

International Student Forum, March 2021 – Forgotten Community

Introduction

Recent news has covered the experiences of international students in the UK (mainly London and other large cities) highlighting the difficult circumstances they find themselves in due to Covid-19. In light of such articles and limited feedback received from our own international students about their experiences during the pandemic, a virtual forum was held on Friday 12 March to hear directly from the international student community. This report includes key findings and responses to prepared questions, as well as suggestions for the University to improve support for international students.

Key findings

- International students living in private accommodation in Bath feel the University does not provide any support for quarantine and isolation.
- Support is needed for international students booking the government's testing package along with clarification as to whether the University's testing programme can replace this.
- International students are aware they are paying higher tuition fees for an online study experience and some want a partial refund.
- After reading information about the Hardship Fund and other funding available at the University, some international students feel they are not eligible. They are also still restricted to 20 hours of work per week therefore some struggle to pay for their tuition or support themselves.
- As international students cannot access the same tuition fee loans as UK students, it is difficult for some to pay for tuition after losing employment due to Covid-19.
- More support is needed to prepare new international students for studying in the UK and where they can find study resources.
- Some international students feel unsafe and reluctant to make friends or go outside as they see many people on campus not wearing masks and partying at night.
- If a group chat is made for a course and there's a majority of UK students included, some international students will not engage as they don't feel confident with their level of English or are unfamiliar with how things work in the UK.
- Some international students have disrupted sleep schedules due to poor mental health, stress from assessments and Covid-19 cases in their local area.
- There is a list of suggestions at the end of this report relating to meeting other students early, arrival support, academic support and a culture shift.

Attendance

Of the 21 students who signed up for the forum in advance, only 6 attended though there was representation from all study levels: undergraduate, PGT (including distance learners) and doctoral students. The questions for discussion were also emailed after the event to all students who signed up, with any additional feedback included in this report.

Topics discussed

What are your experiences of quarantine and Covid testing?

Several participants highlighted a lack of support from the University regarding quarantine and isolation, both on campus and in privately rented accommodation in the city. One participant arrived in University accommodation alone without any food provided for quarantine and was then

informed that food would be delivered late, causing much frustration. Other participants noted “we are on our own” as they felt the University did not provide any support for students living in private accommodation; they described having to “pause” their life to get tested and wait for the results yet were expected to easily catch up with their studies, along with relying on flatmates who had already quarantined for information and support (in contrast to students living alone with no one to turn to).

Issues with booking the UK government’s £210 testing package were also raised, with a participant noting that they were unable to book this from their home country and had emailed the issuer many times but received no response, only just receiving confirmation at the UK border. They queried whether the University’s testing programme could replace the government’s testing package and if the University could help students with booking these.

How have international travel restrictions and UK lockdowns impacted your student experience?

All the participants agreed that travel restrictions and lockdowns had greatly affected their student experience. One participant noted that their flight had been cancelled 4 or 5 times, while another commented that some of their flatmates in University accommodation have not been able to arrive in Bath yet. The impact on the Christmas holiday was also raised by a participant living in the UK for the first time, highlighting that they were unable to go travelling or learn about Christmas in the UK as they had to stay in their accommodation. There was also some discussion about distance learning courses which are primarily held online but include some residential activities at the University; a participant commented that these residential were a huge factor in choosing to study at Bath due to the opportunity to meet and network with staff and students, however these were all unfortunately cancelled due to travel restrictions.

As an international student, in what ways do you think Covid has impacted your academic studies differently to UK students?

