



Reasons Why Students attend Open University in China

Huiping DING, & Robert M. BOODY
University of Northern Iowa, USA
mry_ding@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT :

Although much has been written on the distance education system as a whole in China, little attention has been given to the individual learners, including why they chose to attend. In the past it was not seen as important for Chinese institutions to worry about student perspectives, as there was little flexibility in institutional decision-making. But as more options open up for students, institutions may need to become more entrepreneurial to survive, and thus need to address students' concerns to become more desirable to them. This study was designed to explore student motivations and other perceptions related to attending distance higher education in China. The data reported in this qualitative case study were collected at a Radio and Television University located in Northern China. The following research questions were addressed: (a) What are students' perceptions of their status as students? (b) What is the students' perceived value of the learning achieved via this radio and television university? (c) What are students' reasons for enrolling in this university? (d) What factors influence students' perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved? and (e) What recommendations do students have about changing the current perceptions of distance learning? Data were collected from multiple sources using document review, observation, and interview.

1. INTRODUCTION :

China is a large country with the largest population, recently estimated at more than 1.3 billion (China, 2010) and a correspondingly large need for higher education. Making the need for higher education even greater is the ongoing shift from a planned economic system to a market-oriented economic system. This process has profoundly affected educational development and the education system as a whole. For example, such change has created a vast need for well-trained employees (Wu & Ye, 1997). According to predictions by the State Education Commission, from 1983 until 2000, approximately 40 million professional personnel should have been educated and trained to meet the needs of economic and

social development (Zhou, 1990, as cited in Ding, 1995). However, even in 1994, there were resources for only 4.7% of the secondary school graduates to progress to higher education. Only 1.6 % of the total population has a higher education background, much lower than the 7.4 % average of other countries with a medium level of human development, and even well below the 2.5% average of the low human development countries (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). Although the gap between the desire to pursue higher education and accessibility to such programs has been reduced with the expansion of universities and colleges, demand is still high. The needs of China are still far beyond the capacity of the available conventional universities and colleges in China to address.

Given that China contains a fifth of the world's population in the world's third largest country, distance education appears to be a viable solution. To help meet the demand and to educate a highly trained, specialized work force, China has established alternate forms of higher education such as spare-time, part-time, and radio and television universities. The higher education system in China accordingly now consists of two sectors: the formal education sector and the non-formal sector. The main differences between these two sectors are the target group and admission requirements. In addition to the formal higher education offered at traditional universities and colleges targeting senior high school graduates, there are also four major distance education programs at the university level for different groups of learners: (a) Higher Correspondence Education, (b) Radio Broadcasting and Television Universities, (c) Satellite Television Teacher Training, and (d) State-administered Examinations of Higher Education for Independent Study (Ding, 1994). The four programs have different admission requirements.

Higher Correspondence Education and Satellite Television Teacher Training programs admit only in-service adults who have passed the national college entrance examinations held by the State Education Commission for adult higher education. In radio broadcasting and television universities, there are both degree and non-degree programs. For degree programs, official admission is granted to adults and secondary school graduates who have met the score requirements for admission. The secondary school graduates are those who took the national college entrance examinations for traditional universities and colleges, failed in meeting their required score criteria for entrance, but scored well enough to be admitted into radio broadcasting and television universities. The adults need to pass the national entrance examinations for adult higher education to be admitted. For the State-administered Examinations of Higher Education for Independent Study program, there are no restrictions by age, educational

level, examination scores, or duration of learning. In essence, radio broadcasting and television universities are designed for everybody who wants to continue learning at a post-secondary level.

Although much has been written on the distance education system as a whole in China, little attention has been paid to the individual learners and (a) their participation, (b) perceptions of their status as students in distance education, and (c) factors influencing their perceptions. Without a solid understanding of students in any educational institution, education cannot fulfill its mission. Distance education is no exception. In light of this need and the fact that a large number of students enroll in distance higher education programs in China, it seemed important to undertake a study on what influences students in their decisions to participate in distance education programs and what they perceive about their status as students and the value of the learning achieved through distance education. In the past it was not considered important for any Chinese institution to worry about student perceptions and decisions, as all major institutional decisions were made centrally by the government. But as more options open up for students, institutions of higher education in China may need to become more entrepreneurial to survive, and thus find it beneficial to improve their services by addressing student concerns and needs.

