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Students' attitudes towards distance education: A comparative study between Sino-foreign cooperative universities and ordinary universities in China

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Students' Attitudes towards Distance Education: A Comparative Study between Sino-Foreign Cooperative Universities and Ordinary Universities in China

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ABSTRACT: With the development of the Internet, distance education has also emerged, and more people nowadays pay attention to it. Now a lot of college students also study through distance education, so it is important to understand their attitudes towards online education. As a new type of university that has just developed in China, the Sino-foreign cooperative universities provide students with different academic experiences compared with ordinary universities. Therefore, it is also necessary to explore whether the attitude of Sino-foreign cooperative university students and ordinary university students towards distance education is different. This study examines how type of university that students study at affect their attitudes towards distance education. To achieve the goal, a 14-item questionnaire which was distributed among 80 ordinary university students and 76 Sino-foreign university students and stratified random sampling technique has been used in selecting the samples. The results suggest that (1) students engaged in this study had a generally positive attitude towards distance education; and (2) there were no significant differences in students' attitudes towards distance education due to whether they were studying in Sino-foreign university or ordinary university in China.

Keywords: *distance education; Sino-foreign university; ordinary university; students' attitudes.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Distance education is the education that does not necessarily need students to physically show up in a classroom and is characterized by physical separation of teachers and students during the lecture. And it uses various online technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication. It provides people with the opportunity to engage in studying anytime, anywhere, as long as they can access digital devices and the internet. Through distance education, open access to many universities' hybrid and large-scale interactive courses are provided to students from all over the world (Ahmed, 2016).

Previous studies investigated whether online learning could be an alternative for higher education, and teachers' perceptions towards distance education (Tao & Yeh, 2008), and whether there were significant differences in students' attitudes towards distance learning due to gender, specialization, and academic level variable (Ahmed, 2016). Besides, investigation towards attitudes to distance education in China had also been done. However, none of those studies have explored whether there are significant differences in students' attitudes towards distance education due to the types of universities.

No prior study examines whether there is a significant relationship between the types of universities that students are currently engaged in and their attitudes towards distance education. Instead, those studies gathered information from students at a certain university or ordinary university in a specific country. They emphasized more on the effectiveness, accessibility, and effects of distance education, which are also crucial aspects of the e-learning model. However, researches and investigations on Sino-foreign cooperative universities are exactly what those studies lacked. Even the paper devoted to the study of online education in China (Chen & Wang, 2010) did not explore the comparison between traditional universities and those special universities. The study just generally grouped average students into a same category, which may lead to a lack of thorough analysis of their attitudes due to different academic backgrounds.

The purpose of the study is to describe and compare different attitudes of students in Sino-foreign cooperative university and students in ordinary universities in China towards distance education. The current attitudes of students towards this comparatively new form of curriculum will be explored in this study. More significantly, the results will be analyzed based on students' different academic backgrounds.

The cultural and interactive background of students play important roles in students' comprehension, especially nowadays when they are exposed to information from all over the world, including educational information. Under the trend of globalization, great changes have taken place not only in politics and economy but also in education. The establishment of foreign cooperative schools is one of them. This kind of universities are different from traditional Chinese universities, which results in students' different academic experiences (Xiao, 2018). Their access to different online courses, their choices, and their perception towards distance education can also be different. So it's important to explore their attitudes towards distance education, which is lacked in the previous studies.

This study used descriptive research design and cross-sectional study to investigate whether there was significant influence on students attitudes towards distance education. Besides, independent paired t-test was used for analyzing the results. After investigating 80 students from ordinary universities and 76 students from Sino-foreign universities in China, the results suggested that students engaged in this study had a generally positive attitude towards distance education; and there were no significant differences in students attitudes towards distance education due to whether they were studying in Sino-foreign university or ordinary university in China.

