Understanding Student Mental Health Inequalities:

International Students

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Foreword

As an international student who moved to the UK from Uganda in 2019, I have had the opportunity to look at mental health from a unique perspective, one that's based on my experience of living in two completely different countries, with distinct cultures. Like many others, I was excited to travel abroad for university as this meant that I would finally have my independence. However, since I was going to be away from family and friends for a long time, I had several concerns that drained my excitement every now and then.

One of my biggest worries was how I was going to be able to focus on my studies despite the myriad distractions that my newfound independence would bring my way. I knew that I had to excel in school at all costs and make my parents proud, but this put me under a lot of pressure. Moreover, I felt a lot of stress about how I was going to manage my money in the most effective way possible to reduce the financial strain on my parents. I was aware of the sacrifice they were making to pay my tuition and my greatest desire was to lessen their burden.

This prompted me to look for work even before I moved to the UK. I eventually got a job as an Under-18s Wellbeing Co-ordinator at Kaplan Living Brighton student residence and life has never been the same since. In this role, I've had the opportunity to speak to students under my care who were struggling with mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. Many admitted that they felt lonely and isolated in their rooms during the pandemic. This resulted in low levels of motivation to study, let alone to be productive.

When coronavirus restrictions were in place, the majority of students confessed that they were overcome with acute feelings of nostalgia for their days at the University when they could hang out with friends at pubs and restaurants after an exhausting day. Spending a lot of time in the same environment day after day meant that many students picked up new habits to cope with the boredom and feelings of helplessness. Some created positive routines which included exercising daily, while others found vices. Some of my friends who only used to drink alcohol at social gatherings began drinking at home on a regular basis to deal with their situation. The national lockdown might have officially come to an end but the impact it has had on students across the country will go down in history. As universities return to in-person teaching, special focus should be put on providing extra support for students who have battled with mental health issues during the past year.

I'm pleased to be introducing this report as it explores the issues and challenges that international students like myself experience.

Going forward, we as students should be encouraged to talk about our feelings and struggles. We need to work with universities to break the stigma around mental health, so that we can support one another and know where to find support when we're not okay. If we can do this, then many lives could change for the better.

Bonaventure Murangira
Pharmacy MPharm (Hons) at the University of Brighton.

Acknowledgements

180 Degrees Consulting, London School of Economics (LSE)

In 2017-2018 we worked with a student consultancy group at LSE, through 180 Degrees Consulting. They were briefed to do a literature review exploring factors that impact international student mental health, to run student focus groups and to do some scoping and exploratory work into organisations working to support international students. Their report was comprehensive and an incredible kickstarter for us to explore further work in this space. We share insights from their work throughout this report.

Thank you to Natalie Fisher, Cecilia Rowson, Manon Siméon, Kalee Lee, Dan Lasky and Hugo Adet.

Kaplan

Thank you to Kaplan whose support has been essential in enabling us to be able to bring all of this work together to share with the sector.

Particular thanks to Elizabeth Hess and Iain Brennan who have provided thoughtful feedback and input over the last year.

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Introduction

Since our inception as a charity, Student Minds has had a mission to transform the state of student mental health. Core to that mission is a conviction that we cannot achieve our goals without deepening our understanding of the diverse needs of students and working to address the health inequalities they face. Taking an intersectional approach to supporting student mental health means recognising the heterogeneity of the student community and acknowledging the barriers and risk factors the community faces. It also means learning what helps to protect and support the communities within the student population who face additional barriers or disadvantages. At Student Minds, we advocate for a whole-university approach to improving student mental health, which cannot be achieved without ensuring that all of our work is shaped by the diverse voices of the whole student population.

What is a whole university approach?

A whole-university approach must include both adequately resourced, effective and accessible mental health services and proactive interventions. It must provide an environment and culture that reduces poor mental health, as well as supporting good mental health, and facilitating staff and students to develop insight, understanding and skills to manage and maintain their own wellbeing.

The UK's universities are homes to diverse, global, multicultural communities, which we celebrate and cherish. Of the 2.75 million students studying at UK Higher Education Institutions in 2020/21, 605,130 (22%) were international students. This includes 452,225 (16%) non-EU students and 152,905 (5%) EU students (HESA, 2022). This was an increase of almost 50,000 compared to the 2019/20 year, despite speculation that Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic were going to significantly impact recruitment figures.

Across all of our work we have identified consistent themes when trying to better understand international students' mental health. What's central to all of these themes is that structural inequalities lead to a diversity of experiences and outcomes for international students. We must work to ensure every international student is having as positive an experience as possible while studying and that they are being afforded every opportunity to feel supported, to thrive and to succeed. These themes are explored in more detail throughout the report and include: the significance of language; cultural competency; acculturative stress; the impact of global events; practical challenges; belonging; racism and xenophobia; and financial challenges and demands.

One of the key challenges we've faced, is the inconsistencies and contradictions that exist across practice and evidence. It is clear that what may be best practice for supporting some members of the international student population might not be transferable for others. Within the Higher Education sector, it is widely known and accepted that the student population is heterogeneous and it is therefore important to be mindful of the different needs of specific communities within the student body. But the international student population is, in itself, incredibly diverse with a wide array of expectations, cultures and

perceptions around the university experience, mental health and support. There are also significant intersecting identities to consider - be that with gender, sexuality, faith, disability, social class or political beliefs. Although the administrative logic is clear, it's arguably counterproductive to try and collapse a population with such rich heterogeneity into a homogenised category of 'international student'. We need to think carefully about how we can understand the nuances and diverse needs of all members of the international student community.

In this report, we're sharing the learnings and insights from work we've been doing over the past five years around international student mental health. This includes working with a student consultancy group to research the factors that contribute to international students' mental health; working with an international student panel to understand their university experiences; exploring existing academic literature; consulting with sector leaders and experts; and sharing demographic-specific data from surveys we've conducted in partnership with Alterline. I'm confident that this report will be a useful and timely resource for the sector as our international student populations continue to grow and as we continue working to have thriving student communities.

In our August 2021 report, University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic (Frampton and Smithies, 2021), we committed to further exploration of the intersectionalities of student mental health and to publishing demographic breakdowns of the data we've been collecting. This, I hope, will be the first in a series of reports where we explore these inequalities and share our insights in more depth.

Dom Smithies
Influencing and Advocacy Lead

Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity.

Our goal is to transform the state of student mental health so that all in higher education can thrive.

We support students to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health, support their peers and create change. We also work collaboratively with institutions, students' unions and other organisations involved in higher education, supporting them to take a whole–university approach to mental health. In addition to providing well–resourced mental health services, a whole–university approach recognises that all aspects of university life should support and promote positive mental health and wellbeing.

student minds

Methodology

Throughout this report we draw on a wide range of sources including panel discussions, surveys, qualitative research, case studies, and a literature review of existing scholarship in the area. In this section, these methods are described in further detail, outlining our approach and the strengths and limitations of our work.

International Student Panel
In June 2019, Student Minds received funding from the Office for Students (OfS) to be a partner in a collaborative programme - 'International Student Mental Health: Good Practice Guidance and Intervention Case Studies'. The project was led by the University of Nottingham in partnership with University of Nottingham Students' Union, SOAS, SOAS Students' Union, the University of Leeds, Leeds University Union and Campus Life. The project sought to understand what works in improving international students' mental health – both in terms of how institutions can effectively engage and co-produce approaches with international students, and how culturally competent services can be established.

Student Minds' role in the project was to recruit and support an International Student Panel. The panel shared their experiences with us and the wider project team, allowing the space and opportunity for us to deepen our understanding and to give them the opportunity to shape and inform the project's outcomes. We worked with the panel for the entire 2020/21 academic year, having monthly meetings to discuss a number of topics which we've explored throughout this report. This includes their experiences of the coronavirus pandemic, cultural attitudes to mental health, and the accessibility of university support services. We committed to engaging a diverse panel of international students and successfully recruited students from across Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa and Australasia who were

studying a range of courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

This report shares some of the insights we gained from working with the amazing group of students on the panel.

You can find out more about the toolkit and the best practices highlighted by the project at Globally Minded | About The Toolkit.

Literature Review
In Spring 2022, we pulled together findings from policy briefings, academic research and reports to consolidate our understanding of the main challenges facing international students. Our primary focus was scholarship published since the year 2000 and conducted in UK Higher Education settings.

While research from other national contexts may help us to hypothesise the factors which affect international student mental health in the UK, the findings cannot be seamlessly extrapolated without notable caveats. Differences in the accommodation provision, welfare support, local cultural dynamics, and pedagogy of Higher Education in other countries mean we cannot readily assume that international student mental health is shaped in the same way in the UK as it is anywhere else. There is a far greater body of literature pertaining to the mental health of international students in North America, for instance, but we cannot take it as given that these findings would be replicated in a British context. As such, much of the scholarly evidence we found fell outside the scope of our literature review.

Primary Research

Since April 2021, we have conducted three waves of primary research with Alterline. This research has explored a range of topics, including: the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic; mental health and wellbeing; finances; social connectedness; academic experience; and experiences of accessing support. The surveys also included questions from Alterline's independent 'Being Well, Doing Well' survey, which previously ran in 2017/18 and 2019/20, to offer a comparison between years and cohorts.

Respondents were recruited by Alterline through their database of students willing to participate in research, to achieve a broadly representative sample of the student population. This includes foundation-level, undergraduate and postgraduate students, new and continuing. Geographic representation, institution type and other demographic characteristics were also accounted for. We have published the key findings from this research on our website.

In the first wave, conducted between 30th April and 10th May 2021, the sample was made up of 1100 students. Of these, 211 (19%) were international students, with 95 being from Europe, 85 from Asia and 31 being grouped as 'Other' (North/South/Central America, Africa, Australia/ Oceania).

In the second wave, conducted between 3rd and 15th September 2021, the sample was made up of 1015 students. Of these, 211 (20%) were international students, with 64 being from Europe, 101 from Asia and 46 being grouped as 'Other' (North/South/Central America, Africa, Australia/ Oceania).

In the third wave, conducted between 13th and 31st January 2022, the sample was made up of 1000 students. Of these, 197 were international students, with 89 being from Europe, 61 from Asia and 47 being grouped as 'Other' (North/South/ Central America, Africa, Australia/Oceania).

International Student Mental Health Roundtable

On the 1st December 2021, we hosted an International Students' Mental Health Roundtable. The purpose of this event was to bring together colleagues from across the Higher Education sector, to reflect on insights from our research, and to give space to discuss some of the complex themes and challenges emerging. The roundtable allowed us to form a more developed understanding of these issues, with knowledge of how the sector is working to tackle challenges and improve support. In turn, we identified recommendations, examples of good practice, and learning which we have highlighted in this report.