The following research questions were addressed in this study ;

1. What are students' perceptions of their status as students ?
2. What is students' perceived value of the learning achieved via this radio and television university ?
3. What are students' reasons for enrolling in this university?
4. What factors influence students' perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved?
5. What recommendations do students have about changing the current perceptions of distance learning ?

2. METHODS :

The research approach used in this study was qualitative case study. A key strength of the case study method involves using multiple sources and techniques in the data gathering process (Yin, 2009). Data were collected through document review, observation, and interview in two phases, moving from more open-ended data collection to more focused and selective data collection. A native of Northern China who attended a traditional university in China and then worked as an instructor in English both at a traditional university and non-traditional university, the first author collected the data in China.

Phase one included the majority of the fieldwork. Data collection for this phase included observations/field notes collected in the social situation (Spradley, 1980), student profiles, university newsletters, journals, and interviews / informal conversations with the participants and researcher's journal. During this phase, the observations were broad descriptive observations that attempted to get an overview of the social situation and what goes on there (Spradley). The interviews were conducted to validate the initial data from the observations, documents and the researcher's journal.

In the initial entry stage, I familiarized myself with the setting, conducted general observations of the setting and students, and generated questions concerning the study. As a participant observer, I spent several weeks observing students in different places, such as the library, audio-visual reading room, and computer labs for several weeks. To avoid seeming to be an outsider or giving away my presence as an observer, I dressed similarly to the students. Dressed up, when I was on campus, it seemed that I was one of the students or staff members. When I introduced myself to students, after several chats, I immediately built rapport with them and carried on with our conversations. I documented various conversations among students and informal chats between students and myself. My observations and experiences as a participant observer during the initial stages

of data collection were primarily dedicated towards studying the community and daily activities of students in and outside the classrooms. On one hand, the observations and the informal interviews with those students at different grades from different majors provided crucial information for my understanding of the beliefs and values, the community's culture, and modes of teaching and learning within the community; on the other hand, they helped me generate more meaningful questions and gather more in-depth data from the succeeding interviews.

Second, I observed freshman registration at the university and conducted informal interviews with freshmen and their parents to examine how students and their parents behaved on their first day of school, who those students were, how they learned about the university, and their perceptions of the university.

In-depth classroom observations were not conducted as previously planned. Before going to the university, I was granted permission to conduct field observations. However, after I arrived, I was restricted to conducting observations only outside classrooms. If I wanted to conduct any observations inside the classroom, the observations could only be done when it was not the time of teaching or tutoring. Tutors did not feel comfortable with my presence in the classroom. During my stay at the university, I approached the university personnel and the tutors again to request permission to observe student behaviors inside the classrooms when teaching or tutoring was in process. Again, this request was politely denied.

The first series of informal interviews with freshman and their parents were open-ended explorations guided only by the general themes of the study. The formal interviewees with degree students were more structured, guided by the research questions. Interviews allowed participants to share their personal views and experiences and to provide an in-depth account of distance education at the radio and television university. The time and place of the formal interviews was determined by the interviewees. The formal

interviews were conducted between student and the researcher within a period of 30 minutes or so.

The formal interviews and the small group interviews were taped, transcribed, and circulated back to the interviewees as a member check. Data were further reviewed and checked by a former colleague. As the interviews proceeded, interviewees of the formal interview groups recommended that I interview other people who would be able to provide additional information or clarifications. Subsequently, three other interviewees (one academic administrator and two former undergraduate students) agreed to share their views and perceptions in an open-ended, small group interview.

The participants for the in-depth interviews in this study were current degree students within the radio and television university. Purposeful selection was the dominant strategy used to select participants for this study, as it is useful in identifying information-rich cases which can be studied in depth (Patton, 1990). Participants were purposely selected because they were full-time students in a bachelor degree program majoring in law. After completing their two-year college program at the university, they had been promoted to a four-year bachelor degree program. The most important criterion for their promotion to the bachelor degree program was that all of them successfully passed the examinations specially designed for promoting students from two-year college programs to four-year bachelor degree programs. The fifteen students were chosen for the formal interviews specifically because the university personnel granted me the permission to conduct observations of students' daily life and to interview them at any time, thus allowing for the collection of the data needed for this study.