Prior studies investigated variables like, gender, specialization, and academic year, but none of them explored types of university (Ahmed, 2016). So this study added this new variable

to the existing theory. The reason why this variable is important is that, under the current trend of globalization, Sino-foreign cooperative universities in China have developed in a unique way different from other universities, and parents and students are paying more attention to their current situation. Therefore, in this article, the traditional universities and Sino-foreign cooperative universities are deliberately distinguished for analysis. Adding this variable will improve the current theoretical framework of the studies on distance education in China. The practical utility of the study is that it will arise the distance education institution's attention to students' academic backgrounds. If the results of the study show that there is a significant difference in the attitudes of students towards distance education between Sino-foreign cooperative universities and ordinary university students, then those institutions should make a difference in the distance education provided for this group of students. If this variable is an important influencing factor, they cannot generally open online courses for all students, instead, they need to carry out customized education according to the needs of different groups. Meanwhile, previous studies have also shown that students' intrinsic motivation has an impact on distance education (Firat, Kılınç and Yüzer, 2018), and Xiao (2018) showed that students in Sino-foreign cooperative universities have different academic pursuits from students in other traditional universities. Therefore, their motivation could be different, which may also influence their attitudes towards distance education. These are the points where this article will make contributions to the existing theory.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, relevant literature and development hypotheses will be reviewed. Then the methodology that this study used, and sample collection will be talked about. Besides, the results of the study and relevant discussions will be described. In the final section, conclusion will be discussed.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

1. Related Literature Review Distance Education

Distance education, also known as distance learning, e-learning, and online learning is a form of education. Its main characteristics include the physical separation of teachers and students in the teaching process and the use of various technologies to promote the communication between teachers and students, students and students. Traditionally, distance education has focused on students who cannot take traditional courses in schools, such as full-time workers, residents in remote areas, and individuals who are unable to attend lectures due to other personal reasons (Berg and Simonson, 2016). In general, distance learning has four characteristics. First, distance learning is conducted by non-self-learning or academic learning institutions. It is a kind of informal teaching, and traditional classroom instruction is not usually provided by them, but they can be certified as comparable to those who uses traditional method. Secondly, distance education can separate students and teachers geographically and temporally. Learning anywhere and anytime is an important advantage of this kind of education. A well-designed curriculum can also minimize intellectual, cultural and social differences among students. Third, teachers and students can interact easily through the Internet. Interaction is essential for any kind of education, especially online education (Caliskan, Suzek and Ozcan, 2017). With the development of communication system, the connection between learners, teachers and teaching resources is no longer dependent on real life communication. Therefore, the Internet, mobile phones and E-mail have contributed to the rapid growth of distance learning. Finally, distance learning, like any education, provides students with a learning community, which consists of students, teachers, and teaching resources, such as books, audio, video, and graphical displays, enabling students to access the content of instruction (Berg & Simonson, 2016). Social networks on the Internet promote the idea of community building.

The Constantly Developing Trend of Distance Education

Sheeja (2011) contended that with the development of the knowledge-based economy, great changes have taken place in people's work conditions and their skills required. According to his article, the biggest challenge to education is that this kind of economic development not only places strict requirements on the professional elite but also on the average worker. Traditional education itself is no longer suitable enough for the whole society. Traditional schools cannot provide the necessary education for adults who are already outside the school system. In this regard, governments must find new alternatives to enhance access, quality, cost-effectiveness, and equity in education. In this form, both developed and developing countries believe that distance education is a new and effective method. It can provide knowledge for learners who are unable to accept education from traditional classrooms. Therefore, in most countries, distance education has become an indispensable part of the education system. Governments around the world have recognized the potential of open and distance learning models. Significant changes in communication technology have also resulted in the development of distance education. All of these enable distance learning to provide students with the best and latest educational resources (Sheeja, 2011). The greatest advantage of distance learning is that it makes it possible for everyone to study outside the traditional classroom.

Besides, Berg and Simonson (2016) also suggested that more and more universities are offering distance education to the public. The University of Phoenix in Arizona, founded in 1976, was one of the first schools to adopt distance learning technology. Although there are no exact figures showing international distance education enrollment, the student enrollment in distance learning in two of the biggest Open Universities somewhat suggests how distance education has developed: at the beginning of the 21st century, in New Delhi, Indira Gandhi National Open University has more than 1.5 million students through remote course learning; in Beijing, the central radio and TV university's students are more than 500000. All these show that in today's learning-oriented society, online courses play an increasingly important role and people can accept them more and more (Berg and Simonson, 2016). And there are good reasons for students and institutions to accept distance learning. Through online learning, universities can accommodate more students without constantly expanding their classrooms and dormitories. Not only do universities benefit, but students can also benefit from working at a place and time of their choice (Berg and Simonson, 2016).

