

THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON TIER 4 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

WRITTEN BY MIGRANTS' RIGHTS NETWORK & UNIS RESIST BORDER CONTROLS
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Authors of the report

Migrants' Rights Network is a UK-based NGO that works alongside migrants in their fight for rights and justice.

Launched in 2006 as a campaigning organisation, our work brings together and deepens connections, understanding and solidarity within the migrants' rights sector and across sectors to share learning, facilitate access and bring about visionary and practical solutions. As an organisation that is challenging in our approach, we tackle strategically important but unpopular issues that particularly impact on groups most harmed by anti-immigrant policies and narratives.

MRN builds alliances with individuals and organisations so that migrants are properly represented at all levels of society. It works with and for migrant communities to influence stakeholders and effect structural change to achieve justice and equality for migrants. MRN recognises that achieving justice for *all* migrants strengthens society as a whole.

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Unis Resist Border Controls (URBC) is a national campaign made up of British, EU, non-EU, migrant students, lecturers, & university workers opposed to Home Office surveillance, the Hostile Environment, and border controls on UK campuses.

URBC started over two years ago, on the 5th March 2016 at SOAS, called by the Justice4Sanaz campaign to, *“create meaningful and sustainable discussion and action with other anti-racist, migrant rights grassroots campaigners and groups around the situation concerning non-EU international students, academics, and university workers within the neoliberal university system.”*

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Executive Summary

Covid-19 has created an unprecedented crisis and response for all affected in the UK. Yet, the government's response has still managed to let down those most vulnerable and at risk i.e. migrants, because they do not have access to a safety net, and are being forced into destitution and hardship.

Introduction

In June this year, the Migrants' Rights Network and Unis Resist Border Controls surveyed tier 4 international students to get a better perspective on how Covid-19 lockdown measures here and abroad were impacting them.

Our Findings

- We had 124 respondents from 31 universities across the UK with 28 nationalities represented. Two-thirds of the respondents were male.
- 81 students approached their university for support, advice and hardship funds. Of these 38 received some form of support/ advice and/or hardship fund. There were 12 who were rejected for hardship funds, and 28 who at the time of the study were awaiting a response.
- 70 of the 124 students, believed they were destitute or at risk of becoming destitute. Some had been able to access support via mutual aid groups but others had failed to find an organisation that could support them.

Recommendations

The experiences of tier 4 international students largely mirrored those of other migrants who have been facing hardship and poverty but they have an additional issue regarding their precarity based on the threat of being suspended from their courses, and their student visa's being revoked because they are unable to pay their tuition fees as per some universities demands.

There is a woeful lack of support structures in place within UK higher education for tier 4 international students. Some tier 4 students are too afraid to seek out help when needed for fear that this may impact upon their immigration status.

MRN and URBC urges the following

- **The National Union of Students (NUS UK) and all students' unions to work with us in supporting our efforts in ending the hostile environment policy and on disseminating materials informing tier 4 students of their legal rights.**
- **We urge all universities to make hardship funds available and easily accessible to all students without the need for exhaustive administrative process**
- **We urge universities to allow for a fee amnesty for students unable to pay their tuition fees as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- **We urge universities to join us in putting pressure on the Home Office to end NRPF and also in ending the hostile environment policy.**
- **For this reason we are demanding an end to NRPF to ensure that tier 4 students never find themselves destitute or forced into destitution.**

From 16- 22 June 2020, we asked tier 4 international students to respond to a survey describing their experiences and support from their universities whilst under COVID-19 lockdown. We particularly wanted to understand if they were facing destitution and hardship, especially because they have no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