At the beginning of the study, I was concerned that the fifteen students were chosen by the university rather than myself. However, there were good reasons for their selection: (a) all fifteen had extensive experience as distance learners, and (b) they were available during the time of my study. To make sure that the results would not be overly narrowed or skewed by this selection

process, I sought out additional sources of data to broaden and validate my findings. One additional source was the informal interviews described above. I also recruited three additional people to interview formally. As these three were not students, working with them was not controlled by the university. These three, two graduates of the four-year law program and one a university administrator, were interviewed as a group (due to availability).

Phase two included correlating interpretations between the observations and the interviews. During this phase, the growing interpretations were triangulated through crosschecking described immediately above as well as through more focused observations and interviews, as well as member checking. I also read People's Republic of China government documents related to the study and continued to journal.

IRB approval was applied for and received. However, in China, although the period of greatest political chaos - the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976 - took place over thirty years ago, its impact on the relationships among people has caused serious damage and still exerts an impact. Although China has entered a stage of stability, many people still are afraid of revealing their true feelings to others. This is especially true of the older people. To remain ethical in regards to participants, everything possible was done to "protect their physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and privacy" (Spradley, 1980, p.35).

In this exploratory case study, analysis was a process of question discovery. The goal of ongoing analysis was to discover patterns, ideas, explanations and understandings. In this study, I followed what Spradley (1980) suggested in data analysis; that is, I analyzed the field notes after each period of fieldwork in order to know what to look for during the next period of participant observation and interviews. Data collection and data analysis were interwoven, influencing one another. The initial questions were refined by the unfolding patterns of everyday life that became visible through observations,

interviews and initial data analysis.

Codes were developed to serve as categories to organize the data and searched for patterns as part of data analysis. The general interview questions provided some of the initial coding categories; others were developed inductively. To aid analysis, all the data relevant to each research question was grouped for that question whether it originated from observations or interviews. The next task was to review data for every group to get a sense of the major themes of the data. For each group, I looked for major reoccurring activities or behaviors. Then I examined all the entries that had the same code and number and wrote a sentence or two that captured the essence of the information to summarize the data. In this way, I found patterned regularities of the data. The final task was to look for relationships among categories that suggested generalizations.

3. RESULTS :

The findings begin with a description of the university at which the study was carried out. Following this, specific findings are given for each of the five research questions.

The radio and television university chosen for this study is located in northern China. It was founded in 1979 as a distance education institution. This university has modern teaching facilities such as a satellite receiving system, cable TV system, computer network, audio-visual education center, library and well-equipped information center, computer experimental center with networked classrooms, lecture hall with multi-media, audio-visual reading room, and a variety of laboratories. At the time the data was collected, there were 253 hours of courses broadcast on the city radio station, TV special channels, and the cable TV station each week.

The university provides education in 108 specific areas grouped within 17 categories of arts, science and engineering, agriculture, and economic management. There are 53 study centers attached to this university, which forms a systematic network around

the city and employs 1,807 full-time and 161 part-time staff. They carry out the integrated plans and manage academic affairs at the primary level. There are two-year education programs, with bachelor degree course series, secondary school education, and various kinds of non-certificate training. In the 1998-99 academic year, there were over 14,000 students enrolled. Through the end of 1999, about 80,000 students have graduated from the university, and 170,000 students have received various kinds of training and obtained certificates. Course delivery is accomplished through the use of multi-media and audio-visual networks combined with television and radio programs, face-to-face tutorial lessons, videotapes, and correspondence texts prepared by or for the institution.

