

Chinese International Students Studying Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the UK

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Abstract

As the number of Chinese international students studying abroad continues to rise, they often encounter difficulties in adjusting to college life in a foreign country. These challenges can include difficulties in adapting to new environments, cultural differences, feelings of isolation due to being away from their parents, and academic pressures. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, negative media coverage and social stigmatization of Asians, such as the use of terms like “Chinese virus,” have led to increased discrimination against Asians, particularly Chinese international students, which has had a significant impact on their mental health. To explore these issues further, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with five Chinese international students studying in the UK, examining the challenges and concerns they faced before and after the pandemic and how they coped with them.

Keywords: Chinese international students, well-being, COVID-19, social discrimination, UK

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has severely impacted the global population by the end of 2019. Higher education was also impacted by COVID-19, which posed numerous issues regarding teaching, learning, mobility of students, and administration (Mok et al., 2021). As face-to-face courses were converted to online courses to prevent the spread of the disease, there were still many negative concerns expressed by students or teachers about the quality of teaching and learning as well as the effectiveness of online courses, even though online courses were used as a solution to address higher education issues (Xiong et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought varying degrees of anxiety and uncertainty into the lives of many people, whether it is social isolation, fear of being infected with the virus, family financial concerns, or career planning. Due to travel restrictions, self-isolation, and maintaining a physical distance from others, international students have been one of the affected and vulnerable populations throughout this pandemic. Due to the fact that many Chinese international students are not accompanied by family or friends, they may be more affected by the pandemic and social isolation measures than local students. The inability to return to China, expensive air tickets, travel restrictions, and academic pressure all influence Chinese international students' well-being and mental health to varied degrees.

Increased challenges have been brought because of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak for international students. As the virus was first identified in Wuhan, China, Chinese international students in particular have been discriminated against as carriers of the virus in some countries, increasing stereotypes and prejudice against Chinese people. Inaccurate media reports have created public fear, alienation and discrimination (Liatm & Oh, 2020), which can exacerbate Chinese international students' anxiety and fears and negatively affect their mental health.

In addition, Chinese international students may not have the same social support as local students, which can be

a source of anxiety for them. A person's mental health might be negatively impacted if they do not have sufficient support to work through problems and stress actively. According to research (Chavajay, 2013), overseas students are more likely to seek support from their peers whose also international students from the same country and close friends than from university's employees or local students. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many restrictions have made it more difficult for Chinese international students to access help, which can also affect their wellbeing.

This study seeks to investigate the experiences and influence of COVID-19 on Chinese international students during the pandemic, focusing on the changes the pandemic caused in the respondents. Through the analysis of data acquired through online semi-structured interviews, this study will mainly address the following three research questions:

- 1) What are the main concerns Chinese international students care about, and which concerns challenge their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) What challenges do Chinese international students face during the COVID-19 pandemic? What helped them overcome these challenges and how did they solve them?
- 3) What are the differences in their studying life before and after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, and how did these differences impact on Chinese international students?

This article has six chapters, including an introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion. In this chapter, the researcher provides a brief overview of the context and some difficulties that Chinese international students face during their overseas experiences. In the second chapter, the researcher will conduct a literature analysis on the effects of the pandemic on Chinese international students as well as past research on the difficulties and mental health of Chinese international students. Examine by conducting a literature review and generating three research questions. Chapter 3 will discuss and explain the study's methodology and rationale. In Chapter 4, the content of the interviews, findings, and discussions will be provided. In the last chapter, the researcher will provide a conclusion and some suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to the global population, given the enormous number of confirmed cases (525 million) and deaths (6.2 million deaths) of COVID-19 (WHO, 2022). In addition to the negative consequences that COVID-19 infection has on physical health, the pandemic may also negatively affect mental health. These implications include lockdown, social isolation, protective measures, family and work-related difficulties, unemployment, and economic repercussions. As a result, many have experienced social isolation, increased stress at home and work, and financial pressure, all of which are associated with poor mental health outcomes (Burne et al., 2021). The research shows more challenges on international students since the COVID-19 pandemic started, during the pandemic, the prevalence of major depression and generalized anxiety disorder among overseas students was two times and 1.5 times greater, respectively, than in 2019 (Chirikov et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on the world's education systems, affecting nearly 1.6 billion students in over 200 nations (Pokhrel, 2021) by closing residence halls (Chen et al., 2020), difficulty in finding jobs and career planning (Song et al., 2021), lack of access to remote learning resource (Mpungose, 2020), and stress from economic uncertainty (Yan & Berliner, 2011). The pandemic is an acute stressor, and the disease itself is highly contagious and fatal. Corresponding confinement, social isolation, and general uncertainty are also significant risk factors for poor mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, stress, and depression (Chang et al., 2020; Horigian et al., 2020). Despite everyone being susceptible to this effect, the past study indicates that university students may be especially sensitive to mental health issues under stress compared to the general population (van Zyl et al., 2021). Prolonged periods of isolation, absence of family, cultural differences, deferral of studies, visas, and other unique challenges enhance the likelihood that international students will experience unpleasant emotional reactions and impact students' well-being (Xiong et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a significant impact on the health and well-being of the general population (Van de Velde et al., 2021). It has had a substantial impact on the global higher education sector because of international and domestic travel constraints, as well as social and physical distance (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Students in higher education shifted to virtual campuses, which had an influence on their well-being since all teaching, communication, and learning moved online (Chang et al., 2020). According to Amoah and Mok (2022), non-native students are typically young and study abroad without family or close acquaintances. Consequently, individuals are more susceptible to psychological stress due to isolation, lack of social support, academic difficulties, financial issues, and difficulty integrating into the local culture. All of these issues contribute to a general decline in the happiness of international students (Yu & Wright, 2017; Diener & Chan,

2011).

