Impact of Epidemics on Chinese Students in the Context of Brexit

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Abstract: The UK held a referendum and officially announced its departure from the European Union in 2016. The political and economic landscape within the UK began to change significantly, including a sustained economic downturn, rising prices and a shortage of some resources. In the fourth year of the UK's exit from the EU (2019), Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by a novel coronavirus, was discovered in China and it rapidly expanded and broke out worldwide. Amidst the global tensions, Chinese students in the UK were being affected in unpredictable ways. This article will analyze the impact of Brexit and the epidemic on Chinese students in the UK in terms of the international students' financial situation, daily study and life, with the aim of helping the public to recognize the hardship that this group of people is now facing and to call on the public to initiate protection for Chinese students.

Keywords: brexit, COVID-19 epidemics, Chinese international student, the UK

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of Brexit

Ever since the Schuman Plan was proposed in May 1950, a globally giant political and economic alliance had been being conceived for approximately four decades. The European Union, one of the largest and strongest economic unions, was officially established when Treaty on European Union (also known as The Maastricht Treaty) was adopted in 1991 and took effect in 1993. It was in the year 1973 when The United Kingdom (the UK) became a full member of the European Community, while during that period, the European Union had not yet been fully formed. The first-ever national referendum was held in the UK on 5 June 1975. In that referendum, 67.2% of the British people favored staying in the EEC and 32.8% of people wanted to leave, and according to the result of the referendum, the UK remained in the EEC. However, the UK maintained the British pound instead of the common Euro as currency for the sake of guaranteeing its own status in a global perspective [1].

Over the next few years, calls for support for the decision to leave the EU were heard unceasingly in popular ears. In 2015, in a major speech, former British Prime Minister David Cameron claimed to ask the EU to meet the UK's corresponding demands, which echoed his promise in 2013 to hold a referendum on whether the UK would leave the EU by the end of 2017 in order to win the 2015 prime ministerial election, amidst spreading Euroscepticism. Finally, on 23 Jun 2016, the referendum on whether the UK should leave the EU was held, and according to the results, the leave side won with 51.9% of the total. Table 1 has the results by NUTS2 region.

Table 1: Results on referendum on membership of the European Union, 23 June 2016 [2].

Region	Leave	Remain	Region	Leave	Remain
England Outside London			South Yorkshire	61.56	38.44
Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire	51.93	48.07	Surrey, East and West Sussex	49.29	50.71
Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire	46.84	53.16	Tees Valley and Durham	60.89	39.11
Cheshire	51.67	48.33	West Midlands	58.64	41.36
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	56.46	43.54	West Yorkshire	54.78	45.22
Cumbria	56.43	43.57	**Average of England Outside London**	56.29	43.71
Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire	58.53	41.47			
Devon	55.34	44.66	**London**		
Dorset and Somerset	56.2	43.8	Inner London	28.09	71.91
East Anglia	55.45	44.55	Outer London	43.97	56.03
East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire	64.75	35.25	**Average of London**	36.03	63.97
Essex	62.34	37.66			
Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Bristol/Bath area	49.12	50.88	**Northern Ireland**	44.24	55.76
Greater Manchester	53.46	46.54			
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	54.58	45.42	**Scotland**		
Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire	56.56	43.44	Eastern Scotland	36.82	63.18
Kent	59.25	40.75	South Western Scotland	36.78	63.22
Lancashire	59.03	40.97	Highlands and Islands	43.96	56.04
Leicestershire, Rutland and Northamptonshire	59.03	40.97	**Average of Scotland**	39.19	60.81
Lincolnshire	65.16	34.84			
Merseyside	48.82	51.18	**Wales**		
North Yorkshire	51.89	48.11	West Wales and The Valleys	53.89	46.11
Northumberland and Tyne and Wear	55.71	44.29	East Wales	50.25	49.75
Shropshire and Staffordshire	62.53	37.47	**Average**	52.07	47.93

In general, Number of Regions where percentage of people chose to leave was larger than percentage of those chose to stay was 26 and there were 11 regions where people choosing to stay more than those choosing to leave.

