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Students at a Chinese radio and television university: Reasons for participation, and perceptions of their status as students and the quality of their learning

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STUDENTS AT A CHINESE RADIO AND TELEVISION UNIVERSITY: REASONS FOR PARTICIPATION, AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR STATUS AS STUDENTS AND THE QUALITY OF THEIR LEARNING

A Dissertation

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

Dr. Robert Boody, Chair

Dr. Joyce Chen, Committee Member

Dr. Rodney Dieser, Committee Member

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May 2006
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Approved:

Dr. Robert Boody, Committee Chair

Dr. Susan J. Koch
Dean of the Graduate College

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May 2006
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to investigate students' participation in distance education and perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved within the context of a radio and television university in the North of China. This study focused on the students who had completed a two-year college program and been promoted to a four-year bachelor's degree program. Data was collected and analyzed from observations, interviews and document reviews.

Results of the study identified many reasons for students' participation at the radio and television university to pursue their higher education. The primary reason for most was their inability to choose other universities due to the fact that they could not meet the minimum score requirements for admission after the national college entrance examinations. Other reasons included the location of the city, desire to have a fresh start, and the courage to carry on. Overall, students perceived their learning achieved at the university as valuable. However, the value of the learning achieved appeared to depend heavily on the type of job they could find after graduation. With competition against the increased number of graduates from traditional universities each year in the job market, graduates from this university were at disadvantage in seeking well-paid employment within their city.

The results of the study suggested several directions for further research. Ideas for future research included (a) replicating this study within this university and at other radio and television universities in less developed areas, at distance learning institutions among various groups of students, as well as at traditional higher education institutions;
(b) follow-up studies on graduates from radio and television universities; (c) more in-depth studies on employers' perceptions of their employees who graduated from distance learning programs in comparison with graduates from traditional universities; and (d) studies on the motives and barriers affecting students' participation in higher education offered through distance education institutions.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation first to my late parents who held on to the dream of their daughter becoming a Doctor for years; and to my two lovely children whose thirst for learning and confidence in their mom’s capabilities is great; and to my husband, whose attention to my toils and pain has brought life to my heart, and who has accompanied me through this challenging journey.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

During the past twenty-two years, China has been undergoing a fundamental change, one marked by a 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, cited in Ding, 1995). However, even in 1994, only 4.7% of the secondary school graduates could 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 (UNDP, 1994, cited in Wei, 1997). 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 conventional universities and colleges 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 the only available solution for this problem. It enables higher education to reach more diverse populations and to provide more access. Similarly, Coombs (1978, cited in Keegan, 1996) commented:
Many countries of the world today need educational systems capable of competently handling very large student bodies totaling 100,000 or more students at a time. Governments in both developed and developing countries no longer have the money to build and maintain buildings for 100,000 students a year, or if they did they would not put money into educational buildings because of changed political and developmental priorities. (p. 4)

Higher Education Overview

Higher education in China reflects the changes in political policies that have occurred in contemporary China. Since 1949, emphasis has continually been placed on political re-education, and in periods of political upheaval, such as the Great Leap Forward in 1958 and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), ideology has been stressed over professional or technical competence. During the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, tens of thousands of college students joined Red Guard organizations (political groups), effectively closing down the higher education system. In general, when universities reopened in the early 1970s, enrollments were reduced from pre-Cultural Revolution levels, and admission was restricted to individuals who had been recommended by their work units for possessing good political credentials and distinguishing themselves in manual labor. In the absence of stringent and reasonably objective entrance examinations, political connections became increasingly important in obtaining the recommendations necessary to qualify for university admission. As a result, the decline in educational quality was profound. After 1976, steps were taken to improve educational quality by establishing order and stability, calling for an end to political argument on university campuses, and expanding university enrollments. This pressure to improve educational quality and to provide opportunities for people to continue higher learning led to efforts to run both existing higher education institutions...
and to develop new college and university programs. As a result, the unified national college entrance examinations were resumed for senior high school graduates in 1977, and labor colleges for training agro-technicians and factory-run colleges for providing technical education for workers were established.

For higher educational development, funding remained a major problem because education was competing with four modernization programs: agriculture, industry, science and technology and national defense. Capital was critically short. The prestige associated with higher education caused a demand for it. But many qualified youths were unable to attend colleges and universities because China could not finance enough university places for them. To help meet the demand and to educate a highly trained, specialized work force, China 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. The former mainly admits senior high school graduates, whereas the latter enrolls mainly working adults from all walks of life, though it started to accept high school graduates in the 1980s (Wei, 1997). Generally, Chinese people perceived the formal education sector as having higher educational quality since it was difficult to gain admission.

In order to receive formal higher education where the admission rate is limited, students are required to take the national college entrance examinations and meet the minimum score requirements set by each university or college. The most current data
published in 2000 suggests that there are prerequisites for students to take the national college entrance examinations. First, students are required to take the entrance examinations for senior middle schools or middle-level technical schools and meet the minimum score requirements set by the applicable schools. Then after two, three, or four years of successful study, students may sit for the unified national college entrance examinations, which usually takes place on July 7 to 9. Due the grueling weather and the stress one bears all those days, the month of July is widely nicknamed "Black July" (Education in China, n.d., para. 1).

In addition to 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 (SEHEIS; 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 is no restriction by age, educational level, examination scores, or duration of learning. Basically, it is designed for everybody who wants to continue learning at a post-secondary level.

Distance education is generally considered to be an important part of higher education, a supplement to and continuation of formal schooling in China, and its value has been recognized. However, in the minds of the scholars as well as the general public in China, education offered via distance education is of questionable quality and cannot be compared with the formal education offered at traditional higher education institutions. Distance education is perceived as valuable for people who have no opportunity to go to traditional higher education institutions due to lower admissions test scores, the limited number of admissions available, age, or conflicts with work. Distance education is perceived as of lower status not only in China but in other countries as well. As Barrels and Rathore (1989) noted, not only in the Federal Republic of Germany but also in many other countries where distance teaching universities have opened, academics in the conventional universities expressed fears of dilution of academic standards. They were skeptical about the success of distance teaching universities, their methods, and their claims of providing quality and cost-effective higher education to the masses.

From 1991 through 1995, I served as a part-time teacher within the areas of Intensive English, Grammar, Listening and Speaking in the College of Adult Education,
and as an advisor in the General English Department of a teachers' university helping
distance students complete their research paper for the bachelor's degree in British and
American Literature. Along with other advisors of distance learners in the General
English Department, I witnessed how those distance learners progressed and what they
went through. I believe that distance higher education provides a quality education and is
a valuable component of higher education in China. However, through years of
experience with distance learners, I realize that there existed a general perception among
students that their status as students was inferior to that of students attending traditional
universities or colleges.

Distance education has existed for over eighty years in China. The development
of the radio and television universities has been rapid since their establishment in 1979.
Although much has been written on the distance education system as a whole in China,
little attention has been paid to the individual learners: (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 decision to participate in distance education programs and
what they perceive is their status as students and the value of the learning achieved
through distance education.
This dissertation does not attempt to solve the debate over the effectiveness or the quality of distance education as compared with traditional face-to-face education. Instead, this study presents my attempts to understand (a) the perceived status of students enrolling in distance education programs, (b) factors influencing students to choose to learn through distance education, (c) perceptions students have toward their status as students, (d) student perceptions of the learning achieved within the context of a radio and television university, and (e) what students suggest about changing the current perceptions of distance learning.

Research Problem and Questions

This section describes the basic elements and foundations of my study. First, I present and describe the research problem. Second, I list questions that guided my study.

The research problem and questions for this study result from juxtaposing two propositions (Guba, 1978) about distance education at radio and television universities in China. The first proposition states that radio and television universities consider the status of distance education to be the same as that of conventional education. According to the radio and television university pronouncements, graduates have the same or equivalent status as conventional college graduates. They receive the same pay. They are assigned jobs to match their newly acquired specialty based on the needs of national and local planning. The second proposition states that radio and television graduates are different, often labeled as vocational, technical graduates of non-formal educational programs. Their courses of study cannot be transferred to a conventional university or college program, which appears to reinforce the idea that students of radio and television
universities are different. During my past role as an advisor helping distance learners, some students indicated that they did not like to tell others that they had enrolled in a radio and television university because they would be looked down upon by their peers.

Research Problem

The research problem which results from juxtaposing the two views stated above can be stated in the following way: *Even though radio and television universities announce that their graduates have the same or equivalent status as conventional college graduates, potential graduates are prejudiced against radio and television universities, believing that such programs will not be ladders for them to advancement and will consign them to lower status, vocational and technical positions in comparison with the graduates from traditional universities and colleges.* In other words, although graduates from radio and television universities possess the same type of degrees as those from traditional universities and colleges with the same major, they don’t perceive themselves as receiving equal recognition at work or by the general public.

Research Questions

Given conflicting perceptions about the value of degrees from radio and television universities, how might we understand the status of the students and their participation in distance learning via radio and television universities in China? This broad question can be divided into five specific research questions focusing on radio and television universities. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

1. What, in their opinion, is their status as students?
2. What is the perceived value of their learning achieved at the radio and television university?

3. What are their reasons for enrolling in this university?

4. What factors influence their perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved at this radio and television university?

5. What recommendations do students make about changing the current perceptions of distance learning?

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate distance learners' participation and their perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved through participating in distance learning at a Northern radio and television university in China and also to explore the factors affecting students in their decision to participate in distance education, their perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved, possible causes for their perceptions and the solutions that students may suggest. Answers to the five research questions should render the study significant for two main reasons.

The first reason is the motivation which this study provides for the researchers of distance higher education in China to focus on the perceptions of the individual learners towards distance learning. Many studies about radio and television universities in China have examined the distance education system as a whole, including issues such as (a) how the Chinese system works, (b) administrative structure, (c) target population, (d) assessment, (e) cost-effectiveness as compared with traditional universities or colleges,
and (f) teaching and learning. There has been little attention paid to the individual distance learners’ reasons for enrolling in distance education, their views about their own status as students, and their perceived value of the learning achieved via distance education programs in China. Findings from this study extend what has been known about distance education in China, especially in regards to radio and television universities, and help promote a better understanding of distance learning in China and worldwide.

Second, distance education has become an increasingly prominent field of investigation in recent years due to the number of individuals of all ages who are beginning to take courses through existing and emerging distance learning technologies (Public Broadcasting Service, 1998, cited in Rezabek, 1999). Since one of the most important elements of China’s distance higher education is compulsory face-to-face tutorials, researching factors influencing learners’ decision to participate in distance education, and their perceptions of the status as students and the learning achieved in those programs, could help teachers gain a better understanding of the students in order to meet their needs. Hence, it could help improve the relationship between students and teachers in the learning environment. Better understanding of students’ participation and their perceptions can help strengthen the program and focus on available resources in ways that encourage students to participate in distance education activities. From a more positive and wider perspective, the findings of the study “could provide policy guidelines for establishing and operating programs or courses” (Kember, 1995, p. 21). As Courtney (1992) mentioned,
After all, we live in a highly consumer-oriented society, which requires that we interpret learning as a regulated, norm-governed, consumer type behavior much like other consumer-type behaviors. This society contains half understood pressures towards and away from continuing learning, and it becomes our duty to understand the nature of these pressures the better to harness them and make them work not merely for ourselves and our programs but for the very clients whose learning we wish to facilitate. (p. 20)

**Definition of Terms**

This section provides the definition of 15 essential terms as they will be used in this study.

**Case study** is defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 1984, p. 23). Sources of data include interviews, document reviews, surveys and observations.

**Credibility** is the extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions are believable and trustworthy (McMillan, 2000, p. 272).

**Distance education** within the context of the radio and television universities in China refers to an organized teaching and learning activity via broadcasting (television and/or radio), supplemented with compulsory face-to-face tutorials. In other words, students at radio and television universities are required to come to classes to listen or watch radio/television programs for 40-50 minutes, attend local lectures for local courses, and participate in face-to-face tutorials. Radio and television programs, as well as local lectures, are focused on transmission and delivery of new knowledge, while face-to-face tutorial is centered on students' comprehension and consolidation of the knowledge obtained through radio programs, or television programs, or both. The ratio between
radio/television programs and face-to-face tutorials is 2 to 1, with exceptions of 1 to 1 or 3 to 1 in certain courses. A typical tutorial class lasts 50 minutes (Wei, 1997).

Distance learning refers to the process of distance education with emphasis on the experiences of the students.

Distance teaching refers to the process of distance education with emphasis on the experiences of the instructors.

Ethnography is an in-depth analytical description and interpretation of naturally occurring behavior within a culture or social group. Observation, interviews and document analysis are the primary modes of data collection for ethnographic studies in education (McMillan, 2000, p. 255).

Key school is a designation for selected schools at every educational level in China: elementary, secondary and higher. In addition, there are various levels of the ‘key’ designation itself. There are national key institutions, provincial or municipal key institutions, and county or district key institutions. Key schools enjoy priority funding as well as the privilege of recruiting the best students. Entry into such schools is based on examination scores, academic potential, and achievement. For such schools, success is usually measured in terms of the percentage of its graduates entering colleges and universities, especially the key colleges and universities such as Beijing University and Qinghua University.

Market economy is an economy in which most allocations of resources occur as a result of interactions between buyers and sellers of goods and services. It is often contrasted with a planned economy (Market Economy, 2004, Section 1, para. 20).
Member check is a way to increase credibility of a study through submitting notes to informants to ensure that their perspectives have been recorded accurately (McMillan & Wergin, 1998, p. 91). In addition, interpretations and assertions may also be presented to and discussed with the people from whom the data was originally collected.

Modes of study in this study refer to full-time, part-time and spare-time study.

Natural setting is a "non-contrived environment" (Guba, 1978, p. 16), e.g., a classroom, or an institution. For the purpose of this study, research focused on the social situations within one radio and television university.

Perceptions are the ways people view topics, ideas or feelings. They include how people have achieved understanding of the kinds of individuals they have become and what they observe to hold meaning and value (Kamm, 1998, p. 12).

Planned economy is what China was until 1978 when the economic reform started. The system operates within a political framework of strict Communist control. A planned economy is an economy in which allocation of resources occur as a result of command from the highest administrative planners. In other words, economic decisions are made on behalf of the public by planners who determine what sorts of goods and services to produce and how they are to be allocated. Economic decisions are thus not made based on market forces (Planned Economy, 2004).

Triangulation is used in a research context to describe the use of a variety of data sources or methods to examine a specific phenomenon either simultaneously or sequentially in order to produce a more accurate account of the phenomenon under investigation (Research Methods Glossary, 2000, para. 97).
Value in this study refers to the degree of usefulness in terms of recognition by the employer and the general public in China.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This study has one major delimitation and three potential limitations. They include (a) the sample, (b) languages, (c) my role as researcher, and (d) the type of data analysis used in the study.

First, this study was a case study, and was thus delimited to degree students within one radio and television university. It is quite possible that students' reasons for participation and their perceptions differ in other radio and television universities. Indeed, students' reasons for participation and their perceptions are likely to differ to some extent from degree to non-degree students, from university to university, and from one distance education program to another. Moreover, students' reasons for participation and their perceptions might differ at different stages of life. However, as with most case study and qualitative studies, the intent of this study was to understand as much as possible from this case rather than to try to speak to all possible cases. Therefore, generalizing the results of this study needs to be done cautiously. I did use a variety of sources of data including former students, faculty, and various kinds of documents including government policies in regards to distance higher education as a whole and those policies specific to radio and television universities as well.

Second, the study was conducted primarily in Chinese. Although the researcher is fluent in both Chinese and English, there might still be language concerns. The researcher employed member check to minimize the impacts that language constraints
might bring to the study on the Chinese side. On the English side, the translated transcripts of the original interviews from Chinese to English were crosschecked and approved by a former English professor at a teachers’ university in China.

Third, in my role as a researcher, I am who I am. Based on my past teaching experience and present contact with distance students via email, my stance towards distance education is like an advocate. This could cause bias in the study. To overcome this limitation, while at the site with the participants, especially during the informal and formal interviews, I tried to avoid providing comments or offering opinions on the researcher’s perception towards distance education and students’ status in China, even when asked by the interviewees. Instead, I used open-ended questions or responded by asking participants’ opinions to generate in-depth knowledge from them.

Fourth, limitations could result from the types of data collection and analysis employed. The data collection methods included document reviews, observations and interviews. Data collection, analysis and interpretation of data collected were all completed by me. As a researcher, I am fully aware of the inherent danger of bias with this process. Observations, interviews and the analysis of data received are highly subjective. In this study, I was the observer, interviewer, interpreter of the data collected. My tone and manner may affect responses. This study is my interpretation of things observed and responses gathered and therefore may be somewhat subjective in nature. However, the intent of the study is to provide an accurate description of what I observed and what I found through observations and interviews and to the best of my ability is an objective account. In addition, participants may not always choose to engage in public or
in interviews, particularly given the political system and recent past in China. However, the teaching experiences that I had with distance learners in China helped overcome the barrier quickly and build a relationship of trust with the participants. Participants were actively engaged in the interviews and talked with ease during the interviews.

Summary

Since distance education has been recognized as a viable way to provide higher education in China, it is important to better understand distance education and its participants. In particular, it is important to examine why students choose to learn at a distance, and how students perceive their status as students and the learning achieved through participating in distance education.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to this study. Major elements of the review include: (a) economy, beliefs and values, and the educational system in China; (b) radio and television universities in China, including historical perspectives, organizational structure, target population, modes of study, teaching and learning, assessment, and factors influencing students' participation; and (c) distance education participation in general, including motives and obstacles for participation, demographic factors, and status of learning achieved.

Chapter 3 describes the design and methods used in the study to answer the five research questions. The description includes (a) setting, (b) participants, (c) instrument, (d) protection of participants, (e) data collection, and (f) data analysis.
Chapter 4 first provides the initial findings from document reviews, observations and informal interviews. Then it presents in details the findings of the study from individual interviews and a small group interview.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings and conclusions pertaining to each research question. It further discusses the limitations of the study, addresses my own learning, and concludes with recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter includes three major sections intended to provide further background to the study. The first section provides background information on China, with subsections covering the economy, beliefs and values, and educational system. This information should provide readers with the context of the study and help them understand better the formation of students’ perceptions towards distance learning. They support the second and fourth research questions in the study.

The second section reviews the radio and television universities in China. Important subsections examine the historical background, organizational structure, modes of study, teaching and learning, and assessment. This material is most relevant to the first four research questions.

The third section reviews the body of literature on distance higher education participation including (a) learner demographics, (b) motives for participation, (c) obstacles to participation, and (d) status of learning achieved. This area addresses the first and the third research questions in the study.

