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Analysis of the Preference of Chinese Students Choose to Study in the United Kingdom in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract: With the continuous stability of the post-epidemic era, the social and economic levels of various countries are gradually recovering, and the rate of studying abroad is also gradually rising. The number of international students studying in the UK continues to increase. Among them, the number of Chinese students has always been at the top. This article explores why Chinese students choose to study in the UK, especially for higher education. The article examines key reasons behind this trend, including the perceived benefits of personal and career development, the quality of higher education, and Employability after graduation. Additionally, it discusses the impact of the UK's recent policy changes, such as visa restrictions, on students' choices. Although the overall trend of Chinese students studying in the UK remains strong, the potential challenges, such as employment pressures and evolving immigration policies, may affect future preferences. This article suggests that while the UK's reputation as a high-quality education provider continues to attract Chinese students, the long-term impacts of policy shifts and social issues remain to be seen.

Keywords: Post-Pandemic Era, Study Abroad, International Student Mobility, Chinese Students.

1. Introduction

Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the global growth rate in the mobility of international students witnessed a significant decrement, decreasing from 6.7% in 2019 to 0.2% in 2021 [1]. Following the onset of the post-pandemic era, the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic are progressively waning, and the movement of international students is experiencing a steady resurgence. In 2020, the UK once again became the second most preferred destination for students to study abroad, and its popularity in the global academic community is on the rise [2]. Because the U.S. has always been popular with international students, many previous studies have looked at the U.S. as a traditional destination for higher education [3]. Furthermore, the majority of studies on international students have concentrated on their experiences of studying abroad, rather than on the motivation that drives them to pursue such studies [3]. This report will analyze the preference of Chinese students for studying in the UK, introduce the current advantages of the UK, and finally discuss and make predictions for future development.

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2. Current Situation and Reasons Behind the Choices

2.1. Current Situation

Between the 2019/20 and 2021/22 academic years, the United Kingdom saw a steady rise in its international student population, with growth rates varying between 10.9% and 12.4%. Notably, as the preeminent origin of international scholars for the UK, China sustained a consistent growth trajectory in the number of students pursuing higher education, with an expansion rate of 3.4% during the academic year 20/21, 5.5% in 21/22, and 4.4% in 22/23. The number of Chinese students in the UK totaled 143,820 in the 2020/21 academic year, rising to 151,690 in 2021/22 and reaching 158,335 in 2022/23 [1]. During the 21–22 academic year, 99,965 of these Chinese students studied in the UK [2]. Generally speaking, the number of Chinese students going to the UK for higher education has maintained a continuous growth trend in recent years, and the UK is highly favored by Chinese students as a study-abroad destination.

2.2. Reason Analysis

2.2.1. Personal Development

For Chinese students, the seek of personal development has been a longstanding incentive for studying in the UK, a pattern highlighted in research from the past ten years. Counsell emphasizes that for Chinese students, the quality of higher education plays an important role in their decisions about studying abroad [4]. Moreover, Chinese students place significant value on the additional benefits associated with studying abroad, such as the opportunity to improve their foreign language skills, experience life in a foreign country, and engage with different cultures. Furthermore, the respondent's Counsel's study expressed the belief that the experience of studying and living abroad would positively influence their future career prospects. One of the main reasons Chinese students choose to pursue further education overseas is the opportunity to get living and working experience abroad, according to the Lu et al. study [5]. Additionally, it underscores the influence of university rankings on Chinese students' decisions to study overseas, despite the skepticism expressed by many scholars regarding the validity of such rankings.

2.2.2. Career Development

The employment situation has become increasingly severe in recent years, as Jin indicated, as a result of the increasing number of graduates and the rising number of returning overseas students [6]. Upon their return to China, overseas students have encountered a significant challenge in overcoming the employment predicament.

As the post-pandemic era approaches, the influence brought by the COVID-19 epidemic is gradually weakening, but it has also enabled more influencing factors to be considered. Based on the relevant analytical model, Sun et al. created a new model that combines the interaction between internal and external factors [7]. The study focused on a group of high school students studying abroad, and after conducting several data analyses and dimensional analyses, the study concluded that students' family and academic backgrounds, domestic and international environments, study abroad experiences, the impact of online education, the linguistic and cultural environment, and economic conditions are the key factors influencing the decision to study abroad in this particular era. An increasing number of individuals aged 25 and above are increasingly inclined towards pursuing postgraduate and doctoral studies abroad, with the aim of enhancing their competitive edge in the job, broadening their career prospects, gaining diverse perspectives, and accessing a wide range of

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educational resources. Those who choose to study abroad also believe that it fosters overall skill development and contributes to the cultivation of sound self-awareness [7].

