

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN A POST  
PANDEMIC COST OF LIVING CRISIS**

***KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND POLICY  
IMPLICATIONS***

**Joint report by**

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## INTRODUCTION

International students are the subject of intense public scrutiny. With 679 970 international students studying in the UK in 2021-22, comprising 24% of the total student population and rising to 45% of the postgraduate body, proponents point to the economic and geopolitical benefits of this sector. International students contributed £41.9 billion to the UK economy in 2021-22 with every additional 1% growth in market share potentially boosting its economy by £5 billion per year (UUK, 2023; Russell Group, 2023). The geopolitical influence of students returning to their countries of origin is noted for bolstering the UK's global position in uncertain times. In turn, British universities are increasingly dependent upon international fees for their financial viability/survival.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding this, international students have emerged as a target for the current UK government which is seeking to deliver its pledge to reduce net migration to the UK. Well reported speculation by senior politicians about the future of the UK's post-study visa – a key driver of international recruitment - as well as the subsequent implementation of restrictions on family/dependent migration accompanying postgraduate students pursuing taught programmes have already had a deleterious impact on overseas recruitment. This is a worrying development given that these students accounted for 48% of all international enrolments in the UK in 2021-22 as compared to 34% in 2017-18 (UUK, 2023). Escalating visa costs and NHS surcharge are further rendering the UK an unattractive destination in a fiercely competitive global market (The Royal Society, 2022).

Even as these debates rage, international students studying in UK universities have experienced significant hardships, weathering both the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent cost of living crisis in recent times. These everyday lived experiences are absent in public debates although gaining some traction in recent times (The Guardian, 2023). The ambitions of the International Education Strategy (2019) jointly penned by BEIS and DoE have fallen woefully short of extending and enabling a 'welcoming environment' to international students and providing them with a 'high quality experience'. Caught up in an anti-migrant environment increasingly targeting international students, the economic, social, and emotional fall out of these twin crises are being met by third sector organisations and local councils which are themselves stretched as the cost-of-living crisis beds in.

It is in this rapidly changing context that a collaborative project between Queen Mary University of London, Newham Community Project and Newham Council has sought to (i) evidence the lived experiences and multiple intersecting vulnerabilities that international students face; (ii) building on this evidence, and in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, co-develop a community of practice to better support international students; (iii) leverage opportunities to lobby for international students.

The evidence reported in this briefing paper derives from (i) primary research undertaken with international students for which a mixed methods approach was adopted combining an online survey (81 responses, 61% female respondents, 39% male), in-depth interviews (15, F, M) and a focus group discussion (6 participants); (ii) two knowledge exchange and policy workshops

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<sup>1</sup> International students are charged 'unregulated' fees in contrast to English home students whose fees have been pegged for over a decade. The latter translates into universities facing a significant and growing funding gap which is attributable to the difference between the average cost of educating an undergraduate student in England and the amount that universities receive in tuition fee income and government grants. A Russell Group report (2023) estimates that by 2030, there will amount to a £5000 funding gap per UK student per year.

involving respectively 21 and 29 stakeholders including representatives from voluntary organisations, councils, food bank managers, international students, academics and colleagues working in International Recruitment Offices.<sup>2</sup> The remainder of this briefing paper is organised into two main sections: we present key findings from our research with international students, and building on these, we identify proposed interventions for further discussion arising from a workshop with diverse stakeholders.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CRISIS?

Apart from your education, you know, I think you have to, uh, see the other side of...see the financial side. You need to work. And, uh, everything is so much, you know, fast paced in a very fast paced environment. You need to I can say that you need to be a robot because every time the university is pressurising you and, uh, after university, there are rent and bills and everything you need to manage. You need to manage everything simultaneously and very quickly. So it's very depressive [sic] from my point of view...It's really hard. (International student, interview 6).

In this section of the report, we draw upon survey and in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, held with international students. In terms of their *demographic profile*, 34% of students were over 30 years of age, 48% between 26-30 years; the vast majority (80%) were pursuing a postgraduate qualification and were from Asia<sup>3</sup> (65% South Asia, 11% East Asia). In turn, over half of the surveyed population had lived in the UK for less than three years with a quarter having been here for between three to five years. Three quarters of the women and men resided in private rental accommodation with a further 22% living in council/social housing. One person reported themselves as homeless. Interestingly, while most participants lived in the London Borough of Newham, they attended a range of universities not all of which had a London campus.