The final section presents a summary of the literature reviewed in the chapter.

Please be aware that the literature reviewed in the following sections may not include all the most recent literature relevant to the study. The researcher was aware that there might be some literature unavailable to the researcher at the time of the study. The researcher tried every possible means to locate all sources related to this study. However, much of the writing on learners at radio and television universities or distance higher
education as a whole in China to date has little relevance to this study. Most of them focus on the structure or teaching methods employed.

**Background on China**

**Economy**

For centuries, China stood as a leading civilization, outpacing the rest of the world in arts and sciences. But in the 19th and early 20th centuries, China was beset by civil unrest, major famines, military defeats, and foreign occupation. After World War II, the Communists under Mao Zedong established a dictatorship that, while ensuring China's sovereignty, imposed strict controls over everyday life and cost the lives of tens of millions of people. In late 1978, the Chinese leadership under Deng Xiaoping initiated economic reforms, moving the economy from a sluggish, inefficient, centrally-planned economy to a more market-oriented system. Although the system operates within a political framework of strict Communist control, the economic influence of non-state organizations and individual citizens has been steadily increasing. The authorities switched to a system of household and village responsibility for agriculture in place of the old collectivization, which (a) increased the authority of local officials and plant managers in industry, (b) permitted a wide variety of small-scale enterprises in services and light manufacturing, and (c) opened the economy to increased foreign trade and investment. Agriculture and industry have benefited most, especially in coastal areas near Hong Kong, opposite Taiwan, and in Shanghai, where foreign investment has helped spur output of both domestic and export goods. The result has been a quadrupling of GDP since 1978. Measured on a purchasing power parity (PPP) basis, China in 2003
stood as the second-largest economy in the world after the US, although in per capita terms the country is still poor (The World Factbook, 2004).

Beliefs and Values

In order to have a better understanding of the culture which informs people’s perceptions towards education and the status of the learning achieved in China, it is necessary to be familiar with its legacy from the past, particularly in the realm of values and social life.

China's traditional beliefs and values were contained in the orthodox version of Confucianism, which was taught in the academies and tested in the imperial civil service examinations. Confucianism refers to the complex system of moral, social, political, and religious teaching built up by Confucius, who was born in 551 B.C. in what was then the feudal state of Lu, on the ancient Chinese traditions, and perpetuated as the state religion down to the present day. Confucianism aims at making not simply the man of virtue, but the man of learning and of good manners. The perfect man must combine the qualities of saint, scholar, and gentleman. These values are distinctive for their worldly emphasis on society and public administration and for their wide diffusion throughout Chinese society. Confucianism originated and developed as the ideology of professional administrators and continues to bear the impact of its origins. The Confucians claimed authority based on their knowledge, which came from direct mastery of a set of books, the Confucian Classics. The mastery of the Classics was the highest form of education and the best possible qualification for holding public office. Confucians saw the ideal society as a hierarchy, in which everyone knew his or her proper place and duties. In the ideal
Confucian scheme of social stratification, scholars should be at the highest level of society, followed by farmers, then by artisans, with merchants and soldiers in last place (Traditional Society and Culture, 1987, para. 2). But in reality, farming was considered a hard and insecure life and one that was best left if an opportunity was available (Social Stratification, 1987, para. 3). Farmers have never gained the position that Confucians would have liked them to achieve.

In the minds of the Chinese, the factors generating prestige were education, abstention from manual labor, wealth expended on arts and education, a large family with many sons, and community service and acts of charity. Another asset was an extensive personal network that permitted one to grant favors and make introductions and recommendations. There was no sharp line dividing the elite from the masses, and social mobility was possible and common (Social Stratification, 1987, para. 4). Formal education provided the best and most respected avenue of upward mobility. Traditional society offered alternate routes to worldly success and a number of ways to change one's position in society such as going into business, gambling, joining the army, but in all routes except education the chances of failure outweighed those of success (Social Mobility, 1987, para. 1).

Traditional Chinese thought thus combined an ideally rigid and hierarchical social order with an appreciation for education, individual achievement, and mobility within the rigid structure. For the majority of ordinary Chinese people, such as farmers, education has been the only route to upward mobility if they could afford such education.
The use of competitive examinations to select civil officials began in China during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), and was expanded to include all important positions during the Sung dynasty (960–1279). It was abolished by the Qing empress Tz'u Hsi in 1905. The examination system was an attempt to recruit males on the basis of merit rather than on the basis of family or political connection. Because success in the examination system was the basis of social status, and education was the key to success in the system, education was highly regarded in traditional China. If a person passed the provincial examination, his entire family was raised in status to that of scholar gentry, thereby receiving prestige and privilege. Although only a small percentage of students could achieve office, students spent 20 to 30 years memorizing the orthodox commentaries in preparation for a series of up to eight examinations for the highest degree. The competition for success in the examinations meant that rates of mobility into and out of the elite were relatively high for a traditional agrarian society. The imperial state was staffed by a small civil bureaucracy. Civil officials were directly appointed and paid by the emperor. Although the salary of central officials was low, the positions offered great opportunities for personal enrichment, which was one reason that families competed so fiercely to pass the examinations and then obtain an appointment. For most officials, office holding was not a lifetime career. They served one or a few tours and then returned to their home districts and families, where their wealth, prestige, and network of official contacts made them dominant figures in the local area. By the 19th century, the examination system was regarded as outdated and inadequate training for officials who faced the task of modernizing China. After it was abolished, mass
education along with a Western type curriculum was promoted (Chinese Examination System, 2004).

Traditional values have clearly shaped much of contemporary Chinese life. The belief in rule by an educated and functionally non-specialized elite, the value placed on learning and propagating an orthodox ideology that focused on society and government, and the stress on hierarchy and the pre-eminent role of the state were all carried over from traditional society (The Confucian Legacy, 1987, para. 1).

Since the 1950s, China has implemented a household registration system (*hukou*), which restricts internal migration of its population between urban and rural areas, within the rural sections, between big and small cities, and between the regions. Urban registrants are entitled to the best jobs, education, housing, and health care, all of which are unavailable to those with rural registration. Thus, transforming one’s *hukou* status from rural to urban or from small city to big city is a central aspect of upward mobility. But *hukou* status is essentially obtained at birth. One of the ways to obtain upward mobility is education.

**Educational System**

To provide education for its population, China has a vast and varied school system including preschools, kindergartens, schools for the deaf and blind, primary schools, secondary schools (consisting of junior and senior middle schools, secondary agricultural and vocational schools, secondary teachers' schools, secondary technical schools, and secondary professional schools), and various institutions of higher learning (consisting of regular colleges and universities, professional colleges, distance learning...
institutions, and short-term vocational universities). In terms of access to education, China's system is like a pyramid. Student numbers decrease sharply at the higher levels because of the scarcity of resources allotted to higher education.

The Law on Nine-Year Compulsory Education, which took effect on July 1, 1986, established requirements and deadlines for attaining universal education tailored to local conditions and guaranteed school-age children the right to receive education. The program sought to bring rural areas, which had four to six years of compulsory schooling, in line with their urban counterparts. In most cases, a 6-3-3 system (six years primary, three years junior secondary, and three years senior secondary) has been adopted.

The designation of key schools is used to single out schools whose mission is to meet the special needs of the educational elite. Key schools were shut down during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), reopened in the late 1970s and, in the early 1980s, became an integral part of the effort to revive the lapsed education system. Because educational resources were scarce, selected or key institutions, usually those with records of past educational accomplishment, were given priority in the assignment of teachers, equipment, and funds. They were allowed to recruit the best students for special training to compete for admission to top schools at the next level. Key schools constituted only a small percentage of all regular senior middle schools and funneled the best students into the best secondary schools, largely on the basis of entrance scores. In 1980, the greatest resources were allocated to the key schools that would produce the greatest number of college entrants.
**National College Entrance Examinations.** National college entrance examinations to select students for higher education (and positions of leadership) were an important part of China’s culture, and traditionally, entrance to higher education institutions was considered prestigious. Although the examination system for admission to colleges and universities has undergone many changes since the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), it remains the basis for admitting academically able students. When higher education institutions were reopened in the early 1970s, candidates for national college entrance examinations had to be senior middle school graduates or the equivalent, generally below twenty-six years of age (Entrance Examinations and Admission Criteria, 1987, para. 1).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), higher education in particular suffered tremendous losses; the system was shut down, and a rising generation of college and graduate students, academicians and technicians, professionals and teachers, was lost. The economy was at low tide. The pragmatist leadership, under Deng Xiaoping, recognized that to meet the goals of modernization it was necessary to develop science, technology, and intellectual resources and to raise the population’s education level. Demands on education for new technology, information science, and advanced management expertise were levied as a result of the reform of the economic structure. In particular, China needed an educated labor force to feed its one-billion-plus population. By 1980, achievement was once again accepted as the basis for admission and promotion in education. This fundamental change reflected the critical role of scientific and technical knowledge and professional skills in the Four Modernizations, covering (a) Industry, (b) Agriculture, (c) Science and Technology, and (d) National Defense. Also,
political activism was no longer regarded as an important measure of individual performance, and even the development of commonly approved political attitudes and political background was secondary to achievement. Educational policy promoted expandable enrollments, with the long term objective of achieving universal primary and secondary education. In 1985, the commitment to modernization was reinforced by plans for nine-year-compulsory education and for providing good quality higher education.

In December 1977, when unified national college entrance examinations were reinstated, 5.7 million students took the examinations, although university placement was available for only the 278,000 applicants with the highest scores. In July 1984, about 1.6 million candidates took the entrance examinations for the 430,000 places in China’s more than 900 colleges and universities. A year later, there were approximately 1.8 million students taking the three day college entrance examinations to compete for 560,000 places. Liberal arts candidates were tested on politics, Chinese, mathematics, foreign languages, history, and geography. Science and engineering candidates were tested on politics, Chinese, mathematics, chemistry, and biology. In addition to the written examinations, university applicants had to pass a physical examination and a political screening.

In 1985, changes took place in the admissions policy for universities and colleges. According to the new policy, universities and colleges were given the freedom of admitting extra students whose scores didn’t meet the original minimum admission requirements on the national college entrance examinations, but were willing to finance their own education. The threshold of the score requirements was lowered for those
students who were willing to pay their tuition. In the previous system, that is, before 1985, all students had been enrolled according to guidelines established in Beijing and did not need to pay their own tuition.

Until 1985, all graduates had been assigned jobs by the state. In 1985, some universities started to experiment with a system that allowed graduates to accept job offers or to look for their own positions. The majority of graduates in China are now no longer assigned jobs by the state. Graduates are responsible for their own employment.

Radio and Television Universities in China

Wei (1997) noted that distance higher education in China has never stood aloof from cultural, social, political, economic influences of the society. It is particularly true in the case of the target population in distance higher education at different stages of social, economical and political development.

Historical Perspective

Generally speaking, radio and television universities in China have experienced three distinct stages of development. These are described below in chronological order.

1930s to 1960s. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party established non-formal higher education institutions. They had great implications for the radio and television universities. The target group of the Communist higher education was Communist Party members from the ranks of workers and farmers, the majority of whom had received little or no formal education at all since the traditional education system was restricted to the rich and powerful. This form of education was characterized by short-
cycle and crash programs (Wei, 1997). As can be imagined, the focus was on political and practical matters rather than on academic achievement.

During the 1950s and 1960s, many correspondence colleges, along with the traditional universities, were open to people with worker-peasant origin with no entry qualifications. In 1954, Shanghai Radio Station set up a spare-time junior cultural continuation college for workers and farmers, which developed into Shanghai Self-Study Radio College in 1957. In succession, correspondence colleges were set up in Tianjin, Harbin, Jiangsu, and Shanxi. In 1963, the Ministry of Agriculture and other organizations established a broadcasting network for agriculture. In 1964, Youth Broadcasting College was set up in Shanxi Province, and later the Party’s Central Committee required all the provinces to popularize broadcasting education (You, 1992, cited in Keegan, 1994).

Educational television began in China in the 1950s. The Beijing Television University, known as China’s first television-based open university, opened in March 1960 and was quickly followed by other television universities in Shanghai, Shenyang, Changchun, Harbin and Guangzhou (You, 1992, cited in Keegan, 1994) to meet the demand of adult education. From 1960 to 1966, more than 8,000 students graduated from the Beijing Television University, and over 50,000 students finished single course studies through its teaching programs (Zhao, 1988).

1979 to 1986. In the late 1970s, after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, an evolutionary change began in China. The country attempted to modernize industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense. With the implementation of
the open-door policy and the initiation of economic reform, great educational demands were made of the government and educators (Gao, 1991). In response to the demand, a steering committee was set up with representatives from various ministries. The committee produced a report, and in mid 1978, the State Council approved the establishment of the Central Radio and Television University (CRTVU) and of 28 provincial television universities (PRTVUs). The first courses were developed in late 1978, and by February 1979 there was nationwide enrollment of students. In 1979, the Central Radio and Television University and Provincial Radio and Television Universities were established. The target population was working adults who were deprived of opportunities for higher education during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The radio and television universities implemented a policy that required students to be given time off work to study for three full years. Positive responses came from various factories and schools. However, this enthusiasm did not last long. There was a decrease in full-time students. In 1981, none of the radio and television universities in China enrolled any students. In 1982, a new specialty in Chinese language and literature was offered, which enabled the students to study all the required courses in their spare time. There was a slight increase in student enrollment this year (Tang, 1984).

1986 to the Present. In 1986, three important changes took place in the entrance examinations, the target students, and the delivery system. From 1979 to 1985, the examinations had been held by the CRTVU. Since 1986, applicants have had to pass national college entrance examinations held by the State Education Commission for all adults interested in higher education. In 1986, the radio and television universities began
to enroll fresh secondary school graduates and transmit the programs by satellite (Zhao, 1988). The secondary school graduates are those who have taken the national college entrance examinations but whose scores are not good enough to be admitted by conventional universities and colleges. These students finance their own education and can choose what they study. In the past, the majority of students were financed by their employers, and the qualification obtained would be closely related to change of social status, promotion, and increased salary (Wei, 1997). At present, almost all the students finance their own education, with the exception that students in teachers’ colleges or universities are funded by the government. The previous policy that workers got paid while they studied at radio and television universities was no longer enforced by the government unless the employers were willing to finance the students in the course of their studies. There are pros and cons in terms of paying for students’ education. If students finance their own education, they have the freedom to choose what they study. For students who are financed by their employers, they have little freedom as to the course selection. They should choose the major or courses that are relevant to their job (Hawkridge, 1988; Hawkridge & McCormick, 1983; Zhao, 1988).

The shift from a planned economic system to a market-oriented economic system in China has profoundly affected educational development and the education system as a whole. In addition, such change brought about a vast need for personnel with necessary knowledge for their job competence. In other words, socio-economic factors have caused changes in the mass market for higher education in China (Ding, 1994). The centralized approach to course development and delivery no longer meets the diverse needs of
learners and does not adapt itself quickly to new conditions. In response, China's radio and television universities have changed from a central system of course development and delivery to a regionally responsive system that provides a wide variety of both diploma and non-diploma courses.

By the end of 2002, the total number of graduates from radio and television universities with 2-3 years of college education and 4 year university education was 3,337,000, which is 12.7% of the total graduates from higher education institutions and 26.6% of the total number of graduates from adult education institutions (China Central Radio and Television University, n.d., para. 2).

Organizational Structure

The national radio and television network of higher education in China has formed a complete system throughout the country. China's radio and television universities are run at five levels, corresponding to the organization of China's system of national and regional governments (Organizational Structure—see Appendix A).

There is no political, administrative, financial nor personnel relationship between each of the five levels of the radio and television universities; relationships between each level are limited to the academic (Wei, 1991). The function of the Central Radio and Television University, at the highest level, without students of its own, is as a center for course design, development, production and distribution with responsibility for academic guidance and assessment on a national scale (McCormick, 1992, cited in Wei, 1997). In other words, the Central Radio and Television University controls unified admission standards, teaching plans, academic level and examination criteria. It is the national
center of teaching administration, program production, course delivery and distance education research (Zhao, 1988). At the second level, the 44 provincial radio and television universities are responsible for the organization and implementation of instruction and are authorized to award diplomas and certificates (Wei, 1997). At the third level are the branch radio and television schools. Radio and television workstations (study centers) belong to the fourth level. At the fifth level are the local classes where students attend.

The Central Radio and Television University relies on local radio and television universities to coordinate and accomplish the educational transaction, while local radio and television universities depend on the Central Radio and Television University for the provision of programs (Wei, 1997).

Accompanying the economic reform in 1978 were educational reforms, which allowed more freedom for provincial radio and television universities and the branch schools to offer particular specialties through local radio and television programs to meet the diverse needs of the students in individual provinces and local regions. Tutorial classes or television classes may organize special courses to suit local needs. The courses, approved by the provincial radio and television universities, are quite separate from those laid down by the Central Radio and Television University, and are usually much more specialized (Hawkridge & McCormick, 1983).

As of 2002, this distance education system was made up of 1 Central Radio and Television University, 44 PTVUs, 930 branch schools at prefecture and city level, 2,021 study centers at county level, and 22,237 teaching classes. The system is run and
operated at different levels, both central and local, on the basis of overall planning with the CRTVU as its center (China Central Radio and Television University, n.d., para. 1).

Modes of Study

There are three different modes of study available to radio and television university learners: full-time, part-time and spare-time. Secondary school graduates all study full time. Full-time students must finish their studies in two or three years according to the different specialty area teaching plans. Part-time students must finish their degree courses in three to six years, and spare-time students are allowed to accumulate credits over ten years (Zhao, 1988).

Teaching and Learning

China's radio and television universities are characterized by their heavy use of television for the delivery of instruction and the compulsory group work between tutors and students (Wei, 1997). Compulsory, paced, face-to-face tutorials are a common element at distance higher education in China. A few studies noted the importance of tutorials in distance education (Ding, 1994; Hawkridge & McCormick, 1983; Wei, 1997; Zhao, 1988). Compulsory, face-to-face tutorials can remedy the low quality of the instructional materials so that the quality of education can be maintained and the high dropout rate can be prevented (Wei, 1997). However, some studies also indicate the compulsory tutorials reduce students' independence, and students are not able to develop self-confidence. In addition, the tutorials do not stress developing students' problem-solving and critical thinking skills (McCormick, 1985).
The courses are multimedia, consisting of radio and television broadcasting, audio and visual recordings, and print materials. Curriculum development and teaching follow the pattern of regular higher education. Conventional classroom lectures are brought into the radio and television campus via radio and television with a teacher-centered approach dominating the radio/television programs, local courses, and face-to-face tutorials. The program usually lasts forty to fifty minutes. Audio and visual programs are usually the duplication of radio and television broadcasting. The printed materials include course textbooks, reference books, and study guides. The course books are more or less the same as those used in conventional universities or colleges (Wei, 1997). As Hawkridge and McCormick (1983) noted:

It is understandable that the Chinese television universities had to depend initially on television, compared with other distance teaching universities elsewhere. Television offers the only means of bringing well-qualified teachers to large numbers of students simultaneously, not in their homes but in the television classes. (p. 171)

Teaching is lecture based. Television is being used to teach in words, not pictures. Almost all the programs consist largely of numbers and Chinese characters written on a blackboard by a teacher who speaks usually off-camera (Hawkridge & McCormick, 1983). There is no interaction between the lecturer and the students during the instruction.

