Coronavirus <mark>Briefing note</mark>



Note 4 21 May 2020

Supporting international students

Introduction

The government and the Office for Students have identified international students as a group that may be particularly vulnerable during the coronavirus pandemic. In recent months, many have returned to their home countries; many others have found themselves in a position where this is not possible. While it is critical to support all students at this difficult time, international students may be more likely to experience precarious living situations, isolation or financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. Moreover, working remotely in different time zones presents a particular set of challenges for teaching and assessment.

Universities and colleges have responded quickly to the need to deliver support in different ways, for example by updating their websites and other online platforms with information for international students, and moving learning and teaching resources online. This briefing note highlights the practical and innovative ways in which universities and colleges are working to support their international students. In doing so it considers students who have remained in the UK (perhaps because their home borders are closed or flights are unavailable), students who have returned home and are studying remotely, and those who are intending to start a higher education course in the UK in autumn 2020.

Many of the challenges international students are currently experiencing will not be exclusive to this group, and much of the information in this briefing note will be relevant for other students. Similarly, other OfS briefing notes¹ provide insights into supporting international students through the pandemic. It is important also to recognise Working with universities, colleges and other stakeholders, the Office for Students (OfS) is producing a series of briefing notes on the steps universities and colleges are taking to support their students during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

The notes do not represent regulatory advice or guidance – their focus is on sharing ideas and responses, and signposting to further information. They reflect current information as at date of publication in a rapidly evolving situation.

that some international students will have other characteristics that may present particular challenges at this time. For example, international students may also have a disability, be a carer, be estranged from their family, or for the first time be living in a place where they are perceived as belonging to an ethnic minority.

Background

International students in England

In 2017-18, approximately 378,000 international students registered on courses at English higher education providers. International students comprise around 20 per cent of the student population in England. Six per cent come from EU countries and 14 per cent from outside the EU. These proportions have been stable for at least the last five years.

International students form a larger proportion of the postgraduate student population than at undergraduate level:

a. Around 6 per cent of taught postgraduate (PGT) students - and almost 13 per cent of

The Office for Students is the independent regulator of higher education in England. We aim to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. We regulate to promote quality, choice, competition and value for money in higher education, with a particular remit to ensure access, success and progression for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students.

postgraduate research (PGR) students – are from EU countries.

- b. Students from non-EU countries make up around 28 per cent of both PGT and PGR numbers.
- c. At undergraduate level, international students make up around 14 per cent of the population – 5 per cent from the EU, and around 9 per cent from outside the EU.

Where do they come from?

Students from China make up by far the largest group of international students in England – even larger than students from all EU countries put together. The number of Chinese students increased by 46 per cent over the five years from 2014-15, and in the 2017-18 academic year, there were over 101,000 Chinese students in England – representing 23.2 per cent of all international students.² After China, the nine non-EU countries with the next highest numbers of students, and changes in their numbers between 2014-15 and 2018-19, can be seen in Figure 1.

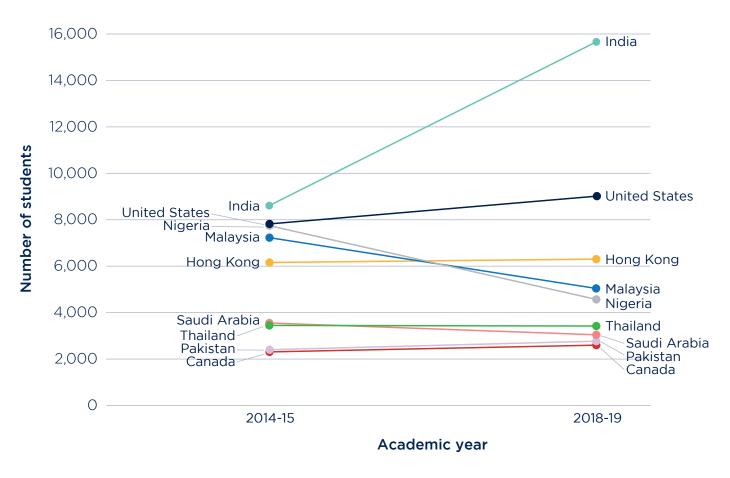
Coronavirus: information for international students

The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) supports international students and those who work with them. Over the next few months, as society adapts to new ways of living and working, UKCISA hopes to support students and staff with news, information, guidance and blogs from students and members.

