THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Working in partnership to improve international student integration and experience

Final Report to the Office for Students

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Abbreviations

AAPI	Asian American Pacific Islander
DfE	Department for Education
DIT	Department for International Trade
EMN	European Migration Network
EU	European Union
GEP	Gender Equality Plan
GP	General Practitioner
HE	Higher Education
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HSM	Harassment and Sexual Misconduct
LSE	London School of Economics and Political Science
LSESU	LSE Students' Union
NDA	Non-Disclosure Agreement
NHS	National Health Service
NUS	National Union of Students UK
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OfS	Office for Students
PG	Postgraduate
SU	Students' Union
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UG	Undergraduate
UK	United Kingdom
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USA	United States of America
UUK	Universities UK

Executive summary

International students are key contributors to the UK economy, culture, and society. They significantly add to universities' and communities' general diversity, inclusivity, and internationalisation efforts. In addition, they bring tangible economic benefits and help to foster international collaborations. Although a considerable amount of information is available regarding international students' numbers, demographics, and reasons to study in the UK, less attention has been given to their unique experiences, concerns, and perspectives as international students. International students face many adjustment issues and challenges when pursuing education outside their home countries, thus requiring more support from their institutions. This was evidenced even more during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The UK Government's International Education Strategy update published in February 2021 set an action (5) for the Office for Students (OfS) and the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) to establish 'What works' in ensuring international students can integrate and receive a fulfilling academic experience in the UK. A series of focus groups with international students studying in English universities and with staff in English Higher Education were held to develop an understanding of sector responses and approaches. Following on from this work and to improve the understanding of international students' experiences and needs, in 2022, the OfS, in partnership with UKCISA and the Department for Education (DfE), launched the project "Working in partnership to improve international student integration and experience". As part of this project, the OfS launched a Call for Evidence addressed to the higher education sector, aimed at identifying effective, innovative, and sector-leading practices that ensure international students can integrate and receive a fulfilling experience while studying in England as well as gaps in provision. The Call for Evidence focused on three themes:

1. Accessibility and effectiveness of well-being and support services for international students.
2. How responding to Covid-19 has shaped practice in supporting international students to adapt and integrate into UK higher education.
3. Work done to prevent and tackle harassment and sexual misconduct (HSM).

The OfS commissioned LSE Consulting to evaluate the submissions received and the quality of evidence on the three themes of the call. Our team screened the 63 entries that were submitted, but only 23 of them had enough relevant information to be included in our analysis (see our Methodological Appendix). For this reason, we complemented this evidence with desk research and additional fieldwork, in particular, a survey targeted at international students from across England and a series of focus groups and interviews with international students and staff at the London School of Economics and Political Science (where around 70% of students are international). The analysis of the submissions and additional fieldwork took place between September and November 2022. This report presents our findings in three chapters, one corresponding to each of the themes listed above.

Chapter one examines the topic of accessibility and effectiveness of well-being and support services available to international students. The concept of well-being in higher education is multi-faceted, encompassing several dimensions, including emotional well-being, subjective well-being, and academic well-being. In alignment with the literature, our findings show that international students' well-being is influenced by different factors and the challenges they experience. Some of these are practical challenges – covering aspects such as housing, finance, and settling in a foreign country – as well as challenges related to transitioning to a different higher education system (e.g. academic skills, class interaction, language barriers, adjustments to diverse educational evaluation systems, high peer and parental pressures) and challenges which refer to their post-university experience (careers, employment insecurity, and job search). Evidence from the submissions shows that universities are addressing these challenges in different ways through various services that often simultaneously target more than one issue. These include academic services, such as skills-based support services (e.g. academic writing or language skills support), community-building initiatives aimed at building a sense of community and promoting peer relationships amongst students (e.g.

welcome packs and orientation events for new students at the time of their arrival, social events running throughout the academic year, etc.), and in-person and online support services including mental health and career counselling.

Chapter two explores how responding to Covid-19 has shaped practice in supporting international students to adapt and integrate into UK higher education. Psychological distress and challenges related to isolation and the online conversion of classroom teaching had an adverse effect on international students' well-being, and those living in students' halls were the most affected. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, the UK government and institutions have taken various actions to support universities and students in the form of targeted guidance, coordinated frameworks, and the sharing of best practices on coping strategies and measures. As emerged in the submissions to the call for evidence, most universities addressed the psychological and practical disruptions caused by Covid-19 through the adoption of strategies such as the switch to remote learning, virtual modes of support for international students to improve their social and academic well-being (often done in partnership with students' unions), and the strengthening of online counselling and mental health services. In this respect, the pandemic's challenges have represented an opportunity to reflect on the importance of implementing a more personalised approach towards international students by raising awareness of the importance of identifying their distinct needs through a proactive approach which also relies on the collaboration of professional staff with students' unions.

Finally, Chapter three looks at the work done to prevent and tackle harassment and sexual misconduct (HSM). This theme was only marginally mentioned in the OfS's Call for Evidence submissions and was not directly covered during our fieldwork. Nevertheless, as HSM is a great concern among higher education institutions, we conducted a few confidential interviews with key professionals and international students at LSE dealing with HSM and explored the relevant literature and policy work on the subject. In this respect, our emerging findings complement the recent work commissioned by the OfS and conducted by SUMS Consulting, which evaluated the OfS's "Statement of Expectations", a set of recommendations to support higher education providers in England develop and implement effective systems, policies and processes to prevent and respond to incidents of harassment and sexual misconduct. After underlining the relevant literature and policy strategies implemented at the institutional level, the chapter discusses the main challenges in tackling HSM in universities. The first challenge is the paucity of data and awareness regarding the unique experiences of international students, given that their cultural beliefs and socialization modalities are likely to play a role in how they perceive and experience HSM. Secondly, in line with current research findings that underline how progress has been uneven and slow, we find that, although the majority of universities have specific HSM policies in place, there is still a significant implementation gap in terms of reporting HSM incidents, which also includes the need to clarify better the definition of HSM itself, including international students' understanding of what "consent" truly entails. Finally, a third challenge lies in the implementation of precise complaint procedures and support systems that can be accessible to international students, including a lack of follow-up for victims who have reported HSM incidents and a lack of specialised teams within universities' services that can facilitate the access to recovery-related resources for HSM survivors.

This study is part of OfS's efforts to strengthen practices and actions for improving the integration of international students. As such, it provides an opportunity to identify and capture challenges, developments, and future avenues of action by combining universities' voices – gathered through the call for evidence submissions – and international students' viewpoints as they emerged during the fieldwork. Although considerable efforts have been made at institutional and university levels to improve international students' integration and experiences, there are currently some gaps which need to be addressed. This situation is not surprising, given the complex definition and understanding of international students' well-being.

Together, the three chapters in our report provide a comprehensive and holistic view of the experiences, perceptions, and actual practices addressed to international students regarding well-being, initiatives undertaken during Covid-19, and work done to tackle HSM. Although there is no one-size-fits-all approach in addressing international students' integration and experience, some common implications across the three

themes of the study should be considered in future research and policy practice. First, international students should not be treated as a homogeneous population, and the effectiveness of interventions depends upon adopting a multi-dimensional approach combining institutional and bottom-up initiatives when capturing their needs, concerns, and unique challenges. Second, more efforts should be made at the university level to support and enhance partnerships and cooperation between the academic community and the (broad) students' community. These efforts would involve promoting a more proactive role for students' unions and other university services (e.g. Student Halls) in the design and delivery of initiatives, together with a better involvement of home students who could further engage with international students through community engagement events and mentorship schemes. Finally, although significant steps have been taken in tackling HSM, more attention should be devoted to taking into account international students' needs in terms of cultural beliefs and socialisation norms when it comes to prevention, reporting, and support measures to tackle HSM. At the same time, higher education providers and policy makers should work more closely with international students' unions to facilitate policy responses targeted at international students.

Introduction

Despite the numerous challenges facing higher education in the UK after Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK remains one of the top three most popular global destinations for international students after the USA and Australia (UNESCO, 2021). The Office for Students (OfS), which is the independent regulator of higher education in England, defines international students as "students from outside the UK who come to study at institutions in England, or who study with English institutions at local campuses or via distance learning while resident abroad" (Office for Students, 2022a). International students studying at UK universities account for 22% of the total student population (HESA, 2022b), bringing to the country a wide range of economic and non-economic benefits, including diversity and cross-cultural experiences (London Economics, 2021; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). Therefore, improving the recruitment and experience of international students is a top priority for the UK government. In 2019, the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for International Trade (DIT) launched the International Education Strategy, setting out the government's ambition to grow international student numbers and highlighting the importance of promoting a welcoming environment for international students (UK Government, 2019). The strategy was updated in 2021 and, thanks also to the advocacy efforts of the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA, 2021), put forward the need to capture better "what works" in ensuring that international students can integrate and receive a fulfilling academic experience in the UK through a holistic approach that also takes into account the impact of international students on the learning experience of home students (UK Government, 2019).

It is in this context that the OfS launched a Call for Evidence addressed to UK higher education providers to gather evidence on three main themes: (i) Work to prevent and tackle harassment and sexual misconduct (HSM) involving international students; (ii) How responding to Covid-19 has shaped practice in supporting international students to adapt and integrate into the UK higher education system; (iii) Accessibility and effectiveness of wellbeing and support services for international students.

These three themes were, in turn, embedded within three cross-cutting questions which focused on the extent to which international students with one or more of the nine protected characteristics (Equality Act, 2010) were impacted by current practices; the extent to which the practice was developed with undergraduate and postgraduate students; and the impact of the practice on home (UK-domiciled) students.

Methodology

This report takes stock of the evidence collected in the submissions and supplements it with additional fieldwork that includes quantitative and qualitative research methods. In doing so, the study provides a unique perspective on international students' experience that reflects the view of universities and students' perceptions of their own experiences. To this end, a four-step approach was adopted. Firstly, we screened the standard of evidence included in the Call for Evidence submission paying specific attention to the relevance to the themes of the call while trying to identify examples of sector-leading practices and innovative practices. As a second step, we reviewed the relevant academic and policy literature for each theme, including scholarly peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, grey literature, online sources, official documents, and documents provided by the OfS. As a third step, we also conducted qualitative research through focus groups and interviews with London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) international students and LSE staff responsible for supporting students' well-being (academic mentors and tutors, wardens in LSE Halls, and professional staff in charge of specific pastoral services. Finally, to integrate our findings with a non-LSE perspective, we launched a survey that gathered 1425 responses from international students. Our survey focused on two themes of interest (how students prioritise specific support services and their assessment regarding the provision of these services) and targeted current international students and alumni in English universities and colleges.

The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete and was distributed by both the OfS and the LSE Consulting team with the aim of reaching the widest sample possible. Whereas our survey provided

quantifiable data from a sample of international students, the focus groups allowed us to capture a more in-depth perspective of these students' experiences and helped us to connect this experience to their multiple cultures and identities (Bourne & Winstone, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2011). All the students who took part in the focus groups and interviews signed and submitted their informed consent forms in advance. The focus groups lasted about one hour, while the interviews were slightly shorter. All participants received a £30 gift voucher for their contribution. For each focus group, we asked them to introduce themselves before asking about their experiences and challenges as international students following the OfS call's themes. The focus groups and the interviews were conducted via Zoom and audio-recorded before being transcribed and analysed through inductive coding. Given the sensitiveness and complexity of HSM, it was agreed to not directly address this topic during our fieldwork; however, it emerged spontaneously in some of the discussions we had with LSE students and staff, which also led to a further investigation of this topic within the LSE context (please see our Methodological Annex for a detailed overview of our methodological approach, sampling, qualitative work, and survey). Finally, we validated our findings during discussions and meetings with the Office for Students and LSE academic experts.

The findings of our fieldwork and the evidence from the submissions are structured into three chapters which correspond to the three themes of the OfS's Call for Evidence: (i) Accessibility and effectiveness of well-being and support services for international students; (ii) How responding to Covid-19 has shaped practice in supporting international students to adapt and integrate into UK higher education; (iii) Work done to prevent and tackle HSM. Each chapter starts by outlining the topic's relevant academic literature and policy context. Then, we present the findings from the fieldwork. We conclude each chapter by highlighting a key innovative or sector-led practice that emerged in evaluating the Call for Evidence submission. The final chapter concludes, highlights the key findings, and provides some key recommendations.

1 Chapter One: Accessibility and effectiveness of well-being and support services for international students

Academic and policy background

In the context of the current government's ambitions to attract international students, the focus on their well-being is of paramount importance. Defined as "reduction in stress, enhanced experienced meaning and engagement in the classroom, and, ultimately, heightened satisfaction with life" (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012; see also Kraut (2007) for an alternative definition), student well-being is understood as a combination of factors including motivation, identity, self-esteem, and self-regulation (Willis et al., 2019). It contributes to improving academic achievement and prepares them to achieve their life aspirations (Mahatmya et al., 2018). For example, research has shown that well-being increases students' engagement in learning activities, promotes positive relationships with others (Cox & Brewster, 2021), and reduces frustration, dissatisfaction and stress (Dodd et al., 2021). Several factors contribute to increasing or worsening, students' well-being. For instance, the process of cultural integration in a foreign country and a different academic system can lead to "acculturative stress", namely the psychological and physical discomfort experienced when adapting to a new cultural environment, including culture around alcohol and social events (Kristiana et al., 2022; Thurnell-Read et al., 2018).

A study published by Student Minds, the UK's student mental health charity, to understand what works in improving international students' mental health, underlined issues such as language barriers, cultural competency, practical challenges, racism and xenophobia, and financial challenges as key themes surrounding international students' well-being (Frampton et al., 2022). For instance, a lack of proficiency in the English language often has an important implication for academic achievement andmakes it more difficult to share anxieties with counselling services (Kim, 2011). However, social support can help mitigate these challenges (Poots and Cassidy, 2020). Perceived discrimination is also a stress factor (Chavajay & Skowronel, 2008) which can, in turn, exacerbate feelings of loneliness and homesickness, usually experienced in the months following students' arrival in their host country (Barron et al., 2007; Sawir et al., 2008). Besides psychological and emotional stress, international students also experience greater academic stress due to peer pressures, parental pressures, and adapting to a new educational pedagogical system (Misra & Castillo, 2004).