The main form of student learning activity is group instruction (Wei, 1997). Students who are studying full-time are expected to come to class for listening/watching radio/television programs. During the class, students take notes. Then they attend local lectures for courses offered at the local level and participate in face-to-face tutorials.
Radio and television programs as well as local lectures focus on the presentation of new knowledge; the face-to-face tutorials focus on further clarification and additional explanation of the points that students do not comprehend. Learning is reinforced through in-class and outside class assignments done both individually and cooperatively.

**Assessment**

Radio and television universities offer two, three or four-year degree courses with a yearly credit system. The academic year is divided into two terms, each with eighteen teaching weeks. The credit is calculated in terms of teaching hours, and one credit is awarded for every eighteen hours. Including credits given for field study, of 114 credits available, the minimum number of credits required is 76. A RTVU student must obtain no less than 60 percent of his/her total credits through courses offered at the CRTVU (Central Radio and Television University, n.d., para. 10).

Provincial radio and television universities may set mid-term exams for some of the courses, but the end-of-term exams for unified courses are set by the CRTVU and held at the same time throughout the country. The student who has completed the specified courses, obtained the total credits required, and been assessed as morally qualified can be granted a certificate of graduation. Both the two-year and three-year degree courses are recognized as college level education by the government (Central Radio and Television University, n.d., para. 11).

Although in tutorial classes students are given assignments and quizzes, they do not earn credit for what they do except special projects assigned in some courses. Rather, students’ progress is assessed through a final examination at the end of each semester.
Students who do not pass their exams can continue their study along with the following year's students, until such time as they pass the exam and obtain the required credits.

**Participation in Distance Higher Education**

It is difficult to characterize the students in distance higher education. Before considering what influences the distance learners to participate or not to participate, what value they perceive in distance education, and their status as students in distance education, attention should be directed to who these people are, and what characteristics they have in general. “Apart from differences in sex, age, cultural origin, marital status, source of income and level of previous education, the nature of their demand is a very complex one” (van Enckevort, 1986, p. 11). The reasons that students participate in distance higher education have not been adequately investigated. Research on this topic has been cited as an important need by distance educators (Brock, 1990, cited in Rezabek, 1999; MacBrayne, 1993, cited in Rezabek, 1999).

**Learner Demographics**

Moore (1998) believed that “distance learners in one country are more like those in others than they are different” (p. 3). Similarly, Thompson (1998) pointed out:

Many distance students do share broad demographic and situational similarities that have often provided the basis for profiles of the "typical" distance learner in higher education. Characteristics included in such a profile have varied, but generally have reflected some combination of demographic and situational variables such as age, gender, ethnic background, disability, location, and life roles. They have many things in common. (p. 10)

Several studies focused on demographic determinants which influenced learners’ participation in distance higher education. However, those studies often resulted in contradictory conclusions (Thompson, 1998). Some studies have reported no correlation
between student participation or persistence and specific demographic variables such as gender (Dille & Mezack, 1991), or age (Gibson & Graff, 1992), whereas other studies reported a positive relationship between participation or success and students' age (Dille & Mezack, 1991). Data from Athabasca University, Alberta, Canada noted an important difference in the gender variable. Women felt gaining a university credential was critical and the impact of failing was serious (Ross & Powell, 1990). A study of graduate-level students enrolled in traditional and computer conferencing classrooms found that the groups differed significantly only on age, with the average age of the off-campus students being older.

According to statistics provided by UNESCO (1999, cited in Kanwar & Taplin, 2001), only about 9% of the population of over 1.2 billion in China has reached higher education, and of these the gender ratio is approximately two males for every female (p. 9). The case studies from China concluded that many women now participated in distance higher education because distance education could benefit those women and their family members without taking themselves away from the home too much to do their studies (Kanwar & Taplin, 2001).

**Age.** Many studies have identified that distance learners are, on average, older than typical undergraduate students, and many of them are in-service adults. In the study of Dille and Mezack (1991), the average age of the students enrolled in telecourses at a Southwestern community college (the United States) was 27, while 80.3% of the students in Gibson and Graff's (1992) study of students in University of Wisconsin System Extended Degree programs were between 25 and 45. According to Robinson's
(1992) study, almost half of the students enrolled in the Open College of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Ontario (Canada) were between 31 and 46 years old. Wong (1992) noted that 83% of the distance education students at Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada) are 19 years of age or older. Based on studies from the last three decades, Holmberg (1995) concluded that the 25-35 age group seems to be the largest in most organizations (p. 12). At the Open University of the United Kingdom (UKOU), Swift (1980, cited in Keegan & Rumble, 1982) found that the majority of graduates (83 percent) were in full-time employment on entry.

A few studies report the age of distance learners at radio and television universities in China. The findings on the age of distance learners in China confirm what Thompson said. Distance learners in China do have many things in common with those in other countries. China's radio and television university degree student population mainly comprises working adults, both part-time, work-release full-time, and secondary school graduates studying full time, of which adult learners accounted for about 70% of the total student population.

Hawkridge and McCormick's (1983) study of China's television universities found that the students were all between 19 and 35 when admitted, and had at least two years of work experience. Upon entry, more than 95 percent of the students had jobs. About 50 percent of them were skilled workers, and 38 percent were under-qualified teachers. McCormick (1985) conducted a study in a local center of a radio and television university in China. In his study, all students were secondary school graduates. The average age in the local center was around 22; two-thirds of them were unmarried and
most were men. Howells (1989) identified that the registered students of the television universities in China tend to be those who have just left school and who are waiting to be assigned to jobs and young adults who are supported by their employers. In his study of the directions for higher education in China, Hodes (1995) found that the average distance learner was 30, with a range from 18 to 50, and was an in-service worker.

**Gender.** Enrollment of women and men varies considerably all over the world. This may be related to cultural differences. Most studies of distance learners in North American higher education reported that more women than men are enrolled in courses delivered at a distance (Thompson, 1998, p. 11). For example, in telecourses at the four institutions examined by Hezel and Dirr (1991), 61% of the students were female. This is similar to what Dille and Mezack (1991) found in their study of the students enrolling in the telecourses they examined; 71.5% of the students were women. Robinson’s (1992) study of distance students at the Open College of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Canada found that 77.9% were female. Taylor and Kirkup (1994) reported enrollment percentages of women in some of the larger distance education institutions: Open University, United Kingdom (50.0%); Indira Ghandi National Open University, India (26.0%); FernUniversitat, Germany (27.4%); UNED, Spain (54.7%); and Open University, the Netherlands (38%). Franks (1996) reported that three-fourths of the distance education students at the College of Rural Alaska were female. In Rezabek’s (1999) study of the motives, barriers, and enablers affecting participation in adult distance education classes in an Iowa community college, he reported that approximately 74% of the distance students were female.
Studies of distance learners in China revealed that male students accounted for 72% of the total, while female students were 28%; minority students represented only 2.3% of the total student population (Wei, 1997).

Motives for Participation

One of the most important studies in this area was done by Houle (1961), who studied the motivational orientations of adult learners. Through taped interviews with students, Houle studied adult learners who were actively involved in continuing education activities and developed a typology for describing three types of learners: goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented.

Mixed reasons. Numerous follow-up studies all over the world have mostly confirmed these motivational orientations, and sometimes have expanded on them (Boshier, 1971, 1991; Morstain & Smart, 1974) because the complexity of motivations has dramatically increased since Houle’s earlier studies. Some studies suggested that almost every learner has more than one reason for engaging in learning activities (Tough, 1968; Jones & Wallis, 1992). Darkenwald (1977) indicated in his study that most people appeared to participate in adult education for mixed reasons, some of which were unrelated to learning per se or to course content. Bolles (1979) suggested in his study that some kind of transition or change related to work was the major motivation for adults seeking further education. Similarly, Sewall’s (1984) study examined the concept of triggering events as a key motivator, suggesting that there was a relationship between an adult’s entry into college and a reported individual triggering life event. This concept of transition life event as a motivator for collegiate enrollment was premised in earlier
works by Aslanian and Brickell (1980). However, Sewall reported no distinctive entry motive which acted as a catalyst for an adult student entering higher education (Kasworm, 1990). And some other studies placed an emphasis on certain age groups and particular groups of individuals (DeJoy, 1997; Mohney & Anderson, 1988; Morstain & Smart, 1974).

In a survey of 2,000 Chinese students (1,698 responded) in Shandong, China, Jones and Wallis (1992) found that the top three reasons for participation in adult education were (a) to become more educated, (b) to improve effectiveness at work, and (c) to keep up to date.

Social change and career goals. A few studies examined the important role that social change and educational system have played in adults’ decision to pursue higher education. For example, in the United States, during the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of various community colleges with nontraditional programs for adults provided more and more opportunities for working adults. In the early 1980s, a shrinking job market necessitated degree completion for workers who wanted to remain competitive (Spanard, 1990). Many studies found that the goals for students to participate in distance higher education programs are work-related (Robinson, 1992; von Prummer, 1990). As Thompson (1998) noted, “Since the majority of distance learners are time-bound adults with multiple roles and responsibilities, it is not surprising that most have educational goals that are instrumental rather than developmental” (p. 12).

At UKOU, Swift (1980, cited in Keegan & Rumble, 1982) found 45% of the students were specifically interested in one or more of the following job-related benefits
when they first entered the University: promotion, better pay, or a new occupation. After studying what motivates rural adults to enroll in associate degree distance education programs, MacBrayne (1993, cited in Rezabek, 1999) found that “degree seeking, information seeking, participating, and job enhancing” (p. 30) emerged as four distinct characteristic motivational traits. Von Prummer's (1990) study found that the most predominant personal study goals that motivate students at FernUniversitat (a West German distance teaching university) are directly related to their wish to improve their employment potential. One interesting finding from this study is that a significant proportion of students who discontinue their distance studies cannot be counted as 'dropouts' in the sense of having failed their degree program. According to the criteria of students' personal study goals, a lot of so-called dropouts are seen to have been successful in their studies. According to Rezabek (1999), many factors contribute to most students' decision to enroll. The overriding motive for most was the opportunity to attain a degree and/or improve their career through a degree, and to accomplish this by minimizing the impact on their work and family life through distance education. For some, their previous working environment was a major part of their decision, e.g., some perceived their job to be a dead-end job.

The same is true in the case of distance learners in China. As a result of social economic change from a planned economic system to a market-oriented system and the initiation of four modernization programs in China, many state-owned enterprises have been closed down and many private enterprises have been established. To regain the opportunities or the dream of learning lost during the years of political chaos in China,
and to remain competitive in the job market, people participate in distance learning programs or courses. In the case study by Huang (2001), the student lost her chance to receive higher education during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). For her, distance education represented a second chance at education in her adult years when work and family commitments made it impossible for her to resume her education after the political chaos.

**Access and flexibility.** Research on learners' motivations for participation in distance higher education often focuses on the obstacles that prevent them from participating in traditional higher education settings. These obstacles are particularly important in the case of longer, i.e. degree, studies (Schutze, 1986). Many studies suggest that most of the obstacles have something to do with the students' life situation, higher education entry requirements, curricula, schedules, modes of delivery, or support services (Schutze, 1986). With changes in organizations, policies, and practices, access to higher education is much easier. Distance education has been developed to bridge the gaps. For example, a lot of higher education institutions offer degree programs through distance education to potential students who were kept from enrolling in the regular system. Other barriers to on-campus attendance include time and distance. In Hezel and Dirr's (1991) study, 75% of the students viewed distance from campus as a "very important" or "somewhat important" barrier, and 95% of the students identified time constraints as a "very important" or "somewhat important" barrier. Similarly, Livertos and Franks (1992) surveyed college students enrolling in a telecourse and found that 82% of the students identified lack of time for on-campus attendance as a very important
motivation for enrolling in distance education programs. Factors contributing to the
sense of being time-bound include work, family, and community responsibilities (Willis,
1994). In Rasmussen's (1992) study, convenience and the instructor were the two
strongest influences for adult students to participate in distance learning programs.

According to 23 case studies from mainland China, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan,
Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (Kanwar & Taplin, 2001), distance education enables mothers
to stay home with their children.

Learning environment and support. Willis (1994) found that some students
enrolled in distance learning because they were attracted to innovative learning
environments. To them, distance learning represented not merely an acceptable
replacement, but rather a desirable alternative to on-campus instruction. Previous level of
schooling has been reported as having correlation with students' participation and success
in distance higher education (Gibson & Graff, 1992).

Support and encouragement from a friend, spouse or co-worker sometimes help
students overcome discouragement from another individual or frustrations during the
learning process. Li's (2001) case study of a distance learner in China found that the
student received encouragement and support from her mother, tutors and group peers.
The tutors around her helped her whenever she needed. The study groups students
voluntarily constructed helped every distance learner gain more confidence in learning
and reduce their loneliness.
Obstacles to Participation

Obstacles that affect students' participation and their perceptions at radio and television universities in China include (a) loss of independence, (b) lack of time, and above all, (c) the status of the learning achieved through radio and television university programs.

Loss of independence. In the literature about distance learners in the Western countries, there are issues of learner isolation and lack of effective interaction between teachers and students and among students. However, in China, distance education has different implications. Within the context of radio and television universities, distance education means education via broadcasting, television and/or radio, supplemented by printed, audio, and video materials, and compulsory face-to-face tutorials. Contrary to the distance education in other countries—such as Britain's Open University, and distance teaching institutions in the United States where distance education is famous for its open access and stress on learners' autonomy and independence—distance education at radio and television universities in China does not allow learners much independence, although recent policies have begun to encourage individual study. In McCormick's (1985) study, students complained that there was too much discipline and control over them. Even though they were in their third year they still had to sign in each day. Besides, although they were legally adults, they were still treated as minors, with the branch school arranging meetings with parents. Students had little control of when they went to classes or when they could study by themselves. Despite the utilization of radio and television in teaching, print still carries more of the instruction. Many programs do
little more than reading the textbooks, which were produced by the CCRTVU during the last ten years, or those used elsewhere in the country's higher education system. Texts tend to be out-of-date and were not written for independent learning (Hawkridge & Chen, 1991). Students were not satisfied with either teachers broadcasting the program or teachers in the tutorial class (Hawkridge & Chen, 1991; McCormick, 1985). The tutorial class environment did not encourage them to learn. Some students thought it was a waste of time for them to be there because the teaching method was inappropriate and did not guide students in understanding. According to students, tutorials should be progressively reduced. Most of all, tutorials should be optional. However, teachers held differing views. Most of the teachers considered the tutorial as the most important element of the quality control in distance education. A few studies supported what teachers perceived as most important. For example, Ma and Hawkridge (1995) noted that many unregistered students watched the broadcasts but did not attend tutorial classes; as a result, their success rate in examinations was very low.

Lack of time. Time is the biggest issue for distance learners in radio and television universities (McCormick, 1985). All students agreed there was insufficient time for individual study, and they wanted to see a shift in emphasis involving less TV. At present, most students' individual study was done in the evening, and even the recommended ratio of TV time to individual study was not achieved because of tutorial time and time for locally run courses. Not only did individual study help them internalize the teaching material, but also it developed independence. The majority of current full time students at radio and television universities were graduates from the senior high
schools. They believed that they should have more control of their time as regular university students, and especially as third year students they should have done more individual study with the TV being a guide to study the learning materials.

**Status of Learning Achieved**

Keegan and Rumble (1982) noted that

If one believes that the quality of distance education is not as good as that of conventional education, then one will not accord it as much status. Indications of the status accorded the learning achieved by distance students come from:

- The extent to which other educational institutions recognize the studies for credit transfer purposes.
- The acceptance of the degrees and diplomas awarded as qualifying students to go on to higher-level studies.
- The recognition of the awards by employers.
- The esteem in which the distance teaching institutions and their awards are held in the community at large. (p. 236)

As far as radio and television universities are concerned, at present, no radio and television university student is allowed to apply to a conventional university to study further or to transfer credit (Hawkridge & McCormick, 1983). Besides, many parents still have prejudice against the radio and television universities. They want their children to pursue a conventional higher education in the hope that it would be ladder to a higher social position. Where choice was available, they pushed their children away from the radio and television universities (Ma & Hawkridge, 1995). Such universal prejudice influences students' perceptions of their status as students enrolling in distance education programs, which might have unexpected consequences to distance education programs. Distance education programs might gradually come to an end without sufficient students enrolling in the programs.
Before 1986, according to the policies for the radio and television universities in China (Radio and Television Universities in China, 1984), after graduation, students should be recognized as having equivalent status to that of conventional college graduates and, where necessary, they were assigned new jobs in their original work units to suit both their newly acquired specialty and the needs of the units. They received the same salary as conventional college graduates. Young people who were waiting for jobs would be employed by the local employment department according to their study records. When they were assigned a job, they would receive the same salary as a regular college graduate. However, in China, graduates from conventional universities or colleges were guaranteed graduate-type job assignments with salary to match on the basis of a national manpower plan. The radio and television university graduates were outside this plan. For those who were working before being admitted to the radio and television university, their work units alone were responsible for any promotion and/or salary increases. In the case of radio and television universities, although the Ministry proclaimed that the radio and television university graduates were equivalent to those from conventional colleges; many work units were not in the position to honor this (Hawkridge & McCormick, 1983). For those secondary school graduates, they had to look for jobs themselves.