The Home Office has introduced some temporary measures for visa applications and immigration status in response to coronavirus. UKCISA's most up-to-date guidance about everything that has changed in response to coronavirus is available in a dedicated section of its website.³

Where, what and how do they study?

Around 30 per cent of all international students in England are studying in London. Non-EU students represent nearly 20 per cent of all students in





Source: HESA student data.

London, with EU students making up a further 9 per cent. The South East has the next highest concentration of international students, with 17 per cent of EU students and 13 per cent of non-EU students located in this region. The North East has the fewest international students in absolute numbers, although since domestic participation rates are lower in this region, the number of non-EU students as a proportion of the overall student population is higher than for any other region outside London.

International students are much less likely to study part-time than home students, with more than 90 per cent studying full-time. The most popular subjects are business and engineering for non-EU students and computer science for EU students.

Supporting international students

Accessible information and advice for current students

Accessible and targeted information and advice are fundamental to supporting international students during the pandemic. While international students share many of the same concerns as the rest of the student population, many universities and colleges are giving particular consideration to the challenges facing this group when providing information on issues such as accommodation and assessment. Presenting this in a clear and accessible manner supports students' decision making as well as their mental health and wellbeing.

University of Hertfordshire: Coronavirus updates

The University of Hertfordshire, with support from Hertfordshire Students' Union, has created a dedicated online space for coronavirus updates.⁴ The page is updated several times a week with student tips and stories on adjusting to life in lockdown, a #HertsHeroes series celebrating the staff supporting students who are living on campus, and information and advice on studying from home.

The webpage signposts to frequently asked questions for students, staff, visitors and applicants, official advice and guidance from the UK government, and contact details for services still operating on campus. The question and answer section includes extensive information specific to international students.

For students who are self-isolating or feeling lonely on campus, the university has set up a Facebook group to provide support from its wellbeing team as well as ideas for activities, online games and 'watch parties' to stay connected and supported. We have already seen that universities and colleges are making use of their student committees, including students' unions, to understand what questions students want answered. Many universities and colleges have produced question and answer content on a range of issues impacting students. For example, the University of Hertfordshire has created an FAQ webpage for students, which includes specific information for international students on themes such as the accessibility of online resources, volunteering to

Coventry University Group: Working with the students' union

Coventry University Group features a page of frequently asked questions⁵ for both prospective and current international students on its website, as well as hosting regular webinars that address queries relating to topics such as visas and remote learning. Remote drop-in sessions are also offered, with members of staff who speak a wide range of languages, including Cantonese and Mandarin.

Working closely with the students' union advice centre, advisors from the university's international student support team contact each international student who requests emergency funding. The team are available for all overseas students who require advice, and keep in regular contact with under-18 international students to ensure that they are aware of the resources available to them. These include the health and wellbeing information and advice provided via Connections Matter, an online platform offering targeted resources developed in response to coronavirus, as well as social events run through Coventry University Students' Union 'lockdown lounge' resource.

These activities are complemented by the specialist staff from Student Services who provide a range of wellbeing support including confidential counselling and disability advice. The Student Services team has also liaised with student accommodation providers to support international students in accommodation, which includes mental health and welfare visits.

Weekly virtual drop-in sessions also take place for pre-sessional English students to address any concerns or questions they might have, as well as a dedicated inbox for international student welfare enquiries. More widely across the university, there is outof-hours support from staff who have had mental health first aid training, and a clear escalation process for any more serious issues that may arise. support the NHS and travel advice. This page also covers information relevant to the whole student population, including on university and private accommodation, wellbeing and support, and learning, exams and assessment.

Student community

Maintaining a sense of community throughout this global crisis will be crucial to supporting students, their mental health and wellbeing and their relationships with other students and staff. Many universities and colleges have moved teaching and learning online, using platforms that allow for some interaction with other students and staff. Many have also moved their wellbeing and pastoral support online and are still able to provide this service for their students.

For international students who have returned home to study remotely, maintaining this sense of community may be more challenging. Their physical distance from their university or college may lead to a sense of detachment or isolation, and they may not be as easily able to access alternative provision or social events with friends or other students on their course.

For international students who are staying in the UK and are unable to return to their home country, it is possible that they could experience isolation from their family or friends. The local community they are a part of might have changed significantly and completing everyday tasks like food shopping might be more challenging because of restrictions relating to the pandemic.