2.2 Benefits of Studying Abroad for International Students

While studying abroad can have some negative effects on some individuals, it can also be a valuable experience that can contribute to one's own growth, competence, and career development. International students can profit from study abroad programs by gaining personal and professional advantages such as personal growth, cultural exposure, learning capacity, skill development, new language abilities, communication skills, social development, and more (Costello, 2015; Tamilla & Ledgerwood, 2018). Research showed that international education opportunities could help students build confidence and grow in the personal challenges involved. Students benefit academically in terms of career development, cross-cultural awareness, and personal character development, such as greater empathy, tolerance, and independence (Black & Duhon, 2006; Kelleher, 2013). The cultural diversity of studying abroad is one way of providing individuals with a creative mindset, a research conducted by Lee and his colleagues (2012) demonstrates that international students are more creative and tolerant than students who did not study abroad. Additionally, Dwyer and Peters (2004) found that international students have more unique and original ideas about a different culture; this makes international students more empathetic, able to positively interact with people from different cultures and form strong social bonds with others.

2.3 Well-Being, Concerns, and Challenges

Nevertheless, while studying abroad can develop students' skills and widen their perspectives, they also face concerns and challenges even before the pandemic, such as financial issues, language barriers, safety issues, social support, and well-being. Given social discrimination, strict social distancing, self-isolation and travel restrictions, the well-being should be high priority for Chinese international students after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (Pradeep, 2020).

First, the importance of students' physical and mental well-being while studying online during a pandemic cannot be overlooked. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students' well-being was negatively affected to varying degrees (Cao et al., 2020). Pradeep (2020) noted that due to the sudden pandemic and the closure of universities, some exams that needed to be taken in the lab were not available online, thus impacting students' assessments. Especially for graduating students, the delay in final exams and the uncertainty of future career plans increase students' anxiety. International students have to face significant challenges in terms of accommodation, food, and safety as they are unable to return to their home countries. Song et al. (2020) suggested that the academic-related stress caused by COVID-19 may be more likely to lead to anxiety, with some of the effects including disruption of future plans, reduced communication with teachers, financial stress, academic delays, and restrictions on entry for Chinese students returning to university, which increased with the concerns and challenges of Chinese students during the pandemic. For example, in February 2020 (Eric, 2020), Australia announced a ban on Chinese entry into Australia to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus. As a result, Chinese international students were not permitted to enter Australia, which had a negative impact on the academic careers and plans of many Chinese international students.

Secondly, according to Yang (2016), meaningful social contact is frequently identified as a critical aspect in enhancing international students' emotional well-being and successful adjustment. Social interactions can include institutional culture, campus atmosphere, support, cross-cultural growth, and foreign student participation. Participating in a variety of social activities, so fostering a sense of well-being and facilitating adaptation to a new setting, made international students feel less isolated. However, the suspension of regular school instruction and the relocation of the majority of activities online during the pandemic deprived students of crucial components of their daily routines, like as face-to-face interactions with classmates and teachers (Amoah et al., 2021). The online service survey with 787 participants conducted by Dodd and his colleagues (2021) revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative and altered impact on the mental health of university, with a low well-being score 33.8 out of 100 and 31.5 out of 100 on very low wellbeing. Amoah and Mok (2022) also discussed that during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in academic and social activities were the root cause of the strains that were placed on the mental health of overseas students. Wang et al. (2020) noted that prolonged confinement without outdoor activities or peer interaction during an outbreak can have serious negative health effects and can also affect students' mental health. Especially for international students, prolonged self-isolation, loneliness, fear of the virus, lack of information, lack of face-to-face contact with teachers, families, and peers, and inadequate financial resources can have a serious negative impact on students' physical and mental health. As Chinese international students live and study abroad alone, they are vulnerable to emotions and feelings of isolation in a completely unfamiliar cultural environment (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Richardson et al., (2017) showed that loneliness is a significant threat and negative effect on one's mental health. Following the outbreak, international students were required to follow a social isolation policy, attending classes in dormitories, reducing social interaction, and avoiding face-to-face contact. This physical isolation and reduced

social interaction exacerbated psychological isolation (Brooks et al., 2020), and was therefore more likely to threaten the well-being of all international students. Isolation increased for many international and non-local students as a result of factors such as class suspensions, campus closures, lockdown, and restricted areas for social activities, online teaching, and the inability to return home. Some Chinese international students have even reported that the increased isolation, stresses, and challenges they have had to face have caused them to develop negative emotions such as depression and anxiety disorders (Lai et al., 2020).

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese students had been experiencing various challenges such as language barriers, differences in learning styles, difficulties in establishing good cross-cultural friendships, and cultural differences, which were sources of stress for Chinese students (Yan & Berliner, 2009). In addition, financial issues are a regular concern and challenge for Chinese international students, particularly those who rely on scholarships to attend school (Cao, 1997), after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, a huge proportion of Chinese international students (49/5%) reported that they have less or insufficient money at their disposal (Dodd et al., 2020). In addition, in some countries, such as the United States, Chinese international students are not allowed to work off-campus on their student visas, which puts financial pressure on those from low-income families, and many U.S. universities do not offer financial aid to Chinese international students, thus increasing the financial pressure on Chinese international students to pursue their studies in overseas (Situ et al., 1995; Wan, 2001). Gallagher et al. (2020) reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, many international students faced multiple challenges such as homelessness, racial discrimination and an inability to pay tuition fees. Financially, many international students reported that their parents' jobs were affected by the pandemic and were unable to support the high cost of international tuition fees and living expenses. Although some countries, such as Australia, have implemented financial support policies (Gallagher et al., 2020), international students were not covered by government assistance schemes at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak; consequently, financial difficulties have been a major challenge to the well-being and mental health of international students.

2.4 The Impact of Pandemic on Higher Education

International student mobility brings diverse and enriching benefits to students, as previously noted, also brings benefits to higher education institutions, communities, and host countries (Knight, 2021). For example, international students are a source of global funding for the higher education sector, while also increasing worldwide visibility and internationalization, thus enhancing opportunities for country-to-country collaboration (Knight, 2012; Lillyman & Bennet, 2014; Ching et al., 2017). However, because of the COVID-19 outbreak, global higher education has undergone significant changes in response to the virus, most notably a rapid shift from face-to-face to online/distance delivery (Ma et al., 2021). As the pandemic continues, there is growing concern regarding the physical mobility of international students and the impact of mobility on global higher education (Mok et al., 2021). Yildirim et al. (2021) state that the mobility of international students and the lack of in-person lectures are the most significant challenges facing higher education.