In 1986, changes took place in traditional higher education institutions in terms of job assignment after graduation. All graduates from traditional higher education institutions are responsible for their jobs. They are no longer assigned jobs. Since 1986, graduates from regular universities or colleges and those from radio and television universities have been challenging each other for positions in the job market. At the
radio and television universities, many students are concerned about the employment prospects upon graduation. Xu (1986) reported similar concerns students had in his study of some aspects of distance education in China. The recognition of the status students learned via distance education by employers suggest two things: (a) the extent to which employers are willing to hire graduates from distance education, and (b) the extent to which graduates from distance education succeed in obtaining well-paid jobs (Keegan & Rumble, 1982). As more and more secondary school graduates are admitted to the radio and television universities, will these learners be sure of finding jobs after completing their study? One more problem concerns the job placement of the radio and television university graduates. About one-fourth of them were estimated to be doing work which had little to do with what they had learned. Such practice seems to confirm what Wei (1997) said:

China's distance education belong to the non-formal sector of the higher education system, which is characterized by its low social status, vocational and technical orientation, association with qualifications, and close linkage with social and economical development. (p. 52)

However, contrary to what Hawkridge and McCormick (1983) found, Xu (1986) examined 34 graduates of the electronics major at Chuansha County Branch Television University, a branch of Shanghai Television University in China, and found that graduates were highly recognized in the local employment market. Before being admitted, 3 out of 34 graduates were technicians, 4 were shop assistants and 27 were ordinary workers. After graduation, some went back to the work units where they came; others were assigned new jobs. They were given wide credit for their solid mastery of basic knowledge and their capability to handle practical problems. Similarly, in 1991,
State Education Commission sponsored a tracer study of television university graduates from 1982, 1983, and 1985. The principal findings of the study were that 77 percent of the graduates were employed in jobs matching their television university specialization and that 86 percent of the employers rated the employees as very good.

In addition, studies done in other countries confirmed the same finding. McIntosh and Rigg (1979, cited in Keegan & Rumble, 1982) showed that about half of a sample group of employers regarded the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) degrees as equivalent to one from other universities. Swift (1980, cited in Keegan & Rumble, 1982) found that 38% of graduates reported they benefited solely because of their UKOU qualification, 16% indicated that the degree had helped their progress, 15% said that they had made progress independently of their qualification, and 31% reported no change in their circumstances. According to the results of a 1994 survey of 674 graduates of academic degree programs offered via distance education in the United States, 96% said they thought the degree they earned was worth the effort, and 92% of the supervisors said they would be inclined to hire or supervise other employees who have earned their degrees through distance study (Distance Education and Training Council, 1994). In a study of graduates' perceptions of the value of distance education degrees gained from the FernUniversitat, Barrels and Rathore (1989) concluded that the FeU degrees have been valued highly in the employment market in Germany since the degrees have contributed to change jobs radically, and these new jobs have brought to a majority of graduates promotions; better intrinsic motivation in work; better chances for promotion; better chances to use knowledge, skills/qualifications; better pay and better
chances to take responsibility. Furthermore, according to some of the graduates, employers believed that studying at a distance at the same time as bearing a full-time employment is a sign of higher engagement, determination, endurance, purposefulness, and ability to take stress.

Summary

Student attitudes and perceptions towards distance education programs and their status as students enrolling in those programs can be influenced by a number of situations and experiences. Negative attitudes regarding one's ability to achieve the goals on entry in academic situations can result in a lack of confidence, and lost desire to participate in other distance learning activities. Researching the factors affecting students' participation and problems of differing perceptions about their status as students and the learning achieved via distance education programs can provide valuable insights.

Reviewing these areas of literature is important in providing background to the research questions. The next chapter describes the design of the study.
CHAPTER 3
DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate, within the context of a radio and television university in Northern China, students' participation in distance education and their perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved through distance education programs. To provide structure and direction for this study, the following questions were formulated:

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

The design described in this chapter was proposed to answer the five research questions. This chapter presents the design of the study, including (a) boundaries to the research questions, (b) setting and participants, (c) researcher as instrument, (d) protection of participants, (e) data collection, and (f) data analysis.

Boundaries to the Research Questions

The research method used in this study is a case study. In selecting the potential radio and television university, two guidelines were used: (a) availability, and (b)
possibility of gaining access. The purpose of conducting a case study is to learn as much as possible from that case, not to generalize beyond that case (Stake, 1998). This study was an exploratory case study based on a need for a general understanding of distance learners' perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved via radio and television universities in China. Mitchell (1984) defined case study analysis as “the detailed presentation of ethnographic data relating to some sequence of events from which the analyst seeks to make some theoretical significance” (p. 237). Case study research often uses ethnographic methods (Stake, 1998). The ethnographic methods used in this study are document reviews, observations, and interviews.

According to Wolcott (1975), in attempting to understand culture from the point of view of those living in it an ethnographer must strive to know the meaning the actors themselves assign to events in which they engage. More often than not the ‘facts’, as observed using conventional quantitative research methods, which are constrained by predetermined hypotheses and categorization, do not bring out all the meanings when observing participants’ human behavior. According to Myers (1999),

> Ethnographic research is one of the most in-depth research methods possible. Because the researcher is there for a reasonable amount of time—and sees what people are doing as well as what they say they are doing—an ethnographer obtains a deep understanding of the people, the organization, and the broader context within which they work. (p. 2)

Wilson (1977) indicated that human behavior often has more meaning than its observable facts. The research methods used in this study allowed me to engage in research that “probes for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features” (Johnson, 1995, p. 4). In *The Flame Trees of Thika*, Huxley (1959) said:
The best way to find things out is not to ask questions at all. If you fire off a question, it is like firing off a gun—bang it goes, and everything takes off flight and runs for shelter. But if you sit quite still and pretend not to be looking, all the little facts will come and peak around your feet, situations will venture forth from thickets, and intentions will creep out and sun themselves on a stone; and if you are very patient, you will see and understand a great deal more than a man with a gun does. (p. 248)

Wolcott (1992) however, reminds us that no matter how tentatively one goes about it, one must position oneself adequately to have a sense of purpose. This sense of purpose includes some hunch about which data may prove of greatest use. To Wolcott, the real secret in descriptive work is not to gather as much data as possible but, rather, to get rid of as much data as possible, as soon as possible.

What Huxley and Wolcott said above helped set the boundaries of my study. Each research question is discussed more fully below in order to provide focus to the study.

The first and the second questions of the study are: “What, in their opinion, is their status as students? and “What is the perceived value of the learning achieved at radio and television university?” In order to maintain a focus regarding my study, I limited my research to students at one radio and television university in the North of China. These two questions led me first to the history of the radio and television universities and the functions that the government had in mind for them originally, and then to the perceptions of students in terms of the status of the learning achieved at radio and television universities.

To address these questions, I first explored the government documents concerning the history of radio and television universities and related policies. Second, I conducted
field observations. Based on the findings from the document search and field observations, I interviewed participants, generated discussions, and asked them about their perceptions of their status as students and of the learning achieved through radio and television universities in comparison with those at conventional universities or colleges. During the interviews, the interviewees provided me with what they perceived to be their status as students and the learning achieved via the radio and television university.

The third question of the study was, "What are their reasons for participation?" This question relates to why students choose to learn at a distance. There may be internal and external reasons involved in their decision. To address the question, I went to the official documents relating to the policies and interviewed students. Through document search, I generated questions needed in the interviews with students. Through interviews with students, I asked them about their reasons for their participation.

The fourth question of the study was, "What factors influence their perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved at the radio and television university?" This question is closely related to what is their status as students and the reasons for their participation; that is, why they chose to learn at a distance learning university in the first place. To address the question, I interviewed students in order to find out what factors influenced their perceptions of the status as students and the learning achieved at the radio and television university.

The fifth question of the study was, "What recommendations do students make about changing the current perceptions of distance learning?" This question relates to the changes that students would like to see in terms of people’s perceptions towards their
status as students and the learning achieved via distance learning. To address this question, I explored the goals of the students to discover what they felt important. Through formal and informal interviews with students I generated discussions and asked students about their goals of enrolling in the program, their perceptions of the learning achieved through distance education, whether they believe they have achieved their goals, and what they recommend for changing the current perceptions.

Setting and Participants

The radio and television university chosen for this study is located in the North of 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 information center, computer experimental center and classrooms on net, lecture hall equipped with multimedia, audio-visual reading room, and all kinds of laboratories. At present, there are 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 1807 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’s 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, video tapes, and correspondence texts prepared by, or for,
the institution.

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. Purposeful selection seeks
information-rich cases which can be studied in depth (Patton, 1990, p. 169). This
strategy was used to understand students' participation in distance education and their
perceptions of their status as students within the context of one radio and television
university without necessarily intending to generalize the findings to all other radio and
television universities in China.

The characteristics around which participants were purposely selected were that
they were full-time students in a bachelor’s degree program majoring in law. After
completing their two-year college program at the university, they had been promoted to a
four-year bachelor’s 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’s degree programs. The fifteen students were chosen for the formal interviews
specifically because the university personnel granted me the permission to conduct
observation of students' daily life and to interview with them at any time, thus allowing for the collection of the data needed for this study.

At the beginning of the study, one major concern for me was the effect of the fifteen students being chosen by the university personnel. Before going to the site, I communicated to the university by phone the purpose of my study. The fifteen students selected by the university had extensive experience as distance learners. Their availability during the time of my study was an important factor for them to be selected. I dealt with this problem by selecting three other interviewees from former graduates and an administrator and all the informal interviewees. After explaining explicitly what my study was, the former graduates and the administrator agreed to be interviewed. Yet, due to the time availability, the interviews were conducted as a group. Other informal interviewees such as students or their parents were selected during my observations at different stages of data collection.

The other concern for me was the squeezing of the interview time between the other daily demands of those students. In addition to course study, my interviewees were involved in many social activities such as welcoming new students when school started. To deal with this problem, every time before an interview I checked with my interviewees about their schedules and adjusted my time accordingly.

As I spent more and more time on the site, both my interviewees and I became familiar with each other. The observations of my informants, their daily behavior, their interactions with other students and me gradually drove away my concerns.
Researcher as the Instrument

In this case study, I, the researcher, actually became part of the instrumentation. Therefore it is important for the reader to know what has brought me to study the issues at hand. The reader should be informed of my background, my preparation for conducting the research, motives, and why I feel qualified to conduct the study.

My interest in studying student perceptions towards distance education first developed in 1990. At that time, I taught both traditional and non-traditional students at both conventional universities and distance teaching universities in China. In addition to teaching, I was also very active in research and course development. From 1994 to 1995, I published several articles on the methodology of teaching and learning at a distance. In collaboration with a colleague, I published a textbook: "Listening and Speaking" for distance learners at a SEHEIS program. I have a Bachelor's degree in Language Arts, a Master's degree in British and American Literature, and another Master's degree in education. Since I was admitted into the doctoral program at the University of Northern Iowa in 1997, I have taken several courses in research. Some of the courses provided me with opportunities of practicing what I had learned. In Spring 1999, I conducted a study investigating native language maintenance among Chinese children who came to the United States with their parents. In the study, I stayed on-site over three months, observing how students interacted among themselves and with the teachers and conducting interviews in and outside of the classroom with the teacher, children and the parents. In 1998, I did a study examining adult learners' reasons for participation in distance education in China. In the study, I surveyed 76 students who enrolled in
SEHEIS, a distance education program in China. Those studies paved the way for me to conduct this study.

There is no doubt in my mind that I am in support of distance learning as a viable way to provide access to higher education, particularly in China where the population is large and the resources and universities that people could have access to are limited. Distance education via different media provides wider access to whoever has an interest in learning regardless of age. I believe distance learning will help improve the quality of people in China as a nation with wider access to education.

However, I must admit that I was also perplexed in mind about distance education. As an alternative form of higher education, I felt it to be valuable. Yet, in my mind, the learning achieved through distance learning institutions was inferior to that achieved via traditional universities in general. To me there was no comparability, especially when one considers the target population at distance learning institutions compared with those at traditional universities.

As my study progressed, my concerns faded. I began to see that, for learning to take place, resources are important, but not determining, factors. All learning requires a degree of motivation, self-discipline, and independence on behalf of the learner regardless of where the learner is. Failure on national college entrance examinations does not mean that students will fail forever. Distance learning is not just an alternative to providing wide access to students for higher learning. It has the same educational value as traditional universities. Especially in China, distance learning is a combination of media and tutorial instruction. In traditional universities in China, teaching is also
supplemented by media, so there is ultimately not much difference in teaching between conventional and distance universities. During the study, especially the observational components, I saw how the distance education students studied. It was not different from what I had done as a student at a traditional university.

Protection of Participants

Participants are “human beings with problems, concerns, and interests” (Spradley, 1980, p. 34). 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.

As a researcher, I had a positive responsibility to safeguard the rights, the interests and even the sensitivities of my participants and to consider them first (Spradley, 1980). I did everything within my power to “protect their physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and privacy” (Spradley, 1980, p. 35). Communicating the aims of research is essential to building a relationship of trust between the researcher and those studied.

When I entered the field, I informed students of the purpose of my study, that their participation was voluntary and that their confidentiality was assured. Confidentiality was extremely important to the students who were selected by the university to be the participants in the formal interviews for my study. All recorded (both taped and written) materials were utilized only by me for my dissertation. Pseudonyms
are used in the presentation of data to protect the identity of each participant as participants have a right to remain anonymous (Spradley, 1980). After the recorded interviews with each participant, I presented my notes and played back what I had recorded and gained approval for using the data collected (member check). I promised that I would give each participant a copy of the findings upon completion of the study and a copy of my dissertation to the university. Therefore, they would be able to read the whole dissertation if they were interested.

Data Collection

A key strength of the case study method involves using multiple sources and techniques in the data gathering process. The case study method, with its use of multiple data collection methods and analysis techniques, provided me with opportunities to triangulate data in order to strengthen the research findings and conclusions. The major sources of data in this case study were observations and interviews in conjunction with document analysis. This study was carried out in four phases ranging from open-ended data collection to more focused data collection. Interviews used in this study were both informal and formal. Formal interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. Formal interviews were conducted between student and the researcher within a period of 30 minutes or so. During the research, observations and interviews mutually interacted with each other, either simultaneously or sequentially, in the course of doing the study (Agar, 1980).
Four Phases of the Research

**Phase one.** This phase included the pre-field work and initial entry into the setting. During the pre-field work, the researcher made decisions about the focus and the purpose of the study, considering the setting, participants, time, the possibility of gaining access, and the selection of tools and techniques. The natural setting selected for this case study was a radio and television university in the North of China. Participants were the degree students within the institution. The time schedule was set for the research from August to December 2000.

The university studied required permission from the administrative manager. Before entering the field, the researcher contacted the related personnel to help remove barriers to entrance by communicating with them the purpose of the study through letters and phone calls (Letter to the University Leader--see Appendix B). However, as Zaharlick and Green (1991) noted:

Access to ethnographic studies involves more than permission to engage in a . . . study. It involves negotiated initial entry and often negotiation of access to additional persons, institutions, or settings as the study unfolds given the interactive-reactive, context-responsive nature of ethnographic research. . . . Access, then, in an ethnographic study, is never totally obtained. (p. 214)

Because ethnographic researchers are asking participants to "grant access to their lives, their minds, [and] their emotions" (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 25), it is also important for the researcher to provide respondents with a straightforward description of the goals of the research.

**Phase two.** This phase involved the actual fieldwork. Data collection for this phase included observations/field notes collected in the social situation (Spradley, 1980),
student profiles, university newsletters, journals, interviews/informal conversations with the participants, and the researcher's journal. This phase focused on the first three research questions. During this phase, the observations were broad descriptive observations, trying to get an overview of the social situation and what goes on there (Spradley, 1980). The interviews were done to check and expand on the initial data from the observations, documents and the researcher's journal (General Interview Questions—see Appendix C).

**Phase three.** This phase included checking out the researcher’s interpretations from the observations and interviews with participants and focused on the first four research questions. According to Heron (1981, cited in Kamm, 1998), fully understanding human behavior “involves participating in it through overt dialogue and communication with those who are engaging in it” (p. 23). During this phase, the researcher narrowed the research and made more focused interviews. Data collection for this phase included observations, interviews, member checks, and document review.

**Phase four.** This phase focused on the last three research questions. Data collection during this phase employed observations and interviews. Both observations and interviews were done to check the researcher’s developing interpretations.

**Observations**

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.

Observational data were used for the purpose of description of settings, activities, people, and the meanings of what was observed from the perspective of the participants.
Observation can lead to deeper understandings than interviews alone, because it provides knowledge of the context in which events occur, and may enable the researcher to see things that participants themselves are not aware of, or that they are unwilling to discuss (Patton, 1990). Observations in this study included descriptive observation, focused observation and selective observation (Spradley, 1980). The selective observations were specifically done during the formal interviews. As explained earlier in the chapter, the fifteen degree students were pre-selected by the university personnel rather than me, the researcher. I had concerns as to what extent the students were willing to share with me about their perceptions and what was really in their minds, and as a result if the data were tainted.

First, as a participant observer, I went to the university, observing students in different places such as the library, audio-visual reading room, and computer labs for several weeks. To avoid being an intruder or giving students the sense of being observed by a stranger, I bought some clothes and dressed myself in the way that was appropriate at the university. I had left China about four years ago, and the clothes I had with me from the United States when I returned to China to conduct the study were not what the local people would likely wear. I was not aware of this until my sister in China mentioned this to me. 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 for the purpose of collecting data for this study. However, after I arrived at the field, I could only conduct observations 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 tutor was in process but was politely denied.
Informal and Formal Interviews

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. Bell (1999) said that the way in which a response is made (the tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation, etc.) can provide information that a written response would conceal. Interviews allowed me to probe deeper into responses by clarification and restatement of questions back and forth.

In his study of gender issues in technology education, Haynie (2003) indicated:

The manner in which an ethnographic interview is conducted has great effect upon the depth and accuracy of findings. People who feel comfortable, safe, and valued are more forthcoming than those who are treated merely as sources of information. Spradley compares the ethnographic interview to other "speech events," such as the friendly conversation, and points out how it is similar in form but more directed in purpose. An effective ethnographic interview should begin as a friendly conversation and then transition to its purposeful elements establishing rapport along the way. (p. 19)

To achieve this, before conducting the formal interviews, I spent time familiarizing myself with students. For each interview, I discussed with the interviewees first about when and where they would like to have the interviews. The time and place of the formal interviews were all determined by interviewees.

The formal interviews and the small group interview were taped, transcribed, and circulated back to the interviewees as a member check. Data was 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.

Additionally, two open-ended questions emerged from the observations and informal interviews concerning the role of students' teachers at senior high schools and the role of students' parents. These two questions were asked as they related to factors influencing students' participation and their perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved at distance learning programs.

**Document Review**

Another source of information that was invaluable to me was the analysis of documents. Such documents included official records, newspaper accounts, journals, and reports, as well as the published data used in the review of literature. In his study of technology teachers in training, Hansen (1995) analyzed journal entries and memos written by participants, in addition to interviews. Hoepfl (1994, cited in Hoepfl, 1997, p. 54), in her study of closure of technology teacher education programs, used newspaper reports, university policy documents, and department self-evaluation data, where available, to supplement data gained through interviews. Documents used in this study included student profiles, university newsletters, government reports considering radio and television universities and students and other related journal accounts as well as the
programs the university has offered, course syllabi, research journals, and television program schedules.