The key *reasons given for coming to the UK* were “an excellent education system...a multicultural country,” (interviewee (int.) 1) while for others London was “the only option...because there are a lot of opportunities. A big city. You can have good exposure, international exposure there, and the job market is very good,” (int. 6). London, interviewee 8 told us “is very welcoming to international students.” In turn, the “option to bring dependents along was an important factor influencing my decision [to come to London]” (int. 1) articulated particularly by female students. This is significant in that recently implemented immigration restrictions on bringing family members may result in fewer female students taking advantage of international education opportunities.

Notwithstanding these positive impressions, the reality post-migration was somewhat different. In the words of interviewee 4, “I expect like how we are seeing in the movies, like, uh, they’re like a super life. So, we think so. We can be like that. But when we come here it’s totally different.” *The students identified multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities.* Despite perceptions that

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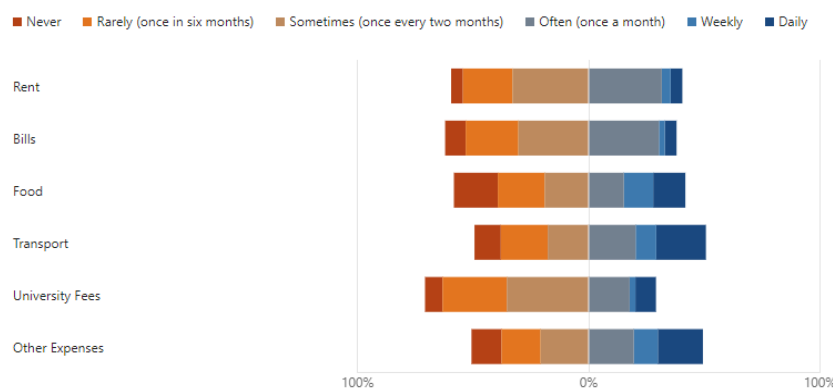
<sup>2</sup> The authors acknowledge the support of the Queen Mary University of London Policy Secondment award for supporting this project.

<sup>3</sup> China and India are the top sending countries to the UK. In 2021-22, Chinese students made up 27.8% of non-EU international student population while Indian students accounted for 22.1%. The latter population has grown by 345% between 2018-19 and 2021-22 (UUK, 2023). Indian students are also likely to want to migrate with dependents.

international students come from well to do families, it is the case that many are critically dependent on being able to work to survive in the UK. Discussions in our Knowledge Exchange Workshop revealed instances of misrepresentation of financial status by students to meet visa requirements and strategies such as ‘crowdfunding’ for fees which involved reaching out to distant relatives for help. Once in the UK, access to jobs – particularly during the pandemic but also in its aftermath - was a key issue for most students we spoke with. Interviewee 2 noted that “the job market and restrictions during the pandemic have added financial stress...The minimum wage not increasing, limited job opportunities for students, and biases in hiring practices contribute to financial challenges. Companies avoid hiring international students due to restrictions, making it harder to sustain oneself.” The survey corroborates this with under half of the sample not working (43%) with 19% working full time, and 29% part time.

The lack of an income or steady income had significant multidimensional repercussions which were captured in the survey (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The frequency of experiencing difficulties in paying for living expenses:**



Accommodation was “scarce, expensive and difficult to find especially if you have children” interviewee 3 said. Pressure to continue to pay rent during the pandemic was evident with interviewee 8 telling us that “we were living in shared accommodation. And so the landlord, he was just very clear. [He said] ‘Whatever happens, whatever circumstances you are going through, I can’t stop taking rent’.” Living in overcrowded housing was a common experience. Of the 81 people who completed the survey, only 14 lived by themselves. The remainder were sharing accommodation with family members (spouse/partner, children under the age of 18) as well as other adults and friends. The maximum number reported was 17. The fact that children under the age of 18 co-resided in these overcrowded dwellings raises safeguarding issues.