Demographics

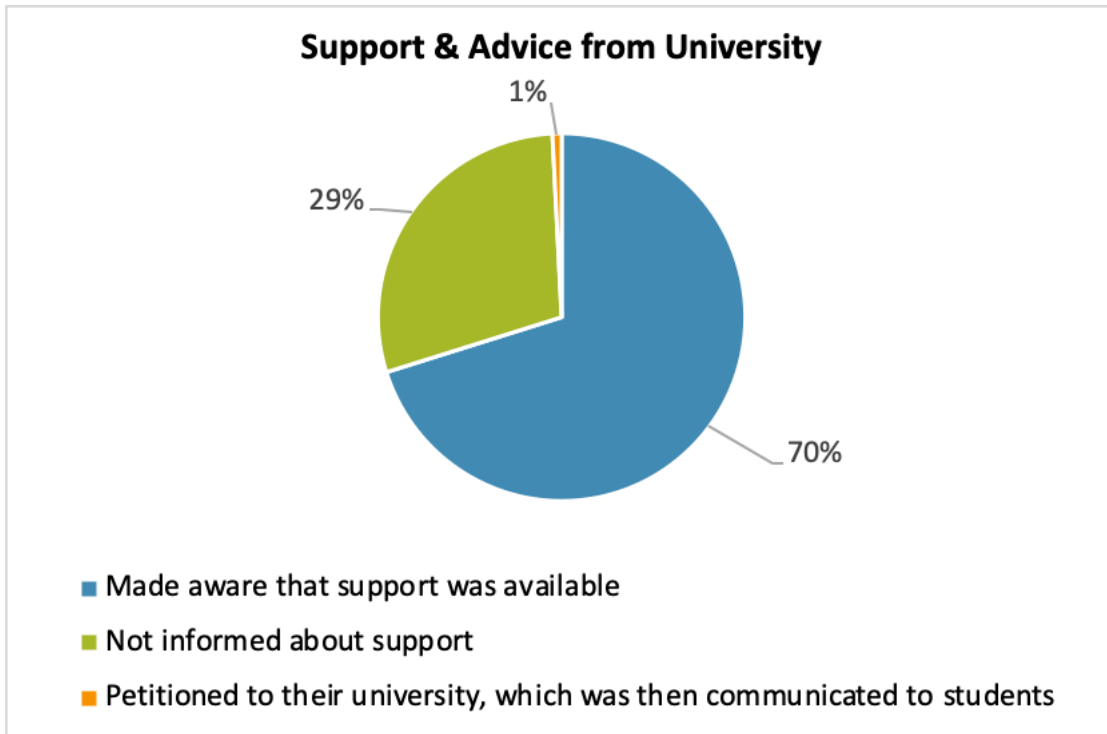
- 124 respondents from 31 universities across the UK, with significant contributions from students at SOAS, UCL and University of Bedfordshire.
- The majority of the students that responded were male aged between 18-25. 66% male, 33% female and 1% described themselves as other.
- 28 countries were represented from America to Taiwan. Significantly, 54% of the respondents were from India (*we had key contacts amongst those supporting Indian students, and therefore it was easier for them to access the survey*)

Support & Advice from University

In the survey, we asked students who had been informed by their university that they were offering support and hardship funds, or if they had approached their university or educational establishment for support and asked about the university's response.

- 87 out of 124 students were made aware that support was available. 36 were not informed and 1 mentioned that the students petitioned Queen Mary UoL for assistance, which was then communicated to students
- 81 students approached their university for either immigration or welfare advice, support or hardship funds.
- Of those who asked for support, 78 shared their response from the university:
 - 10 received financial support via the hardship fund
 - 28 were offered advice and support for welfare, housing or immigration issues
 - 12 were rejected for hardship funds (9 were students who were from India)

- 28 received no response to their query, including 1 who was still waiting to hear from them



“ ...I approached my Uni representatives in order to generate pressure for opening emergency funds in support of international students. The funds that [my university] opened were in direct relationship with students going back to their countries. In my case, I was asking for resources in order to [begin] working from home and the application was rejected. [My university asked] me to apply for [another] fund in which the amount of documentation and information needed was much more, [making it] almost impossible [to receive] funds as fast as I needed...”

Male, South American, 26-35, UCL (Respondent 34)



Income & Financial

“ ...My family has gone into debt coping with the sudden expenses of quarantine and ensuring health and safety for myself being overseas...knowing the university could care less is not shocking but it is absolutely unacceptable...”

