Guest Editorial

Teaching, Learning, and Management: International Student in China During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic presents unprecedented challenges to the management, teaching, and learning in Chinese international education. This special issue focuses on national policies on international student education, institutional risk-management strategies, quality assurance practices, online teaching pedagogy, international student engagement, and factors affecting their satisfaction. We hope that the discussions in this special issue will allow us to share the lessons that we have learned during this crisis, promote international cooperation to cope with common challenges, and support the sustainable development and transformation of international education in China and worldwide in the post-COVID era.

Keywords: international students, COVID-19 pandemic, China, teaching, learning, management

INTRODUCTION

The abrupt outbreak of new crown pneumonia (COVID-19), which was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, has rapidly changed people's daily lives in almost all countries. As of October 13th, 2021, 210 countries and regions were affected, with over 238 million confirmed cases worldwide, including 4.8 million deaths (World Health Organisation, 2021; Worldmeter, 2021). The World Health Organization declared the new coronavirus a public health emergency and a pandemic (World Health Organisation, 2020).

Before the epidemic, the traditional "East-to-West" model of international student mobility was challenged by the emerging study-abroad destination countries (Tian et al., 2020). China (Albach & de Wit, 2017), together with South Africa (Lee & Sehoole, 2015), Turkey, Mexico, Russia (Kondakci et al., 2018), South Korea (Jon et al., 2014), Singapore, Malaysia (Lee, 2014), UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain (Knight & Morshidi, 2011), have emerged as regional education hubs. For example, the average annual growth rate of international students in China has exceeded 10% since the turn of the new century. In 2001, 52,150 international students studied in Chinese educational institutions. The figure rose to 492,185 in 2018, making the country the world's third most popular destination for international students (Institute of International Education, 2018). International education reflects the economic and soft power competition of nation-states. The increasing importance of international student inflow to China and other global South countries indicates the world's transformation from a unipolar to a multi-polar power structure (Tian & Liu, 2020).

Since the outbreak of the highly contagious COVID-19, similar to many other countries, China has adopted strict prevention and control measures, including travel bans and border restrictions, which have immediate impacts on the country's international education. A survey conducted by the China Association of Foreign Student Administration (CAFSA) showed that between January 23rd and May 18th, 2020, among the 162,465 international students studied at 438 CAFSA member institutions, 45,785 stayed in China (including 7,065 stranded outside the host cities), 1,667 suspended their courses, 2,588 dropped out of universities, and 41,256 returned to their home countries (Li et al., 2020). An unpublished estimate provided by China's Ministry of Education suggests that as of the fall semester of the 2021 academic year, approximately 200,000 international students in Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) remain in their home countries and continue their studies remotely online.

In response to the pandemic, Chinese international education has seen a rapid shift from face-to-face instruction to virtual education using various asynchronous and synchronous communication tools. Although online education has been steadily developed in China before the pandemic, the COVID-19 transformation to the massive uses of remote instruction presents unprecedented challenges to the management, teaching, and learning in Chinese international education. For administrators, the most prevalent and critical tasks involve evaluating and assuring the quality of online education (An, this issue). Given the general lack of preparedness, Chinese HEIs have to innovatively handle unexpected problems, review the solutions, and work out contingency strategies (Liu & Zou, this issue). Other challenges involve recruiting and retaining international students (Li et al., this issue). Administrators need to manage financial problems in institutions where the number of international students has sharply dropped. The financial hardship can be worsened by the less ability of self-funded international students to pay tuition fees. Additional challenges include conducting routine work, ensuring the health and safety of international students, and navigating resources to provide services and support (Zhang & Zhu, this issue).

The past months were also difficult for faculty. Most teachers in Chinese HEIs had inadequate experiences teaching remotely online. Many of them had no proper training on online teaching. Immediate challenges presented by the online transition to Chinese faculty, similar to many teachers worldwide (Johnson et al. 2020), range from managing technology to modifying teaching content, adopting interactive teaching methods, and re-designing course assessment. Before the pandemic, when teaching international students in classrooms, Chinese teachers were likely to face language barriers, communication problems, and pedagogy inadequacy (Tian & Lowe, 2018). These problems can be further exacerbated in emergency online education.

International scholars have called for research on students' experiences during the pandemic, warning of students' reduced satisfaction with, decreased motivation for, and increased disengagement in online education (Chan, Bista & Allen, 2021). Most international students in China are from economically less advantageous countries in Asia and Africa. The drastic digitalization of international education places heavy demands on local internet infrastructure, learners' accessibility to electronic devices and online course platforms, and sufficient IT competence (Zang et al., this issue). To meet the demands is challenging to international students in Chinese HEIs in general, and those staying in economically underdeveloped home countries in particular (ibid). Despite the challenges, the research reports that once carefully managed, the emergency online instruction can support the academic development of international students in China (Yu & Xu, this issue; Zhang et al., this issue).