3.1 What Are Students' Perceptions of Their Status as Students ?

All of the students interviewed, whether freshmen or juniors, perceived themselves as undergraduate students with the same status as those students at traditional universities, although they recognized that others might perceive their status differently. According to the students interviewed, compared to traditional universities at the same level, the radio and television university did not appear to be inferior. In some aspects, the educational community of this university seemed more advanced than that of most traditional universities, such as its facilities and in its utilization of technology in course delivery and student learning. As one student put it, "At the beginning when I learned I was admitted by this radio and television university, I felt good as I was a university student now, not a senior high school student any more. I also took the national exam; I wasn't inferior to anybody else. My one failure didn't mean anything to me." (KN, 19)

Most of the students, however, consciously or unconsciously, experienced mental struggles and changed their perceptions of their status as students at this radio and television university. Before, or even at the beginning of the enrollment,

most of them had felt inferior. For some, even wearing the university badge seemed a torture for them. Gradually, as they moved into the process of adapting themselves to university life and gained learning at the university, they changed their perceptions and became confident in their status as students and the learning achieved at this university. For example, one student noted that after being admitted to this university, she was not really happy, compared with my senior high school classmates. "They were admitted by key national universities, some in this city, and some in Beijing...however such feeling was just temporary. First I didn't really think being a university student at this university as a negative thing. This university has been designed to cultivate well-rounded person. Many factors contributed to my poor performance during the exam. One of the key factors is me... not as diligent as my other classmates who succeeded in the exam. I had to accept the consequences of my own choice... of not studying. However I don't think I would be haunted by such failure all my life. If I do want to succeed, I need to overcome myself, my own weakness." (LV, 28)

3.2 What is the Students' Perceived Value of the Learning Achieved via this Radio and Television University ?

Keegan & Rumble (1982) suggested that the perceived value of learning achieved at a radio and television university could be indicated by (a) the extent to which other educational institutions recognize the studies for credit transfer purposes, (b) the acceptance of the degrees and diplomas awarded as qualifying students to go on to higher-level studies, (c) the recognition of the awards by employers, and (d) the esteem in which the distance teaching institutions and their awards are held in the community at large.

Findings indicated that students were confident that the learning they achieved at this radio and television university was valuable. They believed that they were more well-rounded and more capable compared with students who attended the

traditional higher education institutions, as the examination system at the radio and television university was different from that at traditional higher education institutions. They considered their examination system to be tougher. At the radio and television university, the examination for each course was nationally designed for the students from all the radio and television universities, similar to the national college entrance examinations every year.

In terms of transferability of credits between the radio and television university and regular or traditional universities, it was not possible to transfer credits earned at this university to other universities. In China, it was impossible to transfer credits among universities whether the credits were earned at distance learning programs or traditional universities. This rule applies to all undergraduate students in China. However, after graduation from a four-year degree program at the radio and television university, if students want to pursue higher level studies, such as a Master degree program, the degree from the radio and television university is considered equivalent to that from traditional universities. In other words, all applicants need to take the same exams designed for admission to a Master degree program. If they pass the exams successfully, they will be qualified to be admitted into the program for which they have applied. So, to pursue a higher level education, there is no distinction between the diploma obtained from the radio and television university and that from traditional universities. When we talked about whether the degree or diploma achieved from this radio and television university was recognized by employers, the findings indicated various results. The results are related to the findings from research question one. In this city where the competition for jobs is high, employers in the job market may not perceive the degree from this radio and television university as valuable as those from national key universities. As a result, graduates from the radio and television university may not be able to get jobs that match their learning or to receive the same pay as those graduating from the traditional

universities. Their pay varies depending on the kind of job they are looking for and the offerings from individual employers. However, in rural areas or less developed regions where not many people possess a higher education degree, employers may recognize highly the value of the degree achieved from this radio and television university, as some participants commented; “Well, lower if compared with key national universities, like Nankai University, but I guess, it is at the same level if compared with similar institutions. It has nothing to do with whether it is traditional education or distance education. Not really...In our village, there was only one child who had higher education. Nobody really cared which university he went. (He received his education via a radio and television university). What mattered to the people there was the knowledge he achieved. After graduation, he found a job as a technician in his home town serving farmers in nearby villages and helped them in their daily work. He was recognized and well respected.” (Yu, 22)

“I have never been to a job fair, or even tried to find a job, but I learned from my friends who went there. According to them, there were some differences between our radio and television university and other universities at the same level. The same level, means, a two-year program or four-year program, but not really big. Not treated totally different. What they told me changed my perception of student status here. My friends said, in the job fair, what mattered really was the communication between the candidate and the employer. Actual communication helped the employer understand not just where you obtained your diploma but also your capacity, your knowledge, experience, even the manners, whether you show confidence in yourself. All these matter. All my friends found jobs that match what they learned here.” (MW, 31)