**Female, American, Age: 26-35, Queen Mary UoL
(Respondent 123)**

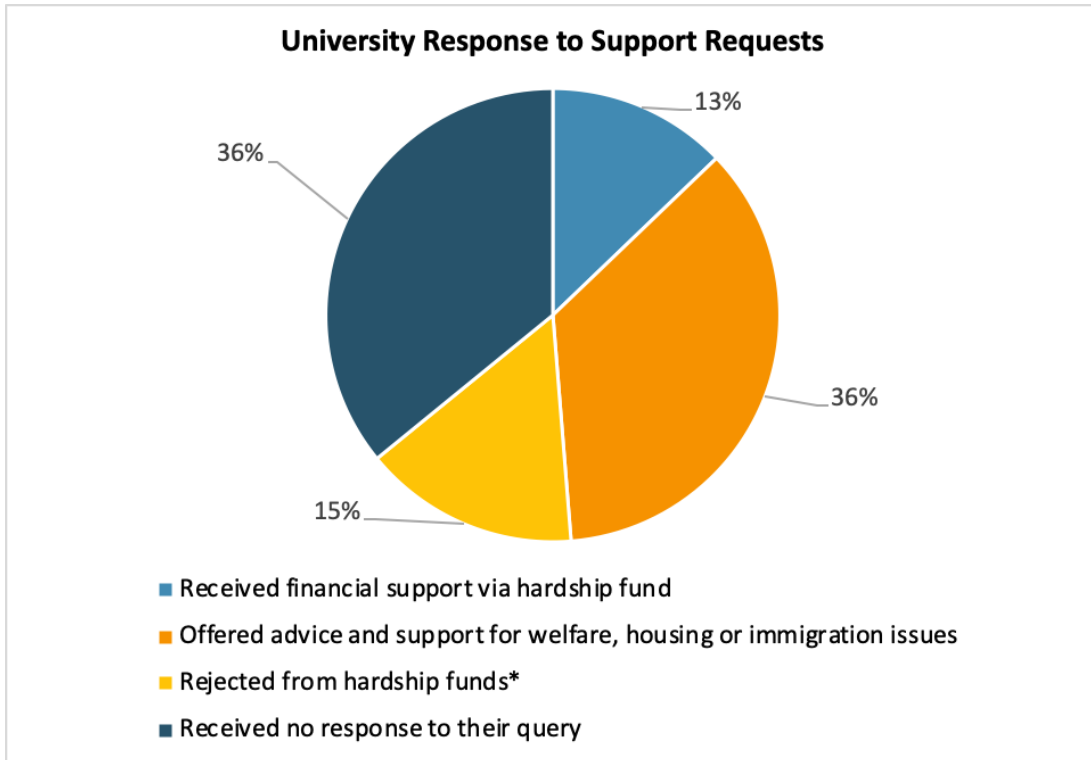
We asked the students if they were in employment prior to Covid-19 and whether there had been changes to their employment since lockdown. Of those that had a job prior to Covid-19 (54 students), 41 were either made redundant or lost their jobs, and 11 were furloughed.

Many were forced to ask their family for money, or were having to borrow money, which forced them into debt (59 students). 29 were going to struggle to pay their tuition fees, which means they are at risk of having their visa revoked, which would force them to return to their country of origin.

Destitution & Hardship Support

Tier 4 students being subject to immigration controls also means they have ‘no recourse to public funds’ (*Section 115 Immigration and Asylum Act 1999*) which has left tier 4 students without a safety net and has created insurmountable precarity for the tier 4 students impacted by this rule. Out of the 124 students, 70 (56%) believed they were destitute or at risk of becoming destitute.

With the emergence of Covid-19 mutual aid groups and others offering food/hygiene support and welfare advice, at least 33 students were able to access this support. However, 47 had not been able to find an organisation to support them.



*9 were students who were from India

“ *I've paid my full fees in this year but I'm at risk in paying rent and finding money for food because of no job*

**Male, Indian, 18-25, University of Bedfordshire
(respondent 122)**

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“ *...As international students we are suffering from financial hardship as a result of Covid-19. We don't have part time jobs and our family members are unable to support us in this Pandemic. At the moment we are forced to use [the] food bank and [are] struggling with accommodation costs. In this current situation what we [are] going through is causing us mental distress.*

Male, Indian, 26-35 (respondent 47)

”

Other comments

There were some concerning comments made about the pressures on families in their country of origin who were accruing debt and/or were under their own financial pressures because of strict lockdown conditions:



The university only needs money. The response from the university was very painful... The students are getting [a] stressful situation in this pandemic and [the] university is chasing for money.