**Language Recording and Use**

In this study, to record the data, I employed written notes, camera, and a tape recorder. Whether one relies on written notes, camera, or a tape recorder appears to be largely a matter of personal preference. For instance, Patton (1990) says that a tape recorder is "indispensable" (p. 348), while Lincoln and Guba (1985) "do not recommend recording except for unusual reasons" (p. 241). They based their recommendation on the intrusiveness of recording devices and the possibility of technical failure. To me, recording had the advantage of capturing data more faithfully than hurriedly written notes might, and made it easier for me to focus on the interview. However, to avoid unnecessary trouble caused by technical failure, I took notes while recording during the interviews. In addition to written notes and a tape recorder, I used a camera to capture any important details that I might have missed during the observations. In total, sixty-eight photos were taken of the computer lab, audio-visual classrooms, as well as the student buildings and campus.

There were three kinds of field notes: (a) condensed notes, (b) expanded account, and (c) transcribed notes from the recordings of the interviews. The transcribed notes from the recordings helped me to make a complete record.

The language used to record the data collected was primarily Chinese. The data recorded on the tape recorder was first transcribed in its original Chinese language and
then translated into English for presentation and interpretation of the data. The translated version of the data was validated and approved by a former English professor.

Researcher’s Stance

During the study, I adopted the roles of complete observer and moderate-participant observer depending on the circumstances and different stages of study. I was also the interviewer and the interpreter of the data received.

Credibility

To enhance the credibility of the study and to reduce researcher bias, I used triangulation, member checking, and crosschecking of the data collected and the translation. As often as possible, a trend that is identified in one data source is corroborated by at least one other data source (Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1998). The primary source of data was from the fifteen bachelor’s degree students majoring in law. Other sources of data included observations, interviews of other students, graduates, and an academic administrator. For the data collected from interviews, I asked my participants to check and validate what I wrote down. As a result, I made some corrections accordingly. During the process of translating the data from Chinese to English, I consulted with a former English professor for accurate translation whenever I had questions. After I completed translating all the data into English, I gave them to the English professor to review both the original Chinese and the English translation. The professor had over 12 year experience in teaching English at a teachers’ university in China. After several reviews and discussions, the professor approved the translation.
Data Analysis

In this exploratory case study, analysis was a process of question discovery. The goal of the 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 next period of participant observation and interviews. Data collection and data analysis were interwoven, influencing one another. I refined the initial questions as the unfolding patterns of everyday life became visible through observations, interviews and initial data analysis. Data analysis included materials from the fieldwork, both written and recorded, and documents. As McMillan (2000) suggested, “a thorough analysis requires three steps: organization of the data, summarizing the data, and then interpreting the data” (p. 264).

In this study, I used codes as categories to organize the data and searched for patterns for data analysis. General interview questions guided the coding of the data. I used Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, and Q5 as categories. Within each category, I adopted numeric series for interview responses and observations. A number assigned to each category code was written in the margin of the transcripts and field notes next to the corresponding code. To protect the participants in the presentation of the data, I used a combination of two letters standing for their pseudonym. For data analysis, the first task was to separate the data collected from observations and interviews so that all the data relevant to each research question was grouped for that question. The second 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 third task was to look for relationships among categories that suggested generalizations.

For each group of data, I selected quotations from the interviewees to prepare for the actual writing of presenting and discussing the findings. It took me much longer to sort the data collected, to select the quotations needed for the writing, to comprehend, and interpret the meaning of the data than I had expected. For detailed lessons I learned during the process of data collection and analysis, please see My Own Learning in Chapter 5.

Summary

In summary, Chapter 3 described the design of the study, covering the setting, participants, phases of research, how and what data was collected and analyzed. In the following chapter, the findings from observations, formal, informal interviews, and document reviews will be presented.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter first presents a description of the initial data collected as contextual information: (a) what the site is like, (b) who the students are, (c) a significant annual event on campus, and (d) a typical day as a student. Later sections report the findings from individual interviews and a small group interview. Last comes a summary of the findings.

Initial Findings: General Context

This section reports data collected initially from document reviews, observations, and informal interviews. It describes the city, the university, freshmen registration and student daily activities. This should help readers relate it to their existing knowledge and participate in a rich experience.

The City

The university is situated in one of the four municipalities directly under the leadership of the Central Government in China. The city is the largest open sea-port in North China and ranks 15th among the largest cities in the world. It is one of the birthplaces of modern higher education in China.

In 2004, the gross domestic product (GDP) for the city was 293.2 billion Chinese Yuan; per capita income was 31,600 Chinese Yuan. Farmland takes up about 40% of the city’s total area. Wheat, rice, and maize are the most important crops. Fishing is important along the coast. The city is also an important industrial base. Major industries
include petrochemical industries, textiles, car manufacturing, mechanical industries, and metal working (The World Factbook, 2005).

As of 1998, conventional universities and colleges in the city had 78,700 undergraduates, and 18,300 students graduated that year. There were also 4,950 students enrolled for master’s degrees and 1,461 doctoral students. Students graduated with masters and doctoral degrees were 1,400 and 367 respectively. There were 42 adult and distance higher education institutions enrolling 65,300 students, with 19,800 graduations that year.

The University

Although it was late summer when I arrived at the university, it was still very hot. The temperature was above 86° F. Several trees were still blossoming. There were many big trees and evergreens on campus. Some people were sitting or standing in the shade. On the two concrete poles of the gate were two signs: the name of the university and the Research Center for Super Hard Abrasives. There was a small suggestion box at the door. The main building facing the university gate was the Teaching and Learning Center.

In the entrance of the center, there were two blackboards on each side of the hall wall. On the left blackboard were written words from the late State Chairman Xiaoping Deng: “To develop teaching methods so as to quicken the tempo of modernizing radio and television education”. On the right blackboard were those from the former State Premier Peng Li: “Radio and Television University is a significant medium to promoting education in China and has broad prospects.” Hanging in the middle of the hall facing
the entrance door was a big television, about twenty-seven inches diagonally. The Teaching and Learning Center consisted of five stories. There were classrooms, a library, a reference center, audio-visual reading rooms, and an information center. In each classroom, there were about eight televisions in the front, middle and the back of the classroom. The lecture hall was equipped with multi-media. The computer laboratories were located in another small building, not far from the Teaching and Learning Center. There were other buildings on campus such as the administrative building and health clinic. The university playground was situated between the Teaching and Learning Center and the small building where the computer laboratories were.

Walking on campus, into each building, each classroom, I felt like I was on the campus of the traditional university where I was an undergraduate about twenty years ago. The campus, the buildings—all looked so familiar except the television sets in the classrooms and the hallway. That sense of connection and familiarity immediately grasped me.

The radio and television university had many things in common with the traditional university where I studied as a student and taught English for over eleven years, such as the layout and components of the campus. They both have administrative buildings, classrooms, library, offices for teachers, audio-visual labs, and clinics. However, unlike students at traditional universities or colleges, during class time, instead of a live professor, students at this radio and television university had TV as their instructor. On the TV, a professor did the teaching or lecturing. In the classroom, similar to those at traditional universities with the exception of the televisions, they watched TV.
for their lesson and they studied by themselves and with tutors’ help. After each class, they went to the library or reading room to study individually or in groups. For each class, students at this university were required to take the examinations held nationally, unlike students at traditional universities whose exams were given by their professors who taught the class. During the time of my stay in the university, I noticed there were no dormitories or student residences on campus, which was different from traditional universities or colleges in China. Traditional universities or colleges usually have both resident and non-resident students. The dormitories or student residences are for resident students. At this radio and television university, all the students, whether part-time or full-time, were non-resident. For full-time students, they were similar to non-resident students at traditional universities or colleges. They were senior high school graduates and they also took national college entrance exams. They did not live on campus. No wonder I felt like I was back to my old university campus.

Freshman Registration

The academic year at this radio and television university started at the end of August. Just like the routines at the traditional universities or colleges, the first three days were the time of registration for first-year students. Around the campus, especially the Teaching and Learning Center, were tutors, administrative staff and current students welcoming new students and their parents who accompanied their children for the registration and orientation.

In the hallway of the Teaching and Learning Center, about eleven oblong desks were carefully placed facing the entrance. The entrance door was kept wide open. All
the desks were covered with registration forms, flyers, and a display of photos showing students in the library, on campus, and in the computer laboratory. Behind each desk were sophomore or junior students and their tutors, ready to welcome and help the new students. Each program or major had its own designated desk to welcome the new students. With smiles on their faces, sophomore and junior students or their tutors were busy answering questions from whomever approached them, whether asking for directions or about registrations. From the way they answered the questions they appeared to be really at ease. Most of the new students were accompanied by one or two parents. For some new students, one could not tell whether they were happy or excited. There was not really any facial expression. Some students seemed relaxed. Most of the students talked with their parents in very low voices except one girl student. She looked to be 17 or 18 years old. She appeared very happy and excited. Her eyes glittered, laughing, while talking with her parents. She (OL, 10) told me: “Finally, now I am a university student. I’ve grown up, not a little girl any more”. Her parents seemed influenced by her happiness and excitement. They (OLP, 12) responded, “Yeah, finally. . . . Now you need to study and make good use of resources here . . . program, you like, you’ve got what you wanted.”

To the girl, being admitted into this radio and television university appeared to be a revelation of her success and a milestone in her life. To some extent, her parents felt relieved and at the same time had more expectations for her future.

After registration, most students and parents took a tour around the campus. During the observation, I, the researcher, approached some new students and their
parents. After a brief chat, I asked them a few questions guided by the research questions of this study. The following are responses from some of the students and their parents during informal interviews:

It's a modern city... Economy here is good. It is one of the best cities in China... I believe it is one of the leaders in education. On the whole, everybody here knows the importance of education. Knowledge is very important... Many famous universities here... like... many people from other cities want to come here to study... they were attracted to this city... many public libraries as well... here, this university... facilities seemed good, even though it is not as big as... University or Nankai University. (BO, 8)

Yeah, we were born here. Our child was born here too. We like here. Education is really good... many universities, colleges, many programs to choose from... many research centers such as teaching and learning... Oh... we have many nation-wide educational journals. (GI, 6)

Oh, this is the first time we came here, not really know much about this university... to describe the educational community in this city... really... good, many famous universities, national key universities... the level of education on the whole is advanced compared with other cities in China... I believe we have more technology utilized in education than many other cities. (FLP, 15)

They seemed to know the city inside out; geography, history, education and university conditions. It sounds like they were very proud of being a resident in this city and it would take them a lot to leave this city. When asked about how they learned about this university and if they have received adequate information pertaining to the university, the program, distance education, the courses offered, and other relevant items before the application, most of the interviewees could not recall any specific advertising that was done by the university that attracted their attention. However, for most of these students and their parents, they knew the existence of such a university in their city, together with other national key universities as well as traditional universities. Information about the university, its teaching and learning, was seemingly acquired in different ways, which
helped them make their final decisions before applying for the enrollment. Some students and their parents toured the university themselves to have a better understanding of what kind of university it is. As one student said:

Well, we didn't make decision right away. My parents and myself, we came here before applying, campus... small, but seemed to have a lot of televisions, computers, books. The audio-visual rooms seemed okay. We talked with some people in the admission office, learn more about the programs they offered, how they taught, how students would learn. (LO, 17)

Other interviewees advised me that they learned from their neighbors or friends who either graduated from this university or still studied at this university, that the university was really good—having not only fascinating computers and labs, but many joint activities with other universities—making it very different from the senior high schools from which they had just graduated (e.g., ZF, 22).

Students' Daily Activities

During the day time classes students gathered in the classroom. Students told me that their tutors managed the class by turning on the television, confirming that everything worked as expected such as picture and volume. Students started their class by watching and listening to the professor on the television. They had their textbooks in hand. While watching/listening to the professor, they would follow what the professor taught and took notes. After each class, they went to the library or reading room to study individually or in groups. Sometimes, I saw them chatting outside the reading room or classrooms. Other times, I saw them talking with their tutors. Some classes were held in the evening. During the day time, when the full time students were free, some of them stayed on campus, studying on their own. The text books they studied were designed for
students at radio and television universities. Other students went to the city public library to study. Still some others attended classes at traditional universities or colleges in the city. All students appeared to be busy taking courses either on campus or off campus. Nobody seemed to simply be idling.

The field experience, especially the formal interviews with the fifteen degree students, became my personal journey, recalling to me the many days of countless painful exams I had experienced, the stress, expectations of my parents and teachers, the deep-rooted beliefs and values people have been holding for centuries on that land. Having once been a full participant, I was constantly aware of my responsibilities towards my informants. Interviewees shared with me their personal struggles prior to being enrolled at the university, their reasons for participation, and perceptions of their status as students. Their reasons or perceptions may or may not differ significantly from other students who participated in similar non-traditional universities. But what they shared helps us to gain rich insight into the life of those who had similar experiences. For most of the students who participated at the radio and television university, there were several factors that contributed to their decision to pursue higher education at this institution.

The names of the participants, whether I interacted with them through observations, informal, or formal interviews, are pseudonyms. They are used to protect the identities of the participants. However the circumstances and all the relevant information are accurate representations of the participants. Only the names have been changed. Gender and age were not individually addressed as they were not the focus of this study.
While conducting my study at the university, I was often asked for my personal rationale for studying this institution in particular. I explained to them my previous teaching experience with different learners and the purpose of my study. They also asked me what they would receive from my study. I explained that I would give the university a copy of my dissertation in English and a copy of the abstract with the findings and analysis to all interviewees in English or Chinese upon the completion of my study, depending on their personal preference. In addition, I gave my email address and home phone number to all my formal and small group interviewees for future correspondence. I believe I have gained my interviewees’ trust, which was crucial to data collection.

Findings: Degree Student Interviews

This section provides a detailed description of the data collected from the formal interviews. It describes (a) the demographics of the student interviewees, (b) their reasons for participation, (c) their perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved, (d) factors influencing their perceptions, and e) student recommendations for changing the current perceptions of distance learning.

Demographics of Student Interviewees

The formal interviews involved fifteen bachelor's degree students selected by the university personnel. They were third-year, full-time students majoring in law. According to the university personnel, the availability of the students was the major criterion for the selection of the group used in the study. Another important factor was that those students had extensive experience as distance learners. There were nine female students and six male students, ranging in age from 20 to 22. They were all unmarried.
The learner demographics in my study confirmed what McCormick (1985) and Howells (1989) found in their studies on distance learners at radio and television universities in China. McCormick revealed that all students in his study were secondary school graduates. The average age was around 22, and two-thirds of them were unmarried. Howells identified that the registered students of the television universities in China tend to be those who have just left school. Of the fifteen students, fourteen of them were born in the city where the university was situated, and only one student was born in another city. However, all of the fifteen students were local residents. The majority of the students were the only child in their family, which was the norm in the urban areas of China as a result of the enforced family planning policy by the Chinese government in the 1970s.

Reasons for Their Participation

All of the interviewees were readily able to explain why they chose the radio and television university to pursue their higher education. Their answers, however, to more specific questions about their participation, their status as students, perceptions of distance learning, or any recommendations of changing the current perceptions of distance learning, drew more cautious responses. The most often cited primary reason for participation in the distance learning via the radio and television university was their inability to choose traditional universities due to their poor performance on the national college entrance examinations. Some students said that being admitted to the radio and television university was either their last wish (HN, 38), or their first choice within their
last wishes (MN. 14). From the following responses, we can still feel the stress, the helplessness, and the inner struggles those students had gone through:

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)

In the Application Form, I couldn't remember exactly, two years ago, I believe, there were three categories ranking First, Second and Third. In the first category were traditional four-year universities including national key and provincial key universities as well as ordinary universities. In the second category were 2-year universities or colleges. The third category included those radio and television universities, self-taught universities. Any student wished to be admitted by the first category universities. Oh, dear, I guess, with my score, what do I expect? My score was not good enough even for consideration by universities in the first or even second category. The third category was for me, so, I chose here. (JV, 23)

Even though I realize my score was not good enough for me to be admitted into traditional universities….my marks were 20 or 30 marks higher than the minimum score requirement at this radio and television university. (MW, 21)

Well, during the exam, I was sick and I knew that I didn’t perform my best, my score, much lower than what I had done during the simulated quiz prior to the actual national college entrance examination. It was just unbelievable. I was one of the top academic students in our class. (MZ. 9)

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 the last one. The students, no different from most people in the society, didn’t value the radio and television university in this city. Other than the lower scores, there were other reasons for their enrollment at the radio and television university. 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 in comparison with 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."

In China, as a result of the implementation of a household registration system (hukou) in the 1950s, this city, like other cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, has its unique policy favoring the local residents in terms of education, employment, housing and healthcare. For local residents in this city, if they choose to go to other cities for higher education except Beijing or Shanghai, it implies a downward mobility, and it would be rather difficult, if not totally impossible, for them to return to their native city and seek employment there. Therefore, the location of the university is a significant factor that affects Chinese people's decision-making in choosing to which university to apply.

Other than the scores and the location of the university, there are reasons for students' participation in distance education via the radio and television university. For some, the desire to have a fresh start and the programs offered at the university appeared to have contributed to their decision to enroll. One interviewee (PN, 11) indicated that the radio and television university had various programs. Another interviewee (GV, 12) said: "This major, law, relatively new and I believe I could find a job more easily than other majors." Similarly, another two shared with me what they had in their minds at the time of applying for the enrollment at the radio and television university:

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)

Well, I just wanted to have a fresh start. I guess at that time, I was really exhausted; I didn’t want to repeat the next year. I wasn’t so sure if I could get a better score even if I took the exam next year. I was like a battle, not so sure if I could win that scary battle. Why waste another year… No, I thought for a long time, no maybe there are some chances later, I said to myself. Nobody could tell. I didn’t want to go back to senior high school again, doing the same thing over and over again, tests, and quizzes, no ending, pretty scary… I kept asking myself, ‘do you really want to repeat?’ No, definitely not. (KN, 29)

All of them expected to obtain some opportunities at the university, although they seemed unsure of exactly what they might be. The desire to start fresh and the availability of the program they liked at this university played important roles in helping students make their final decisions for their participation in distance education via this radio and television university.

Student Perceptions of Their Status and the Learning Achieved

I tried to keep the interviews as conversational as possible. The conversations started from their perception of the university and then led to their perception of their student status and the learning achieved at this university.