1.2. Background of Coronavirus Pandemic in the UK

In December of 2019, an acute respiratory infection caused by viral infections was found in Wuhan, Hubei province of China and started to spread in a domestic range and further a global trend. Experts have confirmed that this highly contagious disease was caused by a new type of coronavirus. After the World Health Organization announced to name this coronavirus-infected pneumonia as "COVID-19" on 11 February 2020, a month later, on 11 March, the WHO stated that the current outbreak of the new coronavirus pneumonia could be described and recognized as a global pandemic [3].

At that time almost all European countries and even the whole world were under strict quarantine measures. However, under the condition of confirmed cases remaining high in the UK, the British government surprisingly pioneered the concept of so-called "herd immunity" [4]. Although the government tried to avoid the unnecessary spread of the epidemic through a series of measures such as city lockdown, free vaccination, free self-test kits, and free treatment, it was still too late. In the two to three years between the pandemic, the number of confirmed, fatal cases of COVID in the UK continued to rise, along with the six mainstream variants (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Lambda, and Omicron) that have been identified so far. Figure 1 illustrates the new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people per day from 5th Feb. of 2020 to 15th Sep. of 2022. Figure 2 shows the number of new deaths, caused by coronavirus, in the UK each day from 4th Feb. of 2020 to 15th Sep. of 2022.
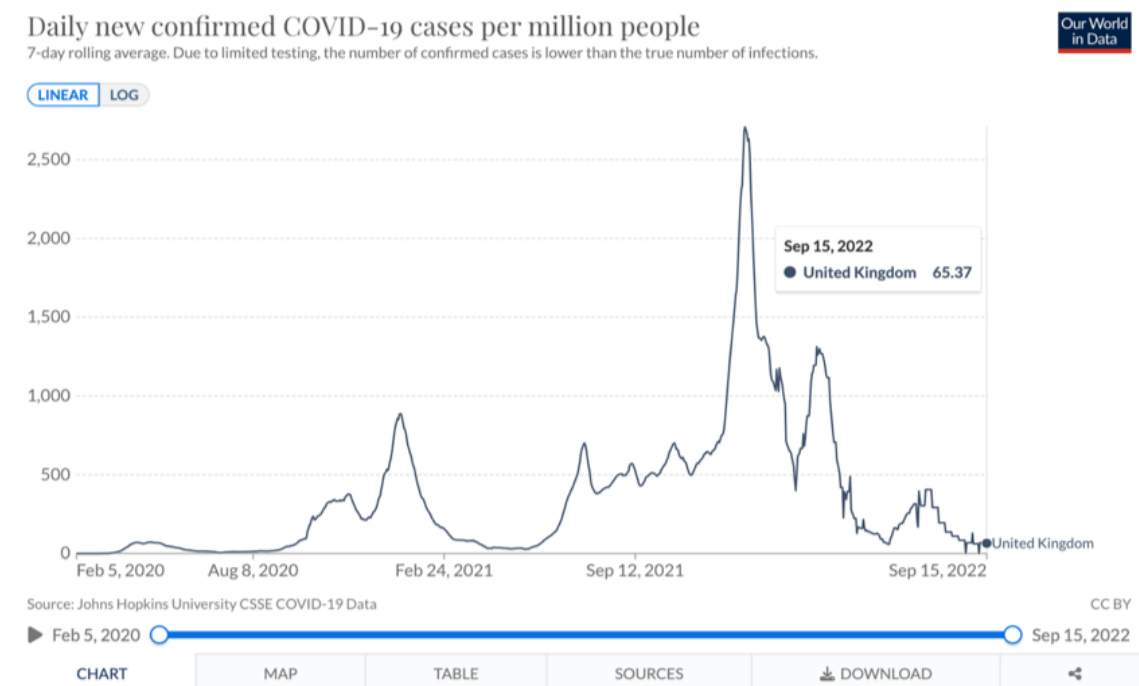