We achieved representation from a number of Higher Education Institutions and sector bodies with a diverse range of roles and voices being brought into the space - from university leaders, support services staff, academics, students' union officers and staff, students, and colleagues leading on policy, projects and research around international students and/or student mental health.

180 Degrees Consulting (LSE) Research Project

In January 2018, we commissioned 180 Degrees Consulting (LSE) to undertake an initial review of mental health inequalities in the international student community. As part of this work, 180 Degrees conducted a review of existing literature and provided an overview of the work being done by organisations working with international students, allowing us to identify current services and practice. They also conducted two groups with

international students to supplement existing literature with new qualitative data focusing on students' perceptions of their challenges and needs.

In April 2018, 180 Degrees presented Student Minds with a report outlining their findings, exploring the following: factors impacting mental health; barriers to accessing support; alternative sources of support for international students. These findings have been included throughout this report.

Challenges and Limitations

Working in the mental health sector, we are mindful there is a risk of self-selection bias in our research, with participants often having an interest in mental health or personal experience of mental health issues. The challenge with this bias is two-fold. First: those with experiences of mental health issues are more likely to participate in research and engage in opportunities with a mental health focus, which could run the risk of over-representing the negative mental health experiences within the student population. Second: those who are comfortable talking about their mental health experiences and who feel they can engage in research and participate in opportunities may have overcome stigma and be managing their mental health better, which could run the risk of misrepresenting what is being experienced in the population. We hope to have mitigated this challenge as far as possible, by working with an independent research agency, Alterline.

We also recognise the limitation that our sample sizes are relatively small and as such can't typically be taken as representative. The international student community is large and incredibly diverse, and it's important to recognise that students from the same countries and/or cultures will still have unique, personal experiences. We hope that by adopting a multi-methods approach, we have been able to balance this challenge and explore a wide range of experiences, capturing some of the nuances within this report. However, we do encourage readers to reflect on our findings critically, with consideration of these limitations and the systemic inequalities, stigmas and biases which may impact our research.

Despite the above challenges we do hope that readers are able to understand the key themes and headline issues in order to enable them to think creatively about how they can better serve and support their international student populations.

Definitions

One of the most important learnings from our work with international students is that the language we use to talk about mental health and wellbeing is critical. We know that students come to our institutions with a broad range of perceptions and knowledge-levels when it comes to mental health. Across the world, there are different cultural norms and conceptions of mental health and mental illness, and acknowledging and understanding these is vital to supporting members of the international student population.

Below, we share some helpful definitions of terms we've used throughout this report, in order to facilitate a transparent, shared language and understanding of what we mean when we use these terms.

Mental health   A full spectrum of experience ranging from good mental health to mental illness.

Mental illness   A condition and experience, involving thoughts, feelings, symptoms and/or behaviours, that causes distress and reduces functioning, impacting negatively on an individual's day to day experience, and which may receive or be eligible to receive a clinical diagnosis.

Mental health problems/ issues or poor mental health   A broader range of individuals experiencing levels of emotional and/or psychological distress beyond normal experience and beyond their current ability to effectively manage. It will include those who are experiencing mental illness and those whose experiences fall below this threshold, but whose mental health is not good.

Wellbeing   A wider framework, of which mental health is an integral part, but which also includes physical and social wellbeing. This uses a model provided by Richard Kraut (2009), in which optimum wellbeing is defined by the ability of an individual to fully exercise their cognitive, emotional, physical and social powers, leading to flourishing.

Definitions taken from
University Mental Health Charter
(Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

Findings and Discussion:

Factors Impacting Student Mental Health

Over the last few years, we have identified many commonalities in the experiences of international students. Through our work with the International Student Panel; our research with Alterline; conversations from the International Student Mental Health Roundtable; and our literature review, we have sought to clarify and explore many of those commonalities whilst also developing new insight and enhanced understanding. We have heard about the factors that impact student mental health, along with the complexities and nuances in the support needs of the international student population, and we have also explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the international student community.

While many of the factors we have explored do affect the wider student population, we know that international students also face unique situations whereby they are more susceptible to, or impacted by, various stressors or challenges. This, coupled with pre-existing inequalities which continue to impact our society, can lead to an entirely different student experience, requiring specific, tailored support. In this section, we explore some of the many key issues that we know to be of particular relevance to international students' mental health.

1. Understanding Mental Health and Wellbeing

The findings of our primary, quantitative research show that international students are overall more positive about their mental health than their UK-domiciled peers, reporting higher levels of life satisfaction and lower rates of self-reported mental health issues. However, in contrast, our findings also show that international students report higher levels of concern about a range of issues including their wellbeing, the quality of their student experience and the need for greater support. This misalignment represented to us a wider issue of how we conceptualise, understand and communicate what we mean by mental health and wellbeing, recognising that this may not be the same as in other cultures or countries.

Throughout all three waves of primary research, we have consistently found that international students are less likely to report having a current mental health issue (Graph 1). Most recently, in January 2022, 62% of UK-domiciled respondents self-reported a current mental health issue, compared with 47% of international students. We also found that on average, international students reported higher life satisfaction scores than UK-domiciled students, a key measure of overall wellbeing (Graph 2).

Self reported mental health issues

Legend: International, UK-domiciled

	May 2021	September 2021	January 2022
International	47%	43%	47%
UK-domiciled	63%	55%	62%
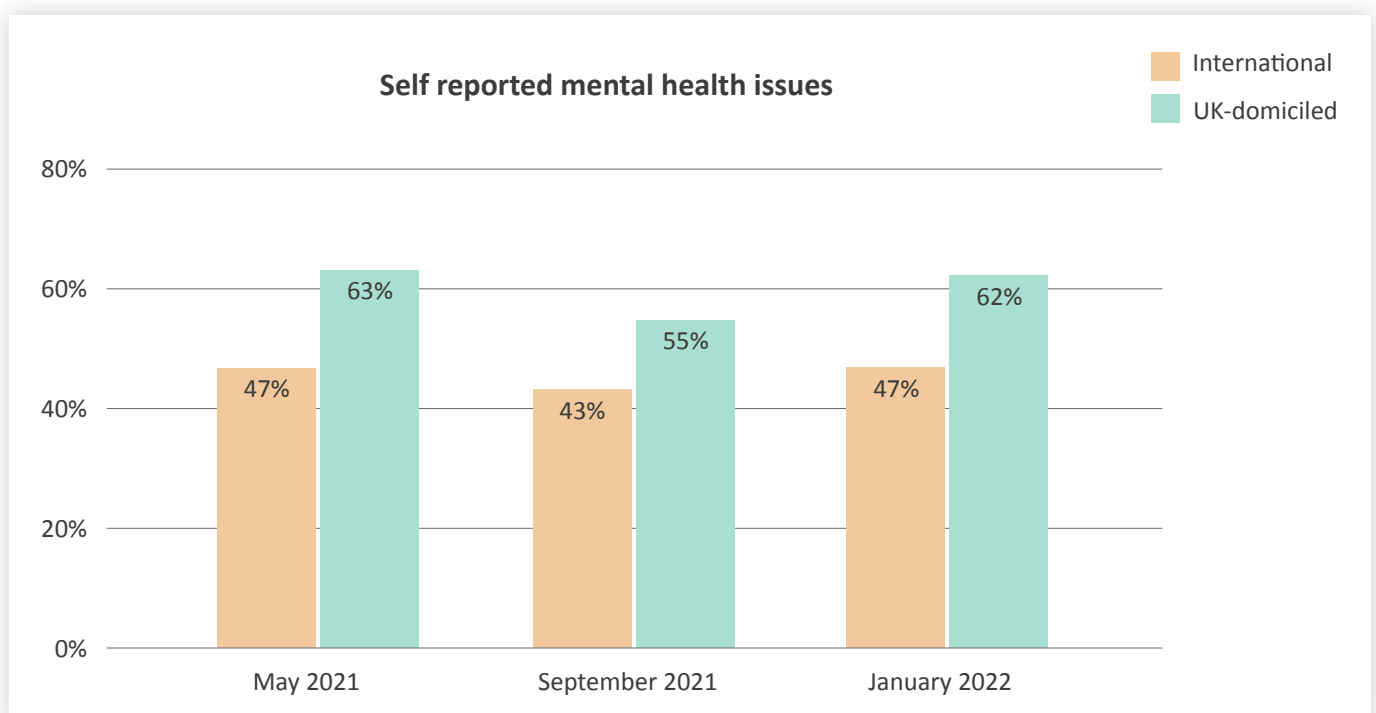
Graph 1: Percentage of respondents self-reporting current mental health issues

Life satisfaction (/10)

International **UK-domiciled**

	International	UK-domiciled
0-4	17%	20%
5-6	26%	30%
7-10	58%	49%
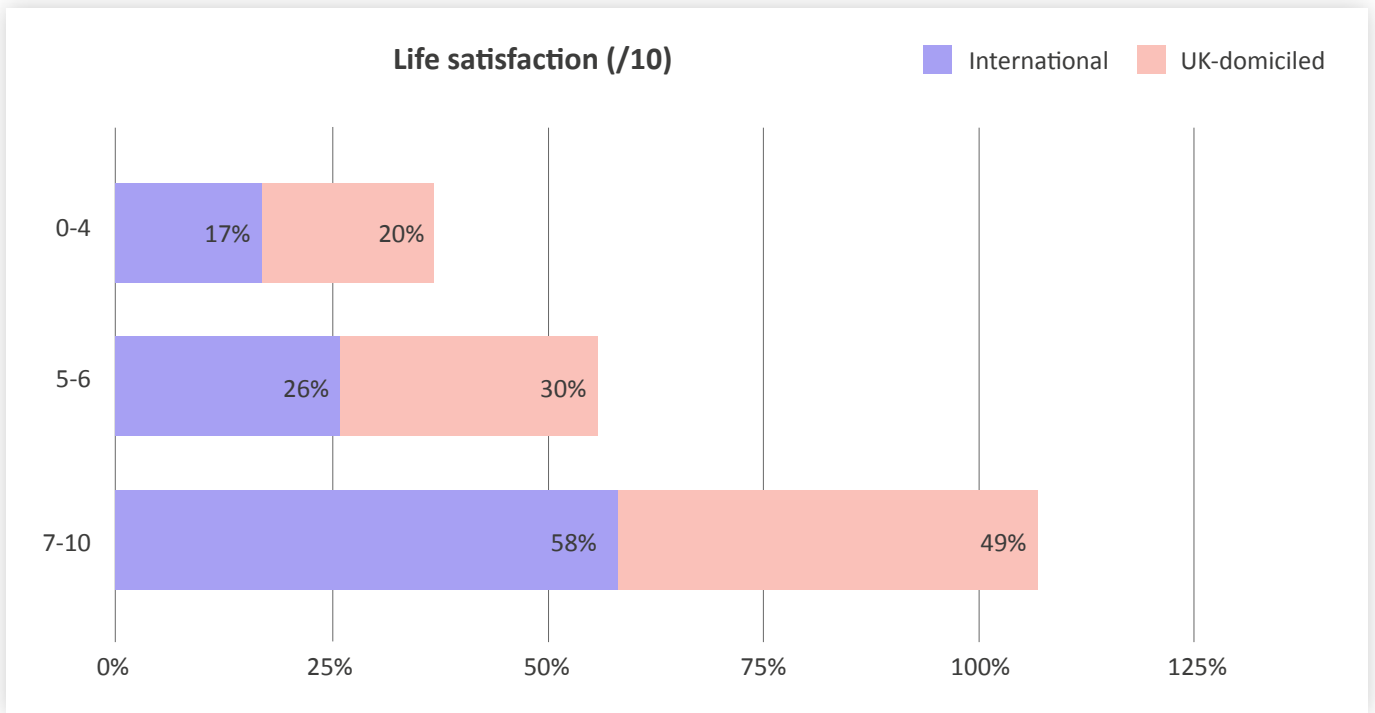
Graph 2: Life satisfaction scores on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is 'extremely dissatisfied' and 10 is 'extremely satisfied', January 2022