Sino-Foreign Cooperative University in China

With Chinese students' increasing demands for more diverse educational experiences, universities and colleges around the world are seeking chances to establish their campuses in China. Sino-foreign cooperative joint ventures (flexible legal partnership between Chinese entities and foreign companies) are good ways for enterprises to do business in China. Similarly, international universities have begun to build those kinds of partnerships to build cross-border education at all levels in China (Xiao, 2018). The first Sino-foreign cooperative university is the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), which was established in the fall of 2004. Following the path of UNNC, eight more Sino-foreign universities are operated in different areas of China. In 2014, the Sino-Foreign Cooperative University Union was established by those 9 universities, and they began to make their statements as a special interest group in Chinese higher education. Those universities provide foreign education experience for Chinese students in their own countries. The courses provided by Sino-foreign cooperative universities use English or other foreign languages to teach instead of Mandarin while ordinary universities in China mostly use Mandarin in campus.

The courses used by the Sino-foreign University are the same as those of foreign universities. To ensure that the quality of teaching reaches the international level, all professors there are also recruited by foreign universities, although some plans have to adapt to China's local policies. Sino-foreign cooperative universities also provide more diverse figures of students. The campuses welcome not only a diverse group of students but also students who want to learn with their international counterparts. When foreign students are looking for opportunities to study in China, Chinese foreign cooperative universities are usually their first choice, since they teach in English (Xiao, 2018). All kinds of students gather different values and cultures in the classroom and provide a forum for students to discuss international issues, which make those Chinese students have a different outlook compared with ordinary Chinese students.

E-Learning in Chinese Schools and Universities

Chen, Wang and Chen's article (2010) mentioned that the new practice of distance education in China is taking place in two important areas: primary and secondary education (k-12), and higher education. They discussed the development of distance education in these two fields in China since 1996, as well as the educational use of radio, television, multimedia, satellite and Internet in China. They emphasized the use of both real-time and non-real-time educational approaches. Then it's discussed in their study about the model and characteristics of online learning, student assessment system, quality assurance methods, and the policies of the Chinese government to regulate and support online learning. Finally, they pointed out the problems and challenges of e-learning in China, caused by a lack of resources, lack of professional knowledge and standardization of methods. The necessary materials of distance education in China usually consist of three parts: video lectures, PowerPoint presentations and text resources. These media lacked the necessary interaction between teachers and students, lacked the guidance of teachers on students' learning skills, and failed to meet students' various personalized needs. In other words, they suggested that students were not satisfied with those aspects, and they looked forward to more interactivity and guidance in their course activities.

Chinese Students' Responses about Distance Education Development and Design

Chen and Wang's study (2010) showed that most students engaged in distance learning had a positive attitude towards distance education. However, they did think that some aspects of distance education needed improvement. Students suggested that distance learning should include more practical exercises and give students more opportunities to use multimedia training materials. They believe that the most convenient media for all materials to be published are audio, VCD and textbooks. Students liked to learn from visual images (75%), especially animated materials (85%). Unfortunately, rural students cannot make full use of the extensive multimedia learning materials because of the lack of electronic devices. So the effectiveness of distance education also depended on the area students lived at. But the mixed medium approach suits the needs of adult learners well, making their study time and space flexible. The combination of online and face-to-face approaches meets complementary needs. Moreover, students expressed dissatisfaction with the inflexibility of learning resources. They noted a preference for rich instruction and participation in discussions. In their survey (Chen and Wang, 2010), many students agreed that online learning needs to be improved in terms of independent learning, time management, resource processing, typing speed, and use of web technologies. They noted the importance of effective guidance in developing these areas. They also say they are happy to use online resources to evaluate the courses. So still, Online universities in China were struggling to meet the special needs of DE students.

2. Hypothesis Development

The literature revealed that students' needs and perspectives towards distance education may be various and different due to their motivation and backgrounds. Xiao (2018) also indicated that Sino-foreign cooperative universities' students' experiences were different from traditional Chinese universities due to different language environments, thinking behavior and different course system they engaged in. Thus, it could be inferred that students' academic background, whether they are from ordinary university or Sino-foreign university might have an impact on their attitudes towards distance education, which was an aspect not explored by any study. Therefore, the following two research hypotheses are formulated to answer the research question :

H1. There are significant differences in students' attitudes towards distance education due to different types of universities they are currently engaged in.