Furthermore, Mercado (2020) notes that the pandemic has significantly impacted international students' mobility due to the fact that online virtual courses prevent international students from feeling a sense of belonging at a physical university. Online courses exclude international students from university campus life, exposing them to additional challenges and concerns. For example, due to web access restrictions in different countries and regions, some international students are unable to access university websites or search for course-related materials, leading to inequalities (Yildirim et al., 2021) and increasing their concerns and anxieties.

Following the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, a quick transition in learning format from on-site to online learning presented teachers and students with various challenges. For instance, inadequate internet connectivity led to the difficulty to enter online classrooms on time, low internet connectivity in low-income families (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020), and inattention or diversion during class due to unexpected interruptions from pets or family members (Manfuso, 2020). Adnan and Anwar (2020) argue that face-to-face teaching motivates students to learn and think more than online teaching, and that online teaching does not allow for closed interaction and thus significantly reduces students' personal development (Robinson & Kakela, 2006). However, previous studies have argued that online learning is an effective and efficient method of knowledge transfer (Neuhauser, 2002; Nguyen, 2015), and Beaudoin et al. (2009) also demonstrated that students are generally satisfied with the online learning experience and that flexible online learning times and approaches can improve learning outcomes. Therefore, whether there is a correlation between the effectiveness of online learning and the anxiety and instability associated with the virus itself remains to be investigated in subsequent studies.

For students themselves, online lectures in the midst of the pandemic have brought many challenges to students as well. According to the survey study about university students' views of online classes after the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong (Mok et al., 2021), compared with in-person classes, lack of self-discipline is one of the major challenges of online learning (59.98%), followed by a poor learning environment (56%), eye strain from

staring at screens for long periods of time (54.77%) and low quality of lectures (44.58%). All these factors impact students' motivation to study and their passions of exploring knowledge which can ultimately lead to lower grades; therefore, many international students have diverse perspectives on continuing their education overseas. The study (Mok et al., 2021) found that 84% of the 2739 Chinese students interviewed no longer wanted to study abroad following the pandemic outbreak. In the UK, higher education institutions are major contributors to the UK economy and international students are an important part of higher education institutions (Soo & Elliott, 2010). China is the main source of international students in the UK (Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2020) and brings huge contributions to the UK economy (UUKI, 2021), so the outbreak of the epidemic and severe travel restrictions has led to a loss of international students and consequently a loss of economic benefits for higher education institutions.

2.5 Social Discrimination

Prior to the outbreak of the virus, Chinese students, being linguistically disadvantaged, suffered from linguistic discrimination in a multicultural living environment. Language discrimination is "discrimination because English is one's second language or because one speaks English with an accent" (Wei et al., 2012, p. 340). When international students are not proficient in English, they are more likely to feel language discrimination. Research has shown (Wei et al., 2012) that perceived language discrimination is associated with negative feelings of depression and anxiety, not only because of lower English proficiency than locals, but also because of the frustration of being rejected in social life or even in the classroom due to poor English expression, which can significantly affect international students' mental health and confidence, such as depression and anxiety. Chinese international students report fear and anxiety about unpredictable stressors, such as poor communication with locals and inability to answer questions in lectures (Nilsson et al., 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007; Wei et al., 2012). As English is not the native language of Chinese students, language discrimination is a source of stress for Chinese students (Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Wei et al., 2015). Sun et al. (2020) also confirmed this claim in their study of 210 Chinese students in the USA. Language proficiency affects the ability of international students to communicate effectively with others and is an important factor in the psychological well-being of Chinese students.

2.6 Conclusion

Overall, this chapter reviewed key literature found on what concerns and challenges Chinese international students have to face before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. As time passed and many countries eased restrictions, life for everyone gradually recovered and many universities resumed their offline courses. However, the wellbeing and mental health of international students continues to be a topic of concern for society, and changes in national policies like hard to go back to China once they decided study abroad, have forced many Chinese international students to change their choices. This study looks at how the wellbeing of international students changed before and after the epidemic, and whether and how pre-epidemic concerns have been exacerbated by the epidemic, and how this has affected their lives at this stage, and how students have addressed the challenges.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research design in further detail and explains the reasoning behind the methodologies and approaches that were selected. It begins by identifying the philosophical viewpoint and assumptions of the researcher, which had a direct impact on the methods that were employed in the study. After that, it goes into detail on the sample selection and the steps involved in gathering the qualitative information. After that, it describes the process that was used to analyze the data. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of the potential ethical concerns raised by this qualitative research investigation.

3.2 Philosophical Assumptions and Research Approach

In the research realm, it is significant for researchers to locate their study within adequate research paradigm, identifying coherent philosophical stance and methodology. A paradigm is a set of assumptions about how things work, usually described as a 'worldview' (Arthur, 2012). Since paradigms are directly related to one's beliefs about the world as a researcher (Schwandt, 2014), they also affect the researcher's choice of methodology and methods (Brown & Dueñas, 2020).

As Guba (1990) noted, a research paradigm is made up of three types of hypotheses: ontological, epistemological, and methodological. Ontology is about 'being', concerned with what is real and the nature of reality. Epistemology is about knowing and knowledge, concerned with 'how we know what we know' (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). In this study, the researcher aims to understand what challenges and concerns that Chinese international students have had to face before the COVID-19 pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic in their studying aboard period in the UK; and how pandemic impact Chinese students' wellbeing and their views

of going abroad. Therefore, this study is informed by the researcher's interpretivist stance. Interpretivism focuses on the idea that each individual person is making sense of the world in their own individual way, there is no single, observable reality; thus, there are multiple realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As Creswell (2013) explains, in the interpretivism stance, individuals seek to understand their world by their own way of living, hence with multiple interpretations, there are multiple perspectives in the one phenomenon (Crotty, 1998; Mack, 2010). Also, it allows the researcher to understand how people make sense of their experiences, how they build their worlds, and what meanings they attribute to their experiences. In this study, by interviewing participants, the researcher was able to understand the meaning of their different reactions and interpreting the underlying reasons for these reactions and thoughts.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) note that 'in qualitative research, understanding is the primary rationale for the investigation' (p. 238). The researcher attempts to gain a comprehensive understanding of one phenomenon by collecting words as data and focusing on the process of meaning-making rather than the outcome. Within the qualitative paradigm, the researcher takes a basic qualitative approach to the research design. A basic qualitative study focuses on discovering experiences, meaning making, and process (Worthington, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 42). Qualitative research is concerned with how meaning is produced and how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. It holds that knowledge is constructed by individuals as they engage in an activity, experience, or occurrence and make sense of it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In other words, "qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive" (Rossman & Rallis, 2011, p. 9), it focuses on analysis, interpretation, and description. In the educational field, a basic qualitative approach enables us to investigate the experiences of groups of people whose voices may not be reflected in mainstream understandings or perspectives. Researchers who use qualitative methods are interested in comprehending the meaning that people have created for themselves; this is the way individuals make sense of both their own lives and the experiences they have in the wider world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015)