However, despite this, when we explored students' everyday experiences, concerns and support needs, we uncovered a different perspective of international students' wellbeing. In September 2021, we asked students how concerned or unconcerned they were about a range of issues when looking ahead to the 2021/2022 academic year. Graph 3 (below) presents some of our findings:

Student Concerns

International **UK-domiciled**

	International	UK-domiciled
Mental wellbeing	81%	63%
Physical wellbeing	70%	53%
Academic performance	82%	78%
Time management	74%	66%
Employment prospects after uni	71%	49%
Financial situation	69%	59%
Making friends	68%	47%
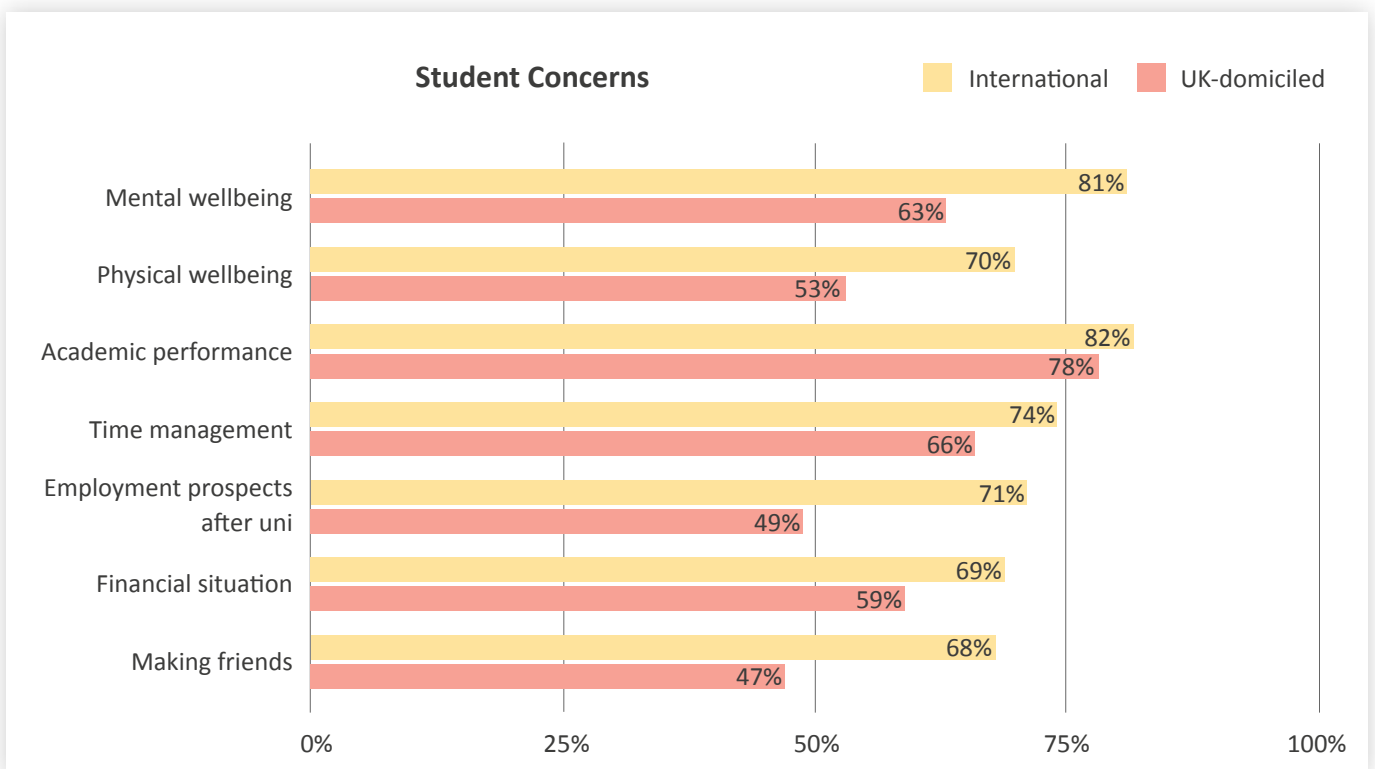
Graph 3: Percentage of students reporting feeling 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about issues, September 2021.

Clearly, at the beginning of the academic year at least, international students felt a heightened sense of anxiety about a range of issues compared to UK-domiciled students. This also translated into students' anticipated support needs (Graph 4).

Aniticipated support needs

International UK-domiciled

Category	International	UK-domiciled
Academic/ learning	61%	55%
Mental health and wellbeing	50%	48%
Employability	67%	40%
Finances	48%	38%
Social life	50%	30%
Life skills	36%	24%
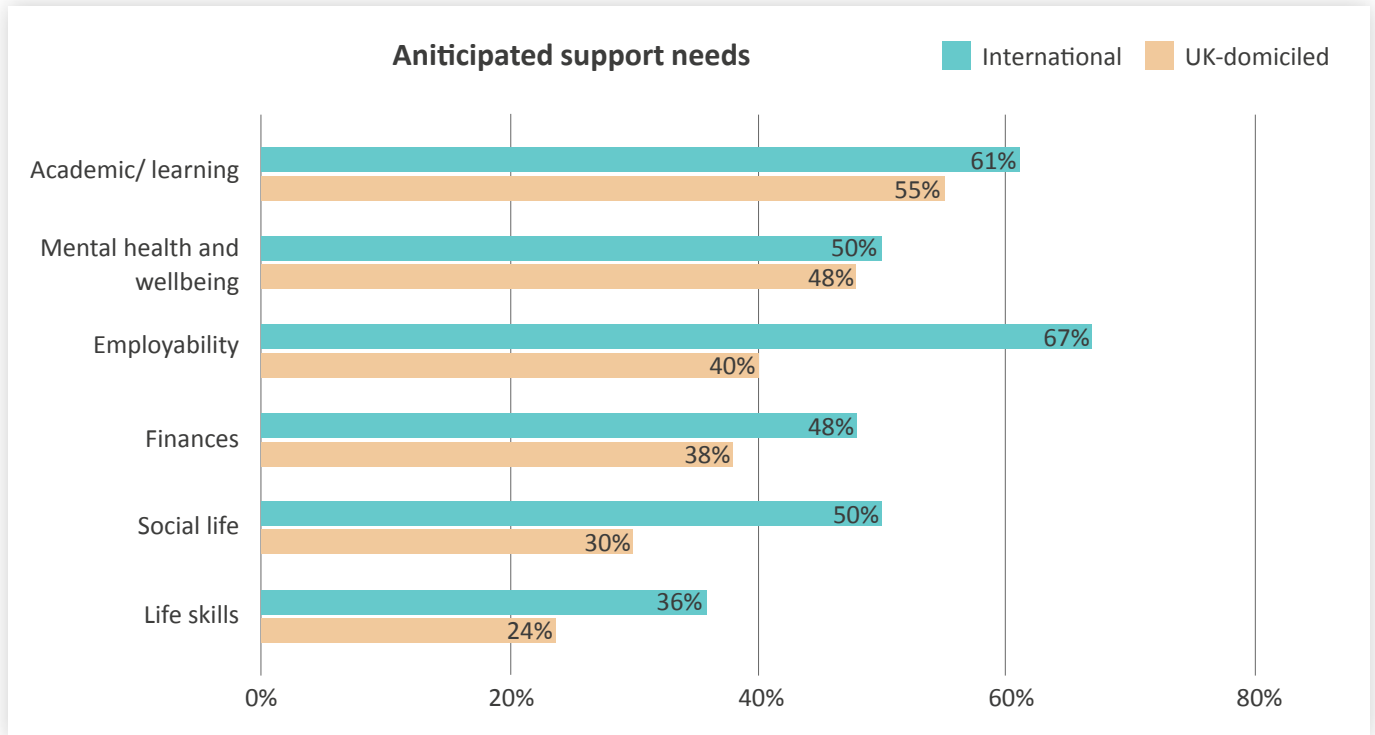
Graph 4: Anticipated support needs, self-reported by students, September 2021

We asked students which areas they felt they may need support in during the 2021/22 academic year. Despite this being an imperfect way of measuring support needs, given that many students won't know what support they'll need in advance, this does offer an indication of where students' concerns lay and their confidence in managing these themselves. As can be seen in Graph 4, international students were far more likely than UK-domiciled students to anticipate needing support in a wide range of areas, but particularly in employability, finances, social life and life skills. These are all issues which also emerged in other areas of our research.

These findings demonstrate the importance of carefully considering how we frame conversations around mental health and the language we use to conceptualise and understand mental health as an issue. Despite international students self-reporting lower rates of mental health issues, we recognise that such high levels of concern around other issues, such as finances, social connectedness and employability can still have detrimental effects on wellbeing. It's therefore vital that we take a holistic approach to understanding student wellbeing, and consider how we can support students to minimise stressors and manage concerns.

We recommend that partners engaging in research with international students are mindful about the language they use to understand the mental health and wellbeing of their international student populations. It may be worth focusing more on qualitative experience and perceptions of challenges rather than using quantitative self-report measures of wellbeing.