“When we say job market, we need to be aware of the different places, not so general. In big cities, like, ...city, Beijing city, every graduate wishes to stay. So in the job market, supply is more than demand. Therefore, the actual brand of the university

carries more weight to the employers as they have so many to choose from. In small cities or remote areas, demand is larger than supply. In the job market, distance learning university diploma has been recognized and graduates were highly respected. I would do my internship in my hometown, a small city. In our court there, I would be the only one who has received two-year education majoring in law. I felt my learning here at this radio and television university would be recognized and benefit the local court greatly. I am quite positive that I could find a job.” (MS, 36)

In conclusion, whether the learning achieved at this university is perceived as valuable or not depends on how the learning is used. For higher level studies, the learning achieved at this university is perceived as having the same value as that from traditional universities. For employment, it depends on the degree of competition in the job market where the employment is pursued.

3.3 What Are Students' Reasons for Enrolling in this University ?

For all of the students, an insufficient score appeared to be the root of the cause for their choice of the radio and television university to pursue their higher education. As two students noted, “Before the national college entrance exam, I never thought of enrolling at a radio and television university. After the exam, my score was not as high as I had expected. It [the radio and television university] is my last wish or choice in my application form.” (MW, 34)

“After the exam, everybody, my parents and teachers tried to persuade me to repeat and take the exam next year. However I was determined; I felt really exhausted, both mentally and physically, I didn't want to repeat. I had four options at the time: (a) repeat and take the exam next year, (b) 2-year colleges in cities other than this city, (c) 2-year colleges at Tianjin Foreign Language University but no chance of selecting what major I liked, and (d) this university with choice of any program I liked. After weighing pros and cons, I applied for the admission at this university. Besides, here offered many programs that I

liked. My parents were sort of disappointed. However, I didn't think my failure in the national college entrance exam would determine my future." (MN, 27)

For each of the above students, they would have attended a different university if scores had allowed them. They felt helpless at the time of selecting which university to apply for admission. This university was among their selections, but was the last one. The students, no different from most people in the society, didn't highly value the radio and television university in this city.

But for most of the students there were other important reasons why they enrolled. The reasons included the location of the university, confidence in their learning potential, the availability of programs offered, and the support the students received from their parents and friends.

Most of the students, during the interviews, stated that the location of the university was very important to them. They liked to stay in the city and were proud of living and learning in one of the universities in this city. For most students, the location of the university was the most important factor to consider when making decisions to enroll at the radio and television university instead of universities or colleges in other cities. For example, one interviewee (MN, 27) expressed explicitly: "As I'm the only child in my family, I didn't want to leave home. This university is closer to my home. My parents thought it convenient too."

As a matter of fact, there is an important reason behind their pride in the city. China adopted the hukou registration system in the 1950s. The hukou registration system is similar to the permanent residence status (green card) in the United States. People with green cards are free to live or work in any place in the United States. However, in China, the green card only applies locally, not nationally. Thus, the hukou registration system is one of the social control and administrative systems on the basis of household, whose members, either in rural or urban areas, must register themselves at the local police subdivisions as legal permanent residents. Without official permission, they would not be able to move

from the registered areas or to work for a longer period of time in other places. This system is used to restrict people in migrating from rural to urban areas, or from smaller cities or towns to bigger cities. For children, their permanent resident status relies on their mother's status. If the mother is a permanent resident in a big city, her children will be permanent residents in that city as well. To move from rural to urban or from smaller cities or towns to bigger cities signifies an upward social mobility. The common way for this social upward mobility in China is through higher education. When students from rural areas, smaller cities, or towns are admitted into traditional universities in bigger cities after national college entrance exams, their permanent residence record or file would be transferred to the university.