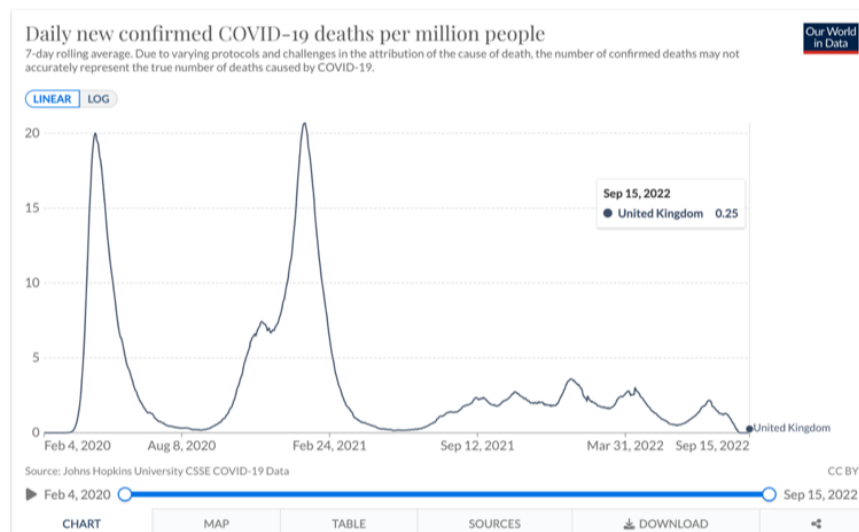Figure 1: Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people [5].

Figure 2: Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people [6].

On 1 April 2022, it was reported that a total of 4.9 million people in the UK were infected with Coronavirus between 20 and 26 March, up from 4.3 million in the previous week, according to the latest estimates from the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The ONS figures show that 1 in 13 people in England, or around 7.6% of the population, were infected with a new coronavirus, compared to 7% in Wales, 8.6% in Scotland and 6.7% in Northern Ireland [7].

2.   Influence on Students' Finances

Against the backdrop of Brexit and the global new coronavirus epidemic, the Chinese student community in the UK has received an unprecedented and dramatic impact. Due to the Brexit, there are a lot of policies covering the whole UK on students' affairs, especially on international students. At the same time, as the coronavirus continues to spread in the UK since 2020, in March, the UK government and the devolved administrations have been rolling out the appropriate public health measures. Their measures include policies such as banning rallies, cancelling sporting events and quarantining people with the disease, which restrict citizens' freedom of movement on a large scale. Although the UK government has introduced a few seemingly effective financial support measures for households and businesses, this will continue to have a significant impact on public sector borrowing and debt in the medium term, and indirectly but further on Chinese students studying in the UK. According to reports and data, the largest influence is on students' living costs and tuition fees.