2. Language, Culture and Communication

Our evidence suggests that language, communication, and cultural barriers are all significant factors when considering the experiences of international students. Through our research, we have found that these factors can manifest across three key dimensions: building social relationships; academic performance (Mori, 2000); and talking about mental health, wellbeing and support. In this section, we explore the former two issues, whilst the latter is discussed in further detail in the Support section (page 22).

" ...in many countries mental health issues are heavily stigmatised or not recognised at all, leading to difficulties in students recognising symptoms or agreeing to seek help."

Turner, 2017

Community, Belonging and Acculturative Stress

Acculturation, the process of integrating and trying to 'fit-in' with a new group of people, a community, or a whole culture, is something the international student population universally experiences in some form. From our literature review, we know that international students report experiencing significant levels of acculturative stress (Russell et al., 2010), which can impact their mental health and self-worth, leading to isolation and feelings of depression (Lee and Rice, 2007; Mori, 2000).

Starting university is already a challenging transition for the student population, with the need to manage establishing independence, getting into a new routine, adapting to new teaching and learning environments, and making friends (Student Minds, 2018). Acculturative stress is an additional challenge that international students have to grapple with, on top of the regular challenges, as they manage all of the aforementioned while dealing with culture shock, language barriers and potentially discrimination, racism and xenophobia.

"[It's] important that we listen hard to those experiences. A painful example - international students are often treated very very differently by landlords when they come into the country. They're often treated with awful experiences of racism, discrimination and bias. There's the work to make students feel like they belong in an institution but also the work to help them feel they belong in the local community and the places they're living."

Roundtable attendee

"When you're abroad you have a different mind-set than people who are locals. You are in a different situation, so you want to travel a lot, you want to experience a lot, you want to discover the city."

**Focus group attendee.
(German undergraduate student,
London School of Economics)**

Some international students have also identified this experience even when they had previously lived in the UK or countries with a similar culture. The cultural attitudes instilled in them through their upbringing are still ingrained within their identities and this can manifest barriers for them. This is an additional burden faced by diasporic populations that are also part of the international student community.

"Moving to university is a huge change for anyone. A new environment, new people and the stresses of working on a degree without the familiarity of home and family, is a challenge in and of itself. For an international student however, these challenges may be amplified and take a toll on one's mental health. It cannot be overstated how much of a culture shock it can be going abroad for any period of time, much less for the duration of an undergraduate degree or more."

Lim, 2016

"I did go to a British school, and I'm very climatized to everything, but I still find it difficult. There is a big cultural barrier for me because of my upbringing… It's not a hugely deep thing, but its smaller, irreconcilable things that can get in the way of making really deep, meaningful connections with people… everyone comes from different countries, so we have different perceptions on different people, so it's quite difficult for me to know every culture, or every difference."

Focus group attendee. Lebanese undergraduate student, LSE.

"London wasn't that different from America, and I thought I'd adjust easily. But now, completely alone in another country, the culture shock was suddenly very real – and so was my anxiety, although I didn't know what to call it at the time. Everyone talks about how studying abroad will be the time of your life – and for me, it was. But I wasn't prepared for the anxiety that came with transitioning."

Alyssa - Student Minds Blog Author (Student Minds, 2019)

In our research, we found that some of the starkest differences between international and UK-domiciled respondents related to concerns around community, relationships and belonging. The proportion of international students who reported being 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about issues in this theme was notably higher (see Graph 5).

Community, relationships and belonging

Legend: International | UK-domiciled

- Making friends: International 68%, UK-domiciled 47%
- Keeping up socially with friends: International 64%, UK-domiciled 50%
- Loneliness: International 58%, UK-domiciled 52%
- Dating and romantic relationships: International 47%, UK-domiciled 33%

X-axis: 0% 20% 40% 60% 80%
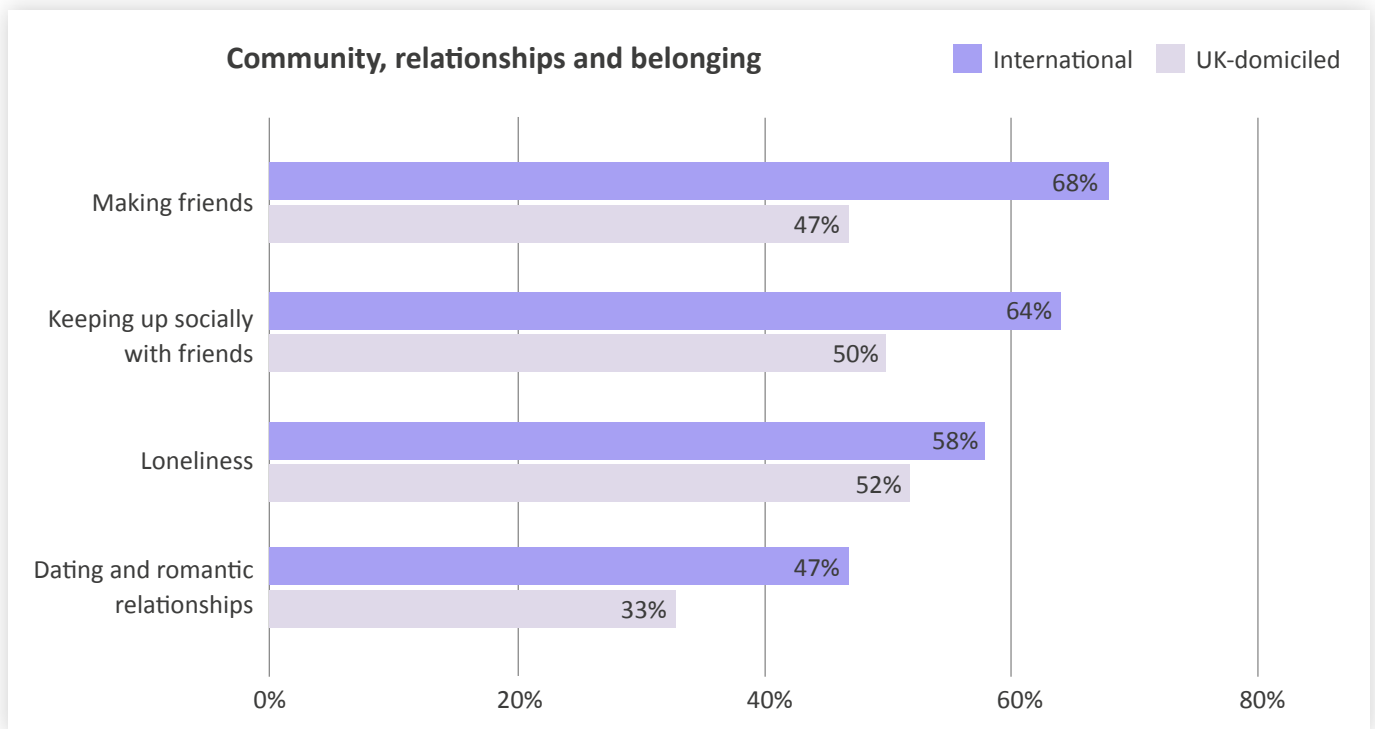
Graph 5: Percentage of students reporting feeling concerned or very concerned about issues, September 2021

Feelings of isolation and alienation were also described by the International Student Panel, who reflected on the norms and expectations of 'student life' which many struggled to engage with. This included the culture around drinking alcohol and going out clubbing, behaviour in communal living spaces, and engagement in extracurricular activities. Some international students told us that they felt a misalignment between how they wanted to spend their time at university and what was perceived as normal - or even essential - aspects of student life. While many panel members praised efforts made by their university and students' union to help them fit in, some reported that these efforts often felt inconsistent with other messages they received regarding fees, visas, the restrictions on their ability to work, and to make the most of the opportunities that were, supposedly, available to all students. Such issues were also highlighted in the focus groups conducted by 180 Degrees and were also identified in our literature review (Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Thurnell-Read et al., 2018).

"The other thing that I experienced as an international student was a constant reminder that I didn't belong here. The constant visa checks and the threatening emails go against all the efforts made by the unis and SUs to make students feel welcome and that they belong. Important to be mindful that those things are happening while efforts are being made to try to build a sense of community."

Roundtable attendee

Other research has also explored the impact of discrimination and stereotyping on international students' sense of integration and belonging. It has been found that both 'negative stereotypes' (actual stereotypes held by UK-domiciled students) as well as 'perceived stereotypes' (remarks that might not have been intended to be stereotypes, but that have been perceived as such by international students) can isolate international students and increase their feelings of vulnerability (Bradley, 2000; Imai, 2017). Bradley (2000) also found that there was a 'widespread sentiment' among international students that UK-domiciled students do not understand or respect their culture, whilst Imai (2007) found a relationship between how international students felt they were perceived and their willingness to 'disclose' themselves.

When discussing the issue of community and belonging at our International Student Mental Health Roundtable, it became clear that this is a challenge the sector is continuously trying to manage and improve. University staff recognise the wide-reaching practical and personal challenges that many international students face when they first arrive in the UK, and outlined how they attempt to mitigate these. Examples included: hosting events during welcome week and throughout the first term; offering guidance for practical matters such as registering with a GP and setting up bank accounts; providing welcome packs with essential items such as bedding and kitchen equipment; and providing information packs that are tailored specifically to international students. It was broadly felt that this helped international students to feel more accustomed to their new university environment and aware of the support available to them. Hosting events also allowed international students to build supportive networks and communities where there was a sense of shared experience, helping to tackle isolation and loneliness. However, there was also a general recognition that this could go further, with an emphasis on the importance of social connections and the non-academic student experience.

"Lots of initiatives that institutions put in place involve lots of things around tracking their arrivals, having a welcome party, providing bedding and kitchen packs and ensuring that international students are supported with lots of the initial steps. It is often an unusual and different environment for international students to transition into."

Roundtable attendee

"In the pandemic we did a virtual reception to ensure we were still offering something for the students and to make sure they have some familiar faces amongst staff and their peers. Key to support with as many practical elements as possible."

Roundtable attendee

"There is a need for more of a focus around ensuring we're doing as much as we can to ensure there is a good welcome, there's lots of connection and lots occurring beyond teaching."

Roundtable attendee

Academic Experience

For all students, the academic experience is the one central, core element of the university journey - a universal touch-point to engage all students. Through our research, we have found that for many international students and their families, there are often specific expectations around the quality of the experience they'll get from their time at a UK university.