**Male, Indian, 18-25, University of Bedfordshire
(respondent 99)**

Facing much anxiety [due to a] lack of university funds will likely affect my course progression and module selection. [I'm] concerned that the university will force us to switch to another course.

Female, Singaporean, 18-25, SOAS (Respondent 54)

Having limitations upon the working hours you can work to support yourself and being alone across the world from family and any personal support makes lockdown incredibly challenging.

Female, American, 26-35, UCL (Respondent 58)

My university is not accepting my request for tuition fees... they are saying [I need] to pay my fee before [the] deadline. I'm unable to pay [and] I'm suffering a lot please help me.

Male, Indian, 26-35, Uni of Hertfordshire (Respondent 101)

I am extremely concerned about the commencement of the new academic year 2020/21, and whether it will be safe for me to travel back to the UK in the midst of the pandemic. For most of the international students like me, the foremost concerns are the issues of quarantine, renting accommodation, and access to medical treatment should any unforeseeable infection affect us during the study abroad. I wonder if the UK universities will be ready to draw plans in response to such issues and whether they will announce them in advance?

Female, South Korean, 26-35, SOAS (Respondent 118)



Concluding Recommendations

As the joint study from MRN and URBC illustrates, the COVID-19 lockdown points to a woeful lack of support structures in place within UK higher education for tier 4 international students. Some tier 4 students are too afraid to seek out help when needed for fear that this may impact upon their immigration status, and it is clear that students' unions have not done an adequate job in both providing tier 4 students information about their legal rights in addition to working with groups involved in ending the hostile environment policy within UK higher education, NHS, and the workplace.

MRN and URBC urges the National Union of Students (NUS UK) and all students' unions to work with us in supporting our efforts in ending the hostile environment policy and on disseminating materials informing tier 4 students of their legal rights.

The issue here is that UK universities perceive international students as 'cash cows' with little concern for the 'hostile environment' that they reinforce on behalf of the Home Office that leave tier 4 students vulnerable to destitution and deportation.

Despite financially supporting UK higher education, the money that tier 4 students bring to the UK doesn't necessarily translate into better support structures and adequate resources for them and all other students. This is clearly seen in our study where tier 4 students have not been given adequate hardship funds by their universities. In a number of other cases, URBC found that when hardship funds were open to tier 4 students, they were still denied these grants, as exemplified by the comments in our study. Likewise, a number of tier 4 students informed URBC that despite applying for hardship grants when they were made available, they nonetheless denied hardship grants and told that this was because they had filed the wrong application for funding.

We urge all universities to make hardship funds available and easily accessible to all students without the need for exhaustive administrative process

We urge universities to allow for a fee amnesty for students unable to pay their tuition fees as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We urge universities to join us in putting pressure on the Home Office to end NRPF and also in ending the hostile environment policy.

Additionally, NRPF stipulates that migrants who have temporary immigration status have no access to public funds like housing benefit and universal credit. Without a safety net, many tier 4 students are struggling, more acutely during the COVID-19 lockdown to pay for basic necessities like groceries and rent. The precarity that these students are finding themselves in, has contributed to mental health problems, which include depression and in some cases suicidal thoughts.

For this reason we are demanding an end to NRPF to ensure that tier 4 students never find themselves destitute or forced into destitution.

Meanwhile, many UK universities are forcing tier 4 students to pay the remainder of their tuition fees or face suspension or revocation of their visa. A suspension makes immigration status of tier 4 students vulnerable, because their visa sponsorship is connected with the university. While the UK continues with its COVID-19 lockdown, we must remember that lockdowns are also happening around the world. Tier 4 students have family members currently in lockdown and/or ill with COVID-19, who are unable to send them money to survive at the present time. Given the unprecedented situation we are in as a result of the global pandemic, we find it incredibly difficult to comprehend how a number of UK universities are weaponising the immigration status of tier 4 students who are unable to pay their tuition fees, much less survive in the UK.

There needs to be compassion and care especially at this very time, and this is why we are demanding a tuition fee amnesty for tier 4 students.