H0. There are no significant differences in students' attitudes towards distance education due to different types of universities they are currently engaged in.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Objective

This study aimed to figure out students' attitudes towards distance education and whether there were significant differences due to students' engagement in different types of university.

Research Questions of the Study

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is Chinese university students' general attitude towards distance education and distance education learner?
- 2) Are there any statistically significant differences in students' attitudes between ordinary universities and Sino-foreign universities?

Study Population and Sampling Techniques

The population of the study consisted of ordinary university students in China and students in Sino-foreign cooperative universities. The simple random sampling design was proposed to be used in the study because equal chance was provided for respondents to be selected. Besides, the chance wasn't affected by other respondents. Also, the chance wasn't affected by researchers' personal bias.

Data Gathering Procedure

The research used online questionnaire to gather the data. The questionnaire was developed and released by SO JUMP, a survey software. Social media like WeChat and QQ Zone were used to provide the link of the online questionnaire to gather sufficient responses completed by respondents. Besides, the survey software, SO JUMP, was applied to collect answered questionnaire and help the researcher to analyze the data collected.

Sample of the Study

The sample of the study consisted of around 80 students from ordinary Chinese universities, and around 76 students from Sino-foreign cooperative universities in China. And the specific frequency and percentage is shown in Table 1. The sample was chosen randomly from the whole population and a careful sampling approach was used to ensure that the

breakdown of ordinary/ Sino-foreign cooperative universities' students were as balanced as possible.

TABLE 1
Sample Distribution Due to Types of University Variable

<u>Types of University</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Ordinary University	80	48.72%
Sino-Foreign University	76	51.28%
Total	156	100%

Instrument of the Study

This study used a two-part self-constructed online questionnaire to collect data from respondents. Part I was about the respondents' demographic profile; Part II dealt with respondents' attitudes towards distance education. And Part II consisted 14-items of certain description towards distance education, which followed Ahmed (2016) study. However, the researcher of this study deleted some items that were not related with this study and grouped the remaining 14 items into two groups: distance education and distance education learner.

For respondents to describe their perceptions, a Five-point Likert scales table towards attitudes was provided with the interpretations shown as Table 2 below accordingly. The highest rank is "strongly agree," and its response scale is 5, which falls into the mean interval 4.51-5.0. And the lowest rank is "Strongly disagree," and its response scale is 1.

TABLE 2
Likert Scale Interpretation-Positive Items

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Very poor	Below 50%
Poor	50-59.9%
Medium	60-69.9%
Good	70-79.9%
Very Good	80% and more

This study aimed to investigate ordinary university and Sino-foreign university students' attitudes towards distance education. Moreover, it tried to find out whether there were significant differences between those two types of universities. The data of the study were statistically analyzed and for the purpose of interpreting the findings of the study, the following percentages and ranks are showed in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Percentages and Ranks

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Very poor	Below 50%
Poor	50-59.9%
Medium	60-69.9%
Good	70-79.9%
Very Good	80% and more

Reliability of the Instrument

This study used specific items or descriptions from a questionnaire developed by Ahmed(2016). Besides, those items selected were adjusted and grouped into two categories: Descriptions about Distance Education and Descriptions about Distance Education Learner. And the reliability of the newly developed questionnaire was tested using Cronbach Alpha, which can test the internal consistence among the test items. And the standard criteria for the reliability of the items are showed below in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Criteria of the Reliability

<u>Cronbach's Alpha</u>	<u>Internal Consistency</u>
$\alpha \geq 0.9$	Excellent
$0.9 > \alpha \geq 0.8$	Good
$0.8 > \alpha \geq 0.7$	Acceptable
$0.7 > \alpha \geq 0.6$	Questionable
$0.6 > \alpha \geq 0.5$	Poor
$0.5 > \alpha$	Unacceptable

For the first group of items, students' attitudes towards distance education, the average covariance between item-pairs is 0.946, which suggests that the reliability of the results is excellent. The specific result is showed in Table 5.

TABLE 5
Reliability Result of the First Group of Items

<u>Cronbach's Alpha</u>	<u>Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items</u>	<u>N of Items</u>
.946	.946	9

For the second group of items, the test result is showed in Table 6. Students' attitudes towards distance education learner, the Cronbach's Alpha is 0.888, which shows that the reliability of the result is good.