In our primary quantitative research, we have consistently found that responses from UK-domiciled and international students have been similar when exploring academic experiences and issues. For instance, in January 2022, almost identical proportions of UK-domiciled and international students reported accessing academic or learning support during Autumn term 2021 (41% and 42% respectively), and similar proportions also reported feeling concerned about their academic performance (83% and 80%). Some of the differences we identified between groups were around confidence and readiness: in September 2021, international students were more likely to say they felt ready to take the next step up academically (68%) compared to UK-domiciled students (60%). Similarly, 69% of international students felt confident that they could succeed academically in the next academic year, compared with 59% of UK-domiciled students.

On the other hand, insights shared by university staff at the International Student Mental Health Roundtable reflected a different picture. When discussing the challenges faced by international students, a key theme arose around students' readiness for Higher Education. Some staff who work in professional support roles shared that the demands on academic support services at their institutions have been increasing, along with instances of plagiarism and academic misconduct. One attendee noted that at their institution, international students were over-represented in such cases - an issue which has been widely debated within the HE sector over many years (Owen, 2021; Bamford and Sergiou, 2005). Though evidence is largely anecdotal, we recognise that many institutions and organisations, have worked extensively to improve international students' understanding of plagiarism in UK HE. Through this discussion, it became clear that institutions must carefully consider the support on offer to international students to ensure their readiness for study. Participants at the Roundtable highlighted the importance of effective induction periods and suggested students should be offered content to work-through prior to the start of an academic year.

"They seem not entirely ready for the world of universities. The induction programmes have had to go on for much longer and the peer support needed is increased. We've learnt that the anxieties students have about starting somewhere new are much more acute now than they used to be and persisting for longer."

Roundtable attendee

"Fitness to study referrals have been increasing. There's lots of focus around academic readiness, not necessarily specific to international students."

Roundtable attendee
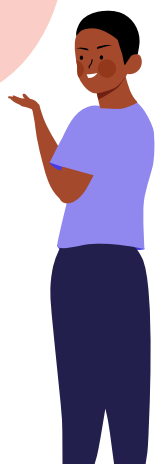
Further, the International Student Panel also highlighted a number of challenges relating to their academic experience. Panel members spoke to us about: the frustrations felt around value for money and the conflict caused by differing tuition fees for international and UK-domiciled students; the challenge of keeping up with other students when English wasn't their first language; and managing the pressure from family to perform well academically and to live up to their expectations.

"I think here you see a lot of [home] students not doing anything for the first four months because they don't need to. They can succeed just as well if they don't. I think that probably works for some people, but at least for me right now, it's scary. I've never been in this position before - knowing that I need to sort of structure my schedule over the next month and a half/two months so that I know everything that I need to know"

Focus Group attendee. (American undergraduate student, London School of Economics).

"Pressure: This one is huge for college students and even more for international students. Your parents may have sent you there to study, get an internship and eventually a job. So you try to make it a priority. But you also have people asking you to go out, professors' pressuring you with deadlines. It can be overwhelming…"

Rodrigo, Student Minds Blog, (2020)

"Home students complain a lot about online classes for £9k, but I'm paying £21k for three recorded lectures per week… this is very unfair, why would you come to the UK [for university]?"

International Student Panel member

"Besides the fact that staying in a different timezone makes it challenging to do classes… having that in person experience, getting to know a campus and a culture, getting to know people… is meant to be part of uni."

International Student Panel member

3. Support

When it comes to support, existing literature and data suggests that there are notable inequalities between international students and their UK-domiciled counterparts. These inequalities are observed at multiple levels: when considering whether a student's support needs are met; whether support is truly accessible; and the perceived quality of the support provided.

Support Needs

According to a 2019 Office for Students briefing, a number of universities and colleges have previously reported that international students were less likely than UK-domiciled students to access their counselling or wellbeing services. This aligns with the findings of our own research, conducted in May 2021, which found that 18% of international students had accessed support via a university counselling or wellbeing service during their time at university, compared to 26% of UK-domiciled students.

Through our quantitative research, we also explored students' own perceptions of their support needs and preferences. When comparing the responses from international students and UK-domiciled students, there were some notable differences, particularly around perception of support needs. Despite similar proportions of international (55%) and UK-domiciled students (53%) reporting they have the tools and skills they need to manage their own wellbeing, international students were more likely than UK-domiciled students to report needing support to manage their wellbeing (48% vs 41%). Similarly, as noted previously, international students were also more likely than UK-domiciled students to anticipate needing support in all of the areas we listed

(Graph 4). The most notable differences were seen around employability, social life, life skills and finances - areas which certainly warrant further exploration in future research.

Our findings also highlighted a disparity in the disclosure rates between international and UK-domiciled students. Of respondents who reported having a current or previous mental health issue, just 23% of international students had disclosed this to their university, compared to 35% of UK-domiciled students (Graph 6).

"Some students experienced major issues when trying to access welfare support. They were signposted to the [university services] only to be told "it's for home and EU students only"... [international] students didn't perceive that they got the same kind of specialised support..."

Shutt, 2022
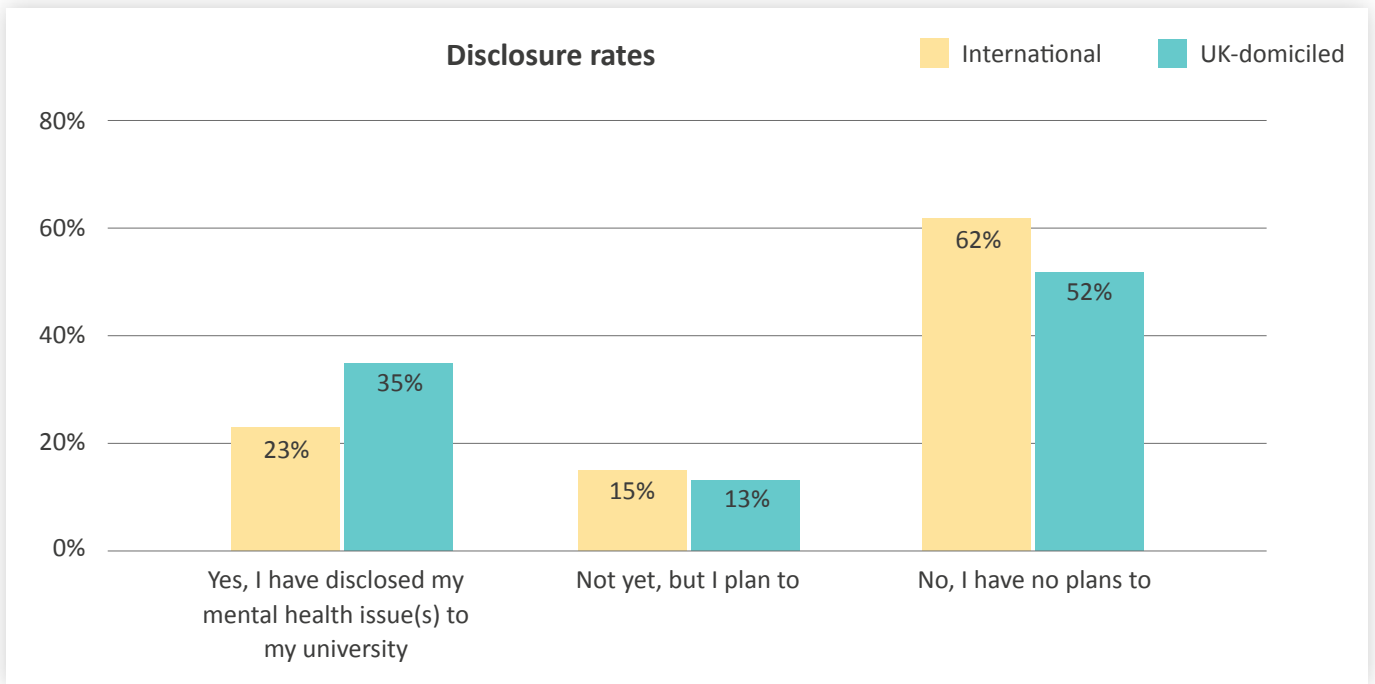
Disclosure rates

Graph 6: Disclosure rates of students with experience of mental health issues, September 2021

Almost two thirds (62%) of international student respondents with experience of mental health issues reported having no intention of disclosing this to their university, compared to 52% of UK-domiciled students. This seemed to contrast with responses around support preferences, where international students reported a higher preference than their UK-domiciled counterparts for accessing university services (54% and 46%, respectively) or students' union services (28% and 20%, respective) (Graph 7).

Support preferences
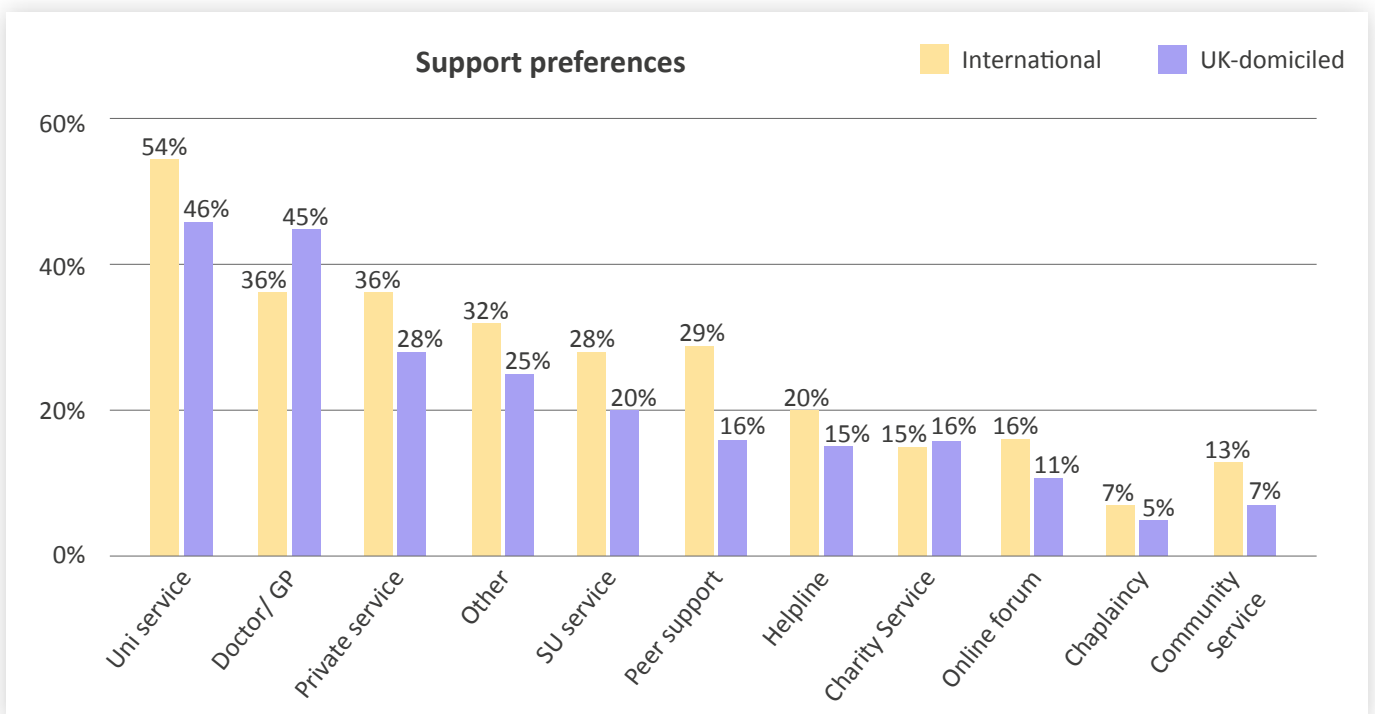
Graph 7: Percentage of students reporting they would access support from services, September 2021

Both the International Student Panel and the attendees at the Roundtable event echoed and validated these findings. They reflected on a number of key themes which had emerged during their own experiences, work and research, which included: the appetite for support from international students contrasted with low engagement with the support provision on offer; the inaccessibility of navigating the support landscape; and the challenge of using the right language to engage an international student audience. Clearly, this issue is complex and often contradictory, further compounding the challenges explored in this report.