During the period of time when the student is enrolled in the university, the student enjoys the privileges of a permanent resident in that city. After graduation, student permanent resident status may change depending on his or her employment. This city, like other cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, still has in place policies favoring local residents. In other words, the admission scores are much lower for local residents than students from other areas of China. Students would rather choose any university or college in this city than go to other cities to pursue their higher education, except for Beijing or Shanghai where the national key universities are located. If they choose universities or colleges in cities other than Beijing, Shanghai, or this city, it implies a downward mobility and would be really difficult for them to return to their native city to seek employment there.

Almost all of the students identified confidence in themselves as at least an important, if not the major, reason for their enrolling at the radio and television university. In their own words, they were not losers. Failure on the national college entrance examinations did not mean that they were doomed to fail in all future endeavors. They did not want to take the exams again the next year. Some students were fully aware of their future goals before

enrolling. To them, a two-year college program was not sufficient. In today's China, it is vital to have a four-year university degree to succeed, if success is measured by the kind of job a person is capable of getting. Without a four-year degree, it is virtually impossible to find a well-paid and well-respected job. All the interviewees believed that there were alternate routes than traditional universities to achieve a four-year degree, including distance education. Although students kept explaining that they had confidence in their learning and their future, I perceived their experience of failure on the national college entrance exams to still haunt them in their daily life. These students still suffered from what had happened two years before. Now, as university students, nobody was ranking them in their class any more. However, unconsciously, they were comparing themselves as if they were still senior high students. They could not really enjoy the university life or learning per se as did their counterparts who were admitted into traditional universities. The sense of inferiority or unhappiness was not just temporary. In order to prove themselves competent they had to spend much more time preparing. They did this not because they enjoyed learning, but because they felt they could not afford another failure. They worked hard to ensure they have got everything under control by going the extra mile in preparing for the exams, gaining experiences at court, and taking courses at other universities in their spare time or during summer holidays.

For some students, the availability of the programs offered was another factor that influenced their decision to enroll. To them, in comparison with the programs offered at some traditional universities, programs at this university were more attractive, more job-oriented, more satisfying, and more challenging.

Support from parents, even from friends or peers, appeared to have had a positive influence on several students who were being interviewed. Although most of the parents seemed disappointed with their children's performance on the national college entrance exams, they showed their

support in a variety of ways once students made their decision to enroll at the radio and television university, such as obtaining more information about the university or taking a tour with the students.

Course delivery at this university also appeared to have played a part in helping students make their decisions at the time. Technology fascinated most of the students. The idea of having some level of flexibility, independence, and control over their learning attracted the students.

3.4 What Factors influence Students' Perceptions of their Status as Students and the Learning Achieved ?

There are many factors that influenced, either positively or negatively, students' perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved at this university. They included Chinese beliefs and values towards the role of education, teacher practices, parents, and the job market.

Deep-rooted beliefs and values Chinese people have been holding for centuries have played a significant part in influencing the perceptions of people, especially parents, hence influencing students. In the traditional Chinese view, formal education is the best and most respected route to social upward mobility; thus, a good education is the first priority for a family. Since China adopted its one-child-per-family policy in the urban areas three decades ago, most families have had only one child. Parents are willing to spend all the money saved for years and time to help their child get a higher education. In people's mind, higher education is the key to a prosperous future. To them, there seemed to be only one route to the procession of the key, which was through education at traditional universities, although they realized that distance education was a viable route as well.

Teachers, especially those who are currently working at senior high schools, appeared to have a negative influence on how people perceive the status of the students at distance learning institutions. What they have done in their daily practices seemed to reinforce the perception that only

education at traditional universities was recognized and of good quality.

The perceptions of students have been influenced by the above factors. However, the study identified that students' perceptions have gradually changed. After they entered this university as undergraduate students, orientation, other university activities, and changes in the higher education system in China helped them change their previous perceptions. A rapid expansion of colleges and universities has reduced the gap between the strong desire for higher education and the limited enrollment. In addition, traditional colleges or universities have begun to offer courses that are taught other than face-to-face with the professors. The distance learning courses offered at traditional universities have influenced students and their parents in recognizing the value of distance education. They no longer view distance education as an alternate, lesser route to higher education but as a quality approach in its own right.