TABLE 6
Reliability Result of the Second Group of Items

<u>Cronbach's Alpha</u>	<u>Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items</u>	<u>N of Items</u>
.888	.889	5

Statistical Analysis

To analyze the data gathered, the following methods are used:

- 1) Means and percentages
- 2) Independent paired t-test
- 3) One-way ANOVA
- 4) Cronbach Alpha Test for reliability

Procedures of the Study

- 1) Prepare the instrument (questionnaire) online.

- 2) Distribute the questionnaire to respondents through internet.
- 3) Collect the answered questionnaire, and export the data to relevant software for statistical analysis.
- 4) Extract the results, analyze and discuss the indication behind the data gathered.

IV. RESULTS

Results Concerning Students' General Attitude towards DE

To answer the first research question of the study, "What is Chinese university students' general attitude towards distance education and distance education learner," means, percentages and degree level for each description item and total degree for their agreement towards the items listed are shown in Table 7.

As can be seen from the Table 7, most students agree with the description of distance education. Their overall attitude reached 3.62, which means that for most of the descriptions, they were approved of by students engaged in the research. Total average means, percentage and descriptive interpretation: 3.62, 72.47% and "good," also shows that their general attitude towards distance education is positive. Also, some interesting trend can be found in the results. Students had a somewhat neutral attitudes towards the descriptions, "the learner in distance learning system is an independent learner who takes responsibility for his or her learning," "DE enhances the learner's motivation" and "The relationship between students and the academic supervisor is a unique one," the percentages and degree levels of which are relatively low compared with other items.

TABLE 7
Means, Percentage and the Degree Level for Each Item

<u>Item No.</u>	<u>Distance Education</u>	<u>Means</u> <u>\bar{X}</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Scaled Responses</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Descriptive Interpretation</u>
1	A large number of students can join the distance learning system.	3.76	1.098	Agree	75.20	Good
2	DE is flexible.	3.83	1.125	Agree	76.60	Good
3	DE uses educational technology at a wide range.	3.83	1.071	Agree	76.60	Good
4	DE enhances the learner's motivation.	3.34	1.081	Agree	66.80	Medium
5	DE offers a good opportunity to the learner to choose the major, the time and the way of studying.	3.76	1.096	Agree	75.20	Good
6	DE employs modern technology that attracts learner's attention.	3.56	1.097	Agree	71.20	Good
7	DE overcomes geographical distances.	3.91	1.166	Agree	78.20	Good
8	DE offers specialized knowledge and skills.	3.58	1.060	Agree	71.60	Good

9	DE enables students in remote areas to pursue higher education.	3.66	1.133	Agree	73.20	Good
10	The learner can evaluate his or her learning due to pre-assigned objectives.	3.53	1.044	Agree	70.60	Good
11	The learner in distance learning system is an independent learner who takes responsibility for his or her learning.	3.33	1.143	Neutral	66.60	Medium
12	It is essential to be daily in contact with the academic supervisor in distance education.	3.67	1.096	Agree	73.40	Good
13	The interaction between students in distance education promotes their experience.	3.51	1.081	Agree	70.20	Good
14	The relationship between students and the academic supervisor is a unique one.	3.46	1.062	Neutral	69.20	Good
General Attitudes towards Distance Education		3.62	.352	Agree	72.47	Good

After breaking the whole items into two groups, Distance Education and Distance Education Learner, depending on their relevance, slightly different results appear in each group. Table 8 shows respondents' attitudes towards each item, and also the table reveals the percentage of each scaled response. It can be seen that the means has little difference with the general attitudes showed in Table 8, which means the result of this group is consistent with the overall result.

TABLE 8
The Scaled Response Descriptions about Students' Attitudes towards Distance Education

<u>Descriptions</u>	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>	<u>Means</u>
A large number of students can join the distance learning system.	9(5.77%)	11(7.05%)	30(19.23%)	65(41.67%)	41(26.28%)	3.76
DE is flexible	10(6.41%)	11(7.05%)	21(13.46%)	68(43.59%)	46(29.49%)	3.83
DE uses educational technology at a wide range	10(6.41%)	7(4.49%)	23(14.74%)	75(48.08%)	41(26.28%)	3.83
DE enhances the learner's motivation	10(6.41%)	19(12.18%)	59(37.82%)	44(28.21%)	24(15.38%)	3.34
DE offers a good opportunity to the learner to choose the	10(6.41%)	10(6.41%)	26(16.67%)	71(45.51%)	39(25%)	3.76