Therefore, it is not surprising that promoting and ensuring international students' mental and physical well-being is a core strategic goal for UK universities and universities in general. It has become a particularly pressing issue after Covid-19, with data suggesting that international students' happiness has dropped by 11% since the Covid-19 breakout (Tribal & i-graduate, 2022; Wang et al., 2020).

Challenges and opportunities

This section presents the main challenges experienced by international students in accessing well-being and other types of support. We have organised these challenges according to six areas that represent the trajectory of an international student in English higher education.

Immigration

The first step to studying in the UK is to apply for and get a student visa. Our interviewees describe the process as confusing, expensive, and slow. However, most students manage to go through this stressful process successfully. Still, we should be mindful that we only have information from those who were able to get their permission to enter. For those cases where the visa application was delayed, it implied missing out on crucial days and events in the first stages of their course. Staff and students at LSE agree that this is particularly problematic for one-year MSc students, whose time in the course and the country is very limited:

> *"All visas have been delayed in their home countries or because of delays within the UK bureaucracy. This has caused some students to miss several weeks of term and to miss that formative mode period of freshers and welcome week when they get to know their peers."*
>
> Senior warden at LSE halls

These results should be interpreted taking into account one key circumstance. Since Brexit, all EU students without a settled status are considered to be international and, thus, are subject to the same rules regarding fees, visas, and work permits as non-EU students (British Council, 2022). The UK hosts 605,130 international students, and one in four of those students comes from an EU country (HESA, 2022a). Before Brexit, EU international students did not need to apply for student visas. After Brexit, this group of students requires support with immigration processes, increasing pressure on existing services. Concerns about service capacity are shared particularly among international students and staff working at LSE student halls.

Our survey of international students shows that 36.3% of respondents rank visa advice services as the first or second priority in the provision of different support services. Indeed, providing a dedicated advice service for international students is seen as one of the most important forms of support for international students: with 12.1% of mentions, it ranks above career advice and health or medical services. The priority that respondents assign to this type of service emphasises how crucial this step is for international students to begin their journey in England with as few issues as possible. In simple words, without a visa, overseas students cannot enter the UK and remain for their studies legally, so it is crucial for universities and colleges to make this process as smooth as possible.

Accommodation

After visa-related issues, the next major concern for international students concerns their accommodation. As discussed in the focus groups and interviews we conducted, for many international students, accommodation represents their largest expense, particularly in London. It is usually much more expensive than in their home country, which results in a lower standard of living. For many of these students, this is also their first experience of living independently with the concomitant need to learn how to do things by themselves and, to make matters worse, in an unfamiliar environment. There are also considerable logistic and legal challenges regarding renting in the UK. Amongst the most important – as mentioned by our participants – is the difficulty experienced by international tenants in finding a guarantor who will back their renting agreement.

Our survey of international students echoed these concerns: more than 40% of respondents put the provision of support to find affordable accommodation in private facilities or college halls and residences as their first or second priority (see Figure 1). Moreover, a housing advice service appears in 10.5% of the mentions as a key service to be provided by universities, ranking fourth among the twelve options provided (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Priorities for accommodation, personal finances, and migration support services. Proportion of students who ranked each option as the first or second priority.

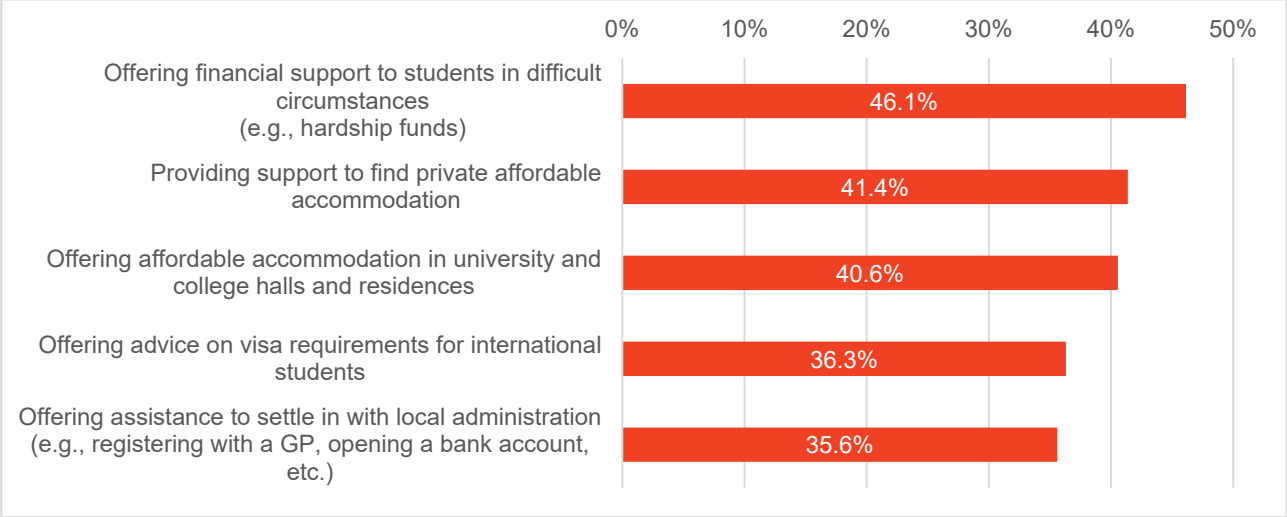
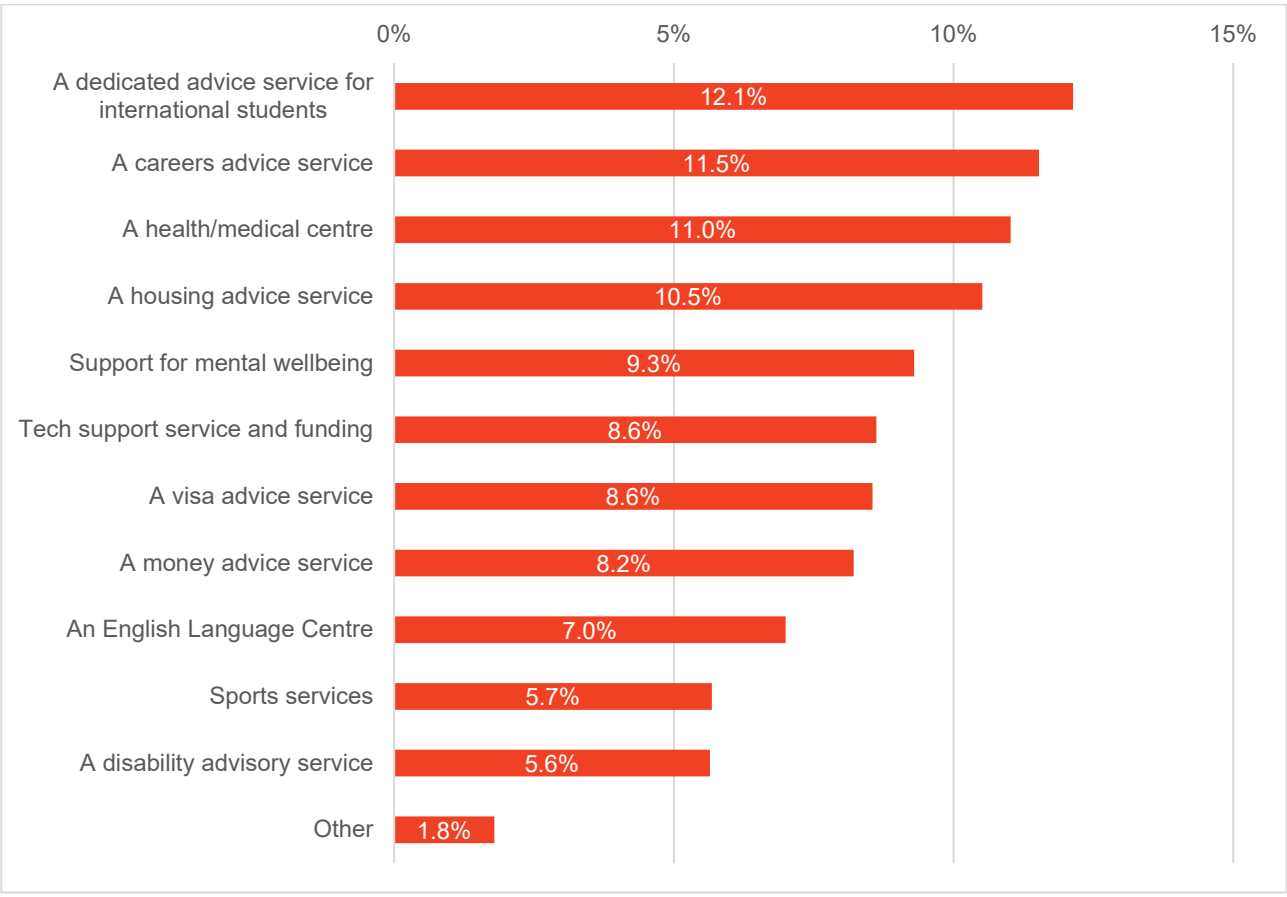


Figure 2. Prioritised support services by international students. Surveyed students and alumni were asked to choose the three most important services. This graph presents the proportion of students who selected the service as one of their priorities.



However, accommodation is not only seen as a challenge but also as an opportunity. Indeed, several interviewees reported that sharing a place to cut costs has allowed them to make friends, which in turn has proven to be markedly beneficial for their mental health. Housemates become some of the first and frequently some of the most important nodes of students' support networks.

> *"I think I had a good time because I was staying in halls, and particularly because each floor was its own household (...) and we worked well as a household. It all worked out fine. It was almost like having a flat. We had a separate entrance than others because we were in the basement. So it was almost like having a our own flat. We could rely on each other."* [Emphasis added by the authors]
>
> Undergraduate alumnus

Furthermore, the sharing of accommodation also allows international students to enlarge their support and social networks through the connections they can make with students from other courses, other universities and colleges, and from different countries and cultures.

Besides operating as an opportunity for spontaneous friendship, university-owned student accommodation serves as a place to advertise and deliver well-being services. In our fieldwork, we identified the crucial role that LSE hall wardens play in safeguarding students.[1] Wardens and sub-wardens in LSE are paid members of the halls that are always on call to address any issue that may arise, ranging from security and facilities management to pastoral support and care. Although they are not professional counsellors, they are frequently one of the main agents caring for the mental health of students living in halls. They are in charge of organising hall-wide social gatherings and activities that foster a sense of community among these students. Moreover, they are also responsible for signposting any student to the more specialised services in case they need them.

> *"(…) our job is to signpost them, but sometimes signposting doesn't work. We have to maintain that and work on that particular case.... It was something which all of our team dealt with. And we were kind of hoping and that student was kind of reluctant to go to the well-being services, and there is no other.... What's the second option other than well-being services?"*
>
> *Sub-warden at LSE Halls*

This suggests that LSE's combined provision of accommodation and pastoral care is an enabling factor regarding international students' engagement with available support services. Having a direct point of contact with useful information for students facing challenges of different sorts is a valuable element that eases access to the right type of assistance as quickly as possible.

Finances

Several elements make an international student's finances challenging. Budgeting to maintain an adequate standard of life – or at least similar to their home country – becomes exceptionally challenging considering the high overseas fees, visa and health surcharge costs, and the cost of living in urban centres. In simple words, since international students are paying more for education, there is less money available for everything else. As highlighted by our student interviewees, when students do not have support from home to make ends meet, this situation becomes aggravated by weak social support networks. For instance, students might lack access to second-hand household items or a place to stay if they need to leave their accommodation.

[1] Similar roles – which involve student welfare and pastoral care – are common in university-owned student accommodation. For example, UCL (Hall Wardens and Student Residence Advisers), Imperial College (Wardens and Assistant Wardens), University of Reading (Hall Wardens), among others.

> *"So, we have a group of PhD students that are practically homeless at this point because the cost of living has gone up so much… They didn't get their PhD stipend. So how are they going to pay rent? You are at the mercy of your landlord at that point."*
>
> *Postgraduate Student*

Besides the additional expenses, there are also logistical issues to consider. Opening a bank account in the UK is a necessary first step that can become problematic for some students. For instance, you need an address to open an account, and if students have not found accommodation yet, they might delay this and other bureaucratic steps necessary to settle in. Our interviewees gave examples of critical situations in which students were unable to access their money in their home countries due to reasons completely outside of their control. The SWIFT ban against Russian banks is an example of this.

> *"(…) she was a Russian student at the time, and Russia invaded Ukraine. So she was dealing with financial difficulties, because you'll remember that the banks froze, like in Russian accounts. (…) And this was, like, so many big things happening in this one person's life that I was like 'I'm here to listen, but I think you need more support than I can provide'. (…) The issues that she was facing were enormous. There were two or three big, very big things that had come together. So that's when I supported her to get like some financial aid and so on. (…) And, I mean, she finished the degree. But this was definitely a very difficult time for her. Maybe she finished it, that's all you can say that you finished it. But I mean, did she enjoy it?"*
>
> Academic mentor

According to our survey, 46.2% of respondents put offering financial support to students in difficult situations (e.g. hardship funds) as the first or second priority. These are considered basic services along with assistance to settle in with local administration (e.g. registering with a GP, opening a bank account), which is prioritised by 35.6% of respondents (see Figure 1 above). A money advice service received 8.2% of the mentions, ranking eighth among twelve services (see Figure 2 above). Together with the interviews, these results reveal that international students face additional pressures which tend to increase at the beginning of their courses, affecting their capacity to cope with studying.