"The only counselling group that survived the transition to online [during the pandemic] was the international one - the men's, women's and general counselling group all failed due to lack of engagement. We believe that lots of home students were engaging with their families and homes so could get support from their networks in that way. For lots of international students, who felt quite isolated, this was the only means for university support."

Roundtable attendee

"The services I run are about student-run wellbeing. Lots of health-promotion, prevention and creating a sense of belonging. Last year we took more careful stock of which demographics were engaging with these initiatives... International student engagement was low - was mostly EU/ UK students and predominantly females. We've been trying to reflect on the barriers that may exist and whether it is in the language that we use. We do have a huge international population so our programmes aren't representative of the populations we're serving."

Roundtable attendee

International Student Panel members highlighted the shock they felt about the UK's openness in talking about mental health, and how this contrasted with their home countries' attitudes - with many highlighting that it's seen to be an incredibly private or taboo topic to discuss. They felt they were coming to university with different levels of understanding and confidence when it came to mental health difficulties - where home students may have been perceived to be more open to admitting they're struggling and seeking help, international students reported feeling more isolated and not knowing where to go for support. This challenge is exacerbated for international students as they report worrying about the confidentiality of accessing services. Some panellists spoke to us about fears that accessing services would result in their parents being informed, or the implication it could have on their course or visa. This uncertainty around confidentiality creates barriers for international students in feeling confident in their ability to access and utilise the services.

"Confidentiality concerns are a big part of anxiety around university services. Visiting students have to sign a contract that says severe mental health problems can be reported or lead to study termination. The policy is threatening"

International Student Panel Member

"I would never seek help from a professional because it kind of intimidates me more, it's just the fact that you have to talk to someone you're like seeing a specialist is kind of scary... it would make myself feel like it's bad"

Focus group attendee.

Both panellists and Roundtable attendees also highlighted the inaccessibility of the often confusing support landscape. The language used to advertise support, along with the wealth of information that students are expected to digest in their induction weeks, is a challenge the sector needs to address. Students are expected to make sense of where to go when there are university counselling services; financial support services; careers counselling; the students' union; college or accommodation support teams; peer support groups; societies; mental health advisers; disability services; and academic tutors. This is in addition to the many support options which exist externally to the university, such as GPs, hospitals and third sector services. Knowing where to go for the right help is a challenge that all students face, and not wanting to have to share their story over and over again is a universal experience. But this challenge is exacerbated for international students because of the language: 'counselling', 'peer support', 'advice', etc. are terms which may be unfamiliar to many students, and if we make the assumption that students understand what that support is, services become increasingly inaccessible.

"I didn't know what counselling is, no one considers what mental health is properly. Important to explain what all these things are, have different pathways"

International Student Panel member

"There is a language focus here, 'counselling' is used as a catch-all for all kinds of support and there's definitely a comms piece we need to do to help map out all of the support that is available."

Roundtable attendee

Through discussions with staff and students around what is effective in communicating support to international students, we have identified a number of key themes. First: the importance of partnership and co-production. Institutions need to build strong relationships with their students' union's International Student Officer and international student societies, to ensure there is consistent communication and signposting about the services available. Second: the importance of the timing of communications. Putting all of the emphasis on communicating everything students need to know in Freshers'/Welcome Week is something that staff and students have told us just doesn't work. Communicating select, key information pre-arrival and throughout the whole of the first term (in lectures, on posters in accommodation, and through social media) is crucial to ensure students receive and retain the information they need. Third: the importance of having a clear 'first point of access' for students who aren't sure where to go for help. As noted previously, there's a wealth of support available to students but accessing the right support requires a degree of self-triaging, which can present a barrier.

"Use students' union cultural and society groups more because that's one of the first things students look for more, want to join specifically for their country… it's a good way to transmit messages; communicate with those Presidents; support buddying schemes within those societies"

International Student Panel member

"Also there needs to be a big focus on our websites. We need to strip these right back to be clearer and more accessible. Need to view these through the eyes of students."

Roundtable attendee

'Check out these resources on the Globally Minded Toolkit:'

- Signposting Pre-arrival Mental Wellbeing Support
- Communicating with International Students Before they Arrive

The NHS

A specific challenge around support provision and international students relates to the NHS. Attendees at the Roundtable spoke to us about the challenge of international students navigating NHS services - being confused by prescription charges when they were told 'everything is free' or going to A&E before trying to access a GP or calling 111. Not equipping students with the information they need to access the right services results in frustration for the NHS - when students inadvertently become a disruption - and for students, who feel like they're bounced around without getting the timely support they need. This issue has been identified previously in Scotland, where improving referral pathways and link-ups between Higher Education Institutions and the NHS became a priority because of students, particularly international students, getting confused by the relationship between university and NHS services (Maguire and Cameron, 2021).

"We hear that international students do want more information but they don't know how/where to get it. A key thing we always hear is around being told the NHS is free but then getting confused by prescription charges and dental care and opticians."

Roundtable attendee

"The points around healthcare and how it's used is really key. We have so much strain on the NHS, partly from students going straight to emergency services before accessing 111 or GPs or alternative services. If we don't educate students about the 'how-to-use-the-system', students then become disruptive to the system."

Roundtable attendee

Cultural Competency

Cultural competency is a topic that emerged across literature, in conversations with the International Student Panel, and at the Roundtable event. Though the issue does not only affect international students, it is vital to be aware of.

By cultural competence, we mean that staff working with students need to be aware of how (or whether) they can sensitively support students from a range of backgrounds, beliefs, cultures and identities. With international students in particular, this may involve an awareness of global events that might be impacting international students; being more sensitive to the heightened risk of discrimination, racism and xenophobia; and being mindful of minority stress and the various intersections of an international student's identities.

"Having language and linguistically competent providers, culturally competent providers, reduces the stigma."

International Student Panel member

Check out our report LGBTQ+ Student Mental Health: The challenges and needs of gender, sexual and romantic minorities in Higher Education (Smithies and Byrom, 2018) where we discuss the importance of services being culturally competent in supporting LGBTQ+ students.

4. Global Events

A key theme that arose in conversations with the International Student Panel when discussing their experiences with university and students' union support staff was how staff could be ignorant to global events that were having an impact on students. There was also criticism that awareness of global issues was often limited to Europe and the Western world, and some students felt an inequality in how and when their institutions and students' unions chose to acknowledge and address issues. Research echoes that political developments, whether in international students' home countries or in the UK, can have a significant impact upon their mental health (Pacheco, 2020).

While the panel acknowledged it would be too much to expect all members of staff to be constantly aware of global events, they felt strongly that it would be good practice for some staff in the institution to have responsibility for being aware of geo-political developments and consider how they may need to support their international students accordingly. An example of good practice that a panellist shared was when Nigeria was in the midst of a financial crisis, a member of staff reached out to check-in and see if the panellist needed financial support, signposting them accordingly.

When discussing this topic at the Roundtable, attendees agreed that to be truly global institutions with rich, diverse international communities, speaking out on global issues needs to be at the core of universities' work. This also involves providing meaningful, practical support to international students - present and future - be that through financial, administrative, legal, mental health or accommodation support.

"There should be some kind of policy or procedure in place so that staff know what they're doing. Universities need contingency plans for unrest, conflict and natural disasters in other countries."
International Student Panel member

"I think universities are great about talking about global outlook and globalisation. But there is more we could do around responding to crises outside of the UK. The social media teams of universities were proactive with UK current affairs - E.g. the pandemic, BLM, etc. - but I would love to see this echoed in responding to more global affairs. If we want to be global, international communities, we need to be vocal around more global issues."
Roundtable attendee

"Lebanese students have issues with government blocking funding due to unrest and violence. University told students to take a leave of absence. If a country is having problems, universities should help the students. Myanmar students are also impacted… I got told the university is a business. In Portugal, university is a right and entitlement."

International Student Panel member

"Students' unions can be exclusionary when they talk about a crisis or disaster in one part of the world, but not another. I'm from Cyprus and no-one talks about what is happening on the Turkish half of the island."

International Student Panel member

"Disputes between international actors, the election of controversial leadership, and the implementation of seemingly ethnocentric or intolerant national policies, are all mechanisms by which macro-level developments locally influence international student experiences and wellbeing."

Pacheco, 2020

"Universities are so brilliant because they are international, diverse communities. This is where the magic happens."

Roundtable attendee

"The UK is only concerned with… issues EU countries are going through. The rest of the world is seriously neglected. Very big shame and the stigma needs to be dealt with if the UK wants to live up to its promise of equality."

International Student Panel member

Impacts of the Coronavirus Pandemic

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the coronavirus outbreak to be a pandemic, as the virus began to spread quickly around the world with devastating consequences. Within a short period of time, it became clear that international students were being disproportionately impacted, as different countries were affected and varying degrees of Government-imposed restrictions were introduced. Some international students stayed in the UK (although not always by choice), while others returned to their home countries and continued their studies at a distance.

Throughout the pandemic, Student Minds committed to actively listening to students in an attempt to understand the widespread impacts of the virus and associated restrictions. In each wave of our primary research, we explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the student community, including on their mental and physical health, academic experience, access to support and overall university experience.