Some universities and colleges are offering diverse and inclusive social programmes developed in partnership with their students' unions. These kinds of activities offer opportunities for students to interact with friends, colleagues and staff, and could provide insights for universities and colleges into the lived experiences of students vulnerable to the consequences of this global pandemic and the challenges they face.

Accessing online learning and teaching resources

As education has moved online, universities and colleges have responded quickly to the challenges presented by remote studying. There may be particular barriers for international students in engaging with online teaching and assessment; for example, they may not be able to access materials or recordings in their home country, or may be studying remotely in a different time zone. These factors will have a significant impact on their ability to continue with their studies, and will potentially limit communications with their teaching staff or fellow students.

Typical concerns of international students contacting the OfS over the past couple of months include whether their immigration status can be extended to allow them to stay in or return to the UK to complete components of their course that cannot be delivered remotely (such as laboratory

UKCISA, Universities UK international and the British Universities' International Liaison Association: #WeAreTogether

The #WeAreTogether campaign is a social media campaign involving students, academics and staff from UK universities and students' unions. The campaign has been launched to bring all those involved in UK international education together in a positive campaign to highlight the way the sector is rising to the challenge of coronavirus.

The campaign aims to create a positive online community, sharing messages of solidarity, support and gratitude. The international element will provide reassurance and support for international students who may remain on campus far away from home and their families, and will ensure they know where to go for help.

University of Sheffield: Global Hangouts

The international student support team at the University of Sheffield has been hosting 'Global Hangouts'.⁷ These sessions, held three times weekly, aim to mitigate the isolating effects of lockdown by providing students with a space to come together, chat, share ideas and connect with fellow students from different countries. The hangout sessions are also a platform to share resources and take part in more structured activities such as quizzes. The students' union International Student Officer regularly participates in the hangouts to provide solidarity and updates on the students' union's ongoing work and available services.

A regular attendee said:

'I was self-isolating and definitely lacking social connections. Then the very first day at global hangouts, I discovered how friendly everybody is and how all are given an opportunity to speak. It's not only about talking serious issues but discussing what we have been doing or new ideas we should try. From then on, I was a regular attendee. Now, it's just like a family – I feel welcomed and cheerful every time I join them.'

work), and how changes to assessment and course design could affect their visas.

A number of universities and colleges have adapted to these challenges through:

• Offering flexible contact hours for teaching staff and avoiding static, permanent slots.

- Communicating and coordinating appropriate times for group work. This could include ensuring that notes and actions are appropriately collected and disseminated so that those unable to attend for whatever reason are not adversely impacted.
- Recording teaching and learning materials in an accessible format, including, where possible, consideration of what content or platforms international students can and cannot access.

University of Oxford: Adapting to remote working

As the university has adapted to teaching online, it has placed emphasis on supporting all students while studying from home. This has included disseminating information and guidance on adapting to remote learning and providing advice on which technology to use when working from home.⁸

All students were invited to complete a selfassessment about their home arrangements during the Easter holidays. The university and its colleges are now analysing the feedback, and expect to provide further information soon about support that might be made available for those students who have raised concerns about their studying circumstances.

Sheffield Hallam University: Access to learning and teaching resources

The university's emergency fund offers grants for laptops to ensure that international students have the means to access online resources remotely.

International students who have travelled back home and have limited access to online learning are contacted by their academic advisers or module leaders, to receive individual support and to ensure that recorded lectures and seminars can be accessed. The requirement for students to submit evidence for two-week extensions has also been waived for all assignments.

Financial hardship

Government student finance bodies have confirmed that student loans and other forms of support will continue during the period of studying remotely for those who are eligible – this includes EU students but usually excludes non-EU international students.⁹

While the UK government has, like most other countries, relaxed certain visa regulations and

The following comments are from international students from Brunei, Germany, Nigeria and the United States of America:

'As a student who didn't get recorded lectures prior to this, moving to online learning was quite challenging as I am used to having to physically attend lectures. We've made use of video conferencing, pre-recorded lectures and handouts/presentation slides with notes attached for the last few weeks of the semester. Being a final year student means a greater part of my course requires me to do a lot of personal study, and so the university has been of great help by providing free access to the core textbooks online seeing as we can't go to the library.'

