to participate in overseas education, steadily promote overseas education, implement the ‘Belt and Road’ education action, and promote education cooperation among countries along the “Belt and Road”. Chinese universities actively responded to this call by running schools offshore, especially in the “Belt and Road” region.

Chinese universities have achieved good accomplishment in overseas education with 128 overseas educational institutions or projects, including 25 independently organized by colleges and universities after cancellation of administrative approvals by Chinese government in 2015, in 48 countries in Asia, Europe, Americas and Oceania until September 2019 (Chen, 2022). However, the global spread of the Covid-19 pandemic under the background of the anti-globalization trend, coupled with the accompanying global economic recession and the increasing challenges to international rules have caused significant and fundamental changes to the internationalization process of higher education all around the world. (Qin & Zhu, 2020)

The following questions are raised under the above background. First, how do we understand the definitions of higher education delivery offshore which is the core research concept? Are there any differences among different countries? Second, what kind of challenges are Chinese universities and colleges facing when great changes are caused by the Covid-19 pandemic? Third, what kind of countermeasures can Chinese government, universities and

colleges adopt in order to deal with the challenges and satisfy the needs of fast development in this field? The following parts of this article are designed to answer these questions.

2. Definitions of Higher Education Delivery Offshore

2.1 Definitions from English Literature

There are different definitions related to this research topic such as cross-border education, transnational education, offshore education, borderless education (Knight, 2005). The concept used in this article is more consistent with offshore education. Offshore education mainly includes joint schools with local partners and overseas branch schools which follow the local degree awarding rules. The research data in the English literature mainly comes from the United States Cross-Border Education Research Group (C-BERT) and The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE).

Local partners offer education service including courses, library, computers and other support services in Joint schools (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2006). The joint school deals with legal compliance and administrative procedures with the support from local partners where the school is located (Woodhouse, 2011). At present, it is more common for students to enroll in some courses of local partners to achieve credits, and then transfer to home universities to complete their studies and obtain degrees. According to the definition of OBHE, an overseas branch school is an entity that is wholly or partly owned by a foreign educator, operates in the name of a foreign education provider, provides complete academic courses on site, and awards degrees from a foreign education provider (Lien & Keithley, 2020). Overseas branch school has three necessary features: first, the education facility is owned, at least in part, by a foreign institution; second, it operates under the name of the foreign institution; third, students receive face-to-face instruction to achieve a qualification bearing the name of the foreign institution (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). In 1955, the establishment of the Johns Hopkins University Advanced Institute of International Studies in Italy marked the emergence of overseas branch school of higher education institutions in a global sense (Liu & Zhang, 2020).

2.2 Definitions from Chinese Literature

Chinese government, universities, colleges and researchers always call this as Running Schools Offshore which can be seen in the legal documents, administrative files and research papers. Researchers in China studies this topic mainly from the aspects of the entity running the school offshore, the operation form, the students enrolled, and the degree awarding, etc. Chinese Association of Higher Education published the Guideline for Running School Offshore by Colleges and Universities in September 2019 which is the first and latest guidance made by industry association for Chinese universities. According to the guidance and the Chinese research literature, Running Schools Offshore is defined as a specific type of higher education service provided by Chinese universities independently or cooperating with overseas organizations such as universities, corporations or social entities. Local citizens where the school is located can be enrolled, study in overseas branch school, joint education entity, joint education program or course, and achieve the degree, diploma, or certificate when they complete the study and fulfill the requirements (Chen, 2020; Jin, 2017; Jiang & Xia, 2019). The concept used in this article follows this definition since the research is based on the activities of Chinese universities.

Guangzhou College of Traditional Chinese Medicine operated a acupuncture and moxibustion training course in Japan with Japanese College of Traditional Chinese Medicine in 1983. This is considered to be China's first case of Running Schools Offshore (Chen, 2020). The Japanese college is responsible for enrollment and management, and the Chinese college sent teachers to Japan for in-person instruction and assessment (Wang, 2009).