3.3 Study Design

In this research, the study design was a qualitative investigation which involved semi-structured interviews. It is hard to observe one's feelings, or how people interpret the world around them, thus, interviewing is necessary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) in this study, interviews can yield valuable insights into the thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of study participants regarding a certain topic (May, 2011). Asked open-ended and less structured questions provide unique answers from individuals. The advantage of the semi-structured interview was its ability to give detail and depth to the data (Denscombe, 2014). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) also argue that semi-structured interview allows the researcher to adapt to the current circumstances, the respondent's evolving perspective, and new insights on the topic. By person-to-person interviewing, participants were asked in the form of open-ended questions to describe the stresses and challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their life patterns and learning patterns during the lockdown, and how they went about addressing the challenges they needed to face during their study abroad in the UK.

Participants were invited to indicate whether they would like to participate in an interview to explore their experiences in depth. Willing participants were interviewed online using Teams or WeChat, and the interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Participants could complete the interview in English, Mandarin, or a mix of English and Mandarin. In this research, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, the questions (see Table 1.) were more open-ended and flexible. Interview questions guided by the following lists of questions and explored deeply with participants' answers. Following questions helped semi-structured the process and allowed the researcher the flexibility and explored participants in more depth.

The aims of these questions were to interpret challenges and concerns Chinese international students needed to face while studying abroad and the tough time during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, and how did these challenges affect their well-being and what actions they took to deal with these challenges.

Table 1.

Wellbeing Challenges	and	1)	What are the challenges for you in studying abroad before the COVID-19 pandemic?
		2)	How did you overcome all these difficulties?
		3)	What are some of the challenges you face after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak?
		4)	Did these challenges have any impact on your studies, emotions, and wellbeing?
		5)	Did you have any support from friends, society, or families in addressing these

	issues? Was their support helpful to you?
Social Discrimination	1) Did you ever worry about being discriminated against by the locals before you went abroad before the COVID-19 pandemic? 2) Have you ever been discriminated against since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak?
Benefits of Studying Abroad	1) Do you feel that going abroad has been beneficial to your personal development? In what ways? 2) How did the pandemic influence your choice to study abroad? 3) Did you choose to study in the UK in the first place? Or were there other factors that made you choose to study in the UK?

3.4 Participants

After obtaining the ethical approval letter, participants were recruited from the whole UK for the qualitative study through three different ways. First, the researcher posted the recruitment of participants on social media (WeChat). Second, the researcher asked close friends individually if they would like to be a participant in this study. Third, the author contacted friends who are Chinese international students to invite their peers to participate, thus snowball research methods used in this recruitment. The feature of the snowballing methods is “the use of participants to contact other respondents” (Streton & Campbell, 2004, p. 37). Therefore, when the researcher contacted her friends who have the same overseas studying experience to participate in this study and asked her friends to introduce more potential respondents to get involved in this research. The researcher herself as a Chinese international student experienced overseas studying life before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, thus she wants to hear more perspectives of studying abroad from Chinese international students.

Using these recruitment efforts, 10 international students have contacted the researcher about the study. According to the specific inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 2), three students were not included because they were not studying in the UK and two were not experienced studying life after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Therefore, the research participants were 5 Chinese international students currently studying full-time in the UK universities and have experience of studying in the UK before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were chosen based on the experiences they had are suitable for the topic of the research. The researcher contacted participants via WeChat to initiate interview consent and scheduling procedures. All participants had the ability to speak both in Chinese and English and were able to complete semi-structured interviews and describe their experiences and perception towards the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, informed consent was obtained from all participants before the data collection.

Table 2.

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Nationality	Chinese	Other nationality
Location	The United Kingdom	Students who are studying abroad in any other location
Studying Experiences	Studies in the UK before the COVID-19 and after the pandemic outbreak	No experience of studying abroad in the UK during the COVID-9 pandemic
Education Background	Higher education	Students below the higher education level
Ages	Over 18 years old	Below 18 years old

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher brought individual experiences into words in data collection, analyzed these data and tried to understand these unique experiences based on the statements, then categorized these data in the discussion part. The interviews were recorded on digital recording devices (Teams and WeChat) and uploaded to a secure OneDrive to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. Before doing the interviews, the researcher sent a WeChat message to each participant to arrange the specific data and time of interviewing. Participants were informed that the session will be recorded, and they can choose not to turn on the camera to protect their anonymity. Also, all participants were given an identification number following the interview and stored in a separate file from the research data. The interview guide that the researcher had created included the primary

themes that were going to be discussed as well as some related questions. The interviewer adjusted the questions' wording as well as the order in which they were asked in order to accommodate the natural progression of the interviews (Robsen, 2011).

As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) discuss, "data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data" (p.202). Initially, the researcher transcribed all the interview records on her own from the audio recording she had made and analyzed data to find the same pattern that all participants had discussed and form themes. In this study, the researcher found 5 different themes: 1) concerns and challenges, 2) benefits of studying abroad, 3) low efficiency online courses, 4) social discriminations, and 5) supports. The researcher will specify these themes in the next two chapters.