Social life

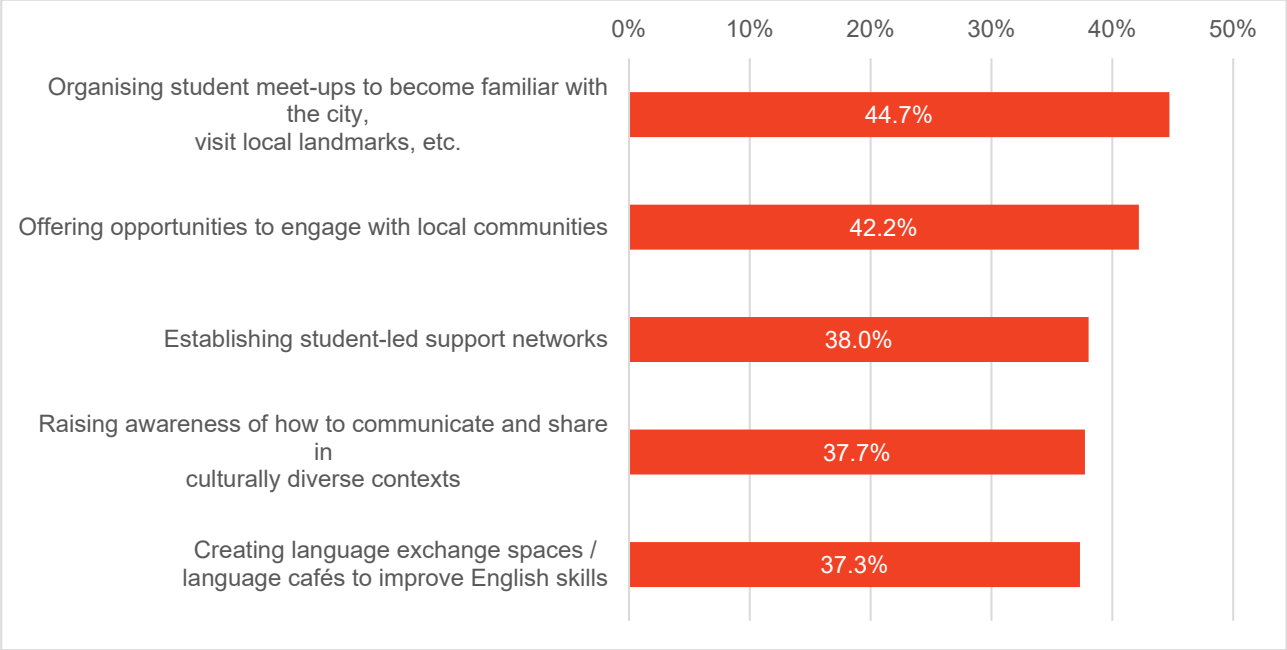
Social life is one of the first activities that gets affected by a stressful environment. When students are pressured, especially when their academic workload is high, participating in social events becomes less of a priority and the risk of becoming isolated increases. This can result in a vicious cycle through which students end up losing their network's support and becoming overwhelmed with increased frequency.

Having a satisfying social life can be challenging for international students. They need to create a completely new social support network, and they need to do so very quickly. The need for sources of emotional support increases, and shared spaces become crucial:

> *"And so you end up relying a lot more on your friends… the friends that you make. And so I do think that being at halls helps you a lot, and probably a lot more than it would a British person, particularly because you need to form a network that can support you."*
>
> Undergraduate alumnus

Student interviewees report that most of their friendships happened more or less spontaneously. Based on the literature discussed above, universities, academic departments, and well-being support services constantly provide students with different opportunities to let networks form organically. From our findings, we interpret that continuous shared spaces enable making friends more easily than one-off socialising activities. In our survey, international students indicated that student meet-ups are a priority: 44.7% of respondents assigned first or second priority to this type of activity, showing that opportunities to meet new people are valuable (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Priorities for social life support services. Proportion of students who ranked each service as the first or second priority.



LSE's student body comprises over 65% overseas students (LSE, 2022), so students will likely find others of the same nationality or from a neighbour country or region. According to our interviewees, socialising is easier among students from similar national or cultural backgrounds. Participants explained that once the number of students of a certain nationality in a programme reaches a critical mass, they will form an independent clique that rarely interacts with students from other nationalities. The most frequently mentioned cases are those of students of Chinese or Indian origin.[2] Moreover, international students can also sometimes feel alienated at the university; although, as also evidenced by the submissions to the Call for Evidence, the majority of universities run induction programmes at the beginning of the academic year, there are very few opportunities to meet with home students. In this respect, as evidenced in the submissions to the Call for Evidence, the most promising initiatives are those done in partnership with local students (e.g. the initiative 'Megareach' at the University of Plymouth and the hybrid initiative 'Global Campus Programme' at the University of Sheffield – see box at the end of this chapter). These feelings of alienation might also lead to separated patterns of interaction within the international student body, with international students reaching out to students' union societies of their own country.

As highlighted by the literature, intercultural awareness enables international students to have a healthy social life in a culturally diverse environment. For this reason, some universities have decided to take additional steps to foster such a skill. For instance, the University of Arts London created a series of workshops where its students can reflect, analyse and exchange personal experiences to identify and strengthen their communication and collaboration skills. The workshops use varying pedagogical strategies depending on their specific goals concerned. However, in line with the university's specialisation in creative and artistic/performative careers, they all focus on creation by incorporating both visual and kinaesthetic elements (University of Arts London, 2022).

[2]At LSE, Chinese and Indian students make up around 15% and 3% of the student population, respectively (LSE, 2022). There are other countries with participation similar to India, but these two specific groups were the ones highlighted during our fieldwork.

A related interesting initiative in intercultural awareness is 'Hear my name' led by the University of Warwick. This initiative aims at remedying the alienating effects of mispronunciation or name avoidance among its community members. To avoid involuntarily mispronouncing someone's name, the university institutionalised an audio badge in their email signature. This badge is a link where the recipient can hear how the sender's name is pronounced. The initiative is part of the *Say my name* initiative, a project that researches and intervenes in this and similar issues in the community (University of Warwick, 2022).

Academic challenges: skills & language

There is consensus among participants that one of the main challenges international students face is adapting to the British higher education system. For instance, our staff participants who work closely with undergraduate students highlight that adapting to an essay-based assessment system can be difficult, especially at the beginning. A student participant echoed this:

> *"I mean… the academic thing, you know? (…) I know, my friend from Turkey, right? He is used to writing very descriptive essays, and you get high marks in Turkey because of that (…) You know? But, when it comes to the UK, like… he gave a lot of description and there was not enough space for analysis… you know?"*
>
> *Undergraduate alumnus*

In addition, there are important differences in pedagogical approaches used in different countries, which also impact students' experiences. For example, those who have studied in a collaborative, group-based learning environment are sometimes shocked by the more individualist approach used in England. Some students are used to a system in which lessons are organised much more vertically, and the content is delivered one-way, with minimum dialogue between students and teachers. Interviewees explain that these students are likely to have issues when participating in seminars where learning is constructed among peers, and the teacher has a role as a moderator or subtle guide instead of a lecturer.

> *"I think, with the Chinese students, there's a pretty big cultural difference. There's challenges in the academic environment in terms of the way that they used to interact in the classroom. And they often start off a lot quieter and less willing to speak up. (…) I don't know if you've spoken to any people before… they will tell you that they tend to kind of remain quiet…. In their own groups, you know? Less… less interacting with the other students from other backgrounds on the courses."*
>
> Academic mentor

Another issue reported by staff and student participants is that many students struggle to understand the grading system used by universities in the UK. The fact that they have a possible score of 0-100 but tend only to use the 40-80 segment is seen as illogical and often creates confusion and academic stress. In addition, it takes a considerable amount of time for students to understand which scores are 'good' and which are 'bad':

> *"LSE, for instance… like a really good mark, really good grade is if you get like a 70 and above. It's a distinction which blows students' minds. I think they believe they're doing so badly if they're getting a 70. And they get very worried and stuff."*
>
> *Academic mentor*

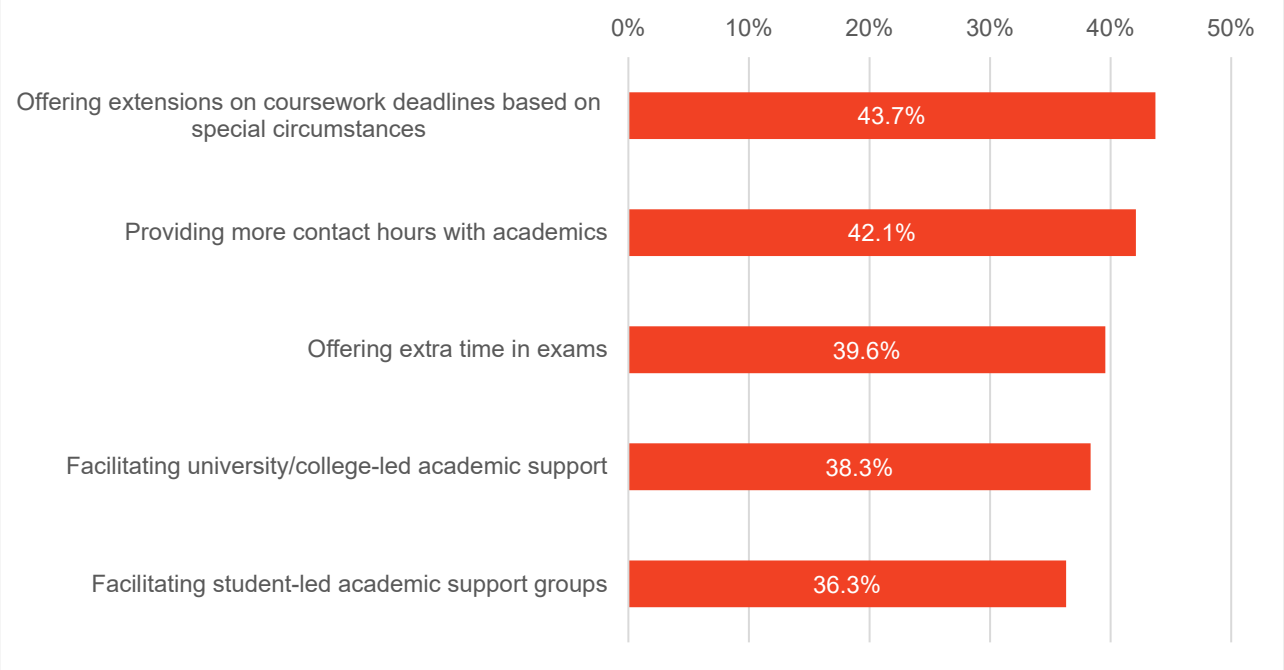
In addition to facing a different educational system, most international students have to do so in a second language. Issues can be present in speaking, writing, reading, and listening. We expected that most of the reported difficulties would be in production in a different language – i.e., speaking and writing. Nevertheless, our interviewees reported being more concerned with understanding spoken English. Listening can be difficult when the speaker has a different accent than what they are used to or when they use words they are not familiar with. This difficulty applies to both academic work and daily living. Students who participated in our focus group and interviews report using some compensatory strategies, such as studying with someone

else or listening again to recorded lectures. Such strategies work, but they also demand additional resources and time.

> *"It takes some time for me to get used to that accent. And I feel that, in a sense, I'm losing a lot in the content that they're trying to deliver. So… I anyway, have to go back home and probably listen to the lecture again, so that I can, you know, revise on the part that I missed out during the live session"*
> [Emphasis added by the authors]
>
> *Undergraduate student*

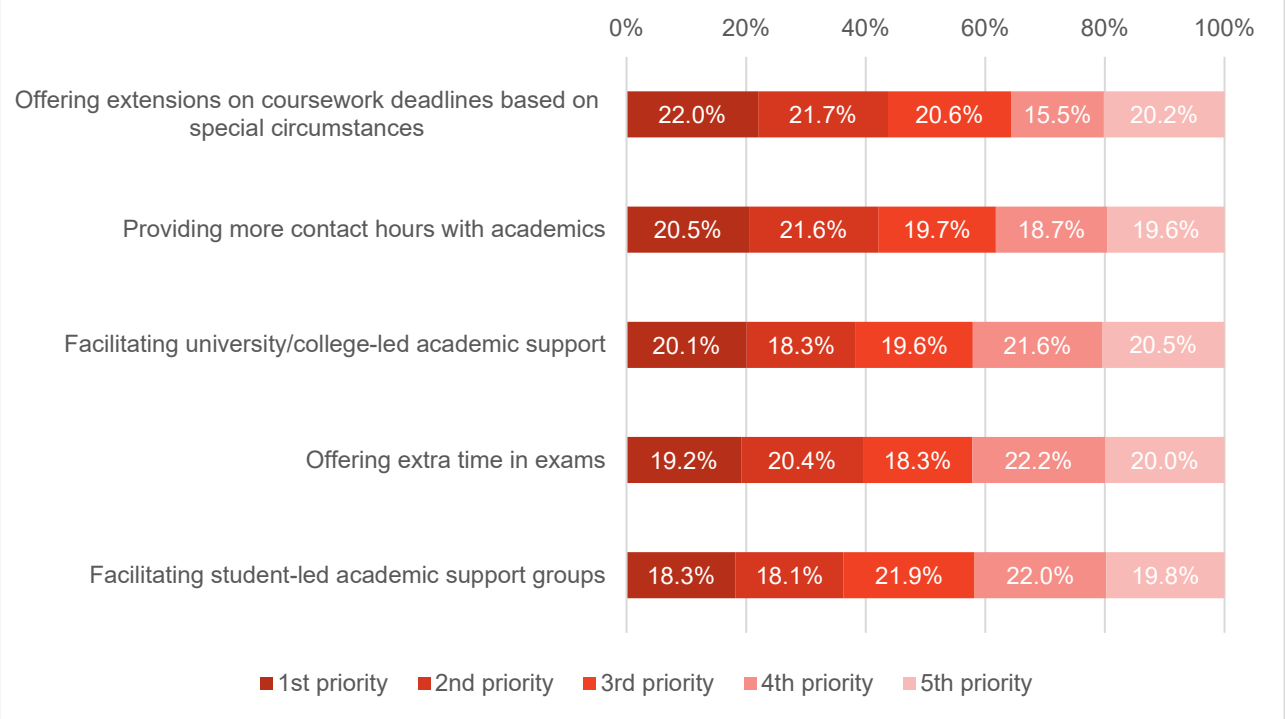
Regardless of the student's educational background, international student interviewees also highlighted the low number of contact hours – for instance, seeing their teachers in lectures only once per week. Some students try to compensate for this by attending office hours with tutors and mentors, but the perception that contact is not often enough remains. Concerning this issue, 42.1% of our survey respondents place providing more contact hours with academics as a first or second priority when asked to rank different academic support alternatives (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Academic support services. Proportion of students who ranked each service as the first or second priority.