'My university has shown tremendous support for online learning so far as providing online resources such as online textbooks which were only available in physical form before the pandemic. This allowed students to overcome certain barriers when attending classes away from campus. However, in terms of teaching experience, the lecturers have shown a lack of incentive to conduct online classes especially for classes with a big cohort, stating their reason to not hold online classes due to their lack of expertise in using video conferencing software. However, lecturers are willing to have one-on-ones with students through Skype for example to go over concerns or queries for any assessments and examinations.'

'While universities have had to respond quickly to government restrictions in the pandemic, one difficulty I am continuing to have is lack of access to physical books. As a humanities student, there are many resources that are not available online but I need for my studies. Hopefully, when restrictions are eased a little, I can still access physical books without using the library (such as library loan pick up system).'

'The transition to working from home and accessing resources solely online wasn't easy and I am still not fully comfortable in working in this new environment. The whole process wasn't made easier by the university's struggling VPN network during the first few weeks. Nevertheless, I think my university did a great job in making all resources possible available online and briefing its staff for the situation. My supervisor team has been very aware of difficulties and despite not being able to physically meet, they seem more accessible than ever.' attendance requirements for international students, all Tier 4 students and short-term students are subject to the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' immigration condition. This means that they are unable to access certain welfare benefits and local authority housing.¹⁰

Some universities and colleges are providing financial assistance to students who are ineligible for public funding, particularly in cases where they have lost their part-time jobs as a result of business closures during lockdown and are struggling to afford rent and basic necessities. This could particularly impact those international students who have remained in the UK because of the closure of their home borders.

Universities and colleges are asking students experiencing financial difficulties as a result of coronavirus to talk to them in the first instance and, if appropriate, contact their accommodation provider. Most universities and colleges have student hardship funds, and some may have specific funds for international and EU students. The OfS has confirmed that universities and colleges can use student premium funding to bolster their mental health support services and hardship funds for students, and this can include international students.¹²

Harassment and hate crime

There is no place for harassment in universities or colleges, and we encourage students and staff to report any incidents using their provider's complaints process. We began to consult in January 2020 on our expectations about how universities and colleges should prevent and respond to incidents of harassment. This consultation is currently paused because of the coronavirus outbreak, but we expect to return to this as soon as possible.¹³

Promoting safety and inclusion at this time is crucial for communities and their wellbeing. As the coronavirus has spread around the world there have been reports of an increase in harassment and hate crimes directed towards international students. Rising 'anti-Asian looking' sentiment has already affected international students, a number of whom have been victims of hate crimes.¹⁴ In a letter to international students, Minister of State for Universities Michelle Donelan MP said that the government is working with universities and colleges to ensure they are doing all they can to stamp out racism, harassment and hatred. This includes ensuring that students are adequately supported when reporting discrimination or harassment.¹⁵ Later this year, Universities UK will develop guidance targeted at addressing racial harassment. This will include recommendations to help universities and colleges improve their practice, and will reflect students' views on what is required.¹⁶

When campuses do reopen, international students may be returning to, or entering, higher education at a time of increased harassment and hate crimes. Interventions may be required to De Montfort University has set up an international hardship fund in response to the financial impact of the coronavirus pandemic on international and EU students who are not eligible for a maintenance loan from Student Finance England.¹¹ As the current situation remains unchanged for the short term, students can re-apply for support from the hardship fund.

The hardship fund is advertised to students with accessible information on how to apply, eligibility and criteria. Eligible students include those:

- currently working in the UK but having to care for a family member because of coronavirus guidelines
- currently working in the UK but whose employer has recently closed because of coronavirus guidelines
- whose country of origin has experienced a significant currency devaluation because of coronavirus.

An international student who applied for the hardship fund after their part-time job ended because of the pandemic, leaving them with no income, said:

'It was really easy to apply and the response from the finance team was quick. As well as the funding, the university also cancelled all the fees for my accommodation. And because we can't go to the university or the library anymore, I couldn't use the software programme needed for my course. I spoke to my tutors and the faculty sent me a brand new laptop. I feel really cared for and safe. I know that the university is taking care of us.'

mitigate against the possibility of rising numbers of incidents as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Information for prospective students

This is a worrying and difficult time for all students in higher education and for those intending to start university or college in autumn 2020 and beyond. Information and guidance are developing and changing at a rapid pace. Communicating to future students is vital to supporting their wellbeing and ensuring that student groups who might be especially vulnerable to the impacts of the coronavirus are not adversely affected.