In conclusion, although findings from the study indicated that students gradually changed their perceptions and recognized the value of the radio and television university as a viable way to higher education, the true value of the learning achieved appears to depend heavily on the type of jobs the graduates are capable of obtaining in the city after they complete their studies. With such high competition in the job market in this city, the students' status and their learning achieved via the radio and television university may not receive its full recognition from the employers unless the graduates are willing to go to other less developed cities or areas to seek employment.

3.5 What Recommendations do Students have about Changing the Current Perceptions of Distance Learning ?

Although most of the interviewees realized that to change the current perceptions was not an easy task, it was imperative. Given China's largest population in the world and the demand for

higher education, it is virtually impossible that the traditional higher education institutions could accommodate such a great demand. The demand for distance education, and higher education specifically, continues to increase with the rapid social and economic development in China. One student noted the need for changing perceptions in this way; "Many people who graduated from junior high schools or senior high schools should have been attracted to radio and television universities, the programs offered, media used in the instruction, flexibility of time... but unfortunately not. For people, you have to change their perceptions." (Xia, 4)

The most cited recommendation for changing the current perceptions was to raise the public awareness via communication. One student suggested: "Well, the university has recognized its problems, now new strategies would be implemented...marketing, as well as programs would be extended and made accessible for people in rural areas, remote areas (mountainous areas), minorities, utilizing technology. Want to develop network education with Chinese characteristics." (Kao, 12)

Some interviewees placed the blame on this university as it failed to communicate with its public especially the changes of the target population and its roles in promoting higher education. For example, one interviewee said helplessly, "In people's mindset, this university is for in-service adults' education, lifelong learning. It is vocational learning, not formal education and it is not for us, not for our age." (LV, 24)

Another interviewee responded, "When I learned that I was admitted into the radio and television university, to be honest, I wasn't really happy. To me, this university was designed for adults or whoever failed in the annual national college entrance exams." (MS, 19)

The comments from all the interviewees suggested a general lack of understanding of the distance education as a whole. As one student said, "However, I felt really bad when I went to the university and learned that the general public didn't really know

anything about distance learning or this university at all. Once when a stranger... direction stopped me on the campus. He looked at the sign at the door and asked me if I would become a broadcaster when I graduate.” (JV, 5)

Other recommendations included the roles of teachers who were currently teaching at senior high schools in the city. Almost all of the interviewees agreed that teachers' behaviors were largely influenced by how their performances were reviewed and evaluated.

For example,

“At senior high schools, every time after a test or quiz, we would be ranked in the class or even the whole grade. The teacher would tell me where I was in the whole class, where our class was compared with the whole grade. If our scores were not as good as the teachers expected, teachers used to say ‘with such score, the best you could go is some ordinary two-year colleges or some vocational schools. Besides, our teachers told us: ‘after graduation, it is more difficult to find a job with such diploma’. Therefore every student in our class worked really hard trying to achieve a higher score in order to be admitted to traditional universities.” (MW, 22)

In conclusion, the recommendations above suggest that this radio and television university needs to do a better job of explaining what distance education is, the role it plays, its teaching and learning, and strengths as well as weaknesses and explain these in comparison with the traditional education.

There is an obvious need to provide the public with the information it needs to fully understand how learning is achieved and to correct their perceptions that learning only takes place at traditional universities. As long as the examination system and the evaluation of teachers' performance remain unchanged, teachers at senior high schools in this city will most likely continue with their current practices, which will negatively impact the perception of the radio and television university, and in turn, its enrollment of the students and its existence as a distance higher education institution.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS :

On the whole, Chinese higher education has expanded rapidly over the past decade, with gross enrollment rates increasing from 3.4% in 1990, to 7.2% in 1995, and to 11% in 2000. Quantitative growth continued in 2001. More than 1,500 new undergraduate and associate degree programs were launched in China. In order to further drive economic growth, the Chinese government lifted the longstanding restrictions on marital status (the requirement to be single) and age (a maximum age of 26 years) of student examinees (Yang, 2002).

The expansion of higher education in China has greatly reduced the longstanding gap between social demand and higher education supply. Many people in urban areas have greatly benefited from the rapid growth in higher education, for example, as of 2001, 70% of secondary school graduates in Beijing went directly to universities (Yang, 2002).