2.3 Comparison and Analysis

The definitions are affected by local laws, policies, and education systems in different countries and regions. Meanwhile, offshore education itself is a leading innovation of education service at the forefront of global education activities that are constantly evolving and influencing each other. Therefore, the definition of Higher Education Delivery Offshore, even the relatively broader concept adopted by Chinese literature as running schools offshore, cannot cover all the latest education forms and educational activities. For instance, offshore schools are recruiting students from all countries including the home country rather than only enrolling students from the city, state, province or country where the school is located. The definition has to be broadened due to such kind of changes together with the development of online education fastened by Covid-19 pandemic. This has caused new challenges for recruitment, teaching, management, certificate issuing, and authority supervision.

3. Challenges in the Post-Pandemic Era

China has been improving international trade since its participation to WTO in December 2001 and increasing its influence on the global market with its rapid economic growth. In the past year, lots of Chinese students have been

going abroad for study and China is still the largest source of international students studying in the US in 2021 (Vlasova, 2021). Another trend cannot be ignored that China is exporting its education service in the international trade. Shanghai Jiao Tong University cooperated with Singapore's Huaxia Management School in 1993 to establish an MBA teaching site in Singapore. In 2002, it cooperated with Singapore's Nanyang Technological University to establish the Shanghai Jiao Tong University Singapore Graduate School in Singapore, which is China's first overseas graduate school. The Bangkok International School of Jinan University, established by Jinan University in Bangkok, Thailand in 2003, is the first full-time undergraduate school established overseas by Chinese university (Lin & Liu, 2008). Since then, Chinese universities started to run more schools offshore from neighboring countries to western developed countries. Tsinghua University Global Innovation School jointly established by Tsinghua University, University of Washington, and Microsoft in 2015 is the first campus and comprehensive education and research platform established by a Chinese university in the United States (Zhang, 2015).

3.1 The Changing Global Governance System

We are experiencing great changes unseen in a century with complicated political and economic situation. On the one hand, the economic power of emerging markets such as China is constantly increasing. They are eager to play a more important role in global affairs, participate in the design and formulation of international rules and take more responsibilities in the global governance system. On the other hand, developed countries such as the USA argue that the existing global governance system represented by WTO fails to protect their interests and strongly demand the reform of WTO and other global governance mechanisms. The USA has continuously blamed the WTO Appellate Body for overreaching the text of the Dispute Settlement of Understanding (DSU) and blocked the appointment of new Appellate Body members (Kuijper, 2017). Cross-border education service trade and resource exchanges have inevitably been affected by these changes.

Different to the open and positive attitude towards Chinese universities, colleges and scholars, some governments hold ambiguous attitude to offshore education service offered by Chinese universities or colleges which can be seen in the declaration made by Pompeo about the Confucius School in 2020. Visa restrictions and other limitations brought new problems to Chinese universities or colleges which would like to run schools offshore such as compliance operation and teachers' recruitment.

3.2 The global spread of the Covid-19 pandemic

The most intuitive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is that the flow of people is blocked and the development of onsite education is restricted, which bring overseas schools, projects and institutions of Chinese universities and colleges with practical problems such as insufficient student resources and inability to carry out normal educational activities. According to a survey made by the International Association of Universities (IAU), 64% of colleges and universities report that their global partnerships have been severely affected by the epidemic; 51% of colleges and universities believe that the epidemic has weakened their global cooperation (Xu & Kan, 2021).

The practical problems have exacerbated the funding problem of offshore schools. The lack of funds for running schools may fundamentally affect the survival of offshore schools. The further and core impact of Covid-19 pandemic is that it hurts the foundation of mutual trust. International education exchanges are born to be an important way to alleviate conflicts and misunderstandings caused by differences. However, the effect on mutual trust make adverse impact on the cooperation between Chinese and foreign universities and will have a profound and long-term impact on the future development and promotion of offshore education.

3.3 Changes of Chinese Laws and Policies

The administrative system of offshore higher education delivered by Chinese universities and colleges has been developed from administrative approval to independent development and then to industry guidance (Table 1). In 2002, the "Interim Measures for the Administration of Offshore Schools of Higher Education Institutions" (Order No. 15 of the Ministry of Education in 2002) states that the offshore education of colleges and universities that implement undergraduate education or above should be subject to the approval of the MoE, and the implementation of junior college education or non-academic higher education should be approved by the MoE. The Chinese universities and colleges have to submit application for approval first to the local government and then to the MoE. In November 2015, the "Decision of the Ministry of Education on Abolishing and Amending Some Regulations" (Order No. 38 of the Ministry of Education in 2015) abolished this administrative order, and then the delivery of higher education offshore experienced a long term of independent development. However, the absence of management rules has also brought about problems such as quality supervision and organizational management (Yan, 2016; Wang, 2018).

