

Expressing the international student voice

What international students in
London tell us about their
experiences of studying at university



A note prepared for the International Higher Education
Commission (IHEC) by London Higher and Middlesex
University London

About the authoring institutions

London Higher represents 50 higher education institutions across the Greater London region, collectively educating over 507,000 students. Of these, over 179,000 are international students coming from at least 159 countries. London Higher is proud to have been the first sector organisation in the UK to produce a regional International Education Strategy and is one of the leading organisations on the 2023 #WeAreInternational campaign revival. London Higher strives to ensure that all our members share the same sense of pride in 'brand London' and are operating in ways to ensure the UK capital remains the best student city in the world.

Middlesex University London is a connected and collaborative global learning community with three international campuses in London, Dubai and Mauritius. The Dubai campus is the largest UK university in Dubai and has a five star rating for quality (KHDA Higher Education Classification 2022). The University has around 3000 international students on its London campus and 38,000 students from 122 nationalities worldwide. The University works with partners in 26 countries. Students and staff benefit from global education experiences that develop their global impact and help them get a job when they graduate.

Foreword

In an era characterized by the increasing globalization of education, the insights shared in this policy note provide a valuable perspective on the experiences of international students pursuing higher education in London. As Chair of the International Higher Education Commission, I am keenly aware of the significance of understanding the challenges and aspirations of international students, and they form a key part of the Commission. This paper serves as an important contribution to our ongoing efforts.

The discussions captured within this report were facilitated through a roundtable event, which brought together a diverse group of international students from several prominent London higher education institutions. The insights shared during this event provide a candid and comprehensive overview of the various dimensions of the international student experience in London.

One cannot underestimate the vital role that international students play in enriching the academic, cultural, and social environment of their host countries and institutions. As such, it is crucial that we not only celebrate their contributions but also actively seek to address the challenges they may face during their educational journey. It is also evident that there is a growing importance of regional co-ordinated collaboration to deliver effective international higher education provision, with London Higher being a pioneer in this space through their creation of the first regional International Higher Education Strategy.

This paper covers a wide range of topics, from arrival and integration challenges to academic experiences, cost of living concerns, and issues related to employment and representation. The recommendations outlined in the report are thoughtful and actionable, reflecting a commitment to enhancing the international student experience and ensuring that their voices are heard and valued.

I extend my sincere appreciation to London Higher and Middlesex University London for producing this piece of work, and I would like to recognize the international students who participated in the roundtable discussions and shared their experiences openly and honestly. Their contributions are at the heart of this paper's significance.

I now encourage educators, policymakers, institutions, and stakeholders alike to carefully consider the findings and recommendations presented in this report. By listening to the voices of international students and taking meaningful steps to address their needs, we can create an environment that fosters inclusive and enriching higher education experiences for all.

Chris Skidmore MP, Chair, International Higher Education Commission (IHEC)

Context

This policy note captures the discussion that was held between current international students from a range of London higher education institutions.

The students included a mix of undergraduates and postgraduates from a wide range of countries, including two from the European Union. The roundtable took place at Middlesex University London on 20 June 2023. It was hosted jointly by Professor Nic Beech, Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University London and Dr Diana Beech, CEO of London Higher, who are both Commissioners on the International Higher Education Commission (IHEC), helping to develop recommendations for a new UK 'International Education Strategy 2.0'.

The roundtable was held under the Chatham House rule and provided insights on how current international students are feeling about their higher education experiences in London, how well London higher education institutions are meeting their expectations and to what extent they feel involved in university governance processes. A summary of the key findings is provided below, with recommendations to improve areas identified by the students as needing more attention by institutions, partners and policymakers.

Special thanks go to Emily Dixon (Programmes, Communications and Research Officer at London Higher) and Jessica Strenk (Head of External Affairs at Middlesex University London) for shaping the roundtable and capturing the discussion.



Why do international students come to London?

There are many reasons why international students come to London to study. Students across many subject disciplines, from practical business courses through to lab-based science or humanities subjects, believe London is a centre for world-class education. London offers people the chance to kickstart careers, access funded research opportunities, and learn from world-class academics amid the city's beautiful architecture, diverse communities and bustling social life.

For students nervous about homesickness in a foreign country, London's status as a hub for many different cultural and ethnic communities makes prospective students feel they can access a 'home away from home' and experience London's culture without giving up their own. Furthermore, London's reputation as a global centre for business inspires students from around the world to believe they will be able to build professional experience, network and make connections here.