3.6 Ethics Considerations

Due to the in-depth nature of a qualitative study's methodology, ethical questions have a heightened significance (Arifin, 2018). Regarding the ethical issues in this study, the researcher has made an effort to perform her work in accordance with the ethical standards that govern the conduct of research, such as avoiding the risk of participants being harmed, obtaining their informed consent, and protecting their privacy (Gray, 2014). Before consent was obtained, the researcher would explain the process thoroughly and the interviewer will need to be fully informed about the research and its purpose and freely choose whether to agree to participate or refuse (Arifin, 2018), and explained their ability to withdraw at any time during the interviewing. To preserve anonymity and protect participants from harm, the researcher deleted from the data she retained and analyzed any information that could make individual responses easily identifiable. For example, the researcher deleted participants' names, universities, detailed institutional descriptions, and living places. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, the researcher used numerical codes to represent participants when their responses appeared in the study results, for example, "Participant 1", "Participant 2" etc. This ensured that the identity of the participants was not revealed under any circumstances. In addition, the recordings were accessed and transcribed by the researchers themselves, while the data was destroyed four months after the dissertation was submitted.

In addition, the nature of some interview questions discussed challenging topics including social discriminations and relational aggression, the close relationship cultivated during qualitative research process mediates some concerns regarding sensitive topics and discussions. The trust established in these researcher-participant relationships allowed the participant to feel comfortable sharing their experiences, including those that were difficult. Also, if participants felt uncomfortable, they have the right to stop the interview at any time.

3.7 Limitations and Trustworthiness

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online via Teams. Therefore, it was difficult to make comfortable environments for participants which might help remove participants' nervous feelings. Also, in order to protect identity of the participants, the cameras were switched off during interviews, the researcher could not observe the participant's non-verbal reactions or behaviors (Thomas, 2013), which could provide potential information which may indications about the participant's feelings regarding the subject matter.

4. Findings and Discussion

As detailed in chapter three, due to the open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews in this study, the researcher conducted thematic analysis rather than content analysis. Based on the themes that emerged from the data analysis, the researcher will report on the findings from the Chinese international students' perspective. From the experience of Chinese international students, their responses indicated five major themes which are 1) concerns and challenges, 2) benefits of studying abroad, 3) low efficiency online courses, 4) social discriminations, and 5) emotional support and financial support.

4.1 Concerns and Challenges

4.1.1 Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the interviews, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, all participants indicated apprehension regarding their inability to comprehend the lectures before they went abroad. Prior to the outbreak, language barriers and better adaptation to the local culture were two of the main concerns of all 5 participants before they went to study abroad. And these two main concerns were related to Chinese international students' wellbeing during their overseas studying experience.

Participant 1 reported:

My concern before I went abroad was the language barrier. I was worried about not being able to communicate with locals or teachers or classmates well because my native language is not English. Also, I was afraid that I would not be able to understand the lectures which might cause I would not be able to finish my assignments very well. So, I occasionally felt anxious that I might be unable to study and live in another country by myself.

Some participants also mentioned that they were concerned that cultural differences prevented them from integrating well into the local culture and thus from experiencing the true meaning of studying abroad.

Participant 2 reported:

For me, my biggest concern before going abroad was that I wouldn't fit in well with the local culture. Because I wanted to make some local friends, I was worried that my ignorance of western culture would lead to my behavior or verbal expressions offending the locals. But I really wanted to make some friends with the locals because I thought that more contact with the locals would help improve my Western logical thinking skills, which would make both my studies and my life relatively easier.

All participants mentioned that their biggest concern prior to going abroad was the language issue, which directly influenced another concern they had, which was how to integrate into the local culture. Language issues have long been shown by scholars to be a negative stressor for international students in cross-cultural environments (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006), and their responses further support this claim.

4.1.2 After the COVID-19 Pandemic

However, the pandemic exacerbated the existing concerns and made a lot of the options for addressing these concerns impossible. Numerous individuals claimed that social and physical isolation negatively affected their interpersonal connections and well-being.

Participant 5 explained:

It was quite challenging for me to stay at home alone. When the outbreak began, many restaurants and cafes were closed. People were also not allowed to walk around either, so I had to stay at home and inevitably I felt very lonely because I had to keep a social distance from others. The feeling of loneliness was very strong and really affected my mood during that time.

Participant 2 reported:

Loneliness is a bit of a challenge for me. Not being able to go home and not having no family to be with makes me feel lonely and it can be harder mentally to cope with this feeling of isolation. To be honest, I cried a lot during the self-isolation period. I felt like I was trapped by my own room, I could not go outside for a walk or have fun with my friends. I cannot even talk to a real person face to face, which really annoys me.

As I discussed earlier, social interaction is necessary for international students to improve their well-being and assist them better to make connections with local culture. Some participants expressed their desire of improving their speaking skills and communication skills with people from different cultural backgrounds in the UK. However, activities which provided opportunities to Chinese international students to learn and explore their knowledge about cultural diversity closed due to the COVID-19, as evidenced by the experiences of participant 5 and 4, detailed below:

Participant 5 said:

The university had many activities about different cultures, so I went to participate in more of their activities and learn more about different cultures. But because of the virus, none of these events are being held anymore, and suddenly a lot of things have become quite pointless.

Participant 4 said:

My friend and I used to attend parties from different countries. Because I believe communication is very important, also is the efficient way to learn whether it is to overcome language barriers or cultural differences. But later on, we stopped going because of fear of catching the virus, then I slowly lost interest in learning about other cultures.

This section identifies the difficulties that participants experienced as Chinese students before the pandemic began and the challenges they had to face after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Due to the lockdown policy, they had to maintain social distance or stay at home during the pandemic. This led to language barriers and cultural conflicts that became more difficult to address. Furthermore, the lack of real-life interpersonal interactions due to being away from their families further challenged them, leading to anxiety and depression. According to previous research, even before COVID-19, international student populations were more likely to feel difficulties due to loneliness because of the lack of family and friends (Yu & Wright, 2017; Diener & Chan, 2011). Through the participants' responses, it is evident that the lockdown policies associated with the pandemic period further exacerbated the feelings of loneliness among Chinese international students.

4.2 Benefits of Studying Abroad

From the interviews, all participants mentioned that experiences of studying abroad are filling with positive

outcomes and beneficial. None of the interviewees changed their mind about studying abroad because of the COVID-19. After conducting an in-depth analysis of the interviews, personal benefits are the significant part for Chinese international students when they decide to go abroad.

4.2.1 Personal Benefits

During the interview, the researcher asked each participant reasons they chose to study abroad and why they chose study in the U.K. All participants claimed that the reason they chose to study in the UK is because of postgraduate study in the UK takes less time than in other countries.