To some extent, our survey results resonate with the findings from the focus groups. For instance, regarding support for academic work, 38.3% put facilitating university/college-led academic support as the first or second priority, whereas 41.8% place student-led academic support as the fourth or fifth priority. These results suggest that students might need reassurance that the information they receive to navigate their studies is reliable and in line with the official requirements (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Distribution of priorities regarding academic support



Future employment

Future employment is one of the most frequent concerns for international students. For instance, in our survey, a careers advice service was ranked second among twelve services, with 11.5% mentions. In addition, this topic surfaced in most focus groups and interviewees in different ways – from students worried about their career prospects to migrant academics who narrated their experience finding a job after graduating from a UK university. In short, international students face many obstacles to finding, selecting, applying for, and obtaining a job.

International students are fairly concerned about their working prospects in the UK. They are aware of their limited time to apply and get a position that would allow them to stay in the country. In general, they are cognisant of who can sponsor a visa and how the process of sponsorship works.

> *"Depending on the country we're from, we're gonna have like a limited runway after we graduate to find a job, which obviously creates, you know, a lot of different, like… a lot of different pressures"*
> [Emphasis added by the authors]
>
> Undergraduate student

Several interviewees report scouting the job market from very early on in their studies, applying for internships that might increase their chances after graduating. This can frequently take time away from their academic tasks and turn what should be relaxing social events into networking endeavours. This pressure is felt both by undergraduate and postgraduate students at LSE.

> *"You might be so consumed in this rat race of trying to get a job that you forget to go on student nights, and you forget to meet friends."*
>
> Undergraduate student

Albeit student interviewees focused the discussion on the jobs they want after graduation, some students also mentioned their challenges when trying to work while they were studying. Here, their main concerns were the limited job opportunities they could access, issues with the drafting of contracts (especially with the

Right to Work checks), the delays in payment, and the general demeanour that employers adopt when they find out that they are not British citizens. The following quote states the intensity of such feelings. This was said by a PhD student while describing a situation when she was not paid her salary:

> *"I think there's something that a lot of departments do not understand or acknowledge is that we're stuck in a foreign land, alone. We're completely dependent on those services. And if they fail, they are causing an immense amount of anxiety to the person on the other end. And there is a certain nonchalance about the way they present even their apologies because they're just like, 'Oh, we messed up, but it's no big deal. No, it **is** a big deal!"* [Emphasis added by the authors]
>
> *Postgraduate research student*

According to our survey, 43.6% of respondents place offering work while studying outside of the university/college as the first or second priority among five different employment-related support alternatives. This suggests that international students are likely to look for jobs while studying and, due to more exposure to employers, their chances of facing these issues might increase (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Career and employment support services. Proportion of students who ranked each service as the first or second priority.

Services that aim at increasing the odds of students getting a job are highly valued. In our fieldwork, participants reported having used LSE's careers services on more than one occasion. Moreover, as mentioned above, career advice is a top-ranked service, according to our survey. Another form of support concerning employability highlighted in our survey was advising students on the available opportunities after graduation, with 43.2% of respondents ranking it as their first or second choice (see Figure 6 above).

Good practice

As we have mentioned before, well-being is a complex and multidimensional concept that requires the involvement of different specialist services to be addressed adequately. Indeed, our research has shown that universities tend to have specialised teams for each topic (i.e., career services for employment, a visa team for immigration, and accommodation services for housing, etc.).

Although access to those services remains important throughout the complete journey of international students, it is especially important that students learn about them when they first arrive in the country, which

is why most universities focus their interventions there. Successful examples of interventions focused on these early stages discussed in the Call for Evidence include the 'Kick Start' programme by the University of Bradford Union of Students and the 'Kickstarter' programme by the University of East London. Both offer a series of workshops for new students (e.g. though online events), before and after their arrival. The content of these workshops can vary slightly. In the case of Bradford, it aims to provide new students with opportunities to interact with other new students so they can form long-lasting bonds. Albeit some academic-related content might be included, that is by no means the main goal of the programme; during the most intensive part of the programme, groups of students even cook and live together for a couple of days (University of Bradford Union of Students, 2022). The University of East London focuses instead on providing students with academic tools (e.g., referencing, structuring planning reports, etc.), information on visas and travelling, and communication about the university's well-being services (University of East London, 2022).

However, not all initiatives are focused only on the first days of new students. In Box 1, we feature the 'Online Global Campus Programme' organised by the University of Sheffield, an initiative that operates continuously throughout the academic year.

BOX 1: Global Campus Programme – University of Sheffield

This programme provides ongoing orientation for international students through continuous events and activities throughout the academic year and vacations. This initiative has been working since 2012.

Implementation and results

The programme is composed of different initiatives that tackle one or more of the challenges faced by international students:

- Global Conversation: Allows international students to practise social English. Both improving their language and providing a space for intercultural encounters.
- Culture Compass: Students explore and discuss cultural differences and various aspects of British culture.
- Local history walks and regular social trips: Students go for walks to different areas of the city. This aims to develop a sense of belonging and community while allowing students to meet new people.
- Global Café: Provide weekly opportunities to make friends in a relaxing environment (even during vacation time).

These activities happen throughout the year at various intervals and are facilitated by a team of 50 Global Campus Ambassadors. They are trained in customer service skills, cultural awareness, and working within a context of diversity. During Covid-19, while most activities became online, they were trained in blended learning through various platforms.

Each activity has different foci: some aim to provide intercultural skills, others strengthen students' language skills, and others give a sense of community towards their place of study. However, they all facilitate the connection between different students, fostering their social support networks, which is, as mentioned above, one of the most important elements of well-being.

Success factors and transferability

- This initiative is multimodal. It provides different alternatives to work on multiple issues. This facilitates students with different personal preferences or concerns to find at least one initiative that caters to their interests.
- It is implemented by a team of dedicated, specially trained people.
- Unlike other one-off initiatives, the events are being organised throughout the year. This provides multiple opportunities for interaction, which might be especially important for those students that arrive later in the term.
- Most universities already do several similar activities, albeit they do not integrate them into one programme. Therefore, taking the necessary steps towards a tighter articulation should not be prohibitively costly.

2 Chapter Two: How responding to Covid-19 has shaped practice in supporting international students to adapt and integrate into UK higher education

Academic and policy background

The Covid-19 pandemic that broke out in December 2019 affected many aspects of students' well-being, with studies and research showing the extent of the psychological and emotional impact of Covid-19 on dimensions such as students' engagement and academic performance, intrinsic motivation and satisfaction, job prospects, and mental health, with feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety reported as the most common (Blake et al., 2021; Firang & Mensah, 2021; Knight et al., 2021). However, little attention has been given so far to how Covid-19 impacted international students, whose experiences and perspectives need to be distinguished from those of the general student population, given that they face additional challenges in comparison with their non-international peers and thus were, potentially, those most vulnerable (Fischer, 2021; Lipura, 2021). Ongoing research underlines the "high-stress context" for international students (Chang et al., 2020). Travel restrictions and national lockdowns exacerbated their sense of loneliness and financial constraints (Chen et al., 2020), together with increasing worries related to visa applications, uncertainty and barriers due to their international student status, loss of part-time jobs and reduced income (European Migration Network, 2020), and the specific struggles experienced by Asian students who experienced racism and racial discrimination (Koo & Nyunt, 2022; see also Chapter 3).

A study conducted through focus groups and interviews among UK international students by Al-Oraibi et al. provided a qualitative explanation of the impact of Covid-19 on international students across three key themes: (i) practical, academic, and psychological challenges; (ii) coping strategies during self-isolation and life in Covid-19; (iii) support needs from institutions. The findings showed how international students faced practical, academic, and psychological challenges, including those linked to the online conversion of classroom teaching, the impact of social restrictions and isolation on their integration with their peers, and the overall sense of uncertainty brought by Covid-19 and the post-pandemic future. The authors found that despite the deterioration of their mental health, students that were interviewed did not access mental health support services and that they felt a lack of communication from the university during Covid-19, including the provision of information about course alterations and regular check-ins by university staff (Al-Oraibi et al., 2022). Another study examined university students in France, Germany, Russia, and the UK, showing that university support provided by instructors and the administration helped mitigate the perceived impact of Covid19 on future job prospects and levels of student well-being (Plakhotnik et al., 2021). Finally, a survey conducted by the University of Newcastle and distributed to international students in the UK in the academic year 2021 showed how Covid-19 negatively impacted international students' sense of well-being and satisfaction with life – with 57% experiencing anxiety and 41% expressing concern about their mental health – and generated a lack of opportunities for socialising, and how the support of universities acted as mitigating factors in promoting their overall sense of well-being (Schartner & Wang, 2022) .

The UK government, universities and students' unions were proactive in their efforts to improve the experience of international students through the implementation of coordinated frameworks and practical guidance. For example, the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) provided guidance for international students[3] and a dedicated advice line; Universities UK (UUK) launched the '#WeAreTogether' campaign in April 2020 to showcase how universities could help during the Covid19 pandemic, reaching over 60 million social media users, with over 100 universities taking part in sharing their stories (Universities UK, n.d.). In partnership with London Higher, UUK also created an ad hoc group (including Pro-Vice-Chancellors

[3] The #WeAreInternational Student Ambassador Programme is UKCISA's student network of global future leaders. empowering international students to be key partners in shaping a quality student experience, using their knowledge and first-hand experience of studying in the UK to influence policy.

– International and Education, directors of international, student welfare teams, international officers, student funding and finance officers, and those with responsibility for international student welfare), who shared best practices for supporting international students during Covid-19, including foodbank volunteers and welfare teams. Other examples include regular updates by UCAS on the impact of Covid-19 on international applicants and the provision of advice on how to deal with xenophobia and links to guidance on reporting hate crime by Student Minds and via the 'True Vision' scheme[4].

Finally, the OfS had a dedicated section on its website providing case studies on ideas and practices put in place by universities and colleges to support international students. Indeed, as emerged in the submissions to the OfS Call for Evidence, universities and students' unions have been very active in providing practical, financial, and emotional support for international students and those living in student halls. In particular, they launched support services (e.g. the University of Hull 'Exceptional Circumstances Fund'; the 'International Hardship Fund' at De Montfort University; and emergency funds granted to students to buy laptops, thus ensuring access to online learning as was done at Sheffield Hallam University and LSE); social events (e.g. the University of Greenwich launched virtual events such as "Netflix parties"); and offered practical support offered to international students living in private accommodations (e.g. Staffordshire University, where the Students' Union provided students with access to food and cleaning services). Particular attention was also devoted to providing students with accessible information through online spaces for Covid19 updates (e.g. the University of Hertfordshire and Coventry University Group), offering flexible contact hours for teaching staff and ensuring the recording of teaching and learning material (University of Sheffield).[5]

Challenges and opportunities

To put it simply, every challenge already faced by international students was aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic (European Migration Network & OECD, 2020). For this reason, this section is structured following the topics in the previous section to discuss the specific challenges and the measures to tackle them.

Immigration

The already difficult and costly immigration process became worse than before. According to our interviewees, student visas took longer to process, and the existing regulations were unclear regarding the possibility of students leaving the country for undetermined periods if they were enrolled in full-time programmes. In addition, the need to quarantine and its associated costs and the non-recognition of certain vaccines dissuaded several students from travelling. Students could not leave the UK with the certainty that they would be able to return if and when face-to-face teaching was allowed again. Other students who managed to travel could not return to the UK because the safety status of their country had changed. Public health regulations also varied between countries, increasing the uncertainty and stress associated with moving abroad.

> *"For example, the absurdity of it was that some students who were vaccinated in their home countries had to self-isolate whereas domestic students didn't. And we had an outrageous case where a resident from North Africa had taken two vaccinations in his home country. And he had to quarantine, I think, for a total of at least two weeks, continuously, I think it might have been closer to 20 days. And I had phone conversations with him almost every day. And there was nothing that we could do, because of the ambiguity of the UK guidance, to give him any hope of getting out sooner than what the requirements were. And his mental health was deteriorating every single time that I spoke to him."*
>
> *Senior Warden at LSE halls*

[4] For a comprehensive overview of these initiatives and of other initiatives on how students were supported throughout the Covid19 pandemic, see also: https://healthyuniversities.ac.uk/covid-19-information/
[5] These examples of best practices together with additional ones are available in the dedicated Covid19 page of the Office for Students: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus/coronavirus-case-studies/international-students/

Accommodation

The precarity concerning accommodation that many international students face was intensified with the Covid-19 pandemic. The most concerning aspect for our interviewees was the feeling of not having anywhere to turn back to. UK and EU students were able to go back to their homes and weather the worst of Covid-19 with their families in a more or less familiar setting. However, international students from more distant countries, countries on the red list, or students who could not afford the trip were simply stuck in their accommodation. The feeling of having nowhere else to go and no one to turn to was a very present concern for our interviewees.

> *"And they do not understand that this is not just like the students who can go back home and have a safety net. But an international student is here alone. We don't do not have a safety net; if something fails, we are alone."* [Emphasis added by the authors]
>
> *Postgraduate student*

Despite the difficulties faced by students who had to stay, going back to their home country was not always preferable. For students who lived alone, away from their families for the first time, going back became a more stressful experience because it meant losing some of the freedoms they had earned while abroad.

> *"I don't think many of us were even aware that being at home is very different in different parts of the world. (...) In large parts of the world, you're a child unless you've married and had your own children, right?"*
>
> *Undergraduate Departmental Tutor*

Another source of stress and anxiety reported by our interviewees was the uncertainty about accommodation contracts. As indicated above, a large portion of the cost of studying in the UK is spent on rent. International students were not sure whether they would be allowed to terminate their contracts with student halls early and save some money. Staff and student interviewees mentioned cases where students needed to return home because a relative had died or students who were stranded in their home countries without the possibility of entering the UK, and they had to continue paying rent.