Table 1. Laws and administrative orders related to offshore higher education

Name of the laws, regulations, and administrative orders	Effective Date	Responsible Authority
The education law of the People's Republic of China	1995 Revised in 2009, 2015, 2021	The National People's Congress (NPC)
Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China	1998 Revised in 2015, 2018	NPC
Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China	1996 Revised in 2021	NPC
Interim Measures for the Administration of Offshore Schools of Higher Education Institutions	2002-2015	Ministry of Education, P.R.C.
Decision of the Ministry of Education on Abolishing and Amending Some Regulations	2015	Ministry of Education, P.R.C.

In September 2019, under the guidance of the Ministry of Education, China Association of Higher Education issued the Guidelines for Running Schools Abroad for Higher Education Institutions (Trial) (2019 Edition), providing guidance about feasibility analysis, preparation and construction, teaching, organization and management. It recommended that universities and colleges report to the education administrative department of the local Chinese government before they deliver offshore higher education. The Covid-19 pandemic broke out half a year after the publication of this guidance. The industry guidance's actual effect remains to be tested in practice.

3.4 Changes of the Main Entity Delivering Education Service Offshore

Higher education is mainly provided by universities, especially research universities and vocational colleges in China. The recent years see the trend to encourage more vocational colleges to deliver education service offshore. Research universities were the main entities delivering higher education abroad in the early stage when China began to have mutual education exchanges with other countries. The first batch of overseas branch campuses were run by research universities, such as the Singapore Graduate School of Shanghai Jiaotong University established in 2002, and the Soochow University of Laos established in 2011 (Kinser & Lane, 2020).

In recent years, the strong demand for high-quality vocational education in developing countries which have long-term relationship with China in international trade has provided new opportunities for Chinese vocational colleges to run schools overseas, and the number of Chinese vocational colleges delivering education overseas has increased rapidly. Due to the statistics provided by the authority, 43 vocational colleges in China have set up 48 overseas branches at the end of 2019 (Zhang & Gan, 2020). These overseas branch campuses were mainly established after 2012, and the number of establishments has been increasing year by year. In 2019, It was reported that Chinese vocational colleges established 15 overseas branch campuses in Thailand, Cambodia, Pakistan and other countries cooperating with China under the Belt and Road initiative, mainly providing vocational education and training (VET) to local people and employees of Chinese enterprises there. The Chinese government also strongly encourages vocational colleges to set up offshore VET brand such as Luban Workshop delivering VET abroad (Xi, 2021).

Although China is making progresses in vocational colleges' running school abroad, there is a big gap between the supply and the demand, such as the current international vision and language skills of the teachers and management teams of Chinese vocational colleges and the needs of students learning in these schools.

4. Countermeasures of China's Delivery of Higher Education Offshore in the Post-Pandemic Era

4.1 Clarifying the Orientation and Direction of Delivery of Higher Education Offshore

Facing the change and reform of the global governance system, Chinese Universities and Colleges should enhance their capabilities to make strategic planning and clarify the orientation and direction under the national laws and policies following the development trend to achieve more support from the government. Meanwhile, they must adhere to local laws, regulations and customs, implement the required procedures such as registration and tax payment, respond to all the challenges legally and reasonably and display a good image.

The offshore education provider should combine the advantageous majors of Chinese universities and colleges with the actual local needs rather than teaching Chinese only, attach more importance to market research, and identify their unique advantages in order to truly integrate into the local community. More cultural activities and volunteer services can be offered since they are popular with local communities.