London: the best student city in the world

It isn't for nothing that London has retained the title of being the best city in the world for students for five years in a row. The [QS Best Study City Rankings 2024](#) place London in the top spot for its high concentration of world-class universities and highly positive feedback from students that have studied in the city. The UK capital scores particularly highly for outstanding career opportunities for graduates and its high levels of openness to international students.



Do international students' experiences match their expectations?

Arrival

The welcome international students receive from their universities and from the country as a whole can differ greatly. Universities, through their academic and professional service staff and students' unions, help international students feel welcome and valued. Clubs and societies, in particular, are an important avenue to help international students feel immersed in London life, helping them to make friends and academic and professional connections, both with students who share their heritage and others from elsewhere in the world.

The experience of arriving in the UK more generally though, away from the specific context of the university, is a different story. The preparation and administration required to enter the UK as an international student can be both challenging and 'othering', making some incoming students feel isolated and unwanted. International students face high costs obtaining visas, insurance and accommodation even before they arrive on British soil.

Issues or delays with any of these processes can have knock-on effects for the start of students' courses. On arrival, it can also be difficult for international students to obtain national insurance numbers and bank accounts or understand and arrange NHS care. The move towards cashless payments in shops on and off campus following the pandemic has exacerbated the challenge for international students to buy groceries and essentials while they are waiting for their bank accounts to be set up. For students who are refugees or asylum seekers, the paperwork is more complicated still and the issues more serious. Universities know students are facing these issues and work hard to support them, but there are limits to how much universities can do. This is particularly true in the context of the imminent changes to UK visa rules for the dependants of international students on one-year Master's courses, as this is a change out of universities' control and, as such, they can only guide and advise students about their options.



The power of partnerships

The international student experience makes clear just how much student satisfaction is dependent on factors outside university control – such as the ease of opening a bank account, liaising with landlords or feeling safe in a local area. All of this shows the importance of partnership working across the capital. That's why, at London Higher, we are proud to sit on [The London Partnership Board](#) alongside some of London's biggest and most influential organisations, including The Metropolitan Police and NHS London, to ensure we can work together on the issues that will help London to be the best place it can be for students and staff wherever they come from in the world. It is also why we designed our '[International Education Strategy for London](#)' with partnership working in mind, calling on different sectors across the capital to work with us to improve London's appeal to different international student recruitment markets.

Study experience

International students have high expectations for the academic experience of studying in London, and London universities generally live up to this. International students expect, and then receive, relevant and up-to-date career-specific training, interdisciplinary studies that prompt them to think differently, and forward-looking curricula that make them feel well-prepared for their future careers. London's international students particularly praise the practical, problem-solving work that is part and parcel of business and science courses in the capital and, in the humanities, students appreciate being able to learn from internationally respected academics.

Despite the generally high level of satisfaction with their courses, international students may experience challenges settling into study, both academically and socially. Where students are used to different forms of instruction and behaviour than their British counterparts, or where students come from a lower socio-economic background, the experience of sitting in a lecture or socializing in a new context for the first time can be challenging and potentially

alienating. If, for example, you are the only person taking notes with a pencil in a room full of laptops and tablets, it is easy to feel 'othered' or 'less than'. In many cases however, time and cultural immersion can help these problems to improve.

While academic staff are appreciated for being attentive, expert, and friendly, issues can arise for international students where staff lack preparation for teaching students with educational backgrounds other than English GCSEs and A-levels. Assumptions about what previous material every student in a room will have covered can exclude international students who hold good grades in relevant subject qualifications in their home country's education system. International students are also affected by how time-poor some of London's teaching staff appear to be (given they are also acknowledged to be busy with research, grant applications and other educational responsibilities) so they may find them hard to access to ask for support, even where staff are willing to help.

Case study from Middlesex University London

There are almost 100 active student groups supported by Middlesex University Students' Union. These societies and communities are based around students' interests, hobbies, cultures and identities with around thirty societies based around international students' nationalities and identities. Student Liberation Groups support students who face oppression and discrimination and are often underrepresented and disadvantaged during their time at University, whether in their education or in wider society.