Regarding the support offered by institutions, Schartner & Warner (2022) reported that 27% of their surveyed students declared that they received guidance on housing/accommodation. In our focus groups at LSE, we found that wardens and sub-wardens played a major role during Covid-19. They narrated that, as lockdown and quarantine measures took their toll on students' mental health leading to an unprecedented increase in the demand and waiting time for counselling services provided by LSE and NHS, the teams within each hall were forced to take the role of impromptu mental health advisors. Hall wardens tried to stay with the students who were in isolation; they checked on those who had just arrived, providing both food and medicine, as well as a sympathetic ear with whom to share and socialise, even if it was through a door.

> *"We don't have specialised people with mental health or counselling or psychiatry backgrounds in halls. So, the warden and sub-wardens, we do sort of, you know, we were supposed only to be doing signposting, and we end up managing, like, proper, real emergencies with doctors and nurses, and we don't really have the training for that."*
>
> Senior Warden at LSE halls

Finances

International students' finances were deeply affected by Covid-19. Our staff and student interviewees narrate that the already high cost of studying in England increased particularly due to the enforced quarantine period. There was a decrease in the chances of obtaining complementary finances through work (several

workplaces such as pubs to shops were closed or reducing their staff) or external support (families and partners were experiencing financial strains of their own). The switch to online teaching did not meet students' expectations nor paired with the high monetary and mental health burdens experienced during Covid-19.

> *"I know other students who are like saying things like 'I pay so much money, and this is what they give me!?"*
>
> Undergraduate student

That being said, Schartner and Warner's (2022) study reports that 67% of students declared receiving guidance on adapting to remote learning, and 25% indicated that they received financial assistance from the university. In line with our interviewees, their study acknowledges the pressure that administrators and academic staff were under and highlights how international students recognise the support they received.

Mental health

Our interviewees and focus group participants emphasised the detrimental effect that the lockdown and Covid-19 had on students' mental health. While they recognise that Covid-19 affected people's lives in general, they explain that international students were at a higher risk regarding their psychological well-being. Since international students depend almost entirely on the support network they can create once they arrive in the country, the lockdown restrictions were particularly damaging. In particular, first-year students, or those who began in September 2020, had almost no opportunity to meet new people and engage in socialising activities that would enable a support network. The situation was aggravated for those forced into isolation for weeks due to the need to quarantine on arrival.

According to our student interviewees, attempts at remedying the lack of interaction were common, but unfortunately, their success was limited. In addition, the proposed strategies were frequently perceived as forced and artificial:

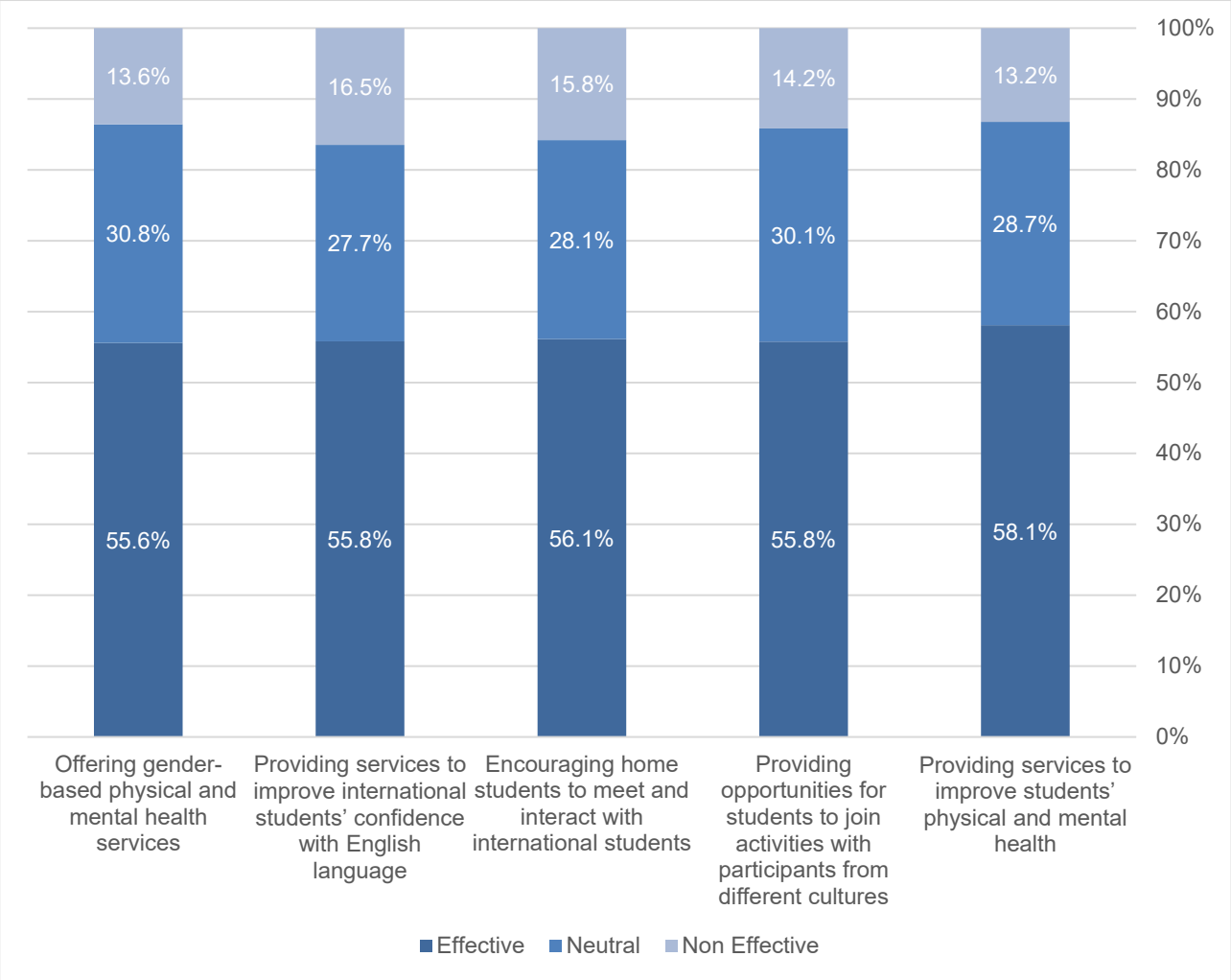
> *"It was very difficult to organise situations for socialising ourselves. Something that didn't feel like a sort of… a parody of what normal socialisation should be."*
>
> Sub-warden at LSE halls

Universities continued carrying out counselling and pastoral activities. Although this offer was frequently overwhelmed by the increased demand, several students acknowledged their usefulness:

> *"I think because it's very welcoming and very open, I didn't feel any judgement. So it was a safe space for me to kind of just cry and express my worries, everything without being judged. (...) And, and that's I mean, that's very empowering on my end, coming from a culture where mental health concerns are frowned upon."*
>
> Postgraduate alumni

More than half (51%) of Schartner and Wang's (2022) respondents declared that they received well-being support (e.g. counselling) during Covid-19, and 39% indicated that they received guidance on accessing medical care. In our survey, 58.1% of respondents indicated that universities are extremely or very effective in providing services to improve students' physical and mental health (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Perception of university's effectiveness in addressing international students' issues. The three categories are a collapsed version of the original five. Extremely effective and Very effective became "Effective". Moderately effective became "Neutral" and Slightly effective and Not effective became "Non effective".



Academic work

Most universities quickly switched to online classes and office hours to mitigate the impact of the lockdown. According to our interviewees, and in line with the findings from the literature review, this switch had a detrimental effect on the quality of teaching and learning opportunities. There is consensus in perceiving online teaching as a lesser version of in-person teaching. Students were concerned about pre-recorded lectures in which they could not participate and the lack of spontaneous interaction with their peers and teaching staff. Online classes were commonly described as more passive yet more draining than in-person classes. However, as indicated above, most students received support to adjust to remote learning.

It is also important to consider that teaching was conducted during a global crisis, and students were neither emotionally nor cognitively in the best place to learn. They became easily distracted and quickly bored and were aware of it. The same can be said for the teaching staff:

> *"Something that I noticed in my class is that there is this overwhelming sense of tiredness, which is that which is kind of constant, especially in countries that were very harshly affected by the (Covid-19) pandemic because… all of us… we've lost someone."* [Emphasis added by the authors]
>
> Postgraduate student and graduate teaching assistant

A few students reported liking having online classes available for rewatching if they did not understand something. However, this was shared mostly among students who had to adjust to listening to British and other accents in English. There was a shared perception among our participants that online classes did not meet international students' expectations regarding value for money.

Employment

Regarding employment, according to our participants, international students were worried about how their odds of being employed might be affected by the lockdown and the lack of good networking opportunities. Additionally, some students were concerned about the state of the labour market after the crisis. They were preoccupied with not being able to find a job, either in their countries or anywhere else.

Good practice

The main way in which universities have responded to Covid-19 has been to adapt their existing well-being services from mostly in-person to mostly online delivery. Based on the entries received through the Call for Evidence, this applies to almost every service aimed at solving the challenges mentioned above. Immigration, career, and mental health services switched from face-to-face meetings to Zoom and MS Teams, with a few adaptations to make the service more appropriate.

Other universities took larger steps when adapting to the new normality. For example, London South Bank University created a virtual internship scheme to maintain a job experience offer for its students, even remotely. Another example, this time regarding housing services, was the 'Virtual Housing Fayres' organised by the University of Bradford, in which they facilitated international students access to different properties from accredited landlords. We describe this service in more detail in the highlighted initiative at the end of this section in Box 2.

Regardless of the area of focus of each initiative, a key success factor was the flexibility to respond to the new demands under lockdown and Covid-19. University/college services with high degrees of flexibility had more capacity to adapt to the many factors in motion and interaction, such as dealing with different and changing regulatory systems from several countries. There was a lot of uncertainty on how every aspect of Covid-19 should be treated and the services needed to adapt to even more diverse needs.

BOX 2: Virtual Housing Fayre – University of Bradford and University of Bradford Union of Students

To better assist international students in making informed housing choices, the union hosted a virtual housing fayre in association with UNIPOL, a student housing charity. This independent housing charity manages an accredited housing scheme for local and national housing providers. Members of different university support services also participated in the fayre to provide additional information and guidance to applicants and students on housing and other topics.

Implementation and results

The first event was hosted on August 2021 (one month before the term started). It was repeated three times after that. The fayre consists of a series of virtual stalls in which students can come in contact with:

- UNIPOL-accredited landlords who offer different housing alternatives.
- Trained housing advisors who inform and advise students on student tenancy agreements.
- University support services representatives that provide information on the pre-arrival process (e.g., Student Support, Visa and Immigration, etc.).

The initiative is promoted through the Union's and University's social media as well as in emails to pre-arrival students. As a way to attract more participants, they offer financial incentives to those who attend it.

Success factors and transferability

There are several elements that made this initiative a success:

- It provides students with a catered array of potential solutions to a very clear concern.
- It is organised in an adequate timeframe for students to make a decision.
- Students can take part from the comfort of their homes.
- It provides students with a source of reliable, institutional housing advice.

The initiative has a clear goal: it presents trustworthy housing alternatives to those students who will need them. This benefits not only the students but also the landlord (the remaining party in the housing agreement). Since the benefits are straightforward, and the cost of the event is negligible, there is an opportunity for other universities to host a similar activity. This seems to be an initiative worthy of being replicated.

3 Chapter Three: Work done to prevent and tackle harassment and sexual misconduct (HSM)

Academic and policy background

Harassment and sexual misconduct (HSM) is a broad umbrella concept that includes a wide range of behaviours ranging from hate crimes to sexual harassment and rape. Following Section 26 of the Equality Act 2010[6], the OfS defines harassment as "any unwanted behaviour or conduct which has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment" because of, or connected to, one or more of the following protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation. Under our definition, we understand harassment to include domestic violence and abuse (which can also involve control, coercion and threats) and stalking, whereas sexual misconduct relates to "all unwanted conduct of a sexual nature" (Office for Students, 2022b). Full-time students were more likely to experience sexual assault than any other occupation type (ONS, 2020).

Most of the evidence available on HSM focuses on sexual violence, and it does not distinguish the experience of international students from that of their domestic peers, with several gaps in terms of theoretical, longitudinal, and qualitative perspectives (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). However, available studies indicate that, compared to their domestic peers, international students face an increased likelihood of being the target of sexual violence (Fethi et al. 2022). Their vulnerability can be attributed to several factors, including sociocultural insecurity due to living outside their home country with sometimes little cultural and language knowledge of the country hosting them (Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016), different cultural norms and practices in socialization patterns (Postel, 2020), as well as little or no knowledge of the mechanisms and procedures in place to report sexual violence episodes (Clancy et al., 2014). A study done in Canada shows that, compared with their domestic peers, international students of all ages, genders, sexual orientations, minority statuses, grade levels, and lengths of time spent at university faced an increased likelihood of being the target of sexual violence (Fehti et al. 2022).

Literature focusing on discrimination and harassment targeted at international students is also scarce. Recent studies mostly address discrimination focusing on communities as a whole. For example, the USA-based initiative 'Stop AAPI[7] Hate' reported a significant increase in anti-Asian discrimination during the Covid-19 pandemic (Jeung et al. 2021). Similarly, Wu et al. (2020) showed that Asian Americans and Asian immigrants were twice as likely to experience Covid-19-related discrimination. Specifically, regarding international students, Brown and Jones (2011) analysed racism and religious incidents in a university in the South of England. The study surveyed a small sample of international students, in which almost a third declared having experienced some form of discrimination and a series of strong negative emotions in response to these incidents. More recently, another study in the UK has shown that 61% of non-binary university students and recent graduates had experienced sexual violence, with students from Black, Asian and mixed ethnic groups more likely than people from white backgrounds to have experienced all types of sexual harassment and violence (Revolt and The Student Room, 2018). Similarly, a study about international students in the USA revealed that international students are also more prone to experience discrimination and harassment, with students from Asia, India, Latin America, and the Middle East reporting feelings of inferiority and experiences of general racial discrimination in comparison with white international students (Lee & Rice, 2007).