Recent British Council surveys of prospective international students from the countries supplying

University of Bristol: Supporting international students

In late February 2020, responding to increased incidents of harassment against the Chinese community, the University of Bristol reaffirmed its proud history of welcoming students and staff from across South East Asia, and stressed that students should not be treated adversely as a result of their personal choices around wearing face masks.

The university encourages students and staff to report any incident of racial harassment and to seek support. A 'report and support' service allows any student or member of staff who experiences an incident of prejudice, harassment or hate crime to report incidents anonymously. Alternatively, students can choose to give their name when making a report to receive support from the student wellbeing service.

Staff in student services have been offered training in hate crime awareness. The university hosted a webinar on hate crime and harassment with a panel including the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience, the Director of Stand Against Racism and Hate and the Chief Inspector of Avon and Somerset Police. Staff and students can also contact Stand Against Racism and Hate for advice and support.

The university also provides access to Nilaari,¹⁷ a culturally appropriate counselling service based in Bristol which helps to support black, Asian and minority ethnic students. Students can make a telephone appointment while social distancing restrictions are in place.

the most students to UK universities have found that large numbers were undecided about whether to press ahead with their study plans for next year. Significant numbers were also concerned about their health, wellbeing, personal safety and finances when thinking about studying overseas.¹⁸

While there is now more clarity around exams and the university admissions process for home students, there remains uncertainty in relation to their travel plans and services, such as English language testing, that may have been disrupted. The British Council is providing information for offer holders and applicants on changes to English language tests and visas,¹⁹ and UCAS is providing regular updates on changes to assessment arrangements and availability of results for international qualifications.²⁰

Universities and colleges will be responding to queries from prospective international students and may be signposting them to British Council Study UK, UCAS or UKCISA for more information. Some universities and colleges have been able to put this information in context for their specific circumstances by creating their own webpages or curating information into an accessible portal for applicants and offer holders, which might be helpful for international students.

Some universities are using bases in East Asia to support the autumn transition for international students. For example, the University of Nottingham has been able to draw on the experiences of its Malaysia and Ningbo campuses to inform its responses for international students. The university's UK and Ningbo welfare services have worked closely to ensure that online video advice is possible in mainland China.

The current focus for universities and colleges is on the urgent and immediate needs of their students during the pandemic. Our previous briefing on supporting student mental health²¹ observed that different student groups will be impacted in different ways. International students could be susceptible to the impacts of the pandemic at any stage of their higher education journey.

Given the disruption to normal functions and routines, we can expect that universities and colleges will see new patterns and challenges emerging in their international student support provision.

University of Leeds: Information for international applicants and offer holders

The University of Leeds has created a website for the specific purpose of offering advice and guidance for students during the pandemic, which includes online learning resources and the latest information on travel and visas.²²

In addition, the university has provided a set of FAQs for international applicants and offerholders, and another for prospective students for its pre-sessional English programme.

An international student said:

'I genuinely believe that universities are doing the best they can at the moment according to government guidelines. At the moment, everyone is pushing out new information frequently to keep up with all that is going on. This can lead to information overload, and I would advise everyone not to be afraid to email or call the institution if you need to clarify anything. In addition to this, I think we should all double check the contracts we sign in this period especially in regards to accommodation by making sure there isn't a clause in it preventing students from getting out of their contracts if we happen not to be able to resume in September.'

Conclusion

International students are facing a range of concerns during the pandemic. This briefing note highlights some of these, although it is not exhaustive: challenges and barriers will continue to present themselves to international students and their universities and colleges over the coming months. The OfS is working with sector bodies and support agencies to share practice on supporting international students, and on understanding the differential impacts the pandemic may have on these (and other) students at various stages of their higher education journey. We have also been updating our information and advice for prospective students, including international applicants, on the Discover Uni website.²³

Resources and information

In April, **Michelle Donelan**, the Secretary of State for Universities, wrote <u>a letter to international</u> <u>students</u> to provide guidance and links to resources.

The **government** has published <u>general guidance on visas and immigration issues</u>, including details on how to contact <u>the Coronavirus Immigration Help Centre</u> with queries.

