

International Student Support and Experience

A 'composite' motion taken from submissions by: Exeter Guild, Nottingham Trent SU and Herts SU

What's the issue?

When International students arrive at University, they are already behind their British/Home peers. As if the transition to a new environment wasn't hard enough, they have to do so in the face of a completely new culture, often alone, with very little support. And yet, despite their diminished student experience, the significantly higher tuition fees they pay mean that Universities themselves only seek to benefit from further income - something that's only going to increase in light of Brexit. This is not reflected in International students' experience on the ground, however, but it should be, for the following reasons:

- Dropout rates: Some International students have to leave University because of financial pressures.
- Working hours: International students can't work for more than 20 hours a week.
Awarding gap: Little spoken about, but this awarding gap also exists. Let's take note of it.
- Student finance: International students have to self-fund their entire academic journey, with no support from student finance. As a result of Brexit, this may also be true for EU students in the near future.
- Wellbeing: The points covered here mean that International students are fighting loneliness, struggling with their Mental Health, and are under extreme pressure to survive University. This can sometimes be all too much, and needs to be recognised. Negative wellbeing = a negative student experience.

The average undergraduate annual tuition fees for International Students is between £12,000- £19,000, although fees for courses except medicine can be as high as £26,000 per year. This means that international students are paying, on average, between £9,000 and £30,000 additionally over the course of their degree, although this can be much higher for those on higher priced courses and for course longer than three years.

Estimates by the Institute for Fiscal Study show that the average Government spending on teaching grants for home students is less than £2,500 over the course of a three-year degree.

Prices for postgraduate courses, in particular PhD level courses, can be higher than double for international students than for home students for exactly identical provision.

International students face additional problems to home student's external from their degree, such as private healthcare services (dentistry, dermatology etc.), being taken advantage of by utility companies charging significantly higher amounts and threatening court action to scare international students into paying.

As we witness a national scramble amongst HE institutions to cash in on the growth of the international student market, many Union officers are realising the dangers associated with this. Across the country, unprepared Universities will increase their international student numbers, without considering how to give them the best student experience possible. International students may be brought into institutions with issues of intolerance, or with insufficient employability, well-being and welfare support. International students deserve an equitable experience to home students, but instead there is great disparity in the international student experience across institutions. What is required is some form of standardisation across institutions and unions to ensure consistent experience and expectations.

What could be the solution?

First off, each University needs to have a structure for International student support.

Pre-arrival induction: Substantive information packs created for all International students going to University, for the purpose of preventing the spread of false information through Agents.

Accommodation - regular check-ins with International students in the lead up to them arriving at University, to ensure they've been able to secure accommodation, or offer support in finding some if not.

Induction to, and transition through University. The induction process for International students needs to be tailored to their needs and circumstances, so that they're able to better adapt to their new environment.

Financial support. There should be a pot of money ring-fenced for International student support that's used in critical situations (e.g. paying for food when a student can't afford to feed themselves). This will not be a normal bursary/scholarship, but an increased provision of funding support. It should also be proportional to the number of International students each University has.

Help should also be provided with regards to tuition fees, where the University step in to help in cases such as a student considering dropping out for that very reason. When students are skipping meals and struggling to pay for their rent, there's a clear problem, and it needs to be addressed.

Using a percentage of the excess fee to fund either a national body or work within universities to provide financial support (e.g. bursaries) to help international students with the additional costs that they face during their studies and after graduation.

Using a percentage of the excess fee to fund either a national body or work within universities to provide additional career advice tailored to international students, enabling them to get the most of the post-study work visa.

Using a percentage of the excess fee to fund either a national body or work within universities to provide international students with additional information to help promote awareness and protect international students from external

exploitation.

