

Migrant Voice is a national, migrant-led organisation working with migrants regardless of their status and country of origin, including refugees and asylum seekers. We have networks in London, Glasgow and the West Midlands. Over the last few months, we have been speaking with a number of international students across the UK who have been facing particular problems as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. The information in this briefing comes from a recent online meeting for international students in the UK and from information shared with us by students since March this year.

Financial issues

International students in the UK pay tens of thousands of pounds in tuition fees. Many rely on sponsors or family income to pay these fees, and some on part-time work to pay their rent and buy the essentials. Due to Covid-19, many sponsors have lost income or closed down entirely, family businesses have collapsed, and jobs have disappeared. Since international students aren't eligible for any support from the Government or for any Covid-19-related financial support, many are struggling to pay their fees and meet their daily living costs. One student, whose sponsor became unable to support her due to the pandemic, said:

“As a partially funded student, I do not receive funding or a stipend from the university, so I am responsible for all my living costs. I had been getting by on my savings and on part-time jobs, which have been completely halted. I spend hours searching the internet for opportunities, but I am also faced with the tough decision of whether to stay home and protect myself from the virus or to go out and try to generate an income. This has obviously affected my productivity levels because it takes time away from my research and weighs heavily on my mind.”

Many students rely partly on financial support from their family, but this has been impacted in many cases by the pandemic. A second student told us:

“This pandemic has dried up all the sources of revenue on which we were dependent. In my case, my father's business collapsed and now I'm facing a lot of financial difficulty. I'm trying to find jobs, but there are no jobs.”

Even as the job market has been picking up, employers are reluctant to offer international students work because they have such a short period of time left on their visas. (See more details on this issue below.)

These factors have left many international students struggling to pay their fees for this academic year – which most universities are still demanding upfront – and sometimes unable to buy necessities. After investing tens of thousands of pounds, students may therefore be forced to leave the country partway through their degree through no fault of their own and without any prospect of returning.

Visa-related issues

Many courses at UK higher education institutions involve a mandatory work placement that must be completed for the student to be awarded the degree. Due to the pandemic, students are finding it extremely difficult to find such placements and while many universities are offering extensions or deferrals on this part of the course, this does not help international students whose visas are expiring within the next few months.

One student told us that an employer had offered him a placement earlier in the year, but this had to be postponed due to Covid-19. The offer has now been withdrawn as the student's visa is only valid until

March 2021 and the employer needs someone who can work for a year: *“This is a very common problem,”* the student told us.

Deferring their placement for a year and returning to their country of origin in the meantime is not an option for most students. They are already struggling financially and would face significant costs in applying for a new visa and paying the (soon to be £624/year) NHS surcharge – fees that will be impossible for many and a process that could still result in a rejection. As one student put it, *“A lot of graduates in our position won’t come back if we defer”* – a loss for both the students themselves and the UK society and economy.

Many are frustrated that the Government has not made the new Graduate Route available to international students graduating this year, a move that would enable students to work and complete placements even after their Tier 4 visa expires, and contribute to the reboot of the UK economy. As one said:

“We are here. And we want to work. We want to strengthen your economy and stimulate it.”

Those planning to stay in the UK and work on a Tier 2 visa after graduating have seen those plans derailed due to the lack of available jobs at RQF Level 6 and above (jobs requiring advanced knowledge).

Lack of support

Many international students have felt unsupported and forgotten during this pandemic, by both the Government and their universities. Many told us there was a lack of information, particularly regarding the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic on their immigration status.

“We’ve been left high and dry to deal with it on our own,” one student said.

Others have found their inquiries regarding tuition fee refunds due to lost library, laboratory or supervision time have been met with silence or immediate refusals. Since international students often pay upwards of £15,000 for just one year of tuition – and given the serious financial struggles they are currently facing – this is a significant loss.

The impact of this lack of support could be far-reaching. One student said:

“A lot of my friends were planning to come to the UK, but when I told them my experience, nobody wanted to come anymore, because students aren’t being supported.”

Recommendations

1. The Government should bring forward the Graduate Route so students graduating before May 2021 can benefit, OR allow visa extensions of at least six months for students whose studies or placements have been disrupted by Covid-19.
2. The Government should bring forward the planned change to reduce the minimum skill level to RQF Level 3 for those seeking to come to/stay in the UK on a work visa.
3. Universities should provide greater support for international students, helping them to understand their options, offering flexibility on fee payments and using industry connections to help students find placements or post-graduation jobs.

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