2.3. Comprehensive Supports

The UK does have excellent higher education institutions. Though criticism exists, the world university rankings give some indication of the study abroad destination. Two distinct rankings of the most prestigious universities in the world have been chosen, namely the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings and the Shanghai Ranking Academic Ranking of World Universities. Among them, the University of Oxford ranked third in QS and sixth in Shanghai Ranking [8]. The University of Cambridge is ranked fifth in QS and fourth in Shanghai Ranking [8,9]. University College London is ranked ninth in the QS ranking and 16th in the Shanghai Ranking, also quite high [2,8,9].

In addition, the UK government is well aware of the benefits of study abroad programs to the country's overall economic and social development, so the government is constantly improving relevant policies to attract international students to study in the UK. For example, in 2019, the UK's strategy and international development components jointly proposed a strategic project on education. The strategy aims to increase the value of education exports to £35 billion a year by 20300. At the same time, the project aims to increase the number of students who want to continue to study in the UK to 600,000 [10]. Although the strategy aims to support the overall economic development of the UK by harnessing the economy generated by studying abroad, it involves five cross-sectoral strategic actions, such as promoting the visibility and competitiveness of UK education by increasing the selection rate of studying abroad and improving the core competitiveness of UK study abroad services by improving the competitiveness of admissions and enhancing the perception of students. Following the execution of the initiative, the institution successfully attained the milestone of accommodating 600,000 international scholars during the 2020/2021 academic year for the inaugural instance, and continued to sustain its upward growth trend in the subsequent academic period [2].

The UK government is also keeping a close eye on the possibility of international students moving from temporary work to long-term migration, and this concern can also be seen in recent policy trends, such as visa and work-related policies after graduation. The policy requires international students to stay in the UK for a further two years after graduation, provided they meet certain conditions: they must be currently living in the UK and have a student visa or other permission, have pursued an eligible UK bachelor's, master's, or other qualifying courses while in possession of the aforementioned visa, and their educational institution must confirm course completion to the Home Office. If the graduate has completed a doctoral degree or other doctoral qualification, the period of stay is three years [2]. It is worth noting that, the UK government implemented new restrictions on student visas in January 2024 to prevent the exploitation of the visa system. Under the new restrictions, international students—apart from those in postgraduate research programs—are barred from bringing dependants to the UK. In addition, students cannot switch from a student visa to a work visa until they have completed their studies. Meanwhile, the UK government will review whether international students have sufficient funds to support themselves and their families while in the UK [11]. Due to the impending implementation of the regulatory constraint in January 2024, the resultant impact remains uncertain. However, the impact of the policy is still under scrutiny, and it remains to be seen whether this measure will directly affect the study of Chinese students in the UK.

3. Discussion

From the above analysis, it can be seen that to encourage students to study in the UK, the relevant policies of the UK for international students have been adjusted. In addition, based on the employment

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choices and expectations of individual Chinese students, it is expected that more students will choose to study abroad, especially in the UK. Some Chinese students believe that a taught master's degree in the UK is more competitive in the job market of the future because it enables a "higher return on investment in a shorter educational cycle", particularly in terms of the age and value of the degree certificate [12]. Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether the recently implemented student visa restrictions will influence the destination preferences of Chinese students who aspire to secure employment overseas. Because the new policy extends the time they need to obtain work, it also limits their ability to transition to an immigrant status to some extent.

Notably, the UK provides a relatively secure and conducive learning atmosphere coupled with superior educational provisions, thereby garnering the preference of numerous Chinese students who had initially contemplated pursuing higher education in alternative nations [12]. However, the recent riots have highlighted the existence of social issues related to immigration within the UK. The emergence of these problems has compelled universities to swiftly ensure student safety and address international concerns [13]. It remains to be determined whether the selection of study destinations for certain Chinese students will be influenced by the introduction of new restrictions on international students, the revision of visa policies to reduce net migration, and the outbreak of conflict due to social tensions over immigration. This will require observation and statistical determination over the long term.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the evolution of the trend of Chinese students studying in the UK under the changing trend of the environment. This paper analyzes the reasons for the change of study abroad policy in the UK and the employment expectations of students. This paper argues that the preference of Chinese students to study abroad, especially in the UK, remains resilient, despite temporary restrictions on international students' mobility caused by factors such as the environment. This article argues that the reason for this trend is inseparable from the excellent reputation of British education and its comprehensive international student support policy. While shifts in policy or global circumstances may affect student preferences, the UK's well-established advantages suggest that it will continue to be a leading destination for Chinese students in the foreseeable future.

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