After consultation with our international student community, institutions should adopt several policies focusing on the International student experience. There are six main focuses:

- The first focus is on employability. We propose that all institutions be obligated to host employability fairs where employers are prepared to hire international students. The employers must understand visa requirements and be willing to employ students and sponsor their necessary Tier 2 visa or visa alternative. Additionally, we propose there should be equitable access to out-of-term-time internships and work experience through better promotion.
- The second focus is on international student fees. Whilst the annual fee cap for undergraduate home students is set at £9,250, international students pay a maximum of £26,000. This leaves many international students feeling like merely income generators for the institution, rather than valued members of an academic community. There should be a meaningful and significant reduction of international student fees.
- The third focus is on housing and accommodation. Host institutions should offer and promote a housing guarantor support service in which the Universities can act as guarantors – what is widely used is a complex and costly online service. We also propose that institutions present accommodation expectations upfront i.e. moving out into the city after first year; support engagement with local letting agents; and finally, offer better information on the expectations of living in the UK, i.e. Council Tax exemption for all students.
- The fourth focus is financial support. The pervading stereotype is that international students are wealthy, but in reality many rely on scholarships and other funding sources to support their studies and living costs. The current lack of standardisation across the sector creates an inconsistent experience which can dramatically impact the study of international students. We propose that all Unions request their host institutions contribute 5% of their annual international student fee income to a hardship fund accessible only for international students.
- The fifth focus is on liberation, equality, diversity and inclusivity for international students. There should be a set of policies that support, safeguard and inform international students who engage with their Union, whether as academic representatives, society members, full/part-time officers, or when meeting students in their independent Advice services. Host institutions should adopt effective, user-friendly and well-promoted reporting platforms for instances of racial harassment and discrimination, as a method of safeguarding international students. Additionally, institutions should have a more accessible and representative wellbeing service, which understand the complexities of international student experience. Finally, all Union and University staff, should undergo LEDI training focused on the international student experience.
- The final focus is on effective promotion of what the university expects from international students when studying. Universities must offer accessible, unintimidating and free visa support and information to international students before and during their studies. They must also provide a free, accessible and comprehensive induction that covers the

educational expectations of the institution (i.e. referencing, essay writing, exam procedures, mitigation, re-sit policies, personal tutor engagement) to ensure international students study with the same opportunities and expectations as home students, and are not disproportionately implicated in instances of academic misconduct.

To conclude, this is a vital step forward in ensuring equity and equality of opportunity and outcome in the experience of international students in UK universities.

Sub-proposals

These are policy proposals which have been submitted on this theme. These would have been considered as amendments to the main proposal, however as we have moved the votes and discussion online the DPC has decided to make these separate votes on the subject, to help set the direction of future officer's work. So the below proposals will be considered separately rather than as 'amendments' to the main proposal.

Sub-proposal One

Submitted by NUS Vice President Higher Education

This proposal is because regulation and enforcement of an obligation would be near impossible in practice and give an interesting, and unlikely, role on campus to (presumably) the Office for Students.

The NUS should work with other campaigning organisations, such as People & Planet, to resist the Home Office's encroachment onto our campuses and get senior management of educational institutions to commit to defending students and staff who are threatened with deportation.

We propose that when institutions host employability fairs, there must be employers present who are prepared to hire international students.

Sub-proposal Two

Submitted by Bath Spa Students' Union Delegate

Financial support. In addition to the pot of money. There should be food banks on campus for all students. I know many starving students and myself as an International Student I got pushed away from the finance team, everything I expressed I was starving. Making it difficult for me to study. If there were food banks, which more fortunate students can donate food, and the resources that need to survive. These are basic human rights which seem that Universities seem to completely ignore for International students. FEED US! - it can sometimes be isolating and feel like International students are exploited, we definitely need to bridge the gap! I personally have had to starve until the Student Union gave me food vouchers lasting 5 days, just so I can eat.

2: The final focus on effective promotion of what the expectation from international students when studying- University can also do a better job at protecting the right n regulation for international students to study in the UK. Many flee society barriers from their families who might not be accepting of their degree, a few have been in a radical position in which their parents want them out of the UK. Regardless of geographical barriers or location. Universities can do a better job to help protect the right of international students. After all, they are students.

3. Housing- what happens if a student has no family in the UK- where are they meant to find a guarantor: Paying for a guarantor and then £825 for rent without bills- is daylight robbery. Guarantor prices in the UK can go up to £2000. Unfortunately, life is extremely hard for International Students on top of that, the current systems put in place. Definitely weren't made for us- or at least it can feel that way.

Sub-proposal Three

Submitted by Hertfordshire Student' Union Delegate

Interim measures to be decide upon as a matter of urgency based on Brexit and the amount of universities which will be seeking to increase their international student populations whilst not drastically improving services and resources for them. An item should also be included surrounding better support in relation to the post-study work visa.