

Reflections on COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of an international student

By Jianan Chen

Covid-19 has brought unprecedented changes to the entire world. As a Chinese student studying at UiO, I have witnessed how this virus spread rapidly in my hometown and Oslo, and I am consistently paying attention to the epidemic dynamic situation all over the world. In this protracted confrontation against the virus, I reflected on two aspects based on my own experience, knowledge and reading, which are the mental health of international students and general strategies against COVID-19 adopted in China.

The mental health of international students

I took the flight in January from Shanghai to Milan for a planned trip in Italy on 21 January, which is the second day after China reported an outbreak for the first-time outside Wuhan City. On the evening of the same day, a medical expert confirmed for the first time in official media that the virus could pass from person to person. At that time, I did not realize how enormous the virus would challenge the national healthcare system and the whole society in the future. However, the news of the virus began to appear more frequently on local social media. During my trip in Europe, I learned from the news that the number of infections and deaths is rising every day at an alarming rate, with several cases detected in Europe. Eventually, COVID-19 came to Norway in March and broke my peaceful student life in Oslo.

Most students had never experienced such a persistent abnormal period, which is likely to cause psychological issues. As far as my personal experience is concerned, sometimes I feel desperate during the special period. These emotions include a sense of crisis and loneliness, anxiety about lower productivity, uncertainty about the future, and worry about family in the home country and so on. Only staying at home could make me feel at ease while staring at the number of registered infected every moment made me particularly emotional and sensitive. I knew it would do me no good, but I could not help checking the latest data and became more anxious, and then more concerned about the number changes, which triggered a vicious circle of anxiety.

On the contrary, some people I know were not scared of the epidemic itself but bound by the infected control measures, such as social distance, quarantine and isolation. That could be even tougher for social enthusiasts. At the very beginning, many people regarded Covid-19 as flu a

which would not pose a threat, and one of my friends told me that she did not care about the virus since nothing could prevent her from going out to enjoy life. Being stuck in the house is unbearable for some people. However, as the epidemic gradually spread, control measures were launched and strictly implemented in Oslo since it was a severely affected area. The university was closed entirely, and social activities were minimized. Even though I usually enjoy home life, staying at home for a long time still makes me feel lonely and lack of vitality occasionally, let alone those who need to socialize frequently.

Furthermore, the situation is more difficult for international students being stuck in Oslo. We were suggested to return to our home countries, for example, some Asian students I knew returned home in early March. However, there are still a considerable number of students who have to stay in Oslo because most of the flights have been cancelled, the flights that are still in operation are in short supply, but high demand and the ticket price is unaffordable. Thus, we long for family support during the epidemic, but it cannot be realized physically. For instance, my classmate from the US was heartbroken because the situation in her parents' community was dangerous, but she could not visit or help them. I could hardly comfort her because I worried about my parents in China as well.

Besides, the low productivity of studying at home frustrated me. I only have one Norwegian language course this semester, the rest of the learning task is mainly to write the master thesis based on published literature data. It is fortunate compared with students who face many exams or need to use the laboratory to obtain data. However, I can hardly concentrate on studying at home and often get distracted by various trivial matters. And boyfriend living with me who is a PhD student now working from home has the same trouble. Sometimes we even get influenced by each other to delay the learning tasks.

All these negative emotions could add invisible pressure to international students. I heard that someone around me suffered severe psychological problems which affected her daily life and social functioning. From my point of view, mental health should never be underestimated because mental illness can lead to extreme behaviour and have irreversible consequences, especially when living in relative isolation. In the past two months, I have tried to adapt myself to the new environment and summarized six effective methods to adjust.

1. Schedule daily or weekly stage goals according to personal circumstances and share with friends, preferably those with strong self-control, to supervise each other. The

goals are best to be specific and can be achieved with a little effort, which makes it easier to stick to the plan.

2. Maintain the regularity of work and rest, and clearly distinguish the time of study and entertainment. I would also set the motivation for myself to complete the goals efficiently. For example, I can play switch games for an hour in the evening as a reward for finishing homework in the afternoon.
3. Spend time tidying up a learning space and find the most immersed way of learning. I like to play some light music or classical music while studying. Leave everything distracting, such as a mobile phone.
4. Avoid feeling idle by taking advantage of the rare time at home and developing some indoor hobbies to enrich life. For me, I am addicted to planting and cooking, which bring me a sense of accomplishment when I have expanded related knowledge. Moreover, the flowers and greenery in the house are delightful, and exquisite homemade food is good for health.
5. Keep in touch with friends and family digitally. Talking and supporting each other is the best way to get rid of negative emotions. Group discussion or synchronous learning through video is also an excellent way to improve efficiency. For example, I was quite productive once I attended the shut up & write room in the virtual library and study with others.
6. Consider seeking psychological counselling if discomfort has been going on for some time despite many attempts to alleviate the problem. I have noticed that some may feel ashamed to receive counselling, or think that is unnecessary. But in all these cases, counselling may provide considerable help.

General strategies against COVID-19 in China

I observed that the countries conducted various strategies based on their considerations. For example, as the country where the virus first broke out, the Chinese government put in place stringent control measures in the first place, some of which have proved to be active and can be learnt by other countries. Here are some of the primary measures.