major, the time and the way of studying DE employs modern technology that attracts learner's attention	12(7.69%)	11(7.05%)	37(23.72%)	69(44.23%)	27(17.31%)	3.56
DE overcomes geographical distances	11(7.05%)	7(4.49%)	26(16.67%)	53(33.97%)	59(37.82%)	3.91
DE offers specialized knowledge and skills	10(6.41%)	11(7.05%)	41(26.28%)	67(42.95%)	27(17.31%)	3.58
DE enables students in remote areas to pursue higher education	10(6.41%)	15(9.62%)	30(19.23%)	64(41.03%)	37(23.72%)	3.66
Total	92(6.55%)	102(7.26%)	293(20.87%)	576(41.03%)	341(24.29%)	3.69

As for the group concerned students attitudes towards distance education learner, the results are showed in Table 9. The means is lower than the former table's result, which is 3.5 in this one. Also, the scaled level for each item of this group is not as high as other items in the former table. And attention needs to be addressed to some items like "the learner in distance learning system is an independent learner who takes responsibility for his or her learning," which has a low means. However, most respondents answered "agree" compared with other attitude level, which shows that still respondents have a relatively positive attitudes towards distance education learner.

TABLE 9
The Scaled Response Descriptions about Students' Attitudes towards Distance Education Learner

<u>Descriptions</u>	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>	<u>Means</u>
The learner can evaluate his or her learning due to pre-assigned objectives.	10(6.41%)	12(7.69%)	43(27.56%)	68(43.59%)	23(14.74%)	3.53
The learner in distance learning system is an independent learner who takes responsibility for his or her learning	13(8.33%)	20(12.82%)	50(32.05%)	48(30.77%)	25(16.03%)	3.33
It is essential to be daily in contact with the academic supervisor in distance education	9(5.77%)	14(8.97%)	31(19.87%)	67(42.95%)	35(22.44%)	3.67
The interaction between students in	8(5.13%)	21(13.46%)	36(23.08%)	65(41.67%)	26(16.67%)	3.51

distance education promotes their experience						
The relationship between students and the academic supervisor is a unique one	10(6.41%)	14(8.97%)	50(32.05%)	58(37.18%)	24(15.38%)	3.46
Total	50(6.41%)	81(10.38%)	210(26.92%)	306(39.23%)	133(17.05%)	3.5

Results Concerning the Hypotheses

According to the independent T-test results, the hypothesis “there are significant differences in students’ attitudes towards distance education due to different types of universities they are currently engaged in” is rejected. And the hypothesis “there are no significant differences in students’ attitudes towards distance education due to different types of universities they are currently engaged in” is accepted.

The 14-item questions were also divided into two groups for the independent T-test. The first group is about students’ attitudes towards distance education, and the independent T-test result is shown in Table 10. It shows that the significance is $0.65 > 0.05$, which means that there were no significant differences in students’ attitude towards distance education due to type of university they were studying at. Also, the variance and means between ordinary university and Sino-foreign university is very similar. For the variance, they are all above 3.5, which falls into the group “agree.”

TABLE 10
The Independent T-test Results in the Students’ Attitudes towards Distance Education Due to Type of university

<u><i>Distance Education</i></u>	<u><i>Ordinary University</i></u>	<u><i>Sino-Foreign University</i></u>
Mean	3.725	3.657894737
Variance	0.844186592	0.865107212
Observations	80	76
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	153	
t Stat	0.453090104	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.325562877	
t Critical one-tail	1.654873847	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.651125754	
t Critical two-tail	1.975590315	

Moreover, for the second group of items, students’ attitudes towards distance education learner, the independent T-test result is shown in Table 11. And the significance is $0.98 > 0.05$, which reveals that there were no significant differences in students’ attitudes towards distance education learner due to type of university they were studying at. Also, the means and variance of both groups are very similar. Those results are partially consistent with previous study that found out students’ attitudes towards distance education were not related with some demographic or educational backgrounds (Kar, Saha and Mondal, 2014).