When considering the mental health implications of the pandemic, UK-domiciled and international students reported similar effects in all three waves: In Wave I (April 2021), 75% of UK-domiciled students reported that their mental health and wellbeing had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, compared to 72% of international students. In Wave II (September 2021), these figures were 63% and 62% respectively and in Wave III (January 2022), they were 65% and 62%. Thus, according to these findings, international students did not face disproportionate mental health impacts during the pandemic.

Similarly, our research has found that comparable proportions of international and UK-domiciled students reported negative impacts on their academic experience and overall university experience:

- In Wave I (April 2021), 84% of international students reported that the pandemic had negatively impacted their academic experience, compared to 81% of UK-domiciled students.
- In Wave III (January 2022), 59% of international students said that the pandemic had negatively impacted their overall university experience, compared to 61% of UK-domiciled students.

Throughout our research, we have asked questions around students' perceptions of their own support needs during the pandemic, as well as their access to support. In Wave I, we found that similar proportions of international and UK-domiciled students received the support they felt they needed during the Covid-19 pandemic (18% and 20% respectively). Equally, similar proportions of both groups said that although they felt they needed help during the pandemic, they didn't get it. This figure was slightly higher for international students (49%) than for UK-domiciled students (44%). Also in Wave I, we explored students' general perceptions of their support needs. Again, similar numbers of both groups reported that they had the tools and skills they needed to manage their own wellbeing (46% in both), and that their ability to manage their own wellbeing had declined during the pandemic (44% UK-domiciled; 42% international).

Clearly, contrary to the evidence we have gathered through the other areas of our work, these findings suggest that overall, international students were not disproportionately impacted by the pandemic when it came to their mental health, academic experience or support needs. However, of course these responses are just a snapshot of how some students felt at the time the surveys were conducted - it's vital that these findings are taken alongside the student voice represented

in other spaces and outlined throughout the rest of this section and report, so we can understand the nuance of students' experiences during the pandemic.

While working with the International Student Panel during the 2020/21 academic year, many of our discussions were framed within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Panellists spoke to us about the challenges of being expected to attend seminars at anti-social hours while they studied remotely; of feeling disconnected from their university community; and of the practical challenges of receiving support while studying abroad.

When discussing the challenges faced during the pandemic at the Roundtable, attendees spoke about how valuable they found the resources and guidance being communicated by sector bodies (Office for Students, 2020a; Office for Students, 2020b; Universities UK, 2021). However, some attendees did highlight the practical challenges they encountered when it came to being able to effectively support international students - particularly the challenges faced in terms of what support (particularly therapeutic) could be offered to students while studying remotely from their home countries, as well as the challenge around supporting international students to access hardship funding.

"Online teaching means no need technically to be present in the UK and the whole idea of the university has been lost, can learn online for some courses, but have missed that essential university journey… the loss of community is worrying."
International Student Panel member

"I also heard a lot from friends about people not having access to their previous mental health service provider because they have left the country; peer support groups not being able to provide support nor counsellors provide appointments to international students."
International Student Panel member

"Doing virtual classes in your home country far away from your campus and feeling isolated or lonely, feels more alienating in that way, having very different life and in person experiences to the other people in your class; feel like you're different from your peers"
International Student Panel member

"Hardship funding often isn't accessible to international students accessing that funding as it comes through in access budgets. This did improve during the pandemic but there was a challenge around how OFS communicated who the funding was available for. Also some challenges in perceptions of what the impact of accessing and receiving hardship funding would be on their sponsors/ grants/ etc."
Roundtable attendee

"Hardship funding was a challenging period as it was hard for students to understand what qualified as 'hardship'. Those that needed money were waiting months for money they needed to order PCRs in order to get back to their home countries and it was massively disruptive."

Roundtable attendee

"There needs to be positive messaging to normalise and validate international students being able to use funding like this."

Roundtable attendee

The Office for Students released a new briefing note on the subject of supporting international students in light of Covid-19 (Office for Students, 2020a). Much like their previous briefing note on supporting student mental health during the pandemic (Office for Students, 2020b), which we contributed to, this piece contains case studies and best practice for institutions to follow.

The OfS briefing note spotlights good practice where certain institutions have provided emergency hardship funds specifically dedicated for international students without recourse to public funds.

The UUKi guidance on Supporting international student financial hardship does have some useful points to consider for institutions when it comes to signposting and communicating resources available to international students: Supporting international student financial hardship - guidance for universities (Universities UK, 2021).

The Political Landscape Back Home

Another key issue which emerged through our research was the impact of political developments in a students' home country. For instance, economic turmoil, corruption or other significant political events can contribute to feelings of uncertainty, distress, and helplessness. Similarly, international conflicts can impact students from affected countries and wider regions. In the last few years, conflicts in Yemen, Afghanistan and Hong Kong have had a notable impact on the mental health and wellbeing of international students from those countries.

Most recently, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has renewed interest in this issue among sector leaders, highlighting the wide-reaching impacts of war and the vital importance of effective support for students. This particular war has received extensive media attention and prompted responses from organisations across the UK, including Higher Education Institutions. Below, Iain Brennan explores what some of this support has entailed.

Working with international students is a lot like travelling the world without ever having to leave the comfort of your office. We learn about different cultures and traditions of far-flung places. We help students overcome inevitable cultural misunderstandings and see first-hand how international students add richness and new opportunities to our academic and local communities. Unfortunately, we also see the world's problems come to our door and we must support students through troubled times when far from home and their usual support network. At Kaplan International Pathways we take a proactive and individual approach to monitoring students potentially affected by world events.

An example of this approach was during the build-up to the war in Ukraine: we monitored the wellbeing of our Ukrainian and Russian students through personal tutorials and discreet outreach. Staff looked out for any potential concerns and signposted students to relevant resources and professional support. Students felt reassured that we were monitoring the situation in their home country and someone in the UK cared about what they were going through.

Immediately after the outbreak of war, we proactively reached out to affected students, including those from Belarus. We refrained from sending generic emails and addressed students individually by name in correspondence to maintain a personalised approach. Students were invited to one-to-one meetings with support staff who were briefed not to make assumptions and maintain impartiality. With the Ukraine crisis, it was important for staff to understand that the region has a complex and interwoven history and how it isn't always possible to tell domicile or heritage from just a passport.

Staff regularly checked in with affected students, listened to any concerns and gave updates about local and national support. Students were prioritised by their address in their home country and proximity to the latest developments. We ensured Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian students received practical support including access to food and funds but also signposted to the relevant academic policies and support. A hardship scheme was set up which was simple and quick for students to access. Social media was monitored, immigration advice sessions set up and reassuring messages of support sent to the parents as well as agents and partners in the region.

As an international crisis develops, whether it's war, political unrest or a natural disaster far from the UK, institutes should take a proactive, targeted approach to wellbeing support for international students. It's important the response is fast and tailored to the circumstances but also ongoing. A crisis can have a long-term impact on those affected and it is important the event is not forgotten as news headlines move on. A simple follow up meeting can do wonders to show that we care about our international community.

Iain Brennan
College Services Director, University of York IPC (Kaplan)

Brexit

While it is vital that institutions are mindful of how global developments may impact the international student community, it is also important to consider the impact of political developments in the UK. A key, recent, example is one both the International Student Panel and the Roundtable attendees brought up: Brexit. On the 23rd of June 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union. The subsequent departure from the EU, 'Brexit', has been a challenging policy area for the sector to navigate as the uncertainty around implications for international students has been a cause of confusion and worry.

Evidence seems to suggest that the outcome of the EU referendum and subsequent decisions, announcements and agreements made as part of the Brexit negotiations have had a substantial impact on how international students are treated in the UK. Research has highlighted that EU students are now significantly more likely than non-EU students to plan to leave the UK upon graduation. Despite many of the rights and privileges EU students possess remaining broadly unchanged, the change in attitudes and the uncertainty of the future has influenced many international students' decision-making when considering post-graduation settlement (Falkingham et al., 2021). Other research also highlights the impact that the Brexit debate, the media discourse surrounding it, and the uncertainty caused by the outcome of the vote had on migrants living in the UK (Mintchev, 2021). Evidence suggests that the vote compounded acculturative stress, feelings of rejection, and experiences of loss (Teodorowski et al., 2021). In addition, the discourse in the media often framed the Brexit referendum as a vote focused on immigration policy (Johnson, 2017). Evidence highlights reports of increasing racial abuse, violence and hate crimes towards minoritised and international communities (Heald et al., 2018; Home Office, 2016).

The Higher Education sector, now more than ever, has a crucial role to play in advocating for the value brought into the UK by international students. As global institutions we need to be doing everything we can to ensure international students feel safe, welcome and supported throughout their studies.

"Once Brexit happened, EU students lost access to the loan from Student Finance. Universities started to rapidly adjust but [I had] never seen this kind of adjustments made for [non-EU] international students. Students paying the most get the least level of support."
International Student Panel member

"As a result of Brexit, EU students face unprecedented worries about future conditions affecting their costs, living standards and employability. Our study suggests that policy-induced uncertainty could have a powerful impact on micro-level decisions"
Home Office, 2016

"Has Brexit created, to any extent, an increase in racism?"
Roundtable attendee

"Brexit represents a hostile change to the acculturative context of the United Kingdom, marking an increase in structural stigma towards EU citizens, with likely implications for their stress and mental health"
**Teodorowski et al., 2021**

5. Intersectionality

Throughout this report, we have repeatedly emphasised the importance of recognising the heterogeneity of the international student population. Although there are many shared experiences and commonalities within the international student community, there are also many differences. Recognising the role that intersectional identities play in shaping students' experiences, it's vital that space is given to explore what we have learned through our listening and research to ensure we take a person-centred, intersectional approach to support provision.

Minority stress

To understand the important role intersectionality plays in shaping students' mental health, it may be useful to understand the impact of minority stress. Meyer (2003) discussed 'Minority Stress Theory' and provided a conceptual framework that helped to articulate the impact that a stressful social environment; the experience of prejudice or discrimination; and the need to manage aspects of one's identity would have on an individual's mental health.

As an example, when doing our research on LGBTQ+ students (Smithies and Byrom, 2018), we highlighted that there were international students within the LGBTQ+ community who were from conservative countries where homosexuality was illegal, and whose families would not be supportive of their identity. The fear of being inadvertently 'outed' - such as from a picture of a pride event being shared on social media, or their family finding out they were a part of the LGBTQ+ society - was a source of worry. While they can enjoy the freedom of being able to explore their identity while studying at UK institutions, many LGBTQ+ international students still have to manage the stress of concealing their identity.