International tuition fees featured greatly in the discussions with participants, including feelings of unease having to pay more than UK students for online study this year, missing practical components of their course after the paying tuition fees and wanting a partial refund. Participants also commented on financial struggles that come with being an international student having to pay higher tuition fees, highlighting that not only do they not qualify for the Hardship Fund and other University funding, but they are also restricted to working up to 20 hours per week (as part of visa compliance) which isn’t enough to support them paying for tuition fees. Similarly, it was noted by a distance learner participant that although their course experience was the same for UK and international students, UK students have access to loans to help with their tuition fees whereas international students do not; they explained that Covid-19 has significantly impacted international students who work alongside their studies as some have lost work or have had to change from full-time to part-time, resulting in lower financial capacity and much psychological pressure. In addition to the distance learner experience, a participant commented that their employer will reimburse the cost of their tuition fees upon receipt of a transcript showing they’ve passed their units, however the participant has still not received an official transcript from the University for their Semester 1 units and is therefore covering all the tuition fee costs themselves so far.

Another theme that emerged from the discussion was the difficulty in adapting to a new method of study, both studying online and joining the UK education system for the first time. Some participants noted a big difference in meeting/networking with other students on their courses, describing such instances as feeling like “business meetings” rather than social opportunities due to the virtual setting. Another participant commented on not being familiar with how things work at a UK university and having only a few friends to help, resulting in difficulties finding useful study resources for their essays; to combat this issue, the participant suggested a guidebook for all new students containing information about resources, services and events so that they feel supported.

Some participants noticed a change in their concentration with the need to stop and rewind recordings as it now takes twice the effort to focus compared to face-to-face teaching.

Although some of the participants missed being on campus for their studies, they commended the University on doing their best to make the study experience as similar to in-person as possible.

How has Covid impacted your social life at university?

The participants agreed that Covid had negatively impacted their social lives and attributed difficulties meeting other students and only having a small circle of friends (mainly people they live with due to restrictions) to the absence of in-person events. They added that they were looking forward to more in-person events so they can socialise, even if they have wear masks and continue social distancing.

Some participants commented that they are reluctant to make friends as they see many people on campus not wearing masks and partying at night, making them feel unsafe to go outside and be close to other people without protection in case they contract Covid-19. There were also concerns that many people “don’t take the pandemic seriously” both on campus and in Bath.

A participant explained that although they were part of a group WhatsApp chat with others on their course, they did not feel confident messaging because most of the students were from the UK and they were worried about their language ability and not being familiar with how things work in the UK. Similarly, another participant noted that they did not feel comfortable talking freely with their peers because of the isolating nature of online study, describing it as “like going into a store and they’re the consumer right next to you waiting to buy”.

What impact do you think Covid has had on your general health and wellbeing?

Some participants attributed disrupted sleep patterns to poor mental health along with stress from assessments and Covid-19 cases in their local area; they described going to sleep around 3am or later and waking up in the afternoon, adding that their new sleep schedules were seriously affecting them but were difficult to resolve through changing their routines.

In relation to physical health, some participants exercised by joining online SU exercise activities and going on walks, however others found it difficult to exercise outside because of Covid-19 restrictions which contributed to weight gain.

What do you think the University should do to better support international students now and until the end of the semester?

The participants suggested the following to help improve the international student experience:

Meeting other students early

- Provide more opportunities to meet other international students at the beginning of the academic year so they can get to know each other early, as well as support each other if they are experiencing the same feelings or difficulties so that they feel more confident and connected in the University.
- More focus and better support for SU cultural societies as they allow students from the same country to meet.
- Include socials and/or team building tasks for students on the same course as part of induction so they can get to know each other.

Arrival support

- Provide support about UK travel policies in a guidebook as international students are unfamiliar with these.
- Provide better instructions and support for arrivals e.g. use student ambassadors to help arriving students who understand the situation and what a new student needs.

Academic

- Use a different way to present information in emails to students (e.g. infographics) as it becomes confusing when there is too much information.
- Introduce set office hours for lecturers so students can drop in and ask questions (e.g. every week at a certain time on Zoom/Teams), which is much easier than emailing back and forth.
- Better support from lecturers and tutors, as well as timely and more friendly email responses.

Culture shift

- Change the University's 'one size fits all' approach for international students – it is too generalised and doesn't address the many communities within the international community.
- Better connection between the University and The SU so students are more aware of opportunities and feel more connected.