Participant 3 reported:

I was able to complete my postgraduate studies in a relatively short period of time. This not only saved a lot of time for me, but it also saved a lot of money for my parents.

Participant 2 said:

I took a gap year last year because of the COVID-19. So, I wanted to finish my postgraduate degree and work as soon as possible in a short time. A one-year course in the UK is the best option for me.

In addition, some participants said that they would pay attention to the global ranking of universities when accepting an offer. The global ranking of universities is important to them and even to their parents, it is not just about ranking itself, but also about the career opportunities that this ranking might give them in the future.

Participant 1 explained:

My parents and I both place a lot of importance on the ranking of universities. After all, the higher the ranking, the better it is for my own future development. In China, some companies only hire top 50 universities' students.

Participant 2 said:

At the beginning, I wanted to study fashion management in Italy where is my favorite country in the world. But my parents and I discussed that the university I got the offer from U.K. was better than the university I wanted to go in Italy. I needed to play my future career first.

Participant 5 reported:

When I received my offer, my parents and I were overjoyed. From the beginning, I wanted to get into a top 50 school, or even a top 30 school, because I had planned my career arrangements in advance and many companies in China that I wanted to work for only accepted graduates from top 50 ranked universities worldwide, so the ranking of the university was important for my personal development.

Furthermore, all participants discussed that after they came to the UK, their self-management and problem-solving abilities improved a lot, which made them feel positive about studying abroad.

Participant 2 explained:

My time management skills have substantially improved. I can schedule my study duties rationally, play when I need to play, study diligently when I study, and maintain a healthy life-study balance.

Participant 1 reported:

I can now plan my time very well. This has definitely been the best thing for my personal development. I used to be a terrible procrastinator, but when I went abroad, I was on my own, both academically and in life, with no one to supervise me. So, I'm forcing myself to plan and organize my time and what I have to do in advance.

Participant 3 reported:

I think one of the biggest positive things that studying abroad has done for me is that I have become more independent. I have also improved a lot in dealing with things, and I can figure out how to solve problems on my own. I used to be more dependent on my parents in China, but when I'm abroad and my parents aren't around, I can figure things out on my own.

Participant 5 said:

At first, I would feel panic when I encountered a problem, but now I am more willing to do it myself. For example, I contact the relevant authorities to gain experience in solving problems, and when I don't understand something, I look up the relevant information on the Internet.

The enhancement of interpersonal handling was also mentioned by the participants. For some of them believed that studying abroad is not only about learning but learning to become a better person is also of key importance.

Participant 4 said:

In fact, I believe that studying abroad was beneficial and enlightening for me in general. I have become more accepting and inclusive to others. Learning how to live in the UK was more essential to me than acquiring knowledge.

Participant 1 added:

I have absolutely no regrets about choosing to further my education in the UK, even though studying abroad during the COVID-19 is quite challenging. Because before I left China, the only people I knew were city I lived in, but after I came to here, I met a lot of people from other parts of China and even all over the world. The experience of interacting with different people has taught me to embrace and understand diversity. My attitude and personality have also undergone great changes. I have become more open-minded in my interactions with people, and I have developed a more laid-back approach to dealing with different challenges.

While studying abroad can have some negative effects on some individuals, it is also a valuable experience that can contribute to Chinese international students' own growth, ability development and career development. According to Campbell's (2010) study of 11 international students in Australia, the experience of studying abroad was positive for the 11 participants. They learned many skills from some difficult experiences, such as becoming independent thinkers and having more confidence in dealing with problems. Participants in this study expressed similar responses to Campbell's study, for these five participants, studying abroad not only expands their academic knowledge, but also develops their social skills, problem-solving skills, and enhances their critical thinking skills, and the experience of studying abroad provides them with more opportunities for their future career planning.

However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic came some academic challenges, such as online courses being one of the challenges that all participants agreed on.

4.3 From Onsite to Online Lectures

After the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, in order to reduce the spread of virus, educational institutions around the world switched lectures from on campus to online. Challenges from schoolwork increased for some students. All participants noted that due to online courses, they felt less motivated to learn and hard to focus on the recording lectures.

Participant 2 reported:

The quality of online lectures was low. I could not concentrate on online lectures like I can in the classroom on campus.

Participant 3 said:

I felt comfortable when I took class online during the COVID-19 outbreak, therefore I could not focus on what the lecturer said because I knew I could re-watch the lecture, so I didn't pay much attention to it.

Participant 1 explained:

I often ate while listening to the lectures at home. Some lecturers did not require the camera to be on, so I hardly interacted with them. I didn't raise my hand to ask questions if I didn't understand something, as I would in an offline class because I felt weird talking with the computer.

The online learning approach makes it easier for several participants to ignore the questions asked by the lecturer than the face-to-face format. The rapid change in learning mode makes it difficult for participants to focus effectively, and participants find it difficult to interact with the lecturer or to concentrate fully on the content of the class, resulting in them not feeling the need to participate the online course.

Participant 1 reported:

I did not feel like I was a student during that time. It was more like being on a mission, as I was unmotivated to study and unable to concentrate. As though I had abandoned the responsibility to study, I experienced a sense of loss. Because both the mode of the lectures and the environment felt unreal to me.

The sudden change in lecture format had a negative impact on the wellbeing of individual participants, some of whom found it difficult to adjust to the change in learning format and felt anxious about studying alone and without social interaction with their peers.

Participant 4 explained:

After the pandemic, it was all the online classes that made me a little anxious, I guess. Because it felt like I was completely disqualified from experiencing campus life and taking online classes at home was

not the lifestyle I desired while studying abroad. I think I experienced the awful feeling of having my expectations broken.

Furthermore, added by Participant 2, she noted that attending online classes constantly during the pandemic was inefficient for her, prompting her to question if the expensive tuition was worth it.