2.1.   Costs for Living Raised

After Brexit, as the pound is no longer circulating for other countries as it usually does. Demand for the pound from consumers, investors, and businesses of all types and sizes in predominantly EU countries has fallen sharply. This has led to a sharp fall in the value of the British Pound. Over the next five years, the government, which already had its hands full dealing with Brexit-related matters, had no time to take care of the situation in the domestic market. The devaluation of the pound further hindered production and marketing practices by increasing the cost of domestic production. Companies were forced to push up the prices of their products, and from this point onwards, the UK consumer index rose. Although the pound has become cheaper relative to the Chinese yuan, Chinese students in the UK have been forced into a flood of higher spending. Figure 3 shows the CPI in the UK from approximately 2013 to 2022, and Figure 4 is a chart about the exchange rate of British Pounds to Chinese Yuan.
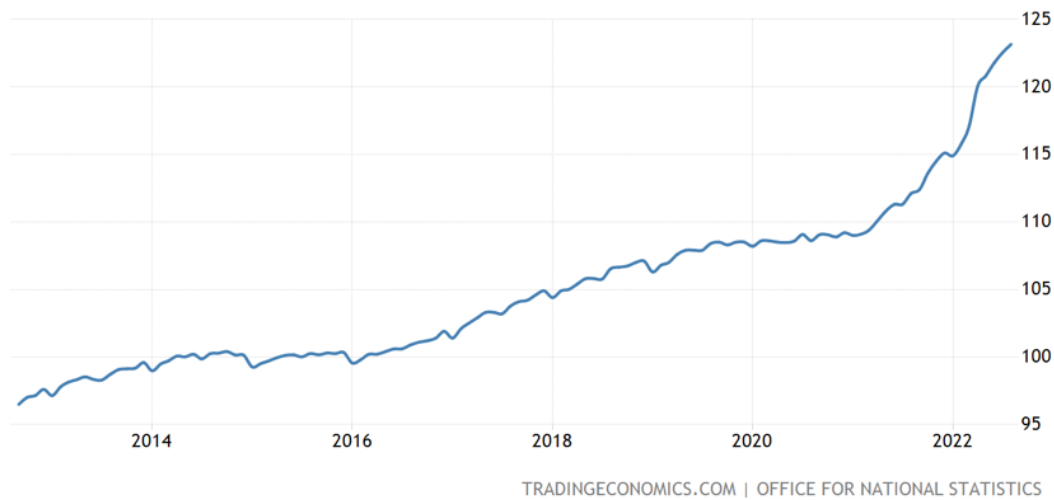
Figure 3: Consumer Price Index in the UK in nearest decade [8].

Figure 4: Exchange rate of GBP to CNY in nearest decade [9].

Since the start of the 2020 epidemic, the government has been unable to obtain more accurate consumer information in a short period of time due to travel restrictions, mandatory bans on offline work and other related policies. The government's intervention policies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 cases have had some negative effects on consumption, including triggering panic buying and hoarding behavior among consumers. Whereas the disposable spending of UK consumers, including Chinese students, has continued to decline as the incidence of COVID-19 has continued to increase, the total amount of spending allocated to necessities such as groceries has been on the rise overall [10]. This means that living costs are becoming more unaffordable for some Chinese students.

According to a survey in 2021, not only does daily spending for Chinese students increase, but the accommodation costs also soared [11]. Figure 5 shows the average rent in the UK in a year-scale. It is obvious in the graph that the quantity of students paying for no matter institution or private provider for accommodation has been increasing through the decade period. For institutions, the rent was around £4600, which rose to £7400, while for Private provider, the rent increased from approximately £5000 to £7700 per year. In further detail, after Brexit, there was an overall 12.3% rise from the year

2015/16 to 2018/19 and another 15.8% increase after the pandemic in 2020. Generally speaking, the accommodation fees increased dramatically, which also brought international students in the UK, including Chinese students more pressure in finance.

Figure 5: Weighted Average Annual Rent for Students in the UK [11].

2.2. Tuition Fees Increased

Due to the Brexit, starting in 2017, the government decided the fee cap is meant to be raised in line with inflation in England area, while maintenance grants were scheduled to cease with the 2016–17 academic year. This is undoubtedly a huge blow to the international student community, especially for those who have enough academic ability but whose families cannot afford the high cost. Table 2 illustrates the estimated inflation rates in the UK from January 2012 till June 2022 by quarter and annual.

As can be seen from table 2, with the rising rate of inflation in England, tuition fees are also going up according to the corresponding policy. For international students, the school fees rose to from £11,400 for lecture-based courses to £67,892 or more for a top undergraduate medical degree. (A top undergraduate medical degree might cost even higher.) Meanwhile, for international postgraduate students, a fee for classroom-based programs for one year started at around £6,500 and could be up to £51,360; an annually charged fee for laboratory-based programs could be within the interval of £7,500 to £54,500 depending on corresponding major and years of study [13]. As a result, families of Chinese students studying abroad are facing even steeper challenges than before in deciding to send their children to study in the UK.