Meyer's Minority Stress Processes (2003)
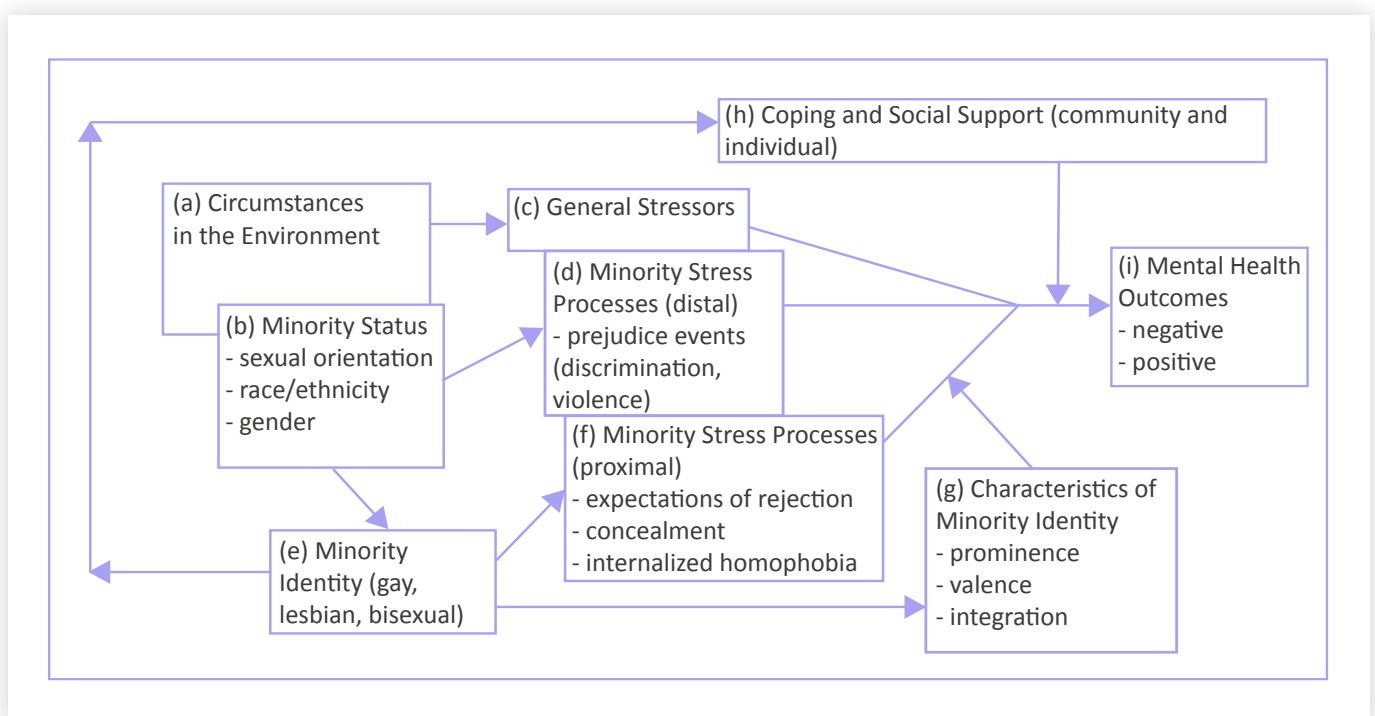
Discrimination, Racism and Xenophobia

Some international students also face the challenge of having to manage discrimination and prejudice in the form of xenophobia. Instances of xenophobia can come from fellow students, from s taff and from members of the local community - for instance through microaggressions in the classroom or discrimination by private landlords.

A key intersecting identity to acknowledge is race. In present-day Britain, racism is still widespread, with research showing that the majority of People of Colour have either witnessed or experienced a form of racial abuse within the last year (Lowles, 2022). As such, international students from racialised backgrounds may experience both racism and xenophobia whilst studying in the UK.

"Two-thirds of people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds think black and Asian people face discrimination in their everyday lives."

State of Hate 2022 Report/ (Lowles, 2022)

Recent research has also highlighted some of the specific challenges that Black students face during their time at university. Stoll et al (2022) explored the experiences of Black UK university students (both UK-domiciled and international) and the factors which impact their mental health. Stoll et al identified numerous themes to be affecting Black students' wellbeing:
- Academic pressure;
- Learning environment;
- Black gendered experience;
- Isolation and alienation;
- Culture shock;
- Racism;
- Support.

Some specific examples around Black international students were provided in discussions around isolation and alienation, and culture shock. It is clear that for some students, the relationship between their international status and their race creates additional challenges and barriers.

"There was evidence suggesting Black international-status students had to adjust to new environments, cultures, and lifestyles in the UK which was characterised by changes in diet, weight, physical activity, sleep, alcohol and smoking consumption, and led to psychological stress, depression, loneliness and loss of confidence. Black students who emigrated from a collectivist culture to the UK experienced culture shock during the transition from home to their new environment, that was characterised by worry, stress and insomnia. Contrastingly, there was evidence to suggest Black home-status students had slightly poorer mental health and lower self-esteem than Black international-status students"

Stoll et al., 2022:p77

"Participants who had the support of other Black students in their learning environment at university reported being more comfortable, understood and happy. However, this may not apply to Black students who are international students. One article reported a student being in tears, feeling alone and isolated, and almost dropping out of university due to their African accent isolating them from Black British students and non-Black students."

Stoll et al., 2022:p7

Furthermore, Unite Students' 'Living Black at University' report (2022) also highlights the many challenges that racialised students face during their time in UK Higher Education. The research found that 75% of Black students surveyed reported some level of negative impact on their mental health because of racism. This figure was also 75% for Asian students and 78% for students of mixed or multiple ethnicities. When specifically considering the experiences of Black international students, the report highlights the importance of acclimatisation and integration activities, along with a desire for this transition period to be extended.

"I sometimes feel … there is a lack of understanding of cultural differences, such as with Chinese/other international students sometimes people don't take into account just how different some aspects of culture can be and they find it difficult to understand that things are just done differently in different places and there is always a period of adjustment when moving to a new country. Things are never said out of malice but just out of ignorance/lack of awareness. We need to be a bit more open minded about our differences and also allow for adjustment periods when people come to live in our country."

Unite Students, 2022: 48

"I would like to stress a political & social context here in that there is a hostile environment that England is setting up. The sector is embedded in culture wars and we have to hold-out against that. We have to ensure calling out racism and discrimination is core to our business."

Roundtable attendee

"My manager has been openly racist and keeps stating she hates international students as they make her life harder because the lack of English."

Unite Students, 2022: 47

During and since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, we have also witnessed a rise in reports of Anti-Asian discrimination in the UK. This was disproportionately felt by international students, as we identified in our 'University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic' report (Frampton and Smithies, 2021).

"International students in the focus groups expressed a wish for a longer acclimatisation and integration period."

Unite Students, 2022: 53

Conclusion and Recommendations

Through this report, we have sought to share all of our learnings from over the past few years, by highlighting key themes and exploring findings from a number of sources. Our work with the International Student Panel and conversations with experts across the sector have shown that there is still a way to go in addressing the inequalities that exist between international students and UK-domiciled students.

We hope that this report will serve as a useful resource and tool for colleagues within the Higher Education sector, and that our findings will help to improve practices, policies and provision to better support international students throughout their time at university. Below, we offer a series of recommendations which we feel will enable universities to become truly inclusive, global institutions to be proud of.

1

We must address international student loneliness and improve feelings of belonging. We need to support students in making friends through activities, societies and events, to give them opportunities to connect and to feel welcomed into the university community.

2

Universities should review and redevelop induction programmes, with a focus on ensuring all students' readiness for academic study. We must equip students with the tools and information they need pre-arrival and when they begin their course, and we must ensure that academic support is easily accessible to students.

3

Universities should improve the accessibility of the support on offer to international students. There are a plethora of services to support students with a variety of needs and we need to ensure the offer is clear and understandable. Co-production with international students must be at the core of this work, to ensure universities effectively communicate what services are offered and how students can utilise them.

4

Universities must have clear and transparent confidentiality policies that international students can access and understand. It's crucial that international students are appropriately informed and comfortable with these policies so that they can be confident in accessing support services.

5

Staff and students have celebrated a variety of schemes and initiatives to enhance the international student experience - such as peer support groups, mentoring and buddy schemes. Universities should develop and deliver dedicated resources, initiatives and interventions specifically for international students.

6

Taking an intersectional approach and being culturally competent is necessary in order to effectively support the diversity of our student populations. Universities must invest in training and development to ensure staff and services can cater to the needs of students effectively. Universities should also explore the possibility of recruiting dedicated staff to support specific student populations, such as the international student population.

7

Universities must be proactive in identifying and responding to global events that could have an impact on international students. Universities must be prepared to reach out to affected students and offer them the support that they need.

8

Universities must be more vocal in celebrating the value that the international student community brings to our sector. We must all use our platforms to be more vocal in challenging racism, discrimination and xenophobia where we see it, to ensure our campuses, communities and cities are inclusive and welcoming.

9

Universities must utilise the initiatives, toolkits, guidance and interventions that already exist, some of which have been highlighted throughout this report.

10

Universities must prioritise co-production with student communities. This means listening to students' needs and empowering them to shape institutional practices, policies and provision. Throughout this report, we've shared what we've learnt and what some students and colleagues have told us works - but on a local level, universities and student communities will know what works best for them. If co-production is core to how an institution runs, students' needs can effectively be understood and met.
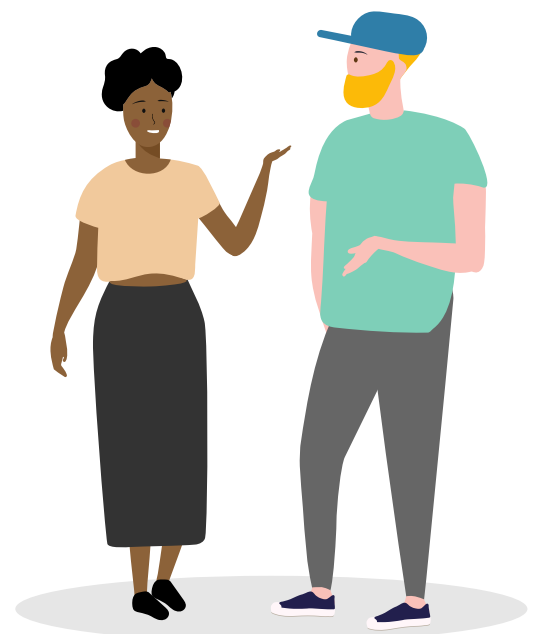
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