Therefore, another challenge that all participants faced in the early stages of the pandemic was the rapid shift in the lecture format. To prevent the spread of the virus, courses originally designed for face-to-face delivery were quickly changed to online courses, making it impossible for participants to adapt to the lecture mode in the first place, which had a negative impact on the academic aspect. Several studies have shown that the online mode of instruction affects students' well-being (Chen et al., 2008; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020), and similar arguments were made by interviewees, most of whom believed that the quality of instruction in online classes was much lower compared to face-to-face instruction, that online courses were designed to be boring, and that the comfort of their home environment made it difficult for them to concentrating on the lectures, and the unusual learning environment made them feel a lack of motivation to learn. Thus, they felt worried about their grades and exams. They also mentioned that online classes were far from what they expected from studying abroad, both academically and life, and that the tuition fees for overseas students were much higher than those for local students, which made them feel that the educational experience they received did not match the tuition fees at all.

By analysing the responses of the five participants, they agreed that online instruction was of little value and inefficient for them. This finding is contrary to previous research findings, mentioned in the literature review, where previous researchers have found online learning to be flexible and efficient (Neuhauser, 2002; Nguyen, 2015). But, for Chinese international students in this study, online learning significantly reduced their opportunities to participate in different cultural course formats and to interact with their teachers and classmates; therefore, they did not consider online learning to be motivating and very few participants even developed negative emotions and considered participating in online interactions to be a burden.

4.4 Social Discrimination

In terms of safety, both before and after the pandemic, all participants had expressed concerns about personal safety. Even four people had experienced discrimination or verbal abuse by locals. However, for the participants, both before and after the onset of the pandemic, they took steps to protect themselves by ignoring acts of discrimination.

Participant 2 reported:

I also experienced discrimination before the pandemic. It was a bunch of teenagers making slant eye at me and then shouting, "Go back to China" "You don't belong here". But I ignored them, firstly because I thought they were young and immature, and secondly because I was afraid that if I fought back, they would physically hurt me.

Participant 5 said:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I did not experience any discrimination or unfair treatment. After the pandemic, though, both my friend and I experienced discrimination on the road. When they noticed us wearing masks, some passersby would purposefully cough loudly at us and mumble something, which we did not understand but I knew it was not a nice thing to hear.

Participant 3 reported:

When the COVID-19 pandemic first began, I was working in a Chinese restaurant and a customer asked me, "Why don't you return to China? Are there too many viruses there?" Since I was a part-time worker and didn't want to get into problems, I ignored him and walked away.

Participant 1 and participant 4 both expressed the same opinion that persons who use viruses to discriminate against others do it because they are going through a difficult moment in their own life and are seeking self-congratulation from bullying others, or to demonstrate their competence.

Participant 1 added:

I do not care one bit about what racist people say to me, it does not affect me, as long as they do not physically harm me.

Therefore, for Chinese international students, dealing with social discriminations is a serious matter, but what they can do is ignore it and try them best to protect themselves from physically harm.

In general, the anti-Asian hate has been exacerbated by a lack of knowledge about the new coronavirus and fears of its spread, coupled with fake information posted on social media. Donald Trump, as a former national leader of the United States, has made discriminatory comments about China on social media Twitter, replacing

“coronavirus” with “Chinese virus” and “Chinese flu” and inciting racist behavior, leading to an increase in anti-Asian discriminatory behavior and anti-Asian racists, which has undoubtedly put Asians around the world in fear, pain, anger and danger, especially Chinese people in the US, but also in other western countries. According to Rui, Edwards and Lopez’s survey (2021) of 352 Asian adults in the U.S., 20 percent of participants directly cited former President Trump and his comments about China as the source of the virus and his labeling of the coronavirus as the “Chinese flu” as one of the reasons for the rise in violence. Also, according to an online survey of 182 Chinese international students studying in 14 different countries conducted by Ma and Miller (2021), one third of Chinese international students indicated that they had experienced discrimination from the local community and two thirds indicated that they had been discriminated against by the media.

Misrepresentation fuel public fear, alienation, and discrimination, thus leading to varying degrees of perceived stress and fear among Chinese international students, especially when individuals perceive them to be contagious. This situation negatively affects the experience and well-being of Chinese overseas students and, in severe cases, their mental health issues (Zhai & Du, 2020; Ma & Miller, 2021).

In the early months of the pandemic, people learned about the outbreak through online news, and discriminatory statements made by the media or state-level leaders greatly placed Asian populations at risk. In this study, four of the five participants in this study reported having been verbally or physically attacked because of their race and color since the COVID-19 outbreak, and two participants even reported that locals shouted “Chinese virus” at them while they were walking in the street in the UK; racists would deliberately cough loudly at them in the street to imply that they had the virus. As noted by Half and Zhou (2021), social media exposure to negative China-related news was associated with perceived discrimination and concurrent anxiety among Chinese students and was stronger in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak (Haft & Zhou, 2021). Thus, the challenges faced by Chinese students during the outbreak were more severe than before the outbreak, and attention to the psychological well-being of international students was particularly important.

4.5 Support

Most participants reported that friends and parents were more conscious of communicating with them and supporting them during the COVID-19 outbreak. All participants reported their parents were main supporters during the COVID-19 outbreak, emotionally and financially.

4.5.1 Supports from Parents and Friends

All highlights mentioned by my participants, their parents were the most caring and helpful people during the self-isolation period of the epidemic. The verbal and emotional support from parents made the participants feel less homesick and lonely, thus reducing negative emotions such as anxiety and depression. Similarly, friends were also the most helpful people mentioned by the participants, as they made them feel less lonely in a foreign country by supporting each other in the same circumstances.

Participant 3 reported:

My parents called me on video almost every day and were concerned about my health. I thought it was a bit much, as we only called on video almost once a month before the pandemic. But again, I felt reassured because being home alone in isolation and my parents’ concern made me less lonely and I would feel loved and cared for.

Participant 4 reported:

After the outbreak, I didn’t get a ticket back to China. So, there was a period when I was really anxious, afraid that I was infected and had no family around me. But my mum would talk to me every day, even sometimes when it was midnight in China, she would reply to my messages and cheer me up. After going through the pandemic, my mum and I have become closer.

Participant 2 said:

Because I didn’t want my parents to worry about me, I would only report good news. But I would often talk with my best friend, we were all at home and self-isolation, so we played video calls, sometimes even if we didn’t say anything, the video was on and watching each other would go a long way to reduce the loneliness.