HSM is a topic of great concern among higher education institutions and policymakers. In the UK, a major step towards the implementation of a collaborative approach to tackle HSM was the publication in 2016 of

[6] Under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, public sector bodies (including higher education providers) have the obligation to protect people from discrimination, harassment, and victimisation (Equality Act, 2010).
[7] AAPI is the acronym for Asian American Pacific Islander communities.

the UUK report "Changing the Culture" (UUK, 2016). [8] The report, which was the result of a taskforce set up by Universities UK to examine violence against women, harassment, and hate crimes affecting university students, recommended the adoption of a holistic approach to tackle HSM; the development of effective prevention strategies through evidence-based bystander intervention modules; and the implementation of effective, responsive strategies through online reporting (UUK, 2016). In parallel, and also in 2016, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (and subsequently taken forward by its successor, OfS) implemented the 'Catalyst for Change: Protecting students from hate crime, sexual violence and online harassment in higher education' projects (Advance HE, 2020; Office for Students, 2019) by funding 119 projects to support universities in developing interventions and initiatives, producing research, and introducing training for staff and students in this area. Since then, organisations such as UUK, the 1752 Group, and Equally Safe in Higher Education have implemented several similar initiatives. Furthermore, and on the wave of the '#Metoo' movement, which acted as a "global learning moment" (Regulska, 2018) in encouraging women to open up about their own experiences, there has been a growing number of student-led campaigns to raise awareness of students' safety, such as 'Everyone's Invited'; 'It Happens Here', and 'It's not Ok at Durham'. (See Lewis, 2022, for a comprehensive overview of studies, initiatives, and measures implemented to tackle HSM in higher education.)

Overall, there is still much to be learned and implemented about HSM. In 2021, the OfS published a "Statement of Expectations" (Office for Students, 2022b) for institutions on preventing and addressing harassment and sexual misconduct affecting students, outlining seven expectations for how universities should prevent and respond to incidents of harassment and sexual misconduct. A very recent report published in November 2022 has evaluated the impact of the Statement of Expectations on higher education providers, showing that although it has acted as an "attention heuristic" for higher education providers, more regulation and good practices are needed to trigger institutional change (SUMS Consulting, 2022). The OfS plans to consult on a new condition of registration to tackle harassment and sexual misconduct in higher education which would place requirements on universities and colleges to address harassment and sexual misconduct. The OfS also plans to run a pilot prevalence survey to understand the scale and nature of sexual misconduct affecting higher education students in England (Office for Students, 2022c).

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, for safeguarding reasons, our fieldwork did not directly cover harassment and sexual misconduct, and only four of the 23 submissions to the Call for Evidence referred to HSM. However, some dimensions of this topic spontaneously emerged during the focus groups at the LSE and in the survey conducted with international students. Furthermore, we also conducted a number of confidential interviews at the LSE to gather additional insights on international students' and staff perceptions of and current practices relating to HSM. The remaining sections of this chapter present our exploratory findings while underlining the challenges and institutional barriers that need to be addressed.

Exploratory findings about HSM in relation to international students

As examined in the previous section, there is a paucity of data and awareness regarding the unique experiences of international students. In addition, international students are not a homogenous population, and factors such as immigration status, country of origin, cultural beliefs and socialisation modalities are, therefore, likely to play a role in how they perceive and experience HSM. Consequently, three main challenges emerged from our fieldwork along three dimensions: (i) **preventing** – defining more clearly HSM by looking at the issue of "consent"; (ii) **reporting** – helping international students feel more comfortable

[8] More recently, UUK has published new guidance on HSM (Universities UK, 2022), identifying four thematic areas where actions are needed: (i) promoting an inclusive and positive culture that ensures an environment that prevents HSM; (ii) developing clear policies and procedures addressing HSM; (iii) avoiding the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) by universities, (iv) improving research and data collection processes on HSM. The UK DfE published in 2022 a statement condemning the use of NDAs by universities dealing with sexual violence cases, and encouraging universities to adhere to the guidance (Department for Education & Donelan, 2022).

when reporting HSM episodes; (iii) **supporting** – helping international students in the "support" phase to recognise their experiences, thus facilitating their recovery after HSM episodes.

The first challenge in relation to HSM focuses on understanding what "consent" entails. Sexual misconduct relates to all unwanted conduct of a sexual nature. This includes, but is not limited to: Sexual harassment (as defined by Section 26 (2) of the Equality Act 2010); Unwanted conduct which creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment (as defined by the Equality Act 2010); Assault & Rape (as defined by the Sexual Offences Act 2003); Physical unwanted sexual advances (as set out by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2017); and Distributing private and personal explicit images or video footage of an individual without their consent as defined by the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 and by the Office for Students (2022b).

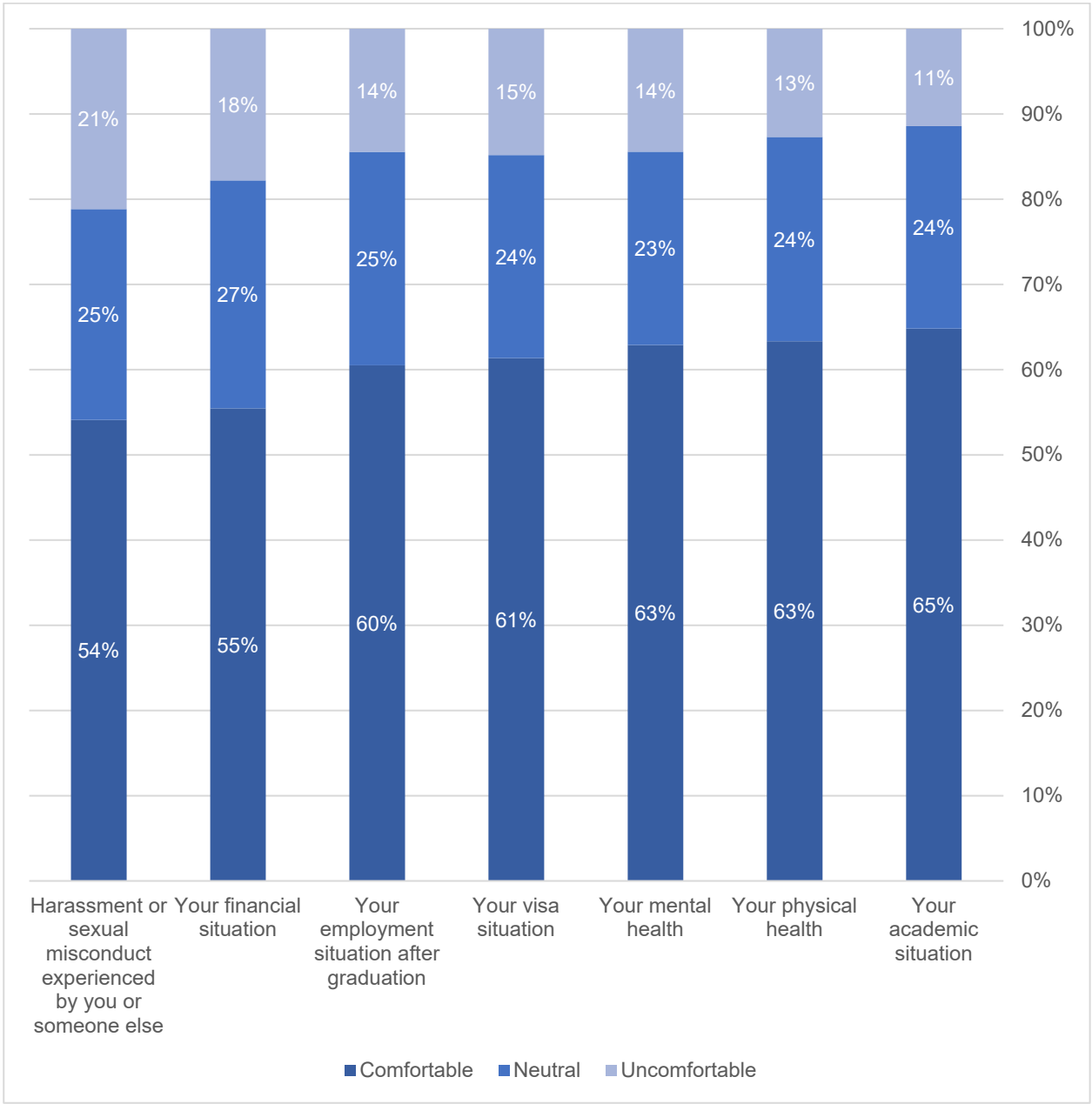
Consent does not only matter because it enables students to navigate their behaviour in sexual situations but because consent-related initiatives seem to be effective in sexual violence prevention (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). For instance, rape is often attributed to misperceptions of consent (Farris, et al. 2008), and cultural norms may also prevent the reporting of HSM episodes. For example, as mentioned in the Call for Evidence by a higher education provider, "EU and international students noted the difference in culture in educational institutions in the UK compared to their home country. […] The prestige of UK higher education and the perceived high levels of gender equality in the UK meant it was sometimes difficult for international students to make sense of their experience of staff sexual misconduct". Teaching about consent and developing effective training modules – which take into account inclusivity (e.g. specific issues faced by vulnerable groups with protected characteristics) – and staff training are therefore essential and crucial components of raising awareness about HSM. For instance, the evaluation of a curriculum-embedded initiative implemented in a UK university in 2015 to promote awareness and cultural change revealed how students improved their understanding of sexual consent as a result and how it contributed to a better and increased signposting of available support services to students (Zelin et al., 2021). In fact, several higher education providers, mainly via students' unions, have implemented awareness campaigns against sexual misconduct. In addition, and with specific reference to the issue of "consent", some promising steps are taking place. For example, the University of Exeter has implemented an online consent training module delivered to all students, which is also expected to become a formal part of the university registration process. It has also established a Gender Safety Group tasked with developing and implementing initiatives on HSM and other related topics (University of Exeter, 2022; see Box 3 on LSE and Consent.Ed). Therefore, implementing mandatory consent training can be considered an important measure to help students – and international students in particular – recognise and appropriately label their experiences.

A second challenge relates to the issue of "reporting", particularly the lack of clear policies and procedures when reporting HSM incidents which, as we have seen above, is of particular concern for international students. On the one hand, the barrier between what is and is not sexual misconduct is not always clear, which might make victims doubt if something should be reported. This difficulty increases when codes and practices from different cultures interact. On the other hand, an international student might have additional issues asking for help because their grasp of the language is not thorough enough, especially to describe such a complex situation. Although several higher education providers have put in place formalised reporting mechanisms which are advertised on their websites, the process of reporting HSM is still very distressing. For instance, a survey conducted in 2021 across UK universities found that 84% of students stated that they do not feel comfortable reporting HSM episodes to their institutions, with 52% saying that they do not trust them to handle the claim appropriately (Our Streets Now, 2021).

Moreover, as emerged during our interviews and through a survey done at LSE (where more than 70% of the student population is international), even when there are effective reporting policies in place, students might not be fully aware of their existence (Fonteñez, et al., 2020). This suggests the importance of improving the official communication channels in a way that is mindful of students' language and cultural barriers. Furthermore, a key issue emerging from our conversations with LSE international students and staff is the importance of developing a precise complaint mechanism through the appointment of a counsellor or a

specialised team to act as a single point of contact to whom all formal reports of HSM would be made. These findings align with the results of our survey. As shown in Figure 8, even though more than 50% of respondents indicated that they would feel extremely or somewhat comfortable asking their university or college for support with harassment or sexual misconduct experienced by them or someone else, this topic also attracts the largest proportion of respondents who declare that they would feel somewhat or extremely uncomfortable (20.4%).

Figure 8. Comfortableness about contacting the university to discuss potential HSM issues. The three categories are a collapsed version of the original five. Extremely comfortable and Somewhat comfortable became "Comfortable". Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable became "Neutral", and Somewhat uncomfortable and Extremely uncomfortable became "Uncomfortable"



Good practice

BOX 3: HandsOff campaign against sexual harassment and violence – LSE and LSE Students' Union

HandsOff (LSE Students' Union, 2022) is a student-led campaign that sits within the LSE Students' Union. It aims to tackle HSM at the London School of Economics and has made successful lobbying efforts to advance measures against sexual harassment in LSE.[9]

Implementation and results

The campaign includes a range of concrete actions to address sexual harassment and violence:

1. The HandsOff student campaign has successfully lobbied for an Independent Anti-Harassment Support Advisor, whose role is to provide emotional and legal support for victims and survivors of harassment, more specifically sexual violence.

2. Staff training, including to senior leadership, to build understanding of sexual misconduct and violence in a university setting and to make sure that investigations, adjudication, and sanctioning are informed by an understanding of trauma. Our interviewees propose that this training has contributed to improve awareness about this topic, in particular the barriers faced by students when deciding whether to report HSM.

3. Students who have been subjected to or have witnessed sexual harassment and violence are encouraged to get in touch with a trained "Safe Contact" for information and support; they can also use a dedicated online portal, and they can access confidential and independent counselling.

4. Regarding consent, LSE SU has also implemented Consent.Ed, an educational programme that explores issues around consent and provides an opportunity for students to discuss how they can look out for one another and create a respectful and inclusive campus. Since 2022, all students are expected to attend consent training online (Consent.Ed). Moreover, first-year undergraduate students, General Course students, and committee members of any Students' Union club or society are expected to take additional in-person training after completing the online course.

5. A dedicated task and finish group was set up in 2020 to review LSE's approach to sexual harassment and sexual violence to develop further and maintain a supportive culture, encourage reporting of incidents, and ensure that they are dealt with sensitively and fairly. This was a jointly led LSE and LSE Students' Union collaboration that involved wide-ranging discussions with students, staff and experts from within the school community and external specialists. As a result, LSE has put in place a range of concrete actions to strengthen sexual harassment and violence processes and support international students.