TABLE 11
The Independent T-test Results in the Students' Attitudes towards Distance Education Learner Due to Type of university

<u><i>Distance Education Learner</i></u>	<u><i>Ordinary University</i></u>	<u><i>Sino-Foreign University</i></u>
Mean	3.5	3.502631579
Variance	0.745316456	0.896526316
Observations	80	76
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	151	
t Stat	-0.018111021	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.492787097	
t Critical one-tail	1.655007387	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.985574195	
t Critical two-tail	1.975798924	

V. DISCUSSIONS

Main Results and Compared with Previous Study

For students' general attitude towards distance education, the percentage of response reached 72% percent, and the means is 3.62, and also the descriptive interpretation is good. So the result is consistent with Ahmed's research (2016), which suggests that students have a generally positive and high attitude towards distance education. The majority of students were comfortable with distance learning. For the research hypothesis "there are significant differences in students' attitudes towards distance education due to different types of universities they are currently engaged in." Besides, for some specific items listed that have relatively low scores, probable reasons will be discussed. For the item "the learner in distance learning system is an independent learner who takes responsibility for his or her learning," the respondents who disagreed with it or had a neutral attitude may consider the influence of digital devices, since when students access to the mobile phones or laptop, they may not be able to concentrate on their study work. Also, since the course is provided by distance education institution, students actually relied on the institution somewhat. Moreover, for the item "the relationship between students and the academic supervisor is a unique one," students who did not agree with it may consider that still students and the supervisor need to communicate or negotiate like the normal relationship between students and supervisor in real life, even though they don't communicate directly.

Compared with Expected Results

This study was expected to have a result that students have a general positive attitude towards distance education which was consistent with previous studies which suggested that students' attitudes towards distance education are generally good. From Ahmed's study (2016), it's suggested that the total degree for the questionnaire was good, and the percentage of response reached 72%, which showed that students' attitudes towards e-learning was very high. Besides, Chen and Wang's study (2010) also showed that students have generally positive attitudes towards distance education. So the result of this study is expected to be consistent with the previous studies. However, since this study also investigates the impact of types of universities in China on students' attitudes, which has not been explored by other researchers yet, new findings will occur when the most part may be parallel with previous ones, especially the general attitude.

Possible Explanation

As addressed by Xiao (2018), students in Sino-foreign universities generally had different academic background than students in ordinary universities. However, this study found out that, at least they didn't have significantly different attitudes towards distance education due to their different academic experiences. More significantly, for the reason why there were no significant differences between Sino-foreign university students and ordinary university students, it might be that the type of university they were currently engaged in did not affect their study or learning style so much, and did not affect their attitude towards different education style very much that their general attitude towards e-learning did not vary from the other one.

Based on the study, some problems also need to be paid attention to. For examples, some students had skeptical attitudes towards whether distance education can enhance their learning motivation. Actually, as what have been investigated before, distance education did have some drawback such as distraction and low efficiency (Valentine, 2002). Besides, the learning environment has to be enhanced in and enriched in a distance education system considering task variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback to the learning process. As what have been investigated and found out, students who have higher levels of motivation to learn, they also have higher levels of satisfaction with the educational process, and higher quality performance in a distance education system (Hannay and Newvine, 2006). So there are still some problems in distance education system that needs to be solved.

Limitation of the Study

However, this study also has some limitations. Since the study only investigated 156 respondents for analyzing students attitudes towards distance education, so the sample is relatively small and may not reveal the accurate relationship between the independent variable, types of university that students are currently studying in, and the dependent variable, students' attitudes towards distance education. In addition, since most of the respondents for the group Sino-foreign university were from Wenzhou-Kean University, the result may not be generalized properly and could not be accurately inferred to the whole population of Sino-foreign university students.

Moreover, since this study used questionnaire to collect information, the investigator did not have direct contact and connection with the students, and could not ensure that each questionnaire was carefully and thoughtfully answered by the students after serious consideration. This could also lead to errors in the study. At the same time, because of the lack of open-ended questions, the questionnaire did not explore the deep-seated reasons behind students' point of view, and it was also not possible for the investigator to explore other more complex questions about distance education. This study is not sufficient enough for explaining why students have such attitudes towards distance education.