With the widespread use of vaccines, hopefully ending the pandemic (Geddes, 2021), we anticipate that international students will soon return to Chinese campuses. Studies have suggested that the flow of international students will remain strong after the pandemic (Mok et al., 2021). The crisis management strategies that Chinese HEIs implement will affect their share in the post-pandemic global market of international education. The effective responses are also critical for the country's building of its soft power and realizing its diplomatic vision when online education and "virtual" internationalization become a new "normality" (see Gultekin, 2020). It is within this context that this special issue is organized.

PAPERS IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue invites Chinese administrators, researchers, and practitioners to critically reflect on the challenges, responses, and impacts of the changes in Chinese international education during the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that the topics discussed in this special issue are of significance. We hope that the discussion in this special issue will allow us to share the lessons that we have learned during this crisis, promote international cooperation to cope with common challenges, and support the sustainable development and transformation of international education in China and beyond in the post-COVID era.

This special issue contains ten articles. In the first article, **Mei Li**, **Qixia Jiang,** and **Shuli Su** review the impacts of COVID-19 on international student

recruitment in Chinese HEIs. This research used documentary analysis to analyze the recruitment policies of international undergraduate students implemented by 41 national "double first-class" universities in China. The findings categorized the "double first-class" universities into four groups according to their recruitment policies, i.e., active-rigorous, active, rigorous, and inactive. The discussion pointed to a lack of national standards for international student recruitments, and highlighted the significance of political and social-cultural rationales for China's international student recruitment.

Following the policy discussion, the next three articles empirically explore the impacts of the pandemic on international students in China. **Wei Zhao** and **Guangrui Wen** examined international students' perceived educational service quality and the factors affecting these students' perceptions. The discussion was based on a survey involving 582 international students at five universities in China's Shaanxi province. The research showed less than satisfactory levels of the perceived quality of the educational services that the participants received at their host institutions. In addition, the analysis revealed the demographic factors which had significant impacts on the participants' perceived educational service quality.

The article by **Fengxiang Zang**, **Mei Tian**, **Jingwei Fan,** and **Ying Sun** focuses on international students in intensive Chinese courses at a comprehensive Chinese university. Data were generated from an online questionnaire survey and follow-up interviews. The research revealed the nature and characteristics of the participants' perceptions of the online Chinese learning environment, their intrinsic motivation towards online Chinese learning and engagement in online Chinese learning. The analysis highlighted dissatisfactory internet connection, insufficient technical skills, and inadequate pedagogical preparation among teachers in emergency online education.

The article by **Lan Yu** and **Lingying Xu** focuses on South Asian students in online Chinese programs at universities in Beijing, China. Drawing on the data generated by a questionnaire survey, the research revealed the participants' positive online learning status and positive perceptions of online learning effects. The study also showed the significant impacts of the participants' autonomous learning on their perceptions of online learning effects, mediated by online learning status.

The following five articles review institutional practices over the pandemic. The article written by **Qingling Liu** and **Nan Zou** focuses on the case of Tsinghua University, China, and reports the administrative measures implemented by the university in managing the negative impacts of COVID-19. Drawing on the organization system theory, the authors have stressed the significance of convergent management of international and domestic Chinese students in the crisis. The integration of international students into the institution's regular operation enhances its managerial efficiency, enabling effective resource utilization and coordination to support learning in the pandemic. The article ends with a discussion on the building of resilient international education in the post-pandemic period.

In the following article, **Yanli Zhang**, **Zihua Yang,** and **Yongtao Chen** from Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) share the measures and reforms that the School of Chinese Studies and Exchange of the university has implemented to support online teaching since the COVID-19 outbreak. To assess the quality of the emergency online teaching, the school administers student satisfaction questionnaires, collects student end-of-course feedback, and invites faculty to reflect on the students' feedback. The quality evaluation results are reported in the article, and suggestions are proposed for further reforms of online instruction in the post-COVID era.

Academic advising is significant to the success and development of international students learning in a new culture and likely encountering complex academic challenges. The article by **Bi Zhang** and **Jian Zhang** discusses the COVID-19 impacts on international student learning and the growing needs for academic support at the Dongbei University of Finance and Economics, China. In this article, the authors review the actions and measures that the university implements to support the international student academic development during the crisis. The international student satisfaction survey results are presented, the effects of the actions and the measures are discussed, and suggestions for further improvement of academic advising services are proposed.

The following reflexive essay is contributed by **Yun Zhang** and **Yining Zhu** from the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), the first Sino-foreign cooperative university in the country. The essay reports the significant problems encountered by international students at UNNC during the pandemic, and the services and support provided by the university to help the students cope with such challenges. The reflection holds implications for international student management and services in times of crisis.

Ling Gao LeBeau and **Fajun Zhang**'s reflective essay discusses an innovative international partnership initiative between Southwest University, China, and the universities in Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. during the global pandemic. This reflection holds implications for transformative international cooperation to promote higher education internationalization.

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