4.2 Promoting the Transformation of Overseas Education from an Emergency State to a New Normal State, and Developing Its Unique Role in International Exchanges and Cooperation

The global spread of COVID-19 pandemic in the past years challenged the original educational model, teaching method, and teaching medium. While affecting the normal development of educational activities, it has also brought about the need and impetus for innovation. MOOCs and online teaching platforms have developed rapidly, and therefore distance education has been enhanced from an auxiliary teaching method to a main teaching method. The overseas delivery of higher education is also affected by the local pandemic prevention and control policies and measures. After a short suspension of classes, the offshore schools have begun to enter an emergency state of remote management, teaching, online activities, and exchanges. Distance education provides new ideas and innovative methods for higher education, and will play a more important role in higher education (Zhong & Nan, 2021). With the gradual control of the pandemic and the global use of vaccines, overseas schools are moving from the emergency state of online teaching to the integration of online and offline teaching in the post-epidemic period to develop internationalization at home as a new model (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

This has not only become a channel and opportunity for overseas schools to seek new breakthroughs, but also an important means to deal with the risks of international cooperation and exchanges brought about by the crisis of trust. Overseas schools can use their advantages in two countries as a platform for mutual international cooperation and exchanges to enhance trust and avoid unnecessary cost.

4.3 Clarifying the Relationship Between Different Shareholders Including Government, Universities, Enterprises, Industry Associations and Other Subjects

The shareholders of higher education delivery offshore include the government, universities, enterprises, industry associations, and other subjects. They are deeply involved in the whole process of overseas education and should give full play to their respective advantages.

With the role of policy making, guidance, supervision, and management, the government should strengthen the planning guidance and institutional standardization construction for running schools overseas, improve the supervision, and evaluation of the performance of offshore higher education delivery. Universities and Colleges should take the initiative to respond to the new situation in the post-pandemic era, sort out their own advantages, strengthen enrollment publicity, improve teaching methods and the quality monitoring of teaching process, and form a complete teaching evaluation, feedback and improvement mechanism in order to improve the performance and effectiveness.

Enterprises should actively participate in the process of running schools overseas and promote the integration of schools and enterprises. They are not only responsible to provide internships and employment opportunities for overseas schools, but also to help the universities and colleges to establish practical goals of running offshore schools considering about the local needs and the support they can give. Industry associations can help universities and colleges with practical and useful industry guidance and intellectual support to actively respond to the new challenges brought about by Covid-19 pandemic, different requirements from local governments, and changes in the international political and economic situation.

4.4 Adapting Curriculum to International Standards and Enhancing the Competitiveness of VET Delivered Offshore

Chinese vocational colleges should give full play to their professional and technical advantages, combine with the actual local needs, and continue to teach Chinese language and organize cultural activities. They should pay more attention to the construction of brand recognized by international students, increase the proportion of professional courses, and promote their supply to meet the demands. In line with international standards, Chinese vocational colleges should actively apply for various international certifications, enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of overseas schools, strive for more and better students, and provide more and better employment opportunities for them. All the effort is made to form well-recognized brand, and enhance the overseas reputation of Chinese education.

5. Conclusion

Offshore higher education is attached great importance because of its irreplaceable role in international education exchange and cooperation and even the international partnership between countries. The development of offshore higher education can be a critical part of cooperation between countries and regions as a special form of international trade involving exchange of people, service and culture. Governments make difference policies, guideline, laws and regulations to improve their offshore higher education which is sometimes seen as an export of culture and idea. Therefore, offshore higher education is facing challenges brought by changes of global

governance system, global spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, changes of Chinese laws and policies and changes of the main entity delivering education service offshore. The countermeasures China might take to deal with these challenges include clarifying the orientation and direction of delivery of higher education offshore, promoting the transformation of overseas education from an emergency state to a new normal state and developing its unique role in international exchanges and cooperation, clarifying the relationship between different shareholders including government, universities, enterprises, industry associations and other subjects, and adapting curriculum to international standards and enhancing the competitiveness of VET delivered offshore. Considering about the new global situation in the post-pandemic era and the existing demands in this area, the above measures are also useful for other countries delivering higher education offshore.

6. Future Research

This article mainly focused on the qualitative analysis of higher education delivery offshore by Chinese universities and colleges in order to identify the factors, mechanisms and countermeasures in the post-pandemic era due to the limitation and restriction of data collection. The quantitative research method is strongly recommended and more efforts should be made in collecting meaningful and reliable data in the follow-up research.

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