The University. I asked the interviewees to think about how to describe the educational community of the university within the context of the city. The first two interviewees didn’t know how to respond. Then I rephrased the question, and they appeared to know where to start talking. Interestingly enough, all the interviewees started with describing most of the universities and colleges in the city, including the national key universities as well as distance learning universities. From the order the
interviewees listed, this radio and television university was the last one in their
description, leaving an impression of academic inferiority. However, as the interviews
went on, they talked more and more about the contributions their university had made to
the community. To them, as they told me, there wasn’t much difference in reputation
between the radio and television university and other traditional universities or colleges at
the same level. When asked further, all expressed that tuition fees, course materials, and
resources were similar compared with the traditional universities at the same level. They
believed student support at their university was good. They had tutoring time, though
mostly in groups. Facilities were really good, such as computers, television programs,
language labs, reading labs, and the library. They had access to library materials in
different places. They mentioned that the educational environment at the university was
better as it had more advanced technology and computers than traditional universities.
From what students shared, they were positive about the course materials used, the
learner support, and the use of tutors at this radio and television university. This is
different from what McCormick (1985) and Hawkridge and Chen (1991) found in their
studies. McCormick’s study revealed that students were not satisfied with either teachers
broadcasting the program or teachers in the tutorial class. The study by Hawkridge and
Chen found that texts tended to be out-of-date and were not written for independent
learning.

Most interviewees also indicated that the campus was smaller; the library,
particularly, being smaller compared with other traditional universities. However, one
student commented:
It didn’t really matter that much as we could go to other universities to register for some other classes, check out books from other libraries. We have famous professors from different key universities to teach us via television program...really good. When I talked about this with my parents...they felt better. My friends really admired me, sort of...when I told them how we had our classes. (MJ, 22)

It seemed the students already understood the advantages and disadvantages of this university. They had plans in place to face the disadvantages. It appeared that the advantages of this university actually won them admiration from their peers. However, what puzzled me was when all the fifteen interviewees described the universities in China, their university came up as the last on the list. When I asked the interviewees why they mentioned their university last, almost all of them had similar responses. They told me they didn’t really know why, and it may be just a habitual act. According to them, whenever people around them talked about the higher education institutions in the city, people always mentioned the national key universities or colleges first, and ended with the distance education universities or colleges. From their responses, we could feel their sense of inferiority though they may not be aware of it themselves.

**Student status.** When I asked them how they perceived their status as students at the radio and television university, all fifteen interviewees said they believed they were undergraduate students. They had the same student status with those from national key universities or conventional universities. For example, they enjoyed the same student discounts as other university students did when they went shopping or some places. Like all other students at traditional universities, they could apply for the admission into master’s degree programs in any university after they complete their four year study with a bachelor’s degree at the radio and television university. In terms of status and the
learning achieved, they did not feel inferior, although others may perceive them differently. They said:

Although 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)

At the beginning when I learned I was admitted by this radio and television university, 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)

The students were not complaining, but on the other hand, were analyzing themselves. It is true that they did not do so well in the past national college entrance exams, but they could be successful at this university since they knew themselves better now. What they told me was that they believed that their failure on the exams two years before didn’t have much impact on them. Compared with other classmates who did really well on the exams, they had felt unhappy at the time, but such feelings of unhappiness were just temporary. Was it really temporary? Did their failure really mean nothing to those students? I doubted it. Two other students shared a bit more about how they prepared for their exams and why:

Nobody really knows, I don’t know why, the stress, fear, every time, before, even a small quiz and I know I had prepared everything. I was just scared, just in case, if I miss anything. (LN, 14)

For other students at traditional universities, especially key universities, they felt they have had sufficient knowledge, as they are elite. They don’t spend much time
studying, like me. In their opinion, they could easily find a job after graduation because they have that brand name on their diploma. Their universities have good reputation. I didn’t believe so and I keep telling myself that I need to be well equipped with knowledge and experience for future jobs. Future will tell. (KN, 22)

The failure to be admitted into traditional universities cast such impact on them that they put themselves on the alert. They could not really enjoy the university life as students at traditional universities did. 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 were afraid of another failure.

Learning achieved. All of the interviewees indicated that for teaching and learning they used a combination of television, on-line via computer, and face-to-face tutorials. Most students expressed their satisfaction with the way the courses were delivered and the learning achieved via the radio and television university. As one student said:

I like the method in this university. At other institutions, all courses were taught face-to-face, just like what we did at senior high. Here much technology and independence. Still, if I have questions, I could ask the tutor afterwards. It is not like nobody helps you. (YV, 18)

However, some students indicated that there should be more on-line teaching, less face-to-face tutorial. They liked the fact that the on-line teaching allowed them more independence and flexibility. As a result they could control their own learning. The strengths most often stated were flexibility. Of the fifteen interviewees, twelve claimed time flexibility as a strength because they could study when they felt most ready, as one interviewee (KN, 29) commented: “The flexibility, do it when you want to, when you’re
fresh or when you want to do some other things some other time.” Another interviewee
(MS, 44) had similar comments: “The time to go to court to gain experience at day time,
link back to previous learned materials, create new concepts, new ideas based on two or
three experiences at court.” According to the interviewees, students at traditional
universities or colleges had classes during the day. It was difficult for those students to
go to the court during daytime except during the internship. Yet for students majoring in
law, practice was equally important compared to learning from the course materials.
What students identified as strengths above is contrary to what McCormick (1985) found
in his study. McCormick reported that students complained there was too much
discipline and control over them. Even though they were in their third year they still had
to sign in each day. Besides, although they were legally adults, they were still treated as
minors, with the branch school arranging parents’ meetings. Students had little control of
when they went to classes or when they could study by themselves.

Strengths less often mentioned were the newly utilized computer technology as
one of the media for their learning, fascination with the technology per se, and the
opportunity to "control" (MJ, 38). The thing most often identified as a weakness was
immediate feedback from the instructor. In terms of interacting with the instructor, only
one interviewee commented:

I don’t have the instructor around me….that when I have a question, I could ask
and get immediate feedback to guide further thinking. Sometimes I was lost and
couldn’t really understand what the instructor on the television talked about.
Then the rest of the time was….to me, wasted. (LN, 8)

Most interviewees indicated that the tutor was the main source of support for them
beyond the course materials and helped them counterbalance the absence of the
interaction between the instructor and students in their learning. This is consistent with what Burge and Howard (1990) found in their study of audio-conferencing in Canadian graduate education, which indicated that the effective utilization of local tutors increased student satisfaction with courses.

When I asked the interviewees if the courses they took at the radio and television university were recognized or accepted by employers or other universities, all the interviewees responded positively about the employers' recognition. In terms of recognition by other universities, the findings are different from what Hawkridge and McCormick (1983) found in their study. Hawkridge and McCormick found that no radio and television university student is allowed to apply to a conventional university to study further or to transfer credit. According to the students I interviewed, it was impossible for other universities to recognize the courses they took if what I meant was transfer of credits. However they also indicated that they never considered this as an issue or concern as students could not transfer from one university to another at their own free will in China anyway. This rule applied not just to students from the radio and television universities but to those at traditional universities as well. In addition, according to them, the degree achieved at the radio and television university is considered the same if they want to pursue a Master’s degree after they complete their bachelor’s degree at the radio and television university. Like all students at traditional universities, they could apply to any university to pursue a higher degree.
Factors Influencing Student Perceptions

During the formal interviews, the interviewees revealed several factors that influenced their perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved at the radio and television university. Deep-rooted beliefs and values regarding education was the most often cited factor for affecting students’ perceptions of their status as students and the learning achieved via distance education (by 14 of the 15 interviewees). Other factors include people’s mindset, teacher practice, the job market, and student orientation at the university.

Role of education. In China, the level of education a person can achieve is primarily determined by his or her performance during each phase of the examination. The scores determine at what kinds of schools students are eligible to enroll. At each level of education, including primary school, junior high school, senior high school and higher education institutions, there are key schools and regular schools. In the minds of the general public, those students who can make it to the national key universities are considered the most competent and the best. Education is the only safe route to changing a person’s identity or status in the society if he or she wants to escape the fate of being a normal laborer all his or her life. To succeed in one’s future life, one must succeed in every examination, especially the national college entrance examinations. Most people see education and a degree achieved at national key universities as an admission ticket to a new prosperous future.

People’s mindset. In the minds of the Chinese people in general, the radio and television universities are for adults and for those who have performed poorly on the
annual national college entrance examinations. They assume that education offered at radio and television universities is not formal education. One interviewee (LV, 24) 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.” Another interviewee (MS, 19) 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.”

**Teacher practice.** Teachers at senior high schools appeared to have the same perceptions towards radio and television universities as the general public in China. Several interviewees said:

> 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)

Believe it or not, what the teachers at senior high schools have said or done in their daily practice reinforced the perception that whoever were admitted to non-traditional universities to pursue their higher education were losers, not just once but forever. Such perceptions affected students and their parents in perceiving the status of the students and their learning achieved at the radio and television university. One interviewee (YV, 10) commented: “Well, in people’s mind, the university you go to determines your future. It
is hard to believe but it is a fact.” Another interviewee (HN, 22) made the similar comments: “When I was at senior high, everybody, especially teachers, stressed how great future one would have if admitted into the key national universities.” Two interviewees felt bad about the university to which they were admitted. One interviewee (YN, 27) told me: “After the exam, when our neighbors asked my mother which university I was admitted to, the look on my mother’s face, I could tell, she was not happy, well, no, actually, she was sort of ashamed of me. I let my parents down.” The other interviewee (MN, 12) said: “When I went out, I didn’t like wearing the university badge. Why, it is different, as if it were telling everybody in the world that I am a loser.”

**Parental support.** There were, however, some positive comments about the support they had received from their parents when they decided to pursue their higher education via this radio and television university. One interviewee (PN, 18) told me: “My mom was not really happy, but she supported me. She checked with her friends, I think she wanted to learn more about the university. So, we actually took a tour before applying for admission here.” Another interviewee (MN, 25) explained further with the support received from parents: “They were disappointed at my performance. But they supported my decision. I guess, in their mind, I wasn’t as bad as the score showed. Even my mom told me: ‘It is hard to tell, It [the three-day exam time] is such a stressful time.’”

**Job market.** When asked how the graduates from the radio and television university were treated in the job market, the responses from the interviewees were not consistent. Most of the interviewees agreed that in the current job market, what attracted the employers most was the brand; that is, which university diploma the candidate was
holding. Whether a candidate could get the opportunity to be interviewed was based on the brand of their university. One interviewee said:

I’ve never been to a job fair. But I heard from my senior high school teachers that if there were two candidates applying for the same job, one has the Nankai University diploma and the other has the radio and television university diploma, the one with radio and television university diploma would be declined the job even without interviewing. (MN, 19)

However, she went further that she learned from some graduates that what the teachers said was not totally true. Capability was more important to the employers than the diploma itself. Similarly, another interviewee responded:

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)

One student explained more about the job market:

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 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)
The students had already studied the job market before graduation. To me, some students were able to weigh their advantages and to make a smart choice of staying away from competing with the brand-name university graduates. They could see their future in other cities than the local city where they reside and complete their university studies.

**Annual orientation.** As students moved through the process of adjusting themselves to their roles as university students, a number of events occurred which helped them change their perception of their status as a student and the learning achieved at the radio and television university. The orientation was the most cited event that helped students change their perceptions toward their status as students at the radio and television university. Like all other universities, traditional or non-traditional, the radio and television university has annual orientation education for the freshmen. The initial task for the orientation education at the universities in China was usually to familiarize the freshmen with their professors/staff, facilities, resources, student services available, and university regulations via different types of welcoming activities. Psychology programs were provided to help students adapt to their new roles as university students. The Student Association provided freshmen with cooperative learning activities.

All of the student interviewees reported that the orientation education helped them regain confidence in themselves as learners. They agreed that they felt welcomed by the teachers, rather than looked down upon. One student (MJ, 13) said: “The teachers were really nice. They didn’t treat us inferior. Every time when I asked a question or check out a book in the library, nobody really took me as some sort of loser.” Another interviewee (MN, 13) said: “At the beginning, I felt really bad. I thought I was inferior,
but later, my perception changed. Now I am settled and became more peaceful.” Still more interviewees shared with me the process of their inner struggles and the impacts of the orientation education:

I could still remember that summer, the darkest time in my life; I don’t know how I passed that summer. When I came here (radio and television university), I wasn’t really excited. I guess, I was, that feeling, difficult to describe. What the teacher at this university said made sense. Gradually, day by day, I became settled, relaxed, concentrated on my study, I know myself, my potential. (YV, 45)

I wasn’t in the mood the whole summer before the school started. The orientation had great impact on how I felt about myself, learning, and what I perceived as distance learning and the roles of students. Whether you learn or not has nothing to do with where you are. It has great to do with whether you yourself want to learn or not. One of the key verses I still remember from the orientation is: ‘Gold glitters wherever it is.’ Since I was a student at the radio and television university, I should concentrate on my learning. Such verse encourages me in my learning. (HN, 22)

The students went through struggles and the pain of decision making. As a result, they matured. They could change their own perceptions, if not other’s, of the role the university would play in their life. Some students said that the concept of being students at the radio and television university motivated them to learn more. They had great confidence in their learning potential and future goals. Several students explained that other than courses at the radio and television university, they also took computer courses and English classes at traditional universities during evening time or holidays, but their friends at traditional universities didn’t have such a sense of crisis. After two years of study at this radio and television university, they all passed the exams successfully and were promoted to a four year degree program. Yet, when we talked about the national college entrance exams, it was like yesterday. Although they didn’t say it in their own words, what I heard, was that their previous failure on the national entrance exams has
haunted them in their life. They would never be able to get over with it. They couldn’t afford another failure; they had to make sure they were well-prepared for any exams and for future employment.

As a full participant in the Chinese culture myself, I know what those students have gone through. Although they kept telling me that they have confidence in their own learning capabilities and their future, I could tell they were at the edge, and they were still suffering from what happened two years ago. Furthermore, their sufferings would have great impact in their future life, whether personal or at work. My own experience in the culture has always prevented me, to some extent, from really enjoying learning itself. Failure on any exam, big or small, at school or at work, means so much to the people who grew up on that land (China). The way that I was brought up in China in terms of education has impacted how I perceive as the proper way of learning for my children, which sometimes has caused conflicts between my son and me. Once when my boy was going to have a geography quiz, I acted as if an enemy were going to invade my home. I asked him if he had prepared everything. He responded positively. But I asked him to give me his textbook. I wanted to test him before the teacher. At first, he was okay, answering my questions. As I basically wanted to test him on everything page by page, I tried to get him ready for the quiz, just in case he missed anything. However, he became impatient and said he had prepared well for the quiz and was pretty confident in himself. I tried to explain to him the necessity of preparing everything to have the best mark. He just laughed and couldn’t really understand why I was so nervous. Such incidents happened quite often at home. Every time after the incident I would tell myself to let it...
go and it would be okay if he missed anything. I am aware of it and just couldn’t stop myself. It seems strange that I would feel nervous before the exam even though I was not the person taking the exam.

Student Recommendations

All the interviewees perceived changing the current perceptions of distance learning to be a larger task than appeared; and it would not only take time, but people from all works of life. People’s perceptions would not change over night. It was a long-term task.

The most cited recommendation for changing the current perceptions was to raise the public awareness, which was the job of marketing; not just by the radio and television university but all distance learning universities as well. The general public should be provided with adequate information about distance learning, programs offered, available courses, methods of teaching and learning, and especially the wide range of target populations depending on the programs. In addition, there should be some advertising about how graduates from distance learning universities perform at their current jobs, how their learning is recognized by employers and co-workers, and how their learning benefits the community as a whole.

Second, most interviewees suggested that teachers, especially those who were currently teaching at senior high schools, should recognize the learning achieved through distance learning universities. As educators, or “engineers of human souls”, as interviewees said, they should know better than anybody else that learning does not only take place via traditional ways of instruction at traditional universities. Students did
indicate that teachers at senior high school were under great pressure every year, and their performance at teaching was primarily evaluated based on the number of graduates from their classes going on to national key universities, provincial key universities, traditional universities, two year colleges, or radio and television universities. As a result, consciously or unconsciously, they also evaluated the students’ performance in their daily learning based on the marks they could obtain in every quiz. Interviewees mentioned that it was not easy to change what the teachers were doing as it was largely determined by the examination system in China. As long as the examination system remains the same, it will tend to maintain teachers’ current practices.

Third, interestingly enough, in their recommendations, interviewees placed a heavy burden on the students themselves. They believed that students were partially responsible for the current perceptions of distance learning. According to them, many students did not focus on their learning after enrollment. As a result, they could not perform their jobs well after graduation. Those bad examples serve as negative marketing to the general public. Word of mouth marketing, for many, is the most common source of information and much stronger than public marketing. If they want to change people’s perceptions of their status as students and learning achieved via radio and television universities, they need to do a better job in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities as students, as one interviewee (MS, 7) pointed out: “Learning takes place not just at traditional universities. If you are motivated to learn, it doesn’t matter where, how you learn.” With the learning achieved, they could prove to the general public their capabilities.
All of the interviewees felt strongly that their failure once on the national college entrance exams would not stop them from succeeding in the future. They would not fail forever. They were aware of people’s perceptions and they thought differently from what people perceived. Some interviewees commented:

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)

I think, we need to raise public awareness of the existence of the university. We have good or even better instructors than most of the universities. We lost once in our national college entrance exam, not really lost, sometimes, just one or two makes difference. It didn’t mean that I would lose forever. (YN, 9)

In a study by Threlkeld and Brzoska (1994), they noted that there was little empirical evidence to show mediated instruction suffers in comparison with face-to-face instruction, stating, “The instructional medium doesn’t appear to make any important difference in student achievement, attitudes and retention” (p. 42). They conclude that the media itself is not as important to instruction as other variables, such as learner characteristics, motivation, and instructional alternatives. It is these variables, they suggest, that are more pertinent to the process of learning and teaching at a distance, and thus to the ability of distance education to meet the needs of learners.

**Findings: Small Group Interview**

In the previous sections, the observations and interviews, especially the formal interviews, focused primarily on current students. To more thoroughly understand how people other than the current students perceived the status of the students and their learning achieved, the small group interview explored, on a more in-depth level, the
target population and the learning achieved via the radio and television university in the past and at present.

This section first provides the background information on the small group interviewees. Then it reports the data collected from the three interviewees: the role of the university, changes in the target population, and challenges and problems they perceived that the radio and television university was facing.

Background information.

There were three interviewees in the small group interview. Kao, the academic administrator, was in his late fifties. He has been in the educational sector for more than ten years, and is experienced in distance education, and in managing distance education programs and students records. He has conducted research on distance learners, distance teaching, and the use of media in distance education. Yu, a former student at a radio and television university, was about 45 years old. She was an undergraduate student in an adult education program designed for in-service adults about 15 years ago. Her daughter graduated from a radio and television university last year and was currently working in a big company as an accountant. Xia, a taxi driver, was about 40 years old. He was a part-time student at a radio and television university ten years ago.