Reliability and Validity of the Results

For the research reliability, since the study used online questionnaire to collect the data and the researcher didn't have direct contact with the participants, the study is free from researcher bias. Besides, the researcher didn't directly get the data from respondents, so the results won't be affected by researcher error that may alters the researcher's interpretation. Moreover, questionnaire used in this study were mostly delivered during the morning, so respondents were energetic and would not make mistakes in filling the form which didn't cause participant error. In addition, the questionnaire was randomly spread among students in different university, so there was no participant bias that who maybe falsely too positive or too negative with his or her answers. And for the research validity, both internal and external

validity is good. Firstly, since previous studies suggest that there might be some effect of the independent variable on students experiences, which may result in their different outlook, the assumption this study made is necessary. And since the respondents were randomly chosen from university students all over China, this result could be generalized to all population.

Theoretical Contribution

Prior studies investigated variables like, gender, specialization, and academic year, but none of them explored types of university (Ahmed, 2016). So this study added this new variable to the existing theory. The reason why this variable is important is that under the current trend of globalization, Sino-foreign cooperative universities in China have developed in a unique way different from other universities, and parents and students are paying more attention to their current situation. Therefore, in this article, the traditional universities and Sino-foreign cooperative universities are deliberately distinguished for analysis. Adding this variable will improve the current theoretical framework of the studies on distance education in China. The practical utility of the study is that it will arise the distance education institution's attention to students' academic backgrounds. These are the points where this article will make contributions to the existing theory. Even though the final results showed that there were no significant differences in students' attitudes towards distance education due to the types of university they were studied in, it's still necessary to explore the relationship.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study described and compared students' attitudes towards distance education between ordinary universities and Sino-foreign cooperative universities. According to the findings of the study, students evaluated in the study mostly had positive attitudes towards distance education which was consistent with previous studies. Most of the students responded "Agreed" to the descriptions towards Distance Education and Distance Education Learner, which was interpreted as "good". Therefore, the overall level of students' satisfaction towards distance education was "Agreed", which was also interpreted as "good". The results of the descriptive and comparative analysis revealed that there was no significant difference in attitudes towards distance education between ordinary university and Sino-foreign university students in China.

Students evaluated in this study were mostly classified as positive, but there was no significant difference due to the type of university variable. Majority of both ordinary university and Sino-foreign university students agreed with the descriptions towards distance education provided by the investigator. There were no significant differences in attitudes towards distance education between Sino-foreign university students and ordinary university students in China. The hypothesis "there are significant differences in students' attitudes towards distance education due to different types of universities they are currently engaged in" is rejected. The hypothesis "there are no significant differences in students' attitudes towards distance education due to different types of universities they are currently engaged in" is accepted.

Further study is needed to find out why students general attitudes towards distance education is almost the same. Also, it can be investigated that what are the principal effectors that influence students' decision on choose what kind of devices to study if they are using online course. Besides, for the purpose to explore students attitudes towards distance education due to types of university, wider range of university types should be investigated. More description items could be set up in further studies. In addition to simply asking students what they think about distance education, future studies can also explore students' views on different courses of distance education, as well as questions about the courses and staffing that students think are most appropriate and suitable, as well as other specific aspects of distance education.

At the same time, scholars can explore the deeper reasons behind student's opinions and perspectives. Also, researchers can endeavor to figure out schoolteachers attitudes towards distance education (Nasser and Abouchedid, 2000) and whether there are significant differences due to their profession. Moreover, the field in distance education of other level learning can be explored such as middle schools or postgraduate schools.

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APPENDIX

Research Instrument

Questionnaire: Students Attitudes towards Distance Education

1. What is your gender?

a. Male	52
b. Female	104

2. What type of university are you studying at?

a. Ordinary University	80
b. Sino-Foreign University	76

3. Please describe your attitude towards the following descriptions towards distance education.

Item	Distance Education	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	A large number of students can join the distance learning system.					
2	DE is flexible.					
3	DE uses educational technology at a wide range.					
4	DE enhances the learner's motivation.					
5	DE offers a good opportunity to the learner to choose the major, the time and the way of studying.					
6	DE employs modern technology that attracts learner's attention.					
7	DE overcomes geographical distances.					
8	DE offers specialized knowledge and skills.					
9	DE enables students in remote areas to pursue higher education.					
10	The learner can evaluate his or her learning due to pre-assigned objectives.					
11	The learner in distance learning system is an independent learner					

	who takes responsibility for his or her learning.					
12	It is essential to be daily in contact with the academic supervisor in distance education.					
13	The interaction between students in distance education promotes their experience.					
14	The relationship between students and the academic supervisor is a unique one.					