Cost of living

While few international students arrive expecting London to be a cheap city in which to live and study, once here, many find the cost of living stressful and some, close to impossible to manage. Managing the rising cost of living is an issue that is affecting many students across London irrespective of where they come from, but international students are likely to have less of a safety net than 'home' students, being less able to work to bring in extra money due to visa restrictions, and unlikely to have the option of living with family. They also face additional

costs, including visas, the NHS surcharge and higher tuition fees. Compared to other popular destinations for international study, such as the US, the UK has fewer scholarships available to plug gaps in funding for international students to cover living costs, and hardship funds are not always available to international students.

Where students' savings are in currencies other than GBP, international events can cause changes to exchange rates which mean that their savings are worth less in real terms than was expected when they entered the country.

Students in employment

The 2023 HEPI/AdvanceHE Student Academic Experience Survey report found that, for the first time since polling began, more than 50% of students are now in paid employment. Between the 2022 and 2023 waves of the survey, the average time worked per week has increased by two hours. Paid work seems to be shifting from an 'optional extra' part of the student experience to an essential part of affording to study.



Transport

While London is a well-connected city with a wide range of public transport options and routes, this comes at a significant cost and, given the expanse of the city, it is not always possible for students to walk to and from their university and accommodation, or to social activities, to save costs.

Transport for London (TfL) offers a discount on fares for travel outside peak hours. However, this is hard for students to derive benefit from, as many are required – and want – to be on campus for the whole day, so they tend to travel during peak hours in the morning.

Accommodation

The high cost of accommodation in London has long been an issue of concern and it is becoming an even greater one in the context of the rising cost of living. The search for affordable accommodation is driving international students further and further out of the centre of the city, lengthening commute times and increasing the cost of travel. For international students, choosing a place to live in a large city they may have never visited before can be difficult, and can come with significant cost and time pressure. As a result, international students may find themselves in areas where they do not feel safe, particularly when news stories emerge about racially motivated violence against people of their ethnicity.

Securing accommodation is another major problem for international students.

Guarantors are often provided through outsourced, external agencies and the fees students must pay to secure a guarantor can make students feel they are paying for accommodation twice.

Moreover, where accommodation is at a significant distance from campus, this only heightens feelings of loneliness and isolation, especially where not all students in the accommodation are from the same university. International students may struggle to make connections with other students outside those who share their country of origin (who they largely meet through clubs and societies) or who they encounter through paid employment. It may take many years to meet and cultivate friendships with a diverse pool of friends (which is what our students wanted) through spontaneous social interaction.



Employment

The limit of 20 hours per week for paid employment for international students on a Tier 4 visa can leave some students from outside the European Union feeling like they have no way to earn their way out of being unable to cover their expenses. The limit makes desirable sectors inaccessible to even well-qualified international students because employers (for example, in computer programming jobs) would prefer to hire students who are able to be more flexible with their hours. As a result, international students feel forced into minimum wage jobs in the service sector, where employers will hire them for the number of hours they are allowed to work but the pay does not add up to enough to live on. It also means that students are unable to use skills relevant to their degrees. Students who were attracted to London for its professional networking and density of relevant, world-leading businesses may find themselves working in bars rather than the businesses they came to the city to access. While the 20-hour limit may have been reasonable in the past, today's international students of all backgrounds are having to work more to afford to live in expensive cities like London.

The fact international students cannot be self-employed also has negative consequences. It puts the brakes on their attempts to start new

businesses (particularly for London's many international business students), and students are unable to work as self-managed private tutors (which may have offered postgraduate students a valuable way to use their academic skills). This represents not just a loss for them, but for UK plc and other students who could benefit from their knowledge and ideas.

When it comes to degrees that contain placements or sandwich years in industry, international students can face more challenges finding suitable placements than domestic students. The same is true for the CV-boosting internships and work experience opportunities that so many international students wanted to come to London to access. Many opportunities are found to be only available to domestic students, perhaps because employers perceive the administrative burden that comes with hiring international students not to be worth the effort. Some universities are plugging this gap by making placements available in their own administration, communications and marketing offices to create more placement opportunities for international students. This is appreciated by the students, but it is essential that the city as a whole offers enough placements in enough sectors to enable London to live up to the reputation it has with international students before they arrive.

Powering London

London Higher's '[Powering London](#)' report highlights the wealth of opportunity presented by London's vast international student population, including providing companies with a strong foundation for growth, diversifying workforces and providing fresh insights and thinking. By working with universities across the capital, London's businesses can create mutually-beneficial pathways to employment for London's international students, so the students get the work experience they need and businesses can secure the talent they need.

