

Advice Support for International Students during Covid 19

Citizens Advice Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole (CA BCP) were alerted in May 2020 by 'One Community Hampshire and Dorset (OCHD: <https://www.ochd.org.uk/>) and the UK-Nepali Friendship Society (UKNFS: www.uknfs.org) of the following issues affecting International Students studying in the Southwest:

- Over 300 students were financially affected by Covid -19 due to financial constraints experienced by their parents back home;
- The majority had part time jobs in service industries that had to totally close during lockdown;
- The majority were not eligible under the furlough scheme;
- The international students do not have recourse to public funds;
- The students were struggling to pay their rent, their tuition fees and basic necessities such as food;
- During this period, some of the students have been served with eviction notices, with some landlords turning up at their door and demanding that they move out and or are been asked to honour their tuition payment plans;

These situations have resulted in general, often severe heightened anxiety, feeling of abandonment and helplessness amongst the 300+ students referred to, and the broader international students community. .

OCHD and UKNFS have been advocating on behalf of the students by contacting the local authorities about the students most at risk of eviction and or adverse treatment in relation to housing issues. The respective organisations have also engaged the universities directly in relation to the payment of fees and housing.

Citizens Advice BCP has been researching what type of issues the students have been facing and had tasked its advisers and volunteers to look at bespoke support systems locally. Together with OCHD and UKNFS, CA BCP has contacted Bournemouth University, their international office Student Union Body to get their view on the situation with the students around support systems. CA BCP has also researched into nationwide charities and organisations that support students during these testing times and have observed the following:

- Our Advisers could not find any Covid 19 relief funds set up for international students;
- There are little or no charities set up to support international students;
- There is general advice for university students and some help during covid 19 but not specifically tailored around international students;
- There are no local organisations advocating for the issues that the international students are facing;
- The communication channels between the institutions and the students around support during hardships were not easy to manoeuvre around and comprehend.

Outreach and achievements to date:

OCHD with UNKFS have jointly written to the Secretary of State for Education, as well as the universities minister, and the Select Committee for Education regarding the particular support needs international students have. A letter has been received back signed by the universities minister giving commitments on the particular needs for support international students have, but only concentrating on emergency Covid 19 type support and not on other issues currently being faced.

The support work for the students and students themselves speaking about their plights and failings of support across multiple issues, has featured on more than one Indian national TV current affairs programme, and on ITV.

Universities UK's international section lead has communicated to OCHD, that now is the time to look seriously at the international students dimension of UK universities engagement.

The two organisations received requests from two of the three south coast universities in question, to develop proposals to improve their systems, communications, and performance where international students are concerned: these proposals included a multi-agency approach in conjunction with relevant BAME community organisations for safety, safeguarding solutions

All three of the universities up to Pro Vice Chancellor level have so far admitted that where international students are concerned Covid 19 has shown some failings that can and ought to be rectified (even asking the UKNFS and OCHD for assistance on one particular area, by Bournemouth University).

Recommendations have been developed by the OCHD and the UKNFS and include the following:

- To create a 'need to know' Information resource pack for international students which follows a thematic approach to include rights of students, how they would be supported if another pandemic happens, what protections they could get, if they are unable to be evacuated;
- Local Universities should create a hardship fund specifically for the international students in the event of another pandemic or other emergency; in tandem a one-stop all key issues topics related international student advice facility needs to be created to synchronise all the different sources where advice or support are currently sought.
- A Strategy for Multi-agency working (including independent diverse communities organisations OCHD and the UKNFS) to be developed to safeguard international students within the conurbation so as to avoid a repeat of the current Covid 19 effects.
- To create a multi-agency 'international students safety network' partnership group as a start for bedding in dedicated international students support by working to clarify what support international students can receive in the future.
- A locally-based survey (led by Citizens Advice BCP) should be commissioned into which BAME groups are falling through the net during these testing times;

- A national research project should be commissioned to scope out the opportunity for national-level information resources and mechanisms and multi-agency strategic partnerships that can be implemented wherever there is a university town (or language colleges): relevant national and online news links and report findings going into this research report.