Table 2: Historical inflation rates for United Kingdom [12].

Year	Jan.-Mar.	Apr.-Jun.	Jul.-Sep.	Oct.-Dec.	Annual
2022	6.22%	9.17%	/	/	
2021	0.61%	2.05%	2.77%	4.91%	2.59%
2020	1.67%	0.62%	0.60%	0.53%	0.85%
2019	1.88%	2.05%	1.83%	1.41%	1.79%
2018	2.72%	2.42%	2.52%	2.27%	2.48%
2017	2.14%	2.74%	2.82%	3.02%	2.68%
2016	0.35%	0.35%	0.73%	1.21%	0.66%
2015	0.10%	-0.02%	0.01%	0.07%	0.04%
2014	1.74%	1.72%	1.46%	0.94%	1.46%
2013	2.78%	2.68%	2.71%	2.10%	2.57%
2012	3.49%	2.76%	2.41%	2.67%	2.83%

3.   Influence on Chinese Students' Study in the UK

However, the economic pressures caused by Brexit have not cut into the number of Chinese students. Contrary to expectations, the number of Chinese students applying to UK universities has risen by 30% in 2019. According to an analysis by experts from the British newspaper The Guardian, this change is based on the tense atmosphere in US-China relations [14]. In addition to this, there are several widely accepted explanations. For example, the decision to leave the EU has led the UK government to cut the corresponding privileges for EU students and to further reduce the number of places occupied by EU students [15]. The decision to leave the EU gave the UK greater control over domestic immigration policy as well. The UK has unraveled its simplified employment visa policy Tier 4 and developed the 2018 Extraordinary UK Million Pound Scholarship Scheme for Chinese students. These related policies have also attracted more Chinese students. But the ongoing outbreak has forced Edexcel and CAIE (Cambridge Assessment International Education), the UK's two main exam boards, to implement the Portfolio of Evidence (POE) approach to performance determination: that is, to collect evidence of students' learning, including coursework, model exam results, etc. However, this approach is only a temporary solution to the assessment of students' academic performance during the epidemic period, and the objectivity and scientific validity of the marking criteria are still open to question.

During the epidemic, some experts predicted that students' experience of school had also been affected to some extent due to the UK government's policy of locking down cities and enforcing home quarantine of residents. However, research has found that the online course experience for university students is not too bad. The number and variety of synchronous tools available for online courses was sufficiently rich and classroom interactivity was kept well, leading to further student motivation. Students perceived higher levels of learning satisfaction during the NCCU epidemic, and the number of online course withdrawals decreased compared to the pre-NCCU epidemic [16]. For Chinese students who were unable to attend offline classes due to the epidemic, they also benefited from the increased availability of online teaching resources. Thanks to the strong support and balance of the UK education authorities and schools, teaching online is no different to teaching offline.

4.   Influence on Chinese Students' Life in Other Aspects

The COVID-19 outbreak still poses a degree of threat to the health and personal safety of Chinese students in the UK. During the years when the new coronavirus was rampant and mutating, along with the government's herd immunization concept, Chinese students were infected on a large scale. Most of the infected students only showed milder symptoms such as fever, runny nose and sore throat, but a small number of students still showed more serious symptoms such as tachycardia, high fever and breathing difficulties. As of May 19, 2022, more than 22 million positive cases have been detected in the UK. Figure 6 is a screenshot from British Government about the cases in United Kingdom in the past 2 years.