Their Perceived Role of the University.

The three interviewees believed that the radio and television university has been one of the key stakeholders in promoting the general level of education in the society and making higher education accessible to a wide range of audience, young and old. Its role in the educational community cannot be underestimated. When asked how they
perceived the university, the three interviewees responded in varying ways. Some of their comments follow:

We cannot compete again Beijing, the capital of China where the famous universities are located, such as Beijing University, Qinghua University; however, the educational community here has been regarded as one of the best in China. The rapid development of national economy in this city spurred the rapid social and educational development. In education, it is one of the advanced cities of fulfilling 9 year compulsory education in China. Resources, research, facilities are good. (Kao, 5)

Yeah, in education, our city is really more advanced than most of the cities in China, not Beijing, but certainly much better than most. We have many national key universities, research centers, facilities, resources, libraries, computers, student support services, many journals on teaching and learning and research. (Yu, 6)

Within the community, the radio and television university has been playing an important role in making higher education accessible to people who are interested in continuing education. Although the policies of higher education enrollment is more open and number of enrollment is greater than before, the number of enrollment is still limited. Think about how many students graduate from senior high schools every year, our country, big population. In most recent years, the annual enrollment at the radio and television university has been around 13, 000 students, not including open learning students, non-degree students, and other post-secondary training programs. Relatively speaking, distance learning has its own strengths. In the past, radio and television university was categorized under Adult Education but now is under higher education along with conventional universities and colleges. (Kao, 7)

**Target Population.**

The target population has been broadened since its establishment twenty years ago. In the past, radio and television universities were mainly for adults, in-service or work-release, full time or part-time, degree courses or vocational training. During the ten-year Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, many senior high school graduates were sent to rural areas to receive re-education from farmers. As a result, many of them were deprived of the opportunities to pursue higher education. By the time they had
opportunities to pursue higher education, they were too old to be admitted at regular universities. The maximum age requirement for admission during that time was 26 years old. Many distance learning universities were established to meet such demand, as Yu said: “The greatest contribution of the university in my time was that it provided opportunities for those who wanted to learn but lost chances during the ten year Cultural Revolution, me a good example.” Similarly, Xia appreciated that the radio and television university provided him with the opportunity to learn. Now given the number of graduates from the senior high schools each year, the limited enrollment at traditional universities and the need for knowledge, the target population has been broadened to include this group of young senior high school graduates. Kao commented:

This year, full time programs, the target population are those who just graduated from senior high schools and participated in the national college entrance examination for universities and colleges and met our requirements, I meant, minimum score criteria. Part time programs, mostly for in-service adults...various programs...depending on the program. (Kao, 6)

Learning Achieved

In terms of learning achieved at the radio and television universities, both graduates agreed they were highly respected within their job assignments. In their current job positions, they were respected by their employers and coworkers. They each assumed important responsibilities and key roles. During the interview, Yu talked about how her learning from the radio and television university helped her in accomplishing her job responsibilities and gaining the respect from her coworkers and employers and getting promotions in her job. Another graduate, Xia, talked about how his learning from the radio and television university helped him to be a better parent in his child’s
education. Both former students and the academic administrator expected that the
students at the radio and television university to be active learners and to take initiatives
in their own learning, not to be restricted by the concept of traditional education. A
typical response was that of Yu in the following:

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)

From the above, it could be concluded that whether the student status and the
learning achieved via this radio and television university are perceived as valuable or not,
they depend heavily on the relationship of the supply and demand in the job market.

The academic administrator mentioned that courses on television or Internet were
programmed by professors from key universities in the city. Course materials were well
developed and approved by the Ministry of Education. There were organized activities
among universities. Due to the flexibility of time at the radio and television university,
many students have registered in classes at other universities to pursue their interest in
learning during their spare time.

Both graduates indicated that certain conditions for learning were important to
enhance students' learning experiences as distance learners and their perceptions towards
distance learning via radio and television universities. Those conditions included access
to library materials, collaborative learning, and student support such as tutors, feedback,
and the quality of course materials. They agreed that the skills they developed via
learning through distance education helped them in having better time management and
independence in their work-related activities as well as in their family and social
activities.

Perceived Problems and Challenges

All of the three interviewees expressed their concerns about the current
perceptions of distance learning; which is that people perceived the status of students and
their learning achieved via the radio and television university as lower. According to
them, such perception had a negative impact on students’ participation and the
development of distance education in the long run. Yu indicated that the university
should market to all areas in China, not limited to senior high school students or adults
within the city only. In addition, teachers should conduct more research on distance
learners’ participation, their learning, and the level of their satisfaction with the learning
achieved through distance learning. They commented further:

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)

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)

In this city, with the expansion of enrollment in traditional universities and
colleges and with more distance learning courses being offered at those institutions, the
radio and television university appears to be slowly losing its market.
Summary

In summary, for most of the students interviewed, many factors contributed to their decision to choose the radio and television university to pursue higher education. The overriding reason seemed to be the inability to choose other universities due to the fact that their scores did not meet the minimum enrollment requirement for other universities. Other reasons that appeared to have influenced their decision most were the location of the university, the desire to have a fresh start, and the programs offered at the radio and television university.

Most of the interviewees believed that the status of the students at the university was no different from those at conventional universities at the same level although the general public may perceive differently. They were positive about their learning achieved at the radio and television university and their future job prospects.

For many of the student interviewees, the factor that influenced their decision to participate was the support or encouragement they received from their parents or friends. Although most parents had expected them to make a different decision—for example, to retake the national college entrance examination—they still showed their support once the students voiced their preference. Finally, all of the interviewees were aware of the significance and necessity of changing the current perceptions of distance learning and made recommendations accordingly.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I will present conclusions based on the findings presented in the previous chapter. The chapter is divided into six sections: (a) summary of the purpose of the study, (b) conclusions, (c) limitations of the study, (d) my own learning, (e) recommendations, and (f) suggestions for future research.

Summary of the Purpose of the Study

This case study was designed to inquire how distance learners' perceive their status as students and the learning achieved in distance education programs within the context of one Chinese radio and television university. It was also intended to explore why they participate in distance education programs, possible causes for their perceptions and to find out any possible solutions that students may suggest changing the current perceptions of distance learning. The purpose of conducting a case study is to learn as much as possible from this case (the radio and television university in the North of China), not to generalize beyond that case (Stake, 1998).

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

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

Conclusions

An analysis of the data collected from document reviews, observations and interviews indicated several findings. Findings and conclusions of this study are presented under each research question to which the data pertained.

Research question one asked what was, in the students’ opinion, their status as students. The findings to this question indicated that the students interviewed, whether freshmen or juniors, perceived themselves as undergraduate students, with the same status as those students at traditional universities, even though others might perceive them 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 in the utilization of technology in course delivery and student learning and in its facilities.

Most students, consciously or unconsciously, experienced mental struggles and changed their perception of their status as students at this radio and television university. Before, or even at the beginning, of the enrollment, most of them 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.
Students at this radio and television university didn’t consider themselves inferior. Yet, they realized that they had to compete against graduates from traditional universities or colleges in the job market.

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 a discriminative university admission policy which 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 disadvantage looking for well-paid jobs that would match what they have learned.

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, what the radio and television university needs to do is reconsider: (a) groups of learners it attempts to reach, and (b) programs to be offered. China has the largest population in the world; about 1.3 billion. The distribution of people is not even. Most of them are living in the Eastern part and 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 big market out there in the rural areas waiting for this radio and television university to explore. In conclusion, students at this university perceived themselves as undergraduate students with the same status as those at traditional universities, which was consistent with Chinese government’s policy regarding the graduates from distance higher education institutions.

Research question two asked about the perceived value of the learning achieved via this radio and television university. To measure whether the learning achieved via the radio and television university was perceived as valuable or not, as Keegan and Rumble (1982) suggested, indications should come from: (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 traditional higher education institutions, just 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's 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’s degree program. If they pass the exams successfully, they will be qualified to be admitted into the program they have applied for. 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 graduates from 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.

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.

Research question three asked about the reasons for students' participation in this university. For all of the students, although 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, there were other important reasons as well. The reasons included the location
of the university, confidence in their learning potential, the availability of programs offered, and the support they 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. As a matter of fact, there is an important reason behind their pride in the city. As mentioned in Chapter 4, 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 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 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 their employment. This city, like other cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, still practices its discriminatory 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 routes to achieving a four-year degree other than from traditional universities, such as distance education. Although students kept
explaining that they had confidence in their learning and their future, to me, their experience of failure on the national college entrance exams seemed to still be haunting them in their daily life. I could tell that those students were still suffering from what happened two years before. Now, as university students, nobody was ranking them in their class any more. However, unconsciously, they always put themselves in the position as if they were still senior high students. They could not really enjoy the university life or learning per se as 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 were afraid of another failure. They could no longer 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 at their children's performance on the national college entrance exams, they showed their support once students made their decision to enroll at the radio
and television university in different ways, such as obtaining more information about the university or taking a tour with the students.

Course delivery at this university 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.

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 to. 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.

Research question four asked about factors affecting students’ perception of their status as students and the learning achieved at this radio and television university. 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, not just as a viable way to higher education only at distance learning institutions.

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.

Research question five asked if students had any recommendations 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.

The most cited recommendation for changing the current perceptions was to raise the public awareness via communication. 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. The comments from all the interviewees suggested a general lack of understanding of the distance education as a whole. 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. However, teachers, as engineers of human souls, need to be fully aware of the positive influence they could have on students and their parents as well.

In conclusion, the above recommendations 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 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 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.

Limitations of the Study

Some limitations may be caused by the languages used in this study. When I first started my study, I carried out the literature review in English. However, when I went to
the field, all data was collected in Chinese, with some footnotes in English. The documents I reviewed while I was on the site were all in Chinese, including government documents and university journals. Although fluent in both Chinese and English, sometimes, I found it really difficult to translate the original transcripts from Chinese to English. Sometimes, direct translation may not be easy to comprehend for non-Chinese readers. On the other hand, if I translated into the common terms non-Chinese could easily grasp, I was concerned that it may lose some of the meaning. For example, hukou registration system is a unique term in Chinese culture. Every Chinese understands what it really means, the privileges and disadvantages to different people depending on where you were born. If I used the term Social Security Number, which is familiar to people in the United States, it would lose what it really means to the general public in China. To find the words closest to what hukou implies, I used permanent resident (green card) and explained in more details. On the Chinese side, at the end of each interview, I asked the interviewee to help me validate what I had written down. I also asked them to confirm if my observations were accurate. For example, once during an interview, after my question, my interviewee didn’t provide an immediate response; instead, she made some movements on the chair, as if feeling uncomfortable. What I wrote down was that the interviewee didn’t feel comfortable answering my question. When I asked the interviewee about it, the response was that she didn’t quite understand the question and didn’t know where to start. I corrected my notes accordingly. On the English side, after I left the field, I first transcribed the recordings of the interviews, and then translated the transcripts into English. Afterwards, I translated all my notes into English. During the
process of translating the data from Chinese to English, I consulted with a former English professor for accurate translation whenever I had questions. After I completed translating all the data into English, I gave them to the English professor to review both the original Chinese and the English translation. This process turned out to be really beneficial, as I learned if somebody else could understand my translation and if my translation faithfully reflected what the original version meant. After several reviews and discussions, the professor approved the translation.

The other limitation resulted from the type of data used in the study. Although I believed that I had built a relationship of trust with my participants, from their perspective I was an outsider. They may not always have chosen to tell me what they had in their minds. However, from what I observed, all of my interviewees appeared to be actively engaged in the interviews and talked at ease either during the interviews or on other occasions.

My Own Learning

The detail and magnitude of the data gathering and analysis procedures could not have been imagined. The most difficult task for me was to sort the data and infer from the data itself. Another helpful experience was the enforced reflection on my own level of skill in conducting interviews without leading the interviewees. Sometimes, when interviewees paused longer than I expected, I wasn’t certain whether they didn’t know how to answer or they didn’t want to answer. Another lesson I have learned was that my intuitive thinking was often ahead of my rational thinking. During the interviews, for example, I developed some ideas of how the students were feeling based on the
observations I had done, but tried to limit my expression of these ideas to avoid leading
the interviewee. Usually this restraint held, and I found that the interviewees would
confirm my idea in their own words at some later point. Once I impulsively gave an
example of what I meant with the questions and the interviewee instantly agreed with
what I said. The last, but not the least, lesson I learned was from language translation.
At the beginning of my translation, I was constrained to translating directly, word for
word. After reviewing my original notes and translation, the English professor advised
that I needed to think out of the box during my translation. To think out of the box, or to
see beyond the data itself, was the goal that I tried so hard during writing this dissertation,
though I found it really difficult to achieve.

Recommendations

In China, great changes have taken place in higher education since 2000 when the
data was collected for this study, including enrollment policy, job assignment, and
management. Still, I have been unable to find any research done on distance learners,
reasons for their participation, perceptions of their status as students and the value of the
learning achieved via distance learning programs in China. In other words, this study is
invaluable as one of the few, if not the only, documentation of part of the change process.
Based on the findings from this study, I have two recommendations to make. One is for
the radio and television university. The other is for policy makers in regards to the
education examination system in China.

First, through this study, I found that students 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, those 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 change back again if they were 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 would match their majors are not that great. 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 consider doing the following:

1. The university should find ways to improve its students' learning experiences; for example, by inviting reputable professors from traditional universities to conduct seminars to help keep learners more engaged in learning activities.
2. The university should work hard to improve its teaching and its status in the community by enrolling students with better scores.
3. The university should 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. The university should 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, from this study, I saw those students 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 once would be haunting them forever, I could tell they were still suffering. 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 cause 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.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The research questions for this study have been answered. Some understandings have been reached about why students choose the radio and television university to pursue their higher education, how they perceive their status as students and the learning achieved at the university, and factors affecting their perceptions.

Given the nature of the study, I am aware that I cannot make generalizations from one case study, but the rich descriptions and the attention to the context in this study invite some useful suggestions for future research. Since this study focused on students' participation and perception of their status as students at distance learning programs within the context of one Chinese radio and television university, it can serve as a foundation for other studies. The following are some suggestions for other studies:

1. A replication study should be conducted within the same university to find out if results are the same with the study conducted in 2000.

2. This study should be extended to other radio and television universities in less developed areas in order to find out how students perceive their status as students and the learning achieved via radio and television universities and factors influencing their perceptions.

3. This study should also be extended to various groups of students at distance higher education institutions, full time, part time, degree and non-degree, to test the generalizability of the findings from this study.
4. There should be follow-up studies on graduates from radio and television universities from different areas of China in order to find out the similarities and differences in terms of the perceived status and value of the learning achieved via radio and television universities.

5. There should be more in-depth studies on employers' perceptions or satisfaction of their employees who graduated from distance learning programs or non-traditional universities in comparison with those from traditional universities.

6. There should be comparison studies on the motives and barriers affecting students' participation in higher education courses offered via distance higher education institutions and traditional universities.
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APPENDIX A

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The following is the five-tiered organizational structure of radio and television universities in China.

- China Central Radio and Television University
  - (1 university, no students)

- Provincial Radio and Television Universities
  - (44 universities, with students)

- Branch Schools
  - (930 schools, with students)

- Work Stations (Study Centers)
  - (2,021 stations, with students)

- Tutorial Classes
  - (22,237 classes, face to face with students)
APPENDIX B

LETTER AND INFORMED CONSENT

Letter to the Northern Radio and Television University Leader

Huiping Ding

#103,252 Stone RD W.
Guelph, ON. N1G 2V7
Canada
Dear Sir:

On Jan 23, 2000, Ms Yuan from the Municipal Women's Associations called me regarding that you have granted me the permission to conduct my study at your university (the Northern Radio and Television University). I really appreciate the opportunity you have provided for me. The study is for my dissertation at the University of Northern Iowa, USA. This study involves in and outside classroom observation and in-depth interviews with current university degree students who are enrolled at the northern Radio and Television University. Specifically, I am investigating why students choose to participate in distance learning through radio and Television universities, how they perceive their status as students in the program, and what factors influence their participation and perceptions.

This study is completely academic, without any political issues involved. I would like to conduct observation and interviews at your university at the convenience of your students. For formal interviews, I will need a quiet room or space for a period of thirty minutes or so. I will be recording the interview on an audiocassette tape recorder that I will bring with me.

I plan to go to your university to conduct the study on August 18, 2000. I will contact you by phone before going to your university.

If at any time, for any reason, you don't feel like any data to be included in my study, I will disregard them, if that is the option.

I sincerely appreciate the cooperation that the Northern Radio and Television University has afforded me in conducting the study. I am looking forward to meeting you and your students.

Sincerely yours

Huiping Ding

Cc: Ms Yuan
Informed Consent -- Student Participants

Dear (Student)

My name is Huiping Ding, a doctoral student at University of Northern Iowa, USA. I am conducting a study for my dissertation at the University of Northern Iowa. The dissertation titled "Students' Participation and Perceptions of Their Status as Students at the Northern Radio and Television University in China", has the purpose of understanding why students choose to participate in distance education through radio and Television universities, how they perceive their status as students and what factors influence their participation and perceptions. The findings of the study are beneficial to teachers and administrators who are struggling hard to strengthen distance education programs to meet the diverse needs of the students.

There will be interviews with you. The interviews will be conducted in Chinese. There are observations in and outside the classrooms. These data will then be analyzed, in conjunction with existing literature and documents, to offer recommendations. Your participation should not interfere with your daily life.

It is my hope that this study can yield some findings that can help you understand better the function of distance education and the status of the learning achieved through radio and Television universities in China.

Participation is voluntary and confidentiality is assured. All recorded (both recorded and written) materials will be utilized only by myself in my dissertation. Pseudonyms will be used in the presentation of data to protect the identity of each participant. Upon completion of the study, all participants will be provided a copy of the findings.

You may at any time remove yourself from the study. This choice will create no penalty to you and will lead to the removal of all data surrounding your previous involvement.

Should you have further questions, I can be reached by mail at Huiping Ding #103, 252 Stone RD W. Guelph, On. N1G 2V7. Canada, by email at dingh0589@uni.edu or by phone at 519-827-9009. You may also contact the Chair of my committee, Dr. David Landis at 319-273-2796 or the office of Human Subjects Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, 319-273-2748, regarding the study or rights of research subjects.

Thank you for becoming part of this study and enhancing knowledge about distance education.
I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this study as stated above and the possible risk arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this study. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement.