Success factors and transferability

- Although this is a very recent initiative, the HandsOff campaign contributed to the institutionalisation of an Independent Anti-Harassment Support Advisor thanks to students' lobbying action. This demonstrates the importance of students as co-creators of initiatives and practices.

[9] For more information regarding the background that led to the set-up of HandsOff, please see: https://thebeaverlse.co.uk/sexual-assault-at-lse-what-has-hands-off-achieved/.For further information about the lobbying efforts of HandsOff LSE Students' Union, see also: *https://www.lsesu.com/referenda/motion/15/21/* and https://thebeaverlse.co.uk/hands-off-a-relentless-force-for-change/.

- This initiative combines a bottom-up and top-down approach, which involves a coordinated partnership across different actors (human resources department; counselling services; Welfare Officers at the LSE Students' Union, and a dedicated Anti-Harassment Advisor).
- It shows how tackling harassment and sexual violence is not a solitary exercise and that addressing sexual harassment and violence requires partnerships and coordination to become sustainable. The task and finish group work is an example of a successful best practice in terms of partnership between LSE and the Students' Union.

4 Conclusions

International students are key assets in our global knowledge economy. They enrich the university experience through their social integration, academic integration, and global diversity.

Commissioned by the OfS to LSE Consulting, this study has examined evidence collected from higher education providers and organisations on practices and initiatives for international students related to three themes: accessibility and effectiveness of well-being and support services; how the responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have contributed to and supported international students in their adaptation and integration to UK higher education; and what work has been undertaken to prevent harassment and sexual misconduct (HSM). To gather international students' opinions and viewpoints, we complemented the findings from the Call for Evidence with additional fieldwork: focus groups/interviews with LSE students and staff and a survey addressed to international students. The project took place over the period September-November 2022.

The three chapters of findings capture a holistic and integrated approach to improving our understanding of international students' integration. They highlight the role of institutional actors and universities in supporting and enhancing the experience of international students through policy strategies, initiatives, and coordinated frameworks addressed at improving their mental, academic, and social well-being, as also evidenced by the work done to mitigate the Covid-19 disruptions and the promising steps undertaken to tackle HSM. However, as also emerged from the academic and policy literature and our fieldwork, international students' integration depends on several complex elements, ranging from practical challenges when settling in a foreign country, academic differences, language barriers, and financial and job insecurity, to an overall feeling of disorientation in managing their adaptation to a foreign context.

In the table below, we highlight the key findings of our study that can be translated into policy recommendations for the OfS and higher education providers.

Summary of findings and recommendations

Key Findings	Policy Recommendations and Actions
Rethinking the delivery of international students' services and initiatives through an integrated framework combining institutional and bottom-up approaches that involve students' unions and home students.	We recommend that higher education providers consider the implementation of an integrated and holistic approach between involving university staff, students' unions and home students. This could include: 1. **Adopting a proactive and personalised approach** in reaching out and cross-checking international students' needs through virtual, in-person, and specialised support services, as it was done during the Covid-19 pandemic. 2. Increasing international students' well-being by ensuring visibility and accessibility of student support through a **more systematic involvement of students' unions in the delivery of international students' services and support actions.** 3. **Improving the connection of international students with their broader community** within and beyond the university settings by **working more closely with home students** in the delivery of online social events, intercultural communication workshops, employment webinars, and tutoring services. 4. Adopting a more institutionalised approach to international students' integration by creating **advisory boards and panels on specific well-being sub-topics** that would bring together professional staff, academic staff, home students, and students' unions.
Improving the governance framework when addressing HSM in terms of prevention, reporting, and support systems	In parallel with the ongoing work promoted by the OfS on this topic, we recommend that higher education providers further strengthen the governance framework of HSM. This could include: 1. Improving the focus on "prevention" through mandatory consent training modules. For instance, developing and communicating definitions of key concepts, and clear examples about HSM that take into account international students' peculiarities in terms of cultural beliefs and socialisation norms. 2. Developing transparent, accessible, and friendly reporting systems by paying more attention to intercultural communication strategies to better target international students. 3. Adopting more effective support and recovery systems to help international students to learn how to deal with the trauma and regain safety and trust. 4. Improving the current institutional approaches and responses to HSM by working in partnership with students' unions and engaging more closely with student-led projects.
Unpacking the concept of "international students"	We recommend that higher education providers and the OfS/Department for Education consider "international students" not as an homogeneous population, and they take into account their different needs and concerns, which are in turn influenced by the culture, values, and norms of their country of origin. This could include: 1. Taking into account international students' **specific communication preferences** when designing services, programmes, and engagement opportunities. 2. Gathering **more robust and systematic quantitative and qualitative evidence to capture international students' unique needs** to implement targeted and personalised approaches in supporting their integration and experience. 3. Facilitating research and policy design that **considers the immigration status, home country and cultural beliefs** of international students and adjusts with the changes landscapes in internationalisation of higher education.

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Methodological Appendix

Analysing the Call for Evidence

The table below lists the sample of entries collected between 16 March and 24 June 2022 by the Office for Students (OfS).

Criteria	**N**
(A) Total entries in the original dataset (including additional late submissions)	63
(B) Total entries with missing responses on two or more key variables (Q8 – overview activity, Q9 – methods and design used, Q10 – key recommendations and conclusions)	32
(C) Total entries with content outside the scope of the call	8
Total submissions analysed	**23**

Regarding criterion C, an entry was considered outside the scope of the call based on the following table:

Inclusion	**Exclusion**
A) The entry described an initiative, intervention or practice targeting international students. B) The described initiative focused on one or more of the following: (1) prevention/tackling sexual harassment and sexual misconduct; (2) response to the Covid-19 pandemic; (3) ensuring accessibility and effectiveness of well-being and support services.	A) Entries focused on the systems and processes associated with student well-being in general. For example, an overview of all the services available at a specific institution. B) Entries concerned recruitment of international students, including information about scholarships or similar.

We classified each submission according to the type of organisation, location, and membership of a university group when applicable. The following table summarise the key characteristics of the information received:

Type of organisation	**Count**
University	20
Membership organisation	2
Private company	1
Total	**23**
Region	**Count**
Greater London	9
Yorkshire and the Humber	6
South West	4
West Midlands	3
South East	1
Total	**23**
University group	**Count**
Russell Group	6
Cathedrals Group	3
University Alliance	3
Million+ Group	2
No group	6
Total	**20**

We also classified each entry based on the themes specified in the Call for Evidence and the target groups of the described activities. The tables below summarise this information:

Target group	Not specified	Postgraduate	UG and PG	Total
International only	13	1	0	**14**
Home and international	7	0	2	**9**

Themes	T1: HSM prevention	T2: Covid-19 response	T3: Access to well-being and support	All	Total
T1: HSM prevention	1	0	2	1	**4**
T2: Covid-19 response	0	3	12	1	**16**
T3: Access to well-being and support	2	12	3	1	**18**

Finally, we classified the entries according to the type of evidence employed (using the standards of evidence provided by the OfS (https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/). Because the entries were very succinct, we used the following simple checkpoints:

Guiding question	Yes/No
0) Was there an evaluation question linked to the description of the activity/initiative? (For information only)	
Questions for Type 1: Narrative	
1) Were the aims and objectives of the activity/initiative made explicit?	
2) Was the approach selected for the activity based on learnings from previous evaluations (either based on scientific literature or internal evaluations)?	
3) Were the reasons for the activity/initiative communicated to create a shared understanding?	
4) Was there an implicit or explicit theory of change?	
5) Was there an indication that the activity/initiative was subject to review (e.g. gathering data from participants)?	
Questions for Type 2: Empirical enquiry	
6) Were there any indicators identified and their measures reported?	
7) Was there any pre-post measurement?	
8) Was there any comparison or triangulation of different types of data?	
Questions for Type 3: Causal claims	
9) Was there a use of (quasi) experimental approaches (i.e. use of treatment and control groups)?	
10) Were the results discussed considering biases and limitations for causal conclusions?	

Question 0 aimed to identity whether the main aim of the entry was to describe an evaluation exercise of any type. None of the submissions stated any evaluation objectives, so we kept that question for our information only. Then each researcher had to answer yes or no to each question, until these became irrelevant. For example if a submission described an activity and provided a series of indicators to justify specific decisions, without any reference to control groups or similar, then the answers to questions 9 and 10 would become 'No'. That is, each researcher had to answer 'Yes' or 'No', until all answers became 'No'. Depending on which region concentrated the most 'Yes' answers, the researcher decided which type of evidence the entry corresponded to. The results are shown in the following table:

Evidence type	Count
Type 1	14
Type 2	6
None	3
Total	23

We did not find any entry that met the requirements for Type 3. Most of them (14) concentrated on descriptive information based on feedback provided by students and only a few (6) had used data collection at several points in time to assess improvement or make decisions. Three of them described how their initiatives were implemented but did not provide any type of evidence.

Qualitative Study

To strengthen the findings from the Call for Evidence, we implemented a series of focus groups and interviews at the London School of Economics. In the table below, we detail the qualitative fieldwork undertaken for this study.

Profile	Method	Participants	Date
UG Departmental Tutors	Focus group	4	Mid October 2022
PG Academic Mentors	Semi-structured interviews	3	End of October 2022
Senior Wardens at LSE residences	Focus group	4	Mid October 2022
UG International Students	Focus group	4	End of October 2022
PG International Students	Focus group	4	Mid October 2022
Alumni	Semi-structured interviews	3	Early November 2022

Additionally, we conducted key informant interviews with the following members of staff:

- Adviser to women students – LSE
- Deputy Head of Student Services – LSE
- Community and Welfare Officer – LSE SU

International Student Survey

Our survey was open from 18 to 28 October 2022 and collected 1,425 responses. The tables below summarise the sample sizes according to different criteria.

Criterion 1

Total number of respondents and consent to participate:

Full dataset	Gave consent	Did not consent	Grand Total
Complete responses	1,275	3	1,278
Incomplete responses	147	0	147
Total responses	1,422	3	1,425

Criterion 2

Subsample comprising only participants who gave consent and separating between students who are studying or have studied in higher education in England.

Only with consent	Current students or recent alumni	Not current students or recent alumni	Total
Complete responses	1,260	15	1,275
Incomplete responses	147	0	147
Total responses	1,407	15	1,422

Criterion 3

Subsample including only participants who gave consent, who are current students or recent alumni, and international students or alumni, from higher education in England.

Only with consent	Current students/alumni Non-UK domiciled	Current students/alumni UK domiciled	Total
Complete responses	1,030	230	1,260
Incomplete responses	91	56	147
Total responses	1,121	286	1,407

Other considerations and number of responses analysed

Because the data had to remain anonymised during all stages of data collection, we had to conduct quality checks to identify duplicate and 'suspicious' cases. As a result, we excluded 64 responses with identical text in the open-ended questions, and that were linked to the same country. Therefore, the total number of usable responses (1,121) decreased to 1,057.

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents

It should be noted that the survey was shared online using various social media channels – therefore, it corresponds to a non-probabilistic convenience sample. To reach a more diverse group of respondents, we listed the Twitter handles of all the university students' unions in England. Then, we used LSE's institutional Twitter accounts and messaged the different students' unions to ask them to share the survey through their social media. Additionally, the Office for Students used its institutional accounts to disseminate the survey via Twitter and LinkedIn.

For the reasons above, to provide a sense of the 'representativeness' of our respondents, this section presents the data regarding different sociodemographic characteristics of our sample. When possible, we compare the proportions of each characteristic with the data published on the OfS 'Get the data' website (https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-diversity-and-student-characteristics-data/get-the-data/).

Age

The mean age of survey respondents was 25.60 (N=977, s.d.=4.82). The table below shows the proportions according to the detailed age groups reported by the OfS.

Survey question: What is your age?

Age	Count	Proportion	OfS proportion 2020-21
Under 21	131	13.41%	29.10%
21 to 25	414	42.37%	48.60%
26 to 30	254	26.00%	13.50%
31 to 40	173	17.71%	6.90%
41 to 50	5	0.51%	1.50%
51 and over	0	0.00%	0.30%
Total	977		

No response = 80.

Sex at birth

Survey question: What was your sex at birth?

Sex	Count	Proportion	OfS proportion 2020-21
Female	443	45.67%	52.50%
Male	511	52.68%	47.35%
Other sex	16	1.65%	0.15%
Total	977		

No response = 80; Prefer not to say = 7.

Gender identity

Survey question: Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?

Gender identity	Count	Proportion	Gender identity (OfS)	OfS proportion 2020-21
Different gender	72	7.37%	Different gender	0.53%
Same gender	879	89.97%	Same gender	78.72%
Prefer not to say	26	2.66%	No response/Not applicable	20.74%
Total	977			

No response = 80.

Sexual orientation

Survey question: What is your sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation	Count	Proportion	OfS proportion 2020-21
Heterosexual	684	70.0%	87.9%
Lesbian, gay or bisexual	244	25.0%	7.3%
Other sexual orientation	18	1.8%	4.9%
Prefer not to say	31	3.2%	--
Total	977		

No response = 80.

Ethnicity

Survey question: What is your ethnic or racial background?

Ethnicity	Count	Proportion
Asian or Asian British	162	16.58%
Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	138	14.12%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	88	9.01%
Other ethnic group – please describe	23	2.35%
White	558	57.11%
Prefer not to say	8	0.82%
Total	977	

No response = 80. OfS ethnicity information is not available for non-UK domiciled students.

Disability

Survey question: Do you have a disability?

Disability	Count	Proportion	OfS proportion 2020-21
Disability reported	183	18.73%	3.80%
No disability	755	77.28%	96.20%
Prefer not to say	39	3.99%	--
Total	977		

No response = 80.

Neurodivergence

Survey question: Are you neurodivergent?

Neurodivergence	Count	Proportion
Yes	170	17.40%
No	765	78.30%
Prefer not to say	42	4.30%
Total	977	

No response = 80. No information is available at OfS.

Religion

Survey question: What is your religion?

