

More than 130 Chinese university leaders, including presidents and vice-presidents, joined a group of leading academics from UK higher education to share insight into emerging practices and issues around the use of digital technologies in education.

In the first of the British Council's 2013-14 Global Education Dialogues: The East Asia Series, higher education leaders discussed what one speaker described as a "tsunami" sweeping the sector. The conference focused on the latest trends in applications for digital technologies, the impact on the sector and how it was responding, and the opportunities and challenges. However, discussion was most lively on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which some anticipate could reshape the landscape of higher education in China.

The event was co-organised by the National Academy of Education Administration. It aimed to promote knowledge exchange and collaboration between UK and Chinese institutions. It covered the broad range of digital technologies, from the use of campus platforms and mobile applications that support teaching, learning, research and administrative functions, to MOOCs. The latter was of particular interest, with the first Coursera and edX MOOCs launched in China in the weeks before the event, along with the arrival of China's own platforms, such as Tsinghua's XuetangX.com, just as UK institutions have launched the FutureLearn platform, which includes the British Council among its partners.

UK participants from the universities of Plymouth, Leeds, Liverpool and Southampton, as well as the Higher Education Academy, shared UK developments, including support for digital technology at policy level, funding, professional development and pilot initiatives, and institutional strategies. Professor Paul Redmond, Director of Employability and Educational Opportunities, University of Liverpool, set the social context, in his analysis of generational trends and their use of technologies that he said transcended national boundaries.

Professor Stephen Gomez, former Academic Lead, Online Learning, at the HEA, now with Pearson, led HEA initiatives that aimed to bring digital technology from what he described as the periphery of higher education to the centre. Both he and Professor Huang Ronghui, Associate Dean, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, pointed to the gap between the innovations now available to enhance teaching and learning, and academic practice.

"The majority of academics don't engage with or use digital technologies in their teaching. Very little has penetrated to the centre of academic practice," Professor Gomez said, adding after the event: "A lot of the points and questions raised are similar to the questions in Britain. We face common issues and they are not insurmountable."

The UK participants shared practices that aimed to bridge that gap. Professor Steven Furnell, Head of School of Computing and Mathematics, Plymouth University, described how his university was podcasting lectures, uploaded to Apple's iTunes U, as a resource for campus-based students to recap on lectures, and for academic to build on their saved work and to reach new international audiences – not just students, but potential academic and business partners.

Professor Neil Morris, Director of Digital Learning, University of Leeds, shared systems Leeds has put in place to make the best use of technology to enhance learning and student experience, consistently across the university. His position was created 18 months ago in order to play a co-ordinating role. Leeds' strategy is overseen by the Taught Student Education Board, chaired by a Pro-Vice Chancellor, while the Blended Learning and Digital Technology Innovation Group of academic champions, drawn from each faculty, horizon scans for the latest useful technologies.

Fiona Harvey, Education Development Manager, Centre for Innovation in Technologies and Education, University of Southampton, highlighted the role of digital technology in supporting internationalisation. Its branch campus in Malaysia had incorporated technology so that students there could work closely with peers in Southampton. "Technology means we can work across campuses around the world in different formats," she said. The university had aspirations to build "Massively International MOOCs". Data gathered from MOOCs would be monitored to inform teaching practices, a constructivist approach it was sharing with FutureLearn.

Sue Milner, Director of Education, British Council China, was upbeat about the potential for the UK after the event. "Platforms accessible for China can only raise the profile and reputation of our institutions," she said. UK institutions could look to build mutually supportive partnerships in developing joint MOOCs. "Pick your best and do something interesting in a cutting edge of multidisciplinary area, either a new offering or something you are internationally renowned in," she said.

Collaborating in the production of a MOOC could also have wider benefits, for instance in supporting joint research, she added.

In the two-way exchange, the conference demonstrated that there was plenty of innovative practice in China. Institutions such as South West Jiaotong and Wuhan universities and the Open University of China have sophisticated virtual learning environments with the range of learning, assessment, evaluation and administrative functions most students in the UK would be familiar with, as well as online courses.

Yet many participants were anxious that China should take greater action to ensure it could stand alongside the MOOC pioneers. They called for policy clarity on accreditation and funding support from education authorities. The cost of RMB40, 000 for creating one MOOC course in China was seen as too heavy an investment for many institutions. Employers also needed to be encouraged to recognise the value of such learning.

Other concerns emerged during the event. Too many Chinese universities could try to jump on the MOOC bandwagon, and weaker institutions and academics could be threatened as more course content is relayed electronically. And if students opted for cheaper MOOC courses rather than go to a physical university, they would miss out on the wider campus experiences and guidance that comes with face-to-face interaction with their teachers.

Li Wenchang, Vice President, National Academy of Education Administration, said that as institutions adopted digital forms of delivery, they should not lose sight of the core purpose of education: "the passing on of civilization from one generation to another". "Teaching and learning as separated by technology does not meet the target of bringing about wiser and more ethical students. How can we raise the wisdom and make them more moral? That is the challenge to address in the technology era," he said.

UK and many Chinese participants saw a blended approach as the best way forward. Digital technologies could enhance face-to-face interaction which should focus on enquiry rather than sharing basic knowledge readily available on the internet. MOOCs were seen as beneficial in extending access to higher education, making up for the weaknesses in teaching in some institutions, and driving improvements in pedagogy. And in a warning to overseas institutions, several participants said that they could reduce demand for study overseas.

Li Fei, Vice President of Wuhan University, said that government policy was now needed to support the MOOC sector in China, including to resolve the question of credit. There was also a need for strategic planning to ensure effecting sharing and co-ordination, to avoid wasteful

duplication, as well as for professional development to improve the digital literacy of staff and students.

He responded to concerns that MOOCs could undermine traditional universities. "We are talking about complementarity between MOOCs and traditional learning. MOOCs can be useful because China suffers such a shortage of education resources," he said. "A lot of people who traditionally do not have access to higher education can be better equipped through the use of MOOCs, for example people in the workplace who want to update their knowledge."

Professor Huang Ronghuai, a leading researcher on digital technology in education, said the Chinese government had recognised the potential of MOOCs and other on-line courses. It would encourage the import of high quality courses from overseas, and the export of the best from China.

Chinese platforms would carry a mix of local and international course, including some translated into Chinese. "Chinese-language versions of overseas courses can meet some Chinese students' needs for learning, while courses from Chinese universities could share Chinese culture and knowledge with students all over the world," he said after the conference. "Strategies for credit transfer and recognition are being developed by policy consulting institutions. Once policies for credit transfer and recognition are established, online courses will go far beyond lip service."

Professor Huang Dawei, Vice President, Southeast University, summarised views that had emerged over the day. "Given that China is the most populous country, we should tap into this tremendous resource. China should develop the necessary policies and strategies to make the most of this resource." Chinese universities should now concentrate on taking a lead in producing their own courses, rather than merely consuming those from overseas.

*This was the first of a series of eight Global Education Dialogues in the East Asia Series, 2013-14. The next, held jointly with South Asia, will focus on **The future of higher education in Asia**, and takes place in Dubai, 28-29 November 2013, followed by **Connecting Asia**, held in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, 16-17 December, 2013. For information, visit <http://ihe.britishcouncil.org/>*