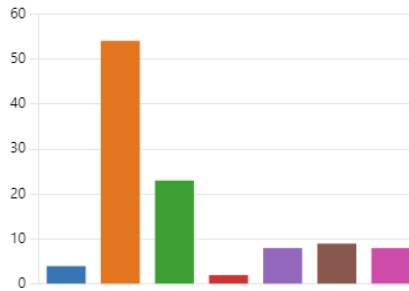
*Food insecurity* was a key issue with 46% of the survey respondents experiencing increased reliance on food aid since they arrived in London/the UK while this decreased for 19% and stayed the same for 35% of respondents. The overwhelming majority of the students we spoke to were reliant upon local food banks and community support programmes to meet their food needs (see Figure 2). When asked how food aid could be improved, responses ranged from having access to jobs which would reduce reliance on food aid to food provisions having a longer shelf life and for culturally appropriate foods.

**Figure 2: Food aid sources**

22. Where have you accessed food aid? Select as many as apply:

[More Details](#)

● University/college food bank	4
● Local food banks	54
● Community support programs	23
● Government assistance (if applic...	2
● Financial support from family/fri...	8
● Other (please specify)	9
● Religious/Faith Places of Worship	8

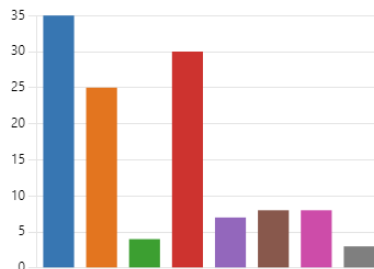


Perhaps unsurprisingly, *paying bills* was a constant struggle particularly post-Covid when our research participants noted high rates of inflation with “everything [prices] have been got double” (int. 6). The impacts of these financial pressures on mental and emotional health were significant. Interviewee 3 spoke about the “significant *mental stress* due to accommodation, financial constraints, and the struggle to provide for our children's basic needs. The lack of proper support and understanding from landlords and the community adds to the stress,” while another respondent, interviewee 7, said that being unable to work, constant demands for rent led to him feeling like “So yeah, everything just, you know how you suffocate. It was like that. You [sic] just came from every side.”

Sources of support varied (see Figure 3) with friends and family located in and outside of the UK featuring quite significantly. Outside of these familial and friendship networks, participants particularly elaborated on universities and the voluntary sector in their responses. Taking these in turn, perceptions of support from universities varied.

**Figure 3: Sources of support in times of crisis**

● Friends in the UK/at home	35
● Family in the UK/at home	25
● University	4
● Service providers in the UK (e.g. ...)	30
● Private Money Lenders	7
● Bank Loans/Public Loans	8
● None of the Above	8
● Other	3



A common complaint was the lack of communication by universities particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic when interviewee 6 told us “no dean, no professor was responding.” Many felt frustrated by this with interviewee 7 commenting that he felt that universities “don’t care who you are.” Indeed, they argued that the main communication from universities related to demands for the payment of fees which generated further pressure on students. These were articulated by interviewee 6 who said:

Universities not good at connecting with students – only got in touch asking for fees - Okay. You can you can tell us when you're going to pay. Know they gave us time that this is the last time where you have to pay so and so amount. And it was it was so bad that my family in India was ready to pay the university fees because they were afraid. They were afraid that, okay, if we don't pay the university fees, what's going to happen? I was in the UK sponsored by the university. The university had access to me with all this

visa and everything because I did applied from the CAS delivery issued from the university. But what happens if I don't pay the university's fees now? Will they abolish my visa? Will they like fail me and then ultimately my visa goes away? What doesn't happen? So my family was ready to like take a loan and then pay my fees, but do pay my fees on time because everything was great. We didn't know what was going to happen.

Importantly, other students reflected that while universities did have services – such as hardship funds – which international students were eligible for, awareness of these services was not widespread.

In contrast the voluntary sector was judged very highly. Speaking about it at length, interviewee 7 told us that it was the voluntary sector which provided aid ranging for access to food to advice and information. Interviewee 8 spoke about the wider emotional support commenting that “But, you know, you get that warm hug, and someone gives you food. That's something else. I think that is what we got from the voluntary sector. We had someone to talk to. We had someone to share our values with. Like if you don't have anyone in. Look, you could go to your brother, you could go to your sister. But as international students, we didn't have brothers or sisters. Who knows what our problems are or what we are suffering from. So voluntary sector was this experienced person who know about the UK.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Having detailed key findings from our research, in this section we identify key points for intervention and leverage which have been co-developed in consultation with key stakeholders who participated in two Knowledge Exchange workshops.