First, social distancing and regional traffic control were implemented according to the severity of the outbreak to prevent the epidemic from spreading around. The public was provided with simple and clear instructions on how to act, for instance, stay at home as much as possible, wear qualified masks when going out and follow 14 days of quarantine after travelling abroad.

Second, thorough investigations of infections were conducted in every community, and a dynamic monitoring network was established. The aim is to detect all infections and trace their close contacts. Body temperature testing was distributed in every public place, and every patient with suspected COVID-19 would undergo testing. Moreover, technology based on big data was applied to collect and manage epidemic data. For example, people can download a "health QR code" on their mobile phone and register their health information and travel history, as a reference for border inspectors to identify potential risks and for the epidemiologist to predict areas where infections are likely to increase.

Third, sufficient medical supplies were guaranteed by increasing the production of the most urgent needs and efficient allocation throughout the country. After the outbreak in Wuhan city, a large number of medical staff with medical supplies across the country were called to fly to Wuhan and support the local work. Besides, the problem of large-scale admission of patients was solved by the construction of two specialized hospitals for infectious diseases in just ten days and continuously reconstruction of a batch of "mobile cabin hospitals" from existing buildings such as stadiums. The greater bed capacity allows not only the admission of critically ill patients but also mild patients, which cut off the transmission route in the community.

These decisive measures have slowed the spread of the epidemic outside Wuhan, and have bought time for other regions to respond to the outbreak, although it comes at the cost of economic shutdown. According to preliminary calculations by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, GDP in the first quarter fell by 6.8% year-on-year¹.

Besides, I do not think that all of these strategies are feasible in other countries because two national conditions are essential for the implementation of the above measures, which are strong manufacturing capacity and social mobilization ability under national coordination mechanism. Explicitly, China is supported by a strong manufacturing base and can make timely adjustments. Many industries have concentrated on the production of medical supplies urgently needed by epidemic prevention, especially masks, disinfectants, respirators, protective clothing, etc. This also explains from one aspect why many countries have not called on the people to wear masks. The other reason might be the cultural difference in attitudes toward masks; for example, in China, everyone gets masks distributed by the government. But many Europeans think that masks are for sick people. I seldom see people wearing masks on the streets of Oslo,

¹ National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020, Preliminary accounting results of gross domestic product (GDP) in the first quarter of 2020, 18 April 2020, National Bureau of Statistics of China. Available from: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202004/t20200417_1739602.html [2 June 2020].

and very few people wear scarves or homemade masks. In contrast, frequent hand washing is more advocated in Norway. It is also the right choice that medical masks should be given to medical staff when supplies are tight and washing hands is a more straightforward and proven, effective preventive measure to COVID-19.

Similar strategic differences are also reflected in the detection and management of mild patients. Even mild patients will be isolated in China, so I was shocked when I first heard that Sweden decided to test and treat severely ill patients only. If people who have mild symptoms there call the medical service centre, they will only receive suggestions for waiting at home and self-observation. At first, I could not understand the intention behind that policy. Still, later I learned that the Swedish government are concerned about preventing medical resources from running out and excessive burden on the medical system. Besides, the Swedish government has not blocked the border, and has taken loose prevention and control measures in an attempt to obtain "herd immunity". When we look at the number of deaths due to coronavirus in Nordic countries from 1 March to 1 June, the death rate of 0.44‰ due to COVID-19 in Sweden is much higher than the death rate of less than 0.1‰ in other Nordic countries, which took stricter strategies.² As for the "herd immunity" strategy that allows a certain percentage of the infected to cope with the possible secondary outbreak of the epidemic, I think it is risky because so far there is no scientific evidence that patients can get immunity after recovery according to WHO, and more lives are likely to be sacrificed to achieve the immune level.

In a word, it is difficult to find a set of policies that apply to all countries. Until the vaccine is developed and put into use, COVID-19 crisis is supposed to continue for a long time. The most appropriate strategy should be flexible and based on the specific conditions of the country. China has a large population and density, so the government has adopted the most cautious policy to keep the epidemic in control, even at the cost of substantial economic losses. Although Norway's strategy is relatively moderate, it has achieved good performance as well by maintaining proper social distance and hand hygiene.

In the end, below are my reflections on some common lessons provided through the experience in China and Norway.

1. Always stay alert and respond promptly to the epidemic situation. Many people I know regarded COVID-19 as flu at the beginning and did not take it seriously. Moreover, if

² VG 2020, Live: Corona-viruset sprer seg i Norge og verden, 2 June 2020, VG. Available from: <https://www.vg.no/spesial/2020/corona/norden/> [2 June 2020].

the virus could be reported and stressed earlier in Wuhan, the early outbreak could have been delayed.

2. Popularize clear, simple, and effective prevention measures to the public. Choose the measures that are easy to be accepted by the public and are easy to operate in the country because public willingness to comply with the government control efforts is crucial.
3. Everyone shares the common responsibility to stop the virus, and social distancing is the only effective measure. Outdoor gatherings and social functions should be avoided until the epidemic is controlled.
4. Vulnerable population such as the elderly and workers in basic positions should be protected. For example, protective equipment should be provided to bus drivers and supermarket cashiers.
5. Promote international experience sharing and cooperation, because COVID-19 is a global epidemic, and the final trend might be determined by the worst controlled country.