Student support

Universities offer students the wellbeing and mental health support they are not easily able to access through the state and for issues such as stress and loneliness, university counselling and wellbeing support is well-appreciated. However, for serious health needs, there are forms of support universities cannot offer which need to be offered by state agencies including the NHS. International students find the paperwork necessary to access healthcare difficult and time-consuming, and they can then face long wait-times for both minor and major health issues.

International students greatly appreciate the infrastructure of university clubs, societies and students' unions. Societies bringing together students from particular national backgrounds or faiths can be a welcoming, fun, affordable and easy-to-access way to make friends in a new country, alleviate homesickness, celebrate cultural events in a community and find solutions to problems living in London. Engaging in clubs, societies and student representation can help international students feel immersed in the cultural and social life of the university, the city and the country.

Case study from Middlesex University London

Middlesex University provides enhanced support, including a dedicated Liaison Officer, for all international students. An International Orientation programme helps students connect with the University, UK institutions and peers before and after they arrive in the UK. The [Ready for Anything](#) welcome programme helps students to transition into university life including advice from current students, wellbeing support and practical tips on getting ready to study.

The cost of living for London's students

The HEPI report [Living and Learning in London](#) considered the experiences of international students in London that emerged in the 2022 Student Academic Experience Report data. The 2022 data indicated that international students particularly valued extracurricular activities and living with and near other students to help them have good wellbeing and foster a sense of belonging. Though their wellbeing in this time period was comparatively good, international students were also more likely than domestic students to indicate they often felt lonely. Rising costs, making it more and more difficult to afford participation in extracurricular activities (as discussed in [a recent Wonkhe blog](#) by London Higher's Emily Dixon), may also be heightening loneliness for London's international students.

Do international students feel their voice is sufficiently heard in higher education governance structures?

International students are, in general, very active in higher education governance structures for student representation, though not all groups of international students from different backgrounds have equal levels of presence in these spaces. Students who take part in university governance feel comfortable and happy with their roles there, though of course it is more difficult to guess the feelings of the students who do take part. The impression students had was that Indian students are more likely to take part in higher education governance than their Chinese colleagues.

The fact that international students pay significantly higher fees than British students can make many feel less valued than their domestic counterparts. The idea that their universities want their money more than they want the students themselves persists in some students' minds in some universities. Where students feel this way, it can lead to a belief that domestic students' views will matter more when universities consult with students.

This is not a universally-held belief, though, and some international students feel positive about the changes that have been achieved through universities listening to the views, feelings and needs of their international student body.

International students believe that they should be present on student consultation committees through the normal democratic processes and that they added value in being able to reflect the fact that their student experience differs from domestic students in several key ways at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. However, it was also stressed that international students are students and, while some of their concerns and interests differ from domestic students, the majority of issues on education, experience and representation are the same regardless of where a student is from. They also see a role for international student representation at the NUS-level, institutional governance level and a more national governmental level.

Recommendations

Our conversations with current international students across London have led us to suggest the following five recommendations to improve their experience:

01 **To improve employability and ease cost pressures**

The Mayor of London and London business groups should commit to working with London's higher education institutions to demystify the process for employing international students, either for paid-employment or course placements, to ensure that international students have the widest range of options for work experience while they are here.

02 **To avoid unnecessary hardship and exclusion**

Shops on or close to university campuses, or located in or close to student residences, should consider offering an option to pay in cash for essentials for international students, to ensure they retain a sense of dignity and still have access to groceries and essentials while they wait for UK bank accounts to be set up.

03 **To help foster a sense of belonging**

London Councils should commit to working with London's higher education institutions to provide pre-arrival welcome information about their local borough (conscious that in London this may be different to the borough in which the students are studying), highlighting local services such as GPs, hospitals and libraries, as well as faith, sport and wellbeing groups that students may wish to join, to help them integrate into local communities in addition to those provided by the university.

04 **To reduce transportation costs**

Transport for London should consider dropping the off-peak restrictions on its student travelcard to ensure students can be on campus all day without worrying about the extra costs.

05 **To ensure international students have a say in key governance issues**

Higher education institutions should make efforts to ensure the international student voice is represented in key governance structures. The Office for Students (OfS) in England and the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland should also consider the creation of an international student panel to ensure their views are reflected in key decision-making processes. In London, the GLA could ensure an international student voice is represented on the Mayor's Academic Forum to give an additional perspective on issues pertaining to the academic and accommodation experience.