The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) has guidance for international students and a <u>dedicated advice line</u> for queries. Its website also features a number of <u>blog posts on mental</u> <u>health and tips for working remotely</u>.

Universities UK has collated information from different sources to provide an extensive <u>FAQ</u> page for current and future international students.

The Erasmus+ website has an FAQ page about the impact of the pandemic on the programme.

The British Council features guidance for current and prospective international students on its website, as well as free online courses.

UCAS provides updates on the impact on international applicants and provides a list of English tests affected by the pandemic, as well as links to a number of international awarding bodies' websites. The Unibuddy function on the website allows prospective students to chat to those already studying at different UK universities, where current students can be selected by their home country.

The International English Language Testing System website also has the latest updates on English test suspensions, and the health and safety precautions that will need to be taken on test day. It also has an <u>online test available</u> for students in particular countries who are unable to attend a test centre because of the pandemic.

Student Minds has a section with guidance for international students on its resources page, as well as advice on dealing with xenophobia and links to guidance on reporting hate crime. The True Vision scheme, which is run by the National Police Chiefs' Council, has a page on its website on <u>Covid-19</u> related hate crime, including informative videos in several languages.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has released a <u>list of free online courses</u> and other learning resources for students working remotely. <u>Jisc</u> has up-to-date information on access to learning content.

We thank those universities and other organisations that provided the case studies in this briefing note. We are grateful to UKCISA and its student ambassadors for sharing their insights on the most pressing challenges currently facing international students.

The case studies and interventions described in this note have been developed at pace and have not yet been evaluated for effectiveness. They are offered in the spirit of sharing practice that others may find useful and applicable in their own contexts.

Notes

¹See <u>www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus/briefing-notes/</u>

² See <u>https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/Intl-facts-figs-19.aspx</u>

³ See <u>https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/</u> <u>Studying--living-in-the-UK/Coronavirus-Covid-19-info-</u> <u>for-international-students</u>

⁴ See <u>https://www.herts.ac.uk/coronavirus</u>

⁵ See <u>https://www.coventry.ac.uk/international-</u> <u>students-hub/covid19-frequently-asked-questions/</u>

6 See <u>https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/About-UKCISA/</u> <u>WeAreTogether</u>

⁷ See <u>https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/globalcampus/</u>global-conversation

8 See <u>http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/news/2020-04-17-</u> what-technology-should-i-use-when-studying-home

⁹ See <u>https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-</u> <u>current-students</u>

¹⁰ A Tier 4 visa is sponsored by a university or college, and issued to allow the holder to study a particular course at the institution. The 'short-term student' category in UK immigration law allows people over the age of 16 to come to the UK for a shorter period of time for short courses or English language courses, or for electives or research tuition relevant to higher education courses they are doing elsewhere.

¹¹ See <u>https://www.dmu.ac.uk/current-students/student-</u> <u>support/student-finance/international-hardship-fund-</u> <u>covid-19.aspx</u>

¹² See <u>www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-</u> guidance/coronavirus/provider-guide-to-coronavirus/ provider-faq/.

¹³ See <u>www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/</u> harassment-and-sexual-misconduct-guide-for-students/

14 See <u>https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/</u> coronavirus-sparks-rising-tide-ofxenophobia-worldwide and <u>https://research.info.yorku.ca/2020/03/york-</u> researchers-receive-1-1-million-in-covid-19-researchfunding/

15 See <u>https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/studentnews/1502/</u> Letter-to-international-students-from-the-Minister-of-State-for-Universities

16 See <u>https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/</u> Pages/Covid-19-intl.aspx#harassment

17 See <u>https://www.bristol.ac.uk/students/wellbeing/</u> services/bame-counselling/

18 For example <u>https://www.britishcouncil.org/contact/press/higher-education-chinese-students-covid-report</u> and <u>https://www.britishcouncil.org/contact/press/</u> survey-international-students-pakistan-and-india

19 See <u>https://study-uk.britishcouncil.org/moving-uk/</u> <u>coronavirus</u>

20 See <u>https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/after-you-apply/coronavirus-covid-19/international-students</u>

²¹ See <u>www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/</u> <u>coronavirus-briefing-note-supporting-student-mental-</u> <u>health/</u>

22 See <u>https://coronavirus.leeds.ac.uk/</u>

²³ See <u>https://discoveruni.gov.uk/corona-covid-19-</u> information/