The starting point for discussions was the need to acknowledge the complexity and interconnectedness of issues affecting international students, ranging from educational experiences, immigration issues and financial precarity, which requires multifaceted solutions. Stakeholders agreed on the need for continuous dialogue and collaboration to address international student needs, adapting to evolving circumstances as well as accountability and responsibility from institutions and policymakers, ensuring commitments translate into action.

The **government**, and in particular, a **whole of government approach**, is required to embed inclusive and equitable practices in education and immigration policies which prioritise diversity. Particular priorities are to:

- Remove international students from migration targets: there is strong evidence that the international student sector is a net contributor to the UK economy. In a post-Brexit world, international alumnae can play a very significant role in British geopolitical status.
- Create a body to monitor international student *experience* which currently falls between the remits of the Office for Students which focuses on home students and UUKi which prioritises recruitment of international students.
- Urgently review the universities funding model so as to reduce dependency on the unregulated fees sector which is increasingly volatile.
- Need for a university grading system such as OFSTED which has safeguarding criteria for schools.

A range of priorities were identified **universities:**

- Establish code of conduct for international students underpinned by principles of fair treatment, commitment to a positive international student experience which is cognizant of issues related to equality, diversity and inclusion and the role of universities in facilitating student success. Such codes of conduct should redress real or perceived disparities in the treatment of home and international students, and align with broader educational goals and the rights of international students.
- Better communication at application stage, prior to departure and on arrival. This is very important in a context where students are overly-reliant upon agents, their peers and other students in the UK for information.
- Improved due diligence of agents, and awareness of sub-agent systems. Our research has highlighted particular issues in India and Pakistan, and concerns about lack of transparency on application processes, disinformation about courses, universities and cost of living in the UK. Clarification of financial requirements for visa applications is also needed.
- Offering targeted pastoral and student support services (such as bursaries), and raised awareness of existing services available to international students (such as hardship funds).
- Particular need for mental health services which are cognizant of cultural barriers which prevent uptake. Pilot programmes, funding collaborations, and efforts to improve cultural competency in mental health services maybe required.
- Lack of pastoral support particularly noted in satellite campuses in London where the focus is on the delivery of education.
- Greater flexibility in the payment of fees, including payment plans extending until the end of programmes. Any failure to meet payment obligations would result in the students being ineligible for graduation, thereby ensuring that fees are settled in full by the end of the programme.
- Opportunities to learn across the sector through the sharing of best practice and resources to support international students and promote collective learning.
- Recognise challenges in language proficiency and accent discrimination faced by international students, impacting academic and social integration. Redress through pre-sessional English language classes.
- Proposal for collaboration between universities and local communities to support international students, leveraging resources effectively. This is partly premised on the fact that international students may be hesitant to seek support from university services due to concerns about visa and perceived penalties.
- In this context, proposals for universities to fund external organisations to provide specialised support services for international students.

#### **Local councils**

- Overcrowded housing with potential safeguarding issues where children under 18 are co-resident.
- **Local Councils: Overcrowded housing with potential safeguarding issues where children under 18 are co-residents. Related to the above, local authorities should work with universities on issues of housing support and licensing.**
- Related to above, local authorities to work with universities on issues of housing support, licensing. Our discussions highlighted that it is important to recognise that while these

measures may address certain risks, they could inadvertently create additional challenges and struggles. The question arises: where would these affected students turn if alternative accommodations are not affordable or available? Implementing measures to alleviate overcrowding may inadvertently leave those with no recourse to public funds unsupported and at risk of homelessness, additionally adding challenges to the local authority. Hence, a comprehensive approach that considers the broader implications should be considered when addressing these issues.

- Leveraging support for employment: local employment fairs co-organised by councils and universities
- Support/resource communities of practice.

There was some surprise in our workshops about the extent to which international students are reliant upon **voluntary organisations**.

- Scope for universities to collaborate or fund voluntary organisations who have requisite expertise and/or cultural capital to provide some of the services identified above.
- Potential to provide wrap around services including providing information on wider sources of support including registering with NHS, housing support, child care.