Participant 5 said:

I’ve had Coronavirus before, but I didn’t tell my parents. So, my friends knew I was sick, and they sent me text messages of concern, some of them even came to my flat to bring me medicine, and one of my best friends used to order takeaways for me to help me reduce my stress. I really appreciated my friends’ dedication and care when I was sick. After I came to the UK, I feel that my friends are the closest people to me now, they are like families.

In addition, city lockdowns, food shortages and rising prices can also cause negative wellbeing among Chinese students during serious times of pandemic. Therefore, financial support from parents is also important and helps participants to avoid financial anxiety and worry.

4.5.2 Financial Support

Reported by 3 out of 5 participants, financially, their parents are unconditionally supporting them.

Participant 1 said:

When the COVID-19 started, my parents were always worried that I wouldn't have enough food. They thought of the pandemic abroad as very serious, so they often told me not to be afraid to spend money, not to care about prices, and to take Uber when I went out and try not to take public transport.

Participant 2 reported:

The COVID-19 pandemic did not affect my family financially because my parents work in a state enterprise. So, whether it was before or after the pandemic, my parents gave about the same amount of money.

However, not all participants get financial support from their parents. Two participants indicated that their parents would imply that they would try to reduce unnecessary expenses.

Participant 4 explained:

China's pandemic prevention and control measures are very strict, and my parents' business has been affected. So, my parents were under a lot of pressure. Although they didn't directly tell me not to spend unnecessary money, they would often bring up the family's financial affairs, which I know what they mean. Thus, I found a part time job trying to cover my daily expenses by myself.

Participant 5 said:

My mom's restaurant was forced to close, and for a while I was afraid to ask them for money, so I worked at a local Chinese restaurant to earn some pocket money.

In this section, some participants mentioned that as a result of the pandemic, their parents became more worried about their safety abroad than before and began to care for or contact them more frequently. This also brought the family closer together within the family. In addition to emotions, financial support also changed as a result of the pandemic. In contrast, if participants' parents had stable jobs or worked for a company funded by the Chinese government (Participants 2 & 3), then the pandemic did not affect family financial support. However, for participants whose parents ran their own businesses (Participants 4 & 5), the strict lockdown policy in China led to a significant cut in their parents' income, which reduced family financial support, which also directly affected participants' well-being. Compared to Participants 4 & 5, the unconditional financial support provided by their parents in Participants 1, 2 & 3 resulted in greater emotional stability during the pandemic, and they did not need to worry about money-related matters, thus maintaining a stable mental and physical state.

It can therefore be concluded that parental financial support plays an important role in keeping Chinese students well, both before and after the pandemic. Similarly parental support leads to less anxiety and loneliness among Chinese international students. According to Su et al. (2021), a study of 167 Chinese international students at U.S. universities, the more frequent contact with their parents, the less loneliness they felt. The social stigma of psychological problems and counseling in Asian cultures has led to Chinese international students being less likely to seek help from formal counseling agencies (Chang, 2008) and more likely to seek comfort from their own parents and friends. Therefore, during high stress periods of the pandemic, timely parental care and support will help Chinese international students better address their challenges and reduce their feelings of loneliness.

4.6 Summary

This study focuses on the concerns of Chinese international students and the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as how these changed and how they responded before and after the outbreak.

Chinese international students have been a large and valuable group of international students in recent years, especially in the UK. Due to the differences in language, race, political system, cultural beliefs and living habits, it is more difficult for Chinese students to integrate into the local community than those from the US or European countries.

To address the previously mentioned questions, this study interviewed five Chinese international students in the UK and recorded and collated their responses. By analyzing and discussing the transcripts and results of the interviews, it was concluded that the biggest concern for all participants before the outbreak was the language barrier, which would make it difficult for them to communicate with the locals in the new environment in the UK and not be able to keep up in class, thus increasing their feelings of loneliness and lack of confidence. The

challenges that came with the outbreak made their study abroad in the UK even more difficult. Researchers categorized the challenges following the outbreak as: adherence to a strict home isolation policy, discrimination by locals and society, inability to adapt to online classes; and financial issues that only a very small number of participants (2/5) had to face, but for those affected, financial constraints were certainly a huge challenge for them to maintain a stable well-being.

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the well-being of Chinese students in the context of the global pandemic and discusses the challenges that Chinese students in the UK have to face and the negative psychological effects that they may experience as a result of the pandemic. Negative news about China and the lack of family accompaniment have left Chinese international students more isolated and vulnerable than locals, as they face challenges alone. The research concludes that the main challenges faced by Chinese international students in the UK after the outbreak are the quick shift in the learning pattern, social discrimination and prejudice, financial issues, and loneliness.

This study also has some limitations. First, the group I studied with was limited to Chinese international students in the UK. Therefore, the relevant analyses and findings were not representative of Chinese international students studying abroad in other countries, such as the United States. Second, because England and Scotland had different lockdown policies, meaning that participants living in these two regions during the pandemic would have substantially different experiences.

5.1 Future Research

By summarizing and reflecting on the limitations present in this study, it is possible to provide some inspiration for future research. For example, after reading through a large body of literature, it has been possible to generalize some common themes of the challenges faced by Chinese international students during the pandemic. Examples include financial issues and difficulty adapting to online courses. In this case, the survey could be changed to a semi-open-ended questionnaire, where participants could directly select from several pre-defined challenges in the questionnaire if they have faced or add their own particular problems and describe it. This method allows for a larger number of participant responses, saves a lot of time and makes the analysis more generalizable.

In addition, when researching a relevant topic, it is essential to know the corresponding lockdown stage when participants were studying in the UK. This is because the impact of UK lockdowns on the life of international students differs at different periods. For example, during the strictest lockdown phase, parties were not allowed, and the classes were all held online, but during the relatively relaxed phase, most students were able to return to class on campus, and people were not forced to wear masks when entering indoors. Therefore, knowing the specific lockdown stage when the participants studied in the UK would allow researchers to analyse the results in a more specific and explicit context.

As the largest body of international students in the UK higher education — 122140 of Chinese international students enrolled in the UK universities (UNESCO, 2022) — a better understanding of the challenges Chinese international students face in general, and during the pandemic specifically, will enable the government and universities to respond proactively. The findings of this study could also help future international students deal with difficulties or cope with stress, whether anticipated or unexpected, and in adapting more effectively to living abroad and facing academic challenges.

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