In addition to the health risks associated with the risk of infecting COVID-19, Chinese students have also been subjected to severe racial discrimination in the UK. In a report by the University of Manchester on 1 March 2022, it was noted that "38% of students who took part in the survey claimed to have experienced racially charged discrimination, harassment, prejudice or stigmatization during the COVID-19 outbreak" [18]. In the early days of the pandemic, there were already many reports of Chinese people being discriminated against and harassed for wearing masks in public areas or because the origin of the virus was regarded as China [19]. This is certainly a fatal blow to the minds of Chinese students who were already scared by the virus.
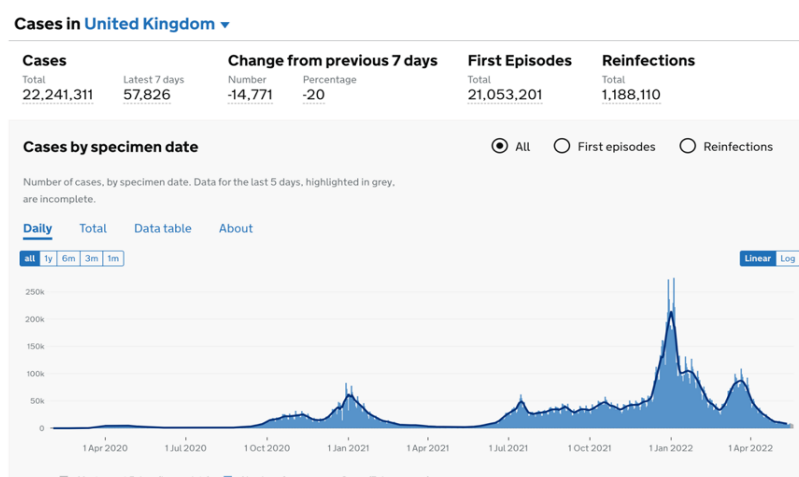
Figure 6: Cases of people tested positive by specimen date [17].

Almost simultaneously with the announcement of full-scale herd immunization in Britain, widespread martial law began to be imposed in China. Flights to China from all over the world have been forcibly called off by the government, and even while the outbreak is stabilizing, the meltdown policy is still in place for flights from the UK back to China. With demand outstripping supply, airfares have soared to several times their pre-epidemic levels. The difficulty and cost of returning Chinese students to their home countries has become a big problem in society. International students who were lucky enough to get a ticket and had a chance to return home often had to go through a long period of quarantine of 7-28 days, depending on the pandemic situation and corresponding policies in each province and region.

Furthermore, according to the related public opinion surveys, there has been a huge increase in prejudice on the internet against international students returning to China during a time of pressure on domestic preparedness. Some netizens have even spoken out saying that international students are unpatriotic for returning to China during the epidemic, trying to stir up the masses and spreading unfavorable content about international students returning to China [20]. In a related study, it was found that the international student population showed more symptoms of insomnia, depression and anxiety during isolation compared to the non-international student population, with particularly higher rates of moderate or higher depression and anxiety. They were also more likely to suffer from poor sleep, poor appetite, diarrhea, constipation and mouth ulcers during isolation when they were mentally distressed [21]. COVID-19 poses far more than a physical health threat to the Chinese student community in the UK, it is also a psychological affliction.

5. Conclusion

Following the Brexit, the UK government's related policies have caused the UK economy to fall into a certain degree of decline. This has led to the continuous depreciation of the pound, and higher CPI and Inflation. In addition, after the start of the epidemic, prices have increased a lot due to the rising cost of production and scarcity of some resources. On further probing, the combined result of this has led to a gradual rise in tuition fees and cost of living for Chinese students, creating a hindrance for Chinese students in the UK. Secondly, in terms of study, Chinese students have benefited greatly from the UK's policies and as a result, the number of Chinese students applying to UK universities has risen rather than fallen during the UK's economic downturn and the severe epidemic. Those students who are currently studying at UK universities have not been affected much in their studies by the online study due to the epidemic closure. However, due to the pressure of the epidemic, Chinese

students are being discriminated against and ostracized in many ways in their daily lives: in the UK, they may be subjected to racial discrimination from other students; in China, they are being plagued by negative comments on the internet. For Chinese students studying abroad to be treated more fairly in society, it is recommended that the Chinese and UK governments introduce more relevant policies and well-being to help this group.

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