Religion	Count	Proportion	OfS proportion 2020-21
Any other religion or belief	9	0.92%	2.1%
Buddhist	100	10.24%	2.6%
Christian	288	29.48%	22.6%
Hindu	34	3.48%	11.4%
Jewish	66	6.76%	0.4%
Muslim	43	4.40%	13.6%
No religion	362	37.05%	44.1%
Sikh	26	2.66%	2.0%
Spiritual	17	1.74%	1.1%
Prefer not to say	32	3.28%	--
Total	977		

No response = 80.

Care responsibilities

Survey question: A carer is anyone who cares, unpaid, for a friend or family member who, due to illness, disability, age, or other reasons, cannot cope without their support. Do you have any caring responsibilities?

Care responsibilities	Count	Proportion
Primary carer of a child or adult	368	37.67%
Secondary carer of a child or adult	85	8.70%
None	508	52.00%
Prefer not to say	16	1.64%
Total	977	

No response = 80. No information is available at OfS.

English as the first language

Survey question: Is English your first language?

English as the first language	Count	Proportion
Yes	752	76.97%
No	206	21.08%
Prefer not to say	19	1.94%
Total	977	

No response = 80. No information is available at OfS.

Methodological considerations: Most respondents are from English-speaking countries (29.14% from the USA, 4.07% from Australia, and 1,99% from Canada, for example). This might be due to the specific social media channels used to disseminate the survey. Besides country of origin, some respondents might not have understood the question as we expected (i.e., 'first language' could be interpreted as the language you use the most instead of the mother tongue).

Educational characteristics of the respondents

Among the 1,057 eligible entries – i.e. current international students or recent alumni who gave their consent to participate – 987 respondents correspond to current students and only 70 were alumni. Because of the difference in the group sizes, we have decided to combine their responses and report these as one group of international students. When necessary, we have reported the information separately.

Type of course

Survey question: What type of course are you studying? (Current students)

Type of course	Count	Proportion
Undergraduate level	430	43.57%
Postgraduate taught master's degree	348	35.26%
Postgraduate research degree (MRes, PhD or equivalent)	204	20.67%
Other	5	0.51%
Total	**987**	**100.00%**

Survey question: Did you complete a course at a higher education institution in England within the last four years (since September 2018)? (Recent alumni)

Type of course	Count	Proportion
Yes, a postgraduate taught master's	38	54.29%
Yes, an undergraduate degree	18	25.71%
Yes, a postgraduate research degree (MRes, PhD or equivalent)	14	20.00%
Total	**70**	**100.00%**

Pre-18 education

Survey question: Where did you conduct most of your pre-18 education?

Pre-18 education	Count	Proportion
In the UK	562	53.17%
In another country	495	46.83%
Total	**1057**	**100.00%**

Student fee status

Survey question: What is/was your student fee status?

Student fee status	Count	Proportion
Overseas student fees	672	63.58%
Home student fees	385	36.42%
Total	**1057**	**100.00%**

Knowledge area

Knowledge area	Count	Proportion
Design, and creative and performing arts	96	9.31%
Education and teaching	40	3.88%
Engineering, technology and computing	197	19.11%
Humanities and languages	78	7.57%
Law and social sciences	125	12.12%
Medicine, dentistry and veterinary sciences	59	5.72%
Natural and built environment	134	13.00%
Natural and mathematical sciences	166	16.10%
Nursing, allied health and psychology	118	11.45%
Other	18	1.75%
Total	**1031**	**100.00%**

No response = 26.

Years of study

Survey question: Please indicate the academic year when you began your studies.

Starting year	Current students Count	Current students Proportion	Recent alumni Count	Recent alumni Proportion
Before 2015/16 academic year	5	0.52%	3	4.35%
2015/16	17	1.77%	2	2.90%
2016/17	28	2.91%	10	14.49%
2017/18	47	4.89%	7	10.14%
2018/19	105	10.91%	16	23.19%
2019/20	183	19.02%	22	31.88%
2020/21	273	28.38%	5	7.25%
2021/22	196	20.37%	4	5.80%
2022/23	108	11.23%	0	0.00%
Total	**962**	**100.00%**	**69**	**100.00%**

No response = 25 students, 1 alumnus.

Survey question: When are you expected to complete your course? (Current students)

Expected completion year	Count	Proportion
2022/23	177	18.40%
2023/24	265	27.55%
2024/25	281	29.21%
2025/26	162	16.84%
2026/27	53	5.51%
After 2026/27 academic year	24	2.49%
Total	**962**	**100.00%**

No response = 25.

Survey question: When did you complete your course? (Recent alumni)

Completion year	Count	Proportion
Before 2015/16 academic year	1	1.45%
2015/16	1	1.45%
2017/18	1	1.45%
2018/19	11	15.94%
2019/20	23	33.33%
2020/21	13	18.84%
2021/22	18	26.09%
I didn’t complete my course	1	1.45%
Grand Total	**69**	**100.00%**

No response = 1.

Type of accommodation

Survey question: Which best describes where you live/lived whilst undertaking your studies? (If the arrangement changed during your course, please select that in which you have spent most of the time.)

Type of accommodation	Count	Proportion
Individual private renting	74	7.18%
Living with parents or relatives in their residence	23	2.23%
Private halls of residence or communal blocks (not owned by the university or college)	285	27.64%
Shared private renting	204	19.79%
University or college halls of residence	445	43.16%
Total	**1031**	**100.00%**

No response = 26.

Access to Well-being and Support

This section asked respondents to select and prioritise different sets of support services offered by higher education institutions.

Ranking of services that help international students' well-being

Survey question: Based on your experience, which of the following services do you think would help international students' well-being? Please rank the activities based on how important they are/were for you (1 being the most important and 5 being the least important – you can drag and drop each option in the order you want them).

In the following tables, the services have been listed in order of number of mentions in the most important ranking.

Physical and mental health

Physical and mental health	1st priority	2nd priority	3rd priority	4th priority	5th priority
Offering access to a mental health adviser	22.0%	21.7%	20.6%	15.5%	20.2%
Offering training on specific challenges such as anxiety and stress	20.5%	21.6%	19.7%	18.7%	19.6%
Having healthy food in restaurants and cafes on campus	20.1%	18.3%	19.6%	21.6%	20.5%
Offering student counselling sessions	19.2%	20.4%	18.3%	22.2%	20.0%
Promoting access to low-cost physical exercise classes	18.3%	18.1%	21.9%	22.0%	19.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

No response = 71.

Academic work

Academic work	1st priority	2nd priority	3rd priority	4th priority	5th priority
Offering extensions on coursework deadlines based on special circumstances	22.0%	21.7%	20.6%	15.5%	20.2%
Providing more contact hours with academics	20.5%	21.6%	19.7%	18.7%	19.6%
Facilitating university/college-led academic support	20.1%	18.3%	19.6%	21.6%	20.5%
Offering extra time in exams	19.2%	20.4%	18.3%	22.2%	20.0%
Facilitating student-led academic support groups	18.3%	18.1%	21.9%	22.0%	19.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

No response = 71.

Social life

Social life	1st priority	2nd priority	3rd priority	4th priority	5th priority
Organising student meet-ups to become familiar with the city, visit local landmarks, etc.	22.7%	22.0%	19.6%	18.3%	17.4%
Offering opportunities to engage with local communities	20.6%	21.6%	20.1%	20.3%	17.4%
Creating language exchange spaces or language cafés to improve English skills	19.5%	17.8%	21.3%	18.5%	22.9%
Establishing student-led support networks	19.3%	18.8%	19.4%	21.9%	20.7%
Raising awareness of how to communicate and share in culturally diverse contexts	18.0%	19.8%	19.7%	21.1%	21.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

No response = 71.

Accommodation, personal finances and migration

Accommodation, personal finances and migration	1st priority	2nd priority	3rd priority	4th priority	5th priority
Providing support to find private affordable accommodation	21.3%	20.1%	19.7%	20.6%	18.4%
Offering financial support to students in difficult circumstances (e.g., hardship funds)	21.1%	25.1%	18.3%	18.8%	16.8%
Offering affordable accommodation in university and college halls and residences	21.0%	19.6%	20.3%	19.9%	19.3%
Offering assistance to settle in with local administration (e.g., registering with a GP, opening a bank account, etc.)	19.1%	16.5%	22.5%	21.7%	20.2%
Offering advice on visa requirements for international students	17.5%	18.8%	19.3%	19.1%	25.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

No response = 71.

Job opportunities and career support

Job opportunities and career support	1st priority	2nd priority	3rd priority	4th priority	5th priority
Offering work-while-studying opportunities outside the university or college	23.0%	20.6%	20.4%	16.8%	19.2%
Offer volunteering opportunities with local organisations	19.6%	18.3%	18.0%	22.3%	21.9%
Advising students on the available opportunities after graduation	19.4%	23.8%	21.4%	18.1%	17.3%
Offering work-while-studying opportunities within the university or college	19.4%	21.1%	24.7%	17.1%	17.6%
Creating internship programmes with external employers	18.7%	16.2%	15.5%	25.7%	23.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

No response = 71.

Top three services that should be offered to international students

Survey question: What are the three most important support services that you think a university or college should offer to students?

Well-being service priorities	Total mentions	Proportion
A dedicated advice service for international students	359	12.1%
A careers advice service	341	11.5%
A health/medical centre	326	11.0%
A housing advice service	311	10.5%
Support for mental well-being	275	9.3%
Tech support service and funding	255	8.6%
A visa advice service	253	8.6%
A money advice service	243	8.2%
An English Language Centre	207	7.0%
Sports services	168	5.7%
A disability advisory service	167	5.6%
Other	53	1.8%
Total	2958	100.0%

No response = 71.

Feeling comfortable to reach out

Survey question: How comfortable would you be asking your university or college for support with…?

Comfortable asking about:	Extremely comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Extremely uncomfortable	Not applicable	Total
Your academic situation	30.2%	33.7%	23.4%	9.1%	2.1%	1.4%	100.0%
Your physical health	27.5%	34.7%	23.5%	10.3%	2.1%	1.8%	100.0%
Your mental health	27.5%	34.4%	22.3%	11.8%	2.4%	1.6%	100.0%
Your employment situation after graduation	26.0%	33.1%	24.4%	11.7%	2.4%	2.4%	100.0%
Your visa situation	24.9%	35.1%	23.3%	12.2%	2.3%	2.1%	100.0%
Harassment or sexual misconduct experienced by you or someone else	22.6%	29.5%	23.8%	14.9%	5.5%	3.7%	100.0%
Your financial situation	21.4%	33.3%	26.4%	13.9%	3.7%	1.4%	100.0%

No response = 71.

Assessing the well-being and other support available

Effectiveness of different services

Survey question: How effective do you think your university or college is/was on the following aspects…?

Effectiveness in:	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Slightly effective	Not effective at all	Not applicable	Total
Providing services to improve students' physical and mental health	23.0%	34.5%	28.4%	10.3%	2.7%	1.0%	100.0%
Providing opportunities for students to join activities with participants from different cultures	20.8%	33.2%	29.1%	11.4%	2.3%	3.2%	100.0%
Encouraging home students to meet and interact with international students	20.9%	33.9%	27.4%	12.6%	2.8%	2.4%	100.0%
Providing services to improve international students' confidence with English language	21.2%	33.8%	27.3%	12.1%	4.2%	1.5%	100.0%
Offering gender-based physical and mental health services	21.4%	33.5%	30.4%	10.2%	3.1%	1.3%	100.0%

No response: 71.

Survey question: Looking at all the services in general, how would you rate the quality of well-being and other support services offered specifically to international students at your university?

Evaluation	Count	Proportion
Very poorly	48	4.90%
Poorly	117	11.94%
Neither well nor poorly	273	27.86%
Well	300	30.61%
Very well	224	22.86%
I don't know	18	1.84%
Total	**980**	100.00%

No response = 77.

Co-creation

Participation of international students

Survey question: How important is it that universities and colleges involve international students in the design of support activities and services?

Importance	Count	Proportion
Not at all important	28	2.9%
Slightly important	265	27.0%
Moderately important	261	26.6%
Very important	315	32.1%
Extremely important	111	11.3%
Total	**980**	100.0%

No response = 77.

Participation of home students

Survey question: How important is that home students are encouraged to participate in initiatives to support international students?

Importance	Count	Proportion
Not at all important	30	3.1%
Slightly important	193	19.7%
Moderately important	302	30.8%
Very important	343	35.0%
Extremely important	112	11.4%
Total	980	100.0%

No response = 77.

Methodological note

Our survey questionnaire included a set of items regarding the positive/negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on a series of aspects. Using a five-level scale, respondents were asked to score the strength of the impact of Covid-19 (strong, weak or neutral) and the nature of such impact (positive or negative). The question appeared as follows:

P3Q5

Please let us know if you believe your experience in the university or college was affected by the Covid pandemic in the following areas:

	Strong negative impacts	Weak negative impact	No impact	Weak positive impact	Strong positive impact	I did not experience university or college during the pandemic
The teaching of the course	○	○	○	○	○	○
My opportunities to learn	○	○	○	○	○	○
Assessment and feedback	○	○	○	○	○	○
Academic support	○	○	○	○	○	○
Organisation and coordination of the course	○	○	○	○	○	○
Learning resources	○	○	○	○	○	○
The sense of community	○	○	○	○	○	○
My ability to voice my concerns	○	○	○	○	○	○
Workload	○	○	○	○	○	○
Employability and skills	○	○	○	○	○	○

The results obtained in our preliminary analysis were very unusual – the tendency across all aspects was that the pandemic had a positive impact (either weak or strong). To explore this result further, we analysed the subsample of respondents who had been in a university or college during 2020 (n = 296). Surprisingly, the results also indicated that the respondents perceived that Covid-19 had a positive effect overall.

We found that this result was greatly counterintuitive, and more importantly, countered the findings from our qualitative fieldwork and our review of the literature. After additional checks, we determined that the results of this section are not reliable and should not be employed to derive research/policy conclusions. The main plausible cause that we identified is an issue with the structure of response options: the questions might not have been properly understood by the participant. Survey respondents might have just read the first line of the right extreme (“Strong”) without realising that it was followed by “Positive”, producing a list of biased responses. This issue could have been identified with a longer pilot study where the researcher could have detected issues with the wording of items.