(Participant Signature)  (Date)

(Printed Name)  (Date)

(Project Researcher)  (Date)
APPENDIX C

GENERAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

[The following are general interview questions used during the formal interviews between August 19, 2000 and December, 2000].

1. Why do you choose to participate in radio and television universities?

2. What are your primary goals of enrolling?

3. Compared with traditional colleges and universities, what do you perceive the status of radio and television universities and the learning achieved through radio and television universities?

4. Are you satisfied with the learning at radio and television universities? Why or why not?

5. What might you suggest to improve the present situation if you think the program needs improvement?
APPENDIX D
SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

English Version

Interview Site: Northern city in China  Date: August 25, 2000

Pseudo Name: Keli

R stands for researcher and S stands for student interviewee

Session began with general chat about the study and the researcher’s home university for a couple of minutes.

R. What is your major?
S. Law

R. When did you start at the Radio and Television University?
S. 1998

R. Two years ago, after your exam, was the Radio and Television University your first choice for higher education?
S. No. Of course not.

R. Then what was your choice or option for this University?
S. Well, my last choice...in terms of category. But it was my first choice in that category.

R. How many universities were available for you to choose at that time?
S. In the application form, there were three separate categories. The first category lists the key universities, such as Qinhua University, Beijing University, Nankai University. To go to the universities in the first category is the dream of every senior high school graduate. The second category includes ordinary four-year universities. The third
category includes all the traditional two-year colleges as well as all radio and television universities.

R. In the third category, how many universities in the form could you apply for enrollment?

S. Several, I guess, 6 or 7. I don't remember exactly, but most students just filled out the category with three choices. The choices have to be in order of preference, first, second and the third.

R. Which university was your first preference?

S. Oh, with my score, I was able to apply for those within the third category. My first preference was the Radio and Television University. Radio and television universities have a separate column within the third category in the form.

R. Why did you choose this University?

S. I didn't achieve my best during the national college entrance exam. Not really good. After score estimate, as you know, there was a minimum score requirement, my score was not really good. At first, I didn't know much about this university. Before applying, my parents and I came here, took a tour. Then we did some comparison, pros and cons of each university, traditional or this university, in this city or other cities, we felt this university was on the whole, okay.

R. Was there any other reason for your enrollment?

S. Well, I...I just wanted to have a fresh start. I guess at that time, I was really exhausted; I didn't want to repeat the next year. I wasn't so sure if I could get a better score even if I take the exam next year. It was like a battle, not so sure if I could win that scary battle.
Why waste another year…..No, I thought for a long time…no, maybe there are some chances later, I said to myself. Nobody could tell. I didn’t want to go back to senior high school again, doing the same thing over and over again, tests, quizzes, no ending, pretty scary….I kept asking myself, do you really want to repeat? No, definitely not.

R. Have you ever regretted?

S. No, never.

R. How did you feel when you received the letter notifying that you were admitted into the Radio and Television University?

S. A sense of belonging. Not really good….Not bad either. I just wanted to have a fresh start, and….forget everything. I was really tired.

R. How did your family feel about your decision?

S. Ok, relatively speaking, supportive. After all, becoming an undergraduate student at key universities is the dream, or ambition for every senior high school student. But, I felt, resources at each university are important to one’s learning but…individual efforts are equally important. The Radio and Television University is not as famous as other universities, that’s true. Maybe…because the public didn’t really know anything about it. After two years’ learning at this university, I am confident that this university could also cultivate qualified scientists and technicians. I talked with my parents... how I felt. They said it was okay and would support whatever decision I would make.

R. Was anybody else that you could remember that influenced your decision at that time?

S. Yes, some of my friends were at this university as well. They came here earlier. I had some discussions with them too.
R. How did you feel when you first came here as an undergraduate student?

S. My first impression was, well, to be honest, the campus was smaller than I had expected, even than my senior high school. To me, university is higher education, the campus should be larger than senior high school, and buildings should be more magnificent, as described in the novels. Later I felt better. It is smaller but has everything, like computers, televisions, audio-visual, library etc. I felt that the whole system seemed well organized and efficient. I went to some of traditional universities; well some of friends at senior high were undergraduate students there. My impression was, those universities were not as good as ours (The Radio and Television University), in terms of resources, student support services, library, space.

R. When you first entered this University, what did you hope to achieve through enrolling in the learning program offered at this university?

S. To complete the two year college program and be awarded the diploma first, then, to get a bachelor’s degree through self-study program or some other programs, I wasn’t so sure, if there were opportunities here to be promoted to the bachelor’s degree program, or maybe some other universities, I was not so sure where. But my goal was very clear, two year college diploma was not the end for me. I didn’t think it sufficient. That’s why I was working really hard...participated in all kinds of school activities, exercised myself, to be better prepared...Then there was opportunity here and I was promoted to the four year bachelor’s degree program.

R. How will you describe the educational community of the Radio and Television University within the city?
S. Good. It is one of the best cities in education in China. We have many key universities, such as Nankai University, many ordinary universities, colleges and distance learning universities…Radio and Television University. Economy is good. Resources and facilities are really good. We have several public libraries in the city. There are many activities among universities and colleges, whether traditional or distance education. Students could utilize services from universities or colleges other than their own university or college. In this way, students could arm themselves with the training or knowledge they needed, not necessarily from their own university or college. Within the university itself, we have many computers, television sets, several labs, reading rooms, libraries. Many of the instructors are from other key universities. There are full time programs, part-time programs. Especially part-time, there are various programs to meet the needs of different groups of people, young or old.

R. How is the course delivered?

S. Combination of television, computer, radio, course materials and…face-to-face tutorial

R. What is the ratio between the use of face-to-face tutorial and other media such as television, computer?

S. I guess, currently we use media more than that of face-to-face tutorial.

R. What do you mean by ‘currently’?

S. Oh, what I meant …is …now when we are in a bachelor’s degree program, we use more media such as television, computers compared to the use of face-to-face tutorials. But when we were in the two-year college program, face-to-face tutorial was more......
R. If face-to-face tutorial is used more often than other media at the Radio and Television University, how to reflect the uniqueness of this distance learning university compared to the traditional universities?

S. Well, to me, face-to-face tutorial is two way communications and can help students communicate better at the beginning. On the other hand, I also believe instructions via television, or computer or other media is really good for teaching the basics. It is not much different from face-to-face tutorials at traditional universities. I think a combination of those is really good, better than the teaching at traditional universities.

R. How do you perceive your status as students at the Radio and Television University? How do others perceive your status?

S. To me, of course I am a university undergraduate student, no different than other students at other universities. The reason why I am here was that I passed the national college entrance exam. The difference was that we selected different universities to pursue our higher education due to score differences. Well, it doesn’t really matter how I feel about my status. Even treatment is the same ....but people perceive differently. People didn’t know what kind of university the Radio and Television University is. People thought that this university was to cultivate broadcasters. Some people didn’t feel good about radio and Television University even when it was mentioned to them. Many people still think this university is vocational education, designed for adults. To them the Radio and Television University is adult education, vocational, not really university.

R. What do you mean by ‘treatment is the same’?
S. We have university logo, like a nametag for every university student here. For example in the mall, or admission fees for some places, we have university student discount. Also, when we graduate, if we could find a job, we are paid according to what kind of diploma we received, two year college or four year university. It doesn’t matter which university you received that diploma.

R. Just now you mentioned that people perceive your status as students differently, who are those people?

S. Teachers at senior high school, my parents, relatives, neighbors, almost every body... my parents’ generation.

R. I remember you mentioned earlier that your parents supported your decision, do they still perceive your status as students here differently from those at other universities?

S. I don’t really know. But I believe they have changed their perception as they gradually know better about this university...especially through my own learning.

R. Have you ever been to the job fair? How do you feel about the employer’s attitude toward the graduates from your university compared to those from traditional universities?

S. Diploma is one thing and capability is more important, that’s what I got through conversations with my friends who graduated from this university,

R. Talking about your friends who graduated from this university, have they found jobs that matched what they learned? What were their majors?

S. Law. Some Yes. Some No. For this major, the knowledge they learned from two year college program was not really sufficient. Some found jobs in law offices as clerks or
assistants. Even for those who found jobs, they take some classes in their spare time, trying to equip themselves with the knowledge they needed in their job. Others found some jobs, which don’t match completely what they learned at the Radio and Television University.

R. In your opinion, how do you improve your learning?

S. Mostly by self-study. At this university, primarily is on our own. I also take some classes in other universities. My major is Law but I don’t want to limit myself to this major. I also want to learn some other areas as well, such as Computer science.

R. Do you have sufficient time to study if you take other classes?

S. I like to get myself busy. I think I am okay. I am very good at managing my time, schedule.

R. Personally, how do you feel about this university, such as resources, facilities, teaching?

S. On the whole, I am satisfied.

R. Just now you mentioned that people perceive differently your status as students at the Radio and Television University, do you have any recommendations or solutions to changing people’s perception?

S. I don’t think it is easy. They have that deep-rooted thinking already. How could you change that perception? As you know, our country has a long history of examination system. Examination score determines a person’s future, no matter where you come from, what your real abilities are. Your once-for-all examination score from that national college entrance examination determines which university you are eligible for...even
application. However that perception needs to change, everybody knows that China is a country with a big population and economy is developing so fast, people need knowledge to catch up with the speed of social, economic development. Traditional universities could not, will definitely now satisfy such increasing demand. The only way is through distance education, such as programs offered at the Radio and Television University.

R. Any recommendations that you could think of?

S. I think as students, we should make good use of resources here and at other places, whether at traditional universities or public libraries, to enable ourselves better prepared for the future, then we could prove to the others that we are good, maybe even better than those from traditional universities. From the university's stand point, the university here should provide us with more opportunities to expand our learning, not just limit ourselves to the learning within our own area, for example, some seminars. Our university did some but not sufficient and the method was not really good. All of them were face-to-face lecture. Most of the students couldn’t attend. As this university is different from traditional universities. Most of the students were non-residents. Most often seminars were conducted in the evening. The organizer should have considered the uniqueness of this university before planning. The seminar should have been done via television program, or other media.

R. Is there anything else related to your reasons for your enrollment?

S. Not really.
中文 (Chinese)
地点: 北方广播电视大学
假名: 凯丽
R 代表此项研究课题人员, S 代表学生．

开始几分钟, 谈了一些普通话题, 此项研究工作, 目的意义, 研究人员的背景．研究人员从哪个大学毕业．

R. 专业?
S. 法律．

R. 你何时上的大学?
S. 1998年

R. 两年前, 你高考完后, 广播电视大学是你的首选吗?
S. 不是, 当然不是．

R. 那么, 广播电视大学是你的第几个志愿?
S. 最后一个, 如果是重点类, 本科类, 专科和电大类．但是, 在专科电大类, 广播电视大学是我的第一志愿．

R. 当时, 你可以填写几个志愿?
S. 在志愿表上, 招生顺序是三类．第一类是重点大学, 比如：清华大学, 北京大学, 南开大学．考上重点大学, 名牌大学毕竟是我们每个高中生的理想．第二类是一般本科．第三类是专科和电大类．它包括所有两年专科和电大分校．
R. 在第三类，你可以填几个志愿？

S. 好几个吧，我想，6个或者7个，我记不清了。但是，我们大多数人都填三个。志愿必须按顺序填写，第一志愿，第二志愿，第三志愿。

R. 在第三类里，哪个大学是你的第一志愿？

S. 以我的分数，我能申请第三类的学校。广播电视大学是我的第一志愿。

R. 你为何选择广播电视大学呢？

S. 高考，我发挥不好。考的不好。真的不好。考完后，估分，你知道，有一个最低分数线。而我考的分数不好……最初，我对这个大学也不特别了解。填写志愿前，我父母和我，我们一起来这里看了一下。然后我们比较了一下，优，劣，普通专科，广播电视大学，本市，外地的。最后，我们觉得这儿的广播电视大学还行。

R. 你选择此广播电视大学还有其它原因吗？

S. 哦，我就是……想重新开始，那时，我真的是太累了。筋疲力尽。我不想补习。下一年再考。我不敢肯定，明年，就一定能考个好成绩。单高考就象打一场战役，我不能保证我一定能赢。太可怕了。不，我想了很久，为什么要浪费另外一年呢？也许以后还有机会。我告诉自己。没有人知道。但是，我不想再回到高中补习。没完没了的测验。我不断地问自己：你真的要补习吗？不，我要。

R. 你后悔吗？

S. 没有，从来没有后悔过。

R. 你收到广播电视大学录取通知书时，感觉如何？
S. 觉得一种归属感，感觉不太好，但是也不太糟糕。我只是想一切从新开始，忘记一切。那时，真的太累了。

R. 你的家人对你上广播电视大学有什么看法？

S. 还是比较支持的。考上名牌大学，毕竟是每个高中生的理想。但是，我想，学校师资是一部分，个人也很重要。广播电视大学在社会上虽然名气不大，是人们对它认识不够。经过在这里两年的学习，我觉得广播电视大学一样能培养出好的人才。这点，我是非常自信的。我把我的想法跟我父母谈了，他们同意我的决定。而且还告诉我，他们会支持我，无论我选择哪个学校。

R. 你记得还有没有其他人影响你的决定吗？

S. 有。我有几个朋友，他们是这里的学生。是我高年级的同学。我与他们讨论过。

R. 当你刚入学时，感觉如何？

S. 刚开始，老实说，觉得这个学校小了点，还不如我们高中大。在我脑海中，大学是高等教育，应该比高中大，楼房应该是... 壮观雄伟，雄伟就象在小说里描写的那样。后来感觉好些了。看看这个学校，虽然小了点但是五脏俱全，感觉整个体制还是很健全。我也去了别的学校，传统教育，我朋友在那里，感觉还不如我们这里呢。比如说，资源，设备，学生服务，图书资料，地方啦...

R. 刚入学时，你希望通过在广播电视大学学习获得什么？
S. 先完成两年专科学习，拿到毕业证书，然后通过自学，或者其它的，我不是
很肯定这里是否有升本科的机会，也许别的大学会有。但是，我的目标很明确，专
科毕业证对我是不够的，所以我刻苦读书，参加学校各种活动，锻炼自己。后来
有了专科升本科的机会，我就专升本了。

R. 如何描述在本市，广播电视大学的教育团体或者环境？

S. 挺好的。在中国，本市在教育方面是最佳城市之一。有许多名牌大学，比如，.
大学，许多普通大学，大专院校，远程教育学校。这里经济发达，资源丰富，有好
几个图书馆。学生可以充分利用各个地方的资源，不只是限于自己的学校的。在
广播电视大学，我们有很多计算机，电视教学，各种各样机房，阅览室。很多教师
都是从名牌重点大学聘请来的。

R. 你们如何上课呢？

S. 结合式。计算机，电视教学，收音机广播，教科书，面授。

R. 比例如何？

S. 我想，现在还是媒体。那么多。比较多吧。

R. 现在？

S. 呃，我说明，我们现在上本科了，用媒体教学比较多。当初上电大专科，面
授比较多。

R. 那么如何体现电大与其它大专院校不同的地方呢？也就是说，如何体现电大的
特色？
S. 哦，对于我来说，面授是双方面沟通，学生刚来到这里，面授是很好的。另外一方面，我觉得媒体用于基础教育也很好，与面授没有太大区别。我看看应用，我认为我们这里比别的大专院校要好。

R. 你如何看待你在广播电视大学的学生身份？别人又是如何看呢？

S. 我自己认为自己是大学生，与别的大专院校的大学生没有什么差别。我也是参加高考上来的。不同之处是选择了不同的学校。当然啦，分数不一样。可是，我如何感觉并没有关系。待遇是一样，可人们不这样看。人们不清楚广播电视大学是干什么的，以为是培养广播主持人。有些人一听电大，感觉就不好，在人们的观念里，还是成人教育，是业余教育。不是什么正规大学。

R. 待遇一样？

S. 我们也有大学校牌，每个大学生都戴的。比如，门票，购物，我们有大学生打折。如果，毕业后，找到工作，工资待遇也是一样的。是专科就按专科发工资，如果是本科就按本科生发工资，与你是从哪个学校毕业，获得文凭没有关系。

R. 你刚提到‘人们’，是哪些人呢？

S. 中学教师，父母，亲戚，邻居，就是我父母那一代人们吧。

R. 刚才，你说，你父母支持你上电大决定。现在他们还坚持以前的想法吗？

S. 我不太清楚。可是我觉得他们已经改变了，因为他们逐渐了解了这个大学，尤其是通过我自己的学习。
R. 你是否去过人才交流中心？你感觉雇主对待电大毕业生与其它大专院校的毕业生有什么不同？

S. 学历是一方面，能力更重要。我的同班毕业后，交谈中，我的感觉是这样。

R. 你的那些朋友，同学，他们找工作与其所学专业对口吗？他们的专业是什么？

S. 法律。有些行，有的就不行。学法律，专科，法律知识掌握的不够。有的去律师事务所工作，边工作，边读书。有的工作与发展所学的专业不是完全符合。

R. 对于你来说，如何使自己的学习提高？

S. 主要靠自学。自学成才。电大主要以自学为主。然后，我在别的学校选修了一些课。我的专业是法律，不想把自己局限于此专业。想学别的专业，比如说，计算机。

R. 那你还有时间吗？

S. 我喜欢把时间排的满满的。我自己还是可以的。

R. 你个人对电大的感觉如何，资源，设备，教学？

S. 总体来说，我还是满意的。

R. 你刚提到，别人对电大学生的大学生身份，看法不同。你有没有什么建议来如何改变人们的看法呢？

S. 不容易。已经根深蒂固。如何改变？你也知道，我们国家的考试制度，很久的历史。分数决定人的前途，不论你是哪里来的，能力如何。一次高考成绩就决定你是否够资格申请哪个大学。这种意识应该改变。中国这么多人，人经济发展变化
这么快，人们需要知识，这种需求，传统教育的大专院校根本就满足不了。唯一就是通过远程教育，象电大这样的大学。

R. 还有其它的建议吗？

S. 我想，作为学生，我们应充分利用这里和其它地方的资源，设施，好好装备我们自己。证明我们是很好的，甚至还比别的院校的学生更好。作为学校，大学应该给我们的拓展知识面的机会，如讲座类的。我们大学过去是搞过讲座，但是，不够，而且方式也不好。大都是面授，在晚上，没有多少学生能参加。电大与其它传统教育的大专院校不同，多数学生是走读生，不住在学校。组织讲座的人在计划时，应考虑电大的特点，讲座可以通过媒体，如电视广播。

R. 关于你选择广播电视大学上大学，还有没有其它别的有关的原因？

S. 没有啦。

R. 谢谢