In the city where this study was conducted, more traditional universities and colleges have expanded their enrollment and programs offered; more distance learning courses are offered at those traditional universities and colleges. Several private universities and colleges have been established in this city as well. Each year, the number of graduates from traditional universities, public or private, has significantly increased. In addition, this city still practices an university admission policy that gives preference to local students. In other words, admission requirements are lower for local students in comparison with students from other areas. Although students at the radio and television university didn't perceive their status as students to be inferior, with such high competition in the job market in this city, they were at a disadvantage in looking for well-paid jobs that would match their education.

There are implications from the above findings. Faced with such high competition against traditional universities or colleges and distance learning programs offered at those universities or colleges, the radio and

television university needs to reconsider the groups of learners it attempts to reach and the programs to be offered. China has the largest population in the world; about 1.3 billion. The distribution of people is not even; most live in the eastern part of the country and in rural areas. The city we studied doesn't appear to have a big enough market for this radio and television university to survive. However, there is a large market in the rural areas that this radio and television university could explore.

In conclusion, compared with some traditional universities or colleges in the city, besides its location, this radio and television university has its uniqueness in meeting certain needs of potential students: lower requirement scores, programs offered, and ways to deliver courses. However, with the expansion of traditional universities or colleges and many internet-based distance learning courses offered at traditional universities or colleges in this city, this radio and television university may not be able to attract as many students as it intends. If this university doesn't have sufficient students to enroll in its higher education programs, its higher education programs may gradually disappear in this city.

Based on the findings from this study, we make two recommendations. One is for the radio and television university. The other is for policy makers in regards to the education examination system in China.

First, it appears that the students studied have changed their perceptions of their status as students and their learning achieved via this radio and television university since they were admitted into the university. At the time of the study, interviewed students were positive about their student status and the quality of learning achieved. They perceived distance learning differently than the general public. However, as the value of their status and the learning achieved depend so heavily on the types of jobs they could obtain after graduation, their perceptions might become negative again if they are unable to obtain the jobs that match what they have learned. With heavy competition from graduates of the traditional universities in the job market,

if those students were unwilling to seek employment in locations other than the city itself, their chances of getting well-paid jobs that match their majors are low. If this is the case, students may have the same perceptions of distance learning as the general public does. Furthermore, their experiences would in turn serve as negative marketing to others, which would reinforce people's current perceptions of distance learning. Based on the above, for its continued existence as a distance higher education institution and role in making higher education accessible to a wider audience, the university should:

1. Find ways to improve its students' learning experiences; for example, invite reputable professors from traditional universities to conduct seminars to help keep learners more engaged in learning activities.
2. Work to improve its teaching and its status in the community by enrolling students with better scores.
3. Work closely with various employers in the city to have co-op student programs and internships available to students so that the students could gain some experience and have better chances of obtaining employment after graduation.
4. Conduct more research on employer satisfaction with their graduates and publish the research results via public media so that the general public is made aware of the graduates' performance at work.

Otherwise, with the wide expansion of universities and colleges and more distance courses offered at traditional universities or colleges, this university might gradually lose its attraction to learners, especially the senior high graduates. Without sufficient learners in its programs, it is hard to believe this university would still continue to exist as a higher education institution as it does today.

Second, it appears that the students studied were still suffering from what happened on the national college entrance exams two years before. Although they kept explaining they had confidence in their learning capabilities and didn't believe their failure in the examination would haunt them

forever, their repeated mentioning of it suggested that they were still dwelling on this past failure. They were vulnerable and couldn't afford another failure. Their past experiences from all those countless exams had a lasting psychological impact on them. It affected their lives. They prepared for the exams, not because they enjoyed learning so much, but because they couldn't afford another failure. The policy makers for the examination system in China should be aware of the damage the current exam practices has caused to the learners. More research should be conducted on individual learners and the psychological impact on them. This would help to provide policy makers guidelines for reforming the current education exam practices, which in turn would help cultivate healthy learners who would truly enjoy learning.

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Dr Huiping DING, email mry_ding@yahoo.com, and Dr Robert M. BOODY, email Robert.Boody@uni.edu, are at the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA-50614-0607. <http://www.uni.edu> Telephone 1- 319 273 6198

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