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Introduction

International students in the UK are the only group of undergraduate students to be subjected to unregulated tuition fees. This means that the tuition fees they pay can be disproportionately higher than those based in the United Kingdom (UK) and European Union (EU). Along with stringent financial requirements in the Tier 4 visa process this can make funding studying in the UK unattainable for many from outside the EU.

For those who can find the level of funding needed to allow them to start an undergraduate degree in the UK, ensuring that they have enough money to cover their entire degree can be daunting. For international students at UAL there further financial burdens because of the cost of living in London as well as the potential higher cost of study of an arts based education.

This paper sets out to explore the issues facing international students and to argue that UAL should lessen this burden by fixing tuition fees for undergraduate courses.

International Tuition Fees

Unlike tuition fees for Home (UK) and EU students the fees for international students are unregulated by the UK Government, leaving annual increases wholly at the discretion of institutions. In 2015/16 income from international student tuition fees rose by 6.3% or by £175m in England; in comparison the number of international students only rose by 1.4% or 3,300 students¹. At UAL specifically, the tuition fees for a new international student starting in 2018/19 rose from £17,920 to £19,350 an increase of 8%. International student fees are disproportionately more expensive than other fees and rising faster, this is because many universities rely on this tuition fee income to support their operational models. While this is sector practice and the numbers of international students applying to study in the UK rose in 2018² numbers of international students have fallen in previous years³. Therefore the question remains when does higher education in the UK become too expensive to remain competitive?

There are further pressures on international students as UAL does not adopt a cohort approach to international tuition fees. International students can see increases of up to 5% for each year of their study, further increasing the financial burden on these

¹ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/HEinEngland/finhealth/international/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/feb/05/uk-universities-rise-in-applications-eu-students>

³ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/overseas-student-enrolments-uk-universities-fall-again>

students. For example, for academic year 2018/19 UAL has increased the fees for continuing international students by 4%; meaning for an international student starting in 2017/18 and assuming an increase of 4% each year an international student will have to pay an additional £1,424 in fees over the course of their degree. While this figure may seem small in comparison to the tuition fees as whole; when taken into account with the cost of living in London and the cost of study this can be the difference between financial hardship and academic success for some international students.

For Home and EU students the UK Government's current position is that tuition fees are fixed until a review of higher and further education is complete. However, this position was only adopted in September 2017, prior to this the UK Government had allowed institutions to increase fees for both new and continuing Home and EU students. In this situation UAL were clear that they would adopt a cohort approach to these groups of students. The SU was grateful to UAL for this approach and believes that this generosity and this clarity should be extended to international students. While the SU will continue to argue for free education for all students, the SU believes that a pragmatic approach is to reduce the financial burden on international students by applying a cohort approach to their tuition fee setting.

Cost of Living in London

It is generally accepted that the cost of studying in London is higher than elsewhere in the UK. This and the non-campus nature of UAL spread around London presents financial challenges for all students. UAL halls are more expensive than the private rented sector; however this sector is not easy for international students to access due to unwillingness of landlords to them on, inability to obtain a rent guarantor and high upfront costs. Therefore, many international students have no choice but to opt for UAL halls of residences, which the Students' Union (SU) has long argued are not affordable⁴.

Research by the National Union of Students (NUS) in 2013 calculated that for the academic year 2013/14 that the average cost of studying in London for a home student is £23,531⁵. This figure was broken down into course and living costs:

- £9,666 – course costs (including £8,425 tuition fees); and
- £ 13,521 – Living costs (including £6,340 for rent).

These figures do not take into account the additional financial costs which international students face on top of home students, such as increased tuition fees, visa fees, flight costs and fluctuating exchange rates. Further, depending on what course at UAL a

⁴ <http://arts-su.tumblr.com/post/154204786868/happy-holidays-and-a-round-up-of-this-term>

⁵ <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/press-releases/nus-figures-show-new-students-face-cost-of-living-crisis/>

student chooses, they can expect to pay higher course costs on materials etc.

Since this NUS research was completed the cost of studying in London and at UAL has increased, for example looking at UAL's own rent prices for 2018/19 just 20 beds (twin rooms at Portland House) are either equal to or below the £6,340 figure quoted in the research. For many international students, they are beholden to the higher cost of living in halls of residence as their ability to find accommodation within the private rented sector is more limited. While there will be some students of all demographics who are able to afford the high cost of studying at UAL, this is not the case for all international students.

International Student Hardship

Likely because of the high costs associated with studying at UAL there is a perception that international students are generally and colloquially speaking 'vastly wealthy'. The SU has argued for the better recognition of international student hardship through its work lobbying UAL to introduce an international hardship fund. To this end the SU undertook a small survey in April 2017; the survey asked students to detail their lived experience of being an international student and living in hardship as well as asking for qualitative data around how they pay their fees. Students were asked how they primarily paid their fees and were allowed to choose multiple options, in total 78% of students chose parental contributions and 27% of students also stated wider family contributions and 19% personal savings. While it is unsurprising that international students primarily rely on their parents to pay their fees these results suggest that there is an intersection between parental, wider family contributions and personal savings.

The survey then asked students whether they had struggled to pay their tuition fees, when those students stating either 'Always' or 'Sometimes' are compared to those who stated 'Rarely' or 'Never' the former group were more likely to receive funds through parental contribution (70%) but were also more likely to have sourced their funding through multiple sources including commercial borrowing (21%), personal savings (21%) and wider family contributions (38%). Whereas the students that did not struggle were primarily paid their fees through parental contributions (92%). However, interestingly of the latter group 30% of students stated that they topped up their fees from working part time while studying.

This suggests that there is a complex interplay in how international students pay their fees while many can rely solely on parental contributions, for some financial support they receive can come from multiple sources. This in itself can place an emotional burden on international students, with some comments left by students referencing the guilt that these students feel for the high contribution by others towards their

education. The survey also asked students for comments on international hardship and the testimonies received by students were at times detailed and emotive.

"I always had to prioritise part time job over studies in order to pay my parents back for their contribution to tuition fee"

Wimbledon Student, South Korea

"Yes, even my parents told me not to worry about it too much, they said they will take care of it, but I know it is such a hardship for them"

Camberwell Student, China

"Being an international student, I am constantly made to feel that it is a privilege to be studying in London, as if I am not already paying twice the amount as my classmates. It is disheartening to find literally zero financial support. I am currently juggling 6 different temporary jobs through art Temps still trying to maintain 20 hours a week, alongside my coursework. This creates unbelievable amount of mental burden not only on myself but my family, 1000 miles away, trying to support me the best way they can. And all I receive from UAL is indifference."

Wimbledon Student, India

"I am still struggling about my tuition fee for my third year, although I am a first year student right now. My parents are my main financial support, they are using their savings from the last 30 years(when they start to plan for my further education) to pay my first 2 years tuition fees, apart from that, they have to ask help from bank loan. I truly understand the insecurity that a poor international student have to endure, sometimes it gives me too much pressure, but I can't do nothing more apart from working hard at my part-time job, which is a minimum paid job in a coffee shop. I think It's hard for international students not only because double expense on the tuition fee itself, but also the fact we can't access to any public fund, which means no matter how hard we study, we still facing the risk of dropping out in terms of financial inefficiency. This in a way took away a bit of our hope."

Camberwell Student, China

"International school fees are high as they are and the yearly addition on top of the cost of visa makes living in London nearly impossible"

LCC Student, Singapore

"My dad lost his job and it's a huge struggle trying to figure out how to pay"

for next year.”

LCC Student, Singapore

This SU research demonstrates that international student hardship does exist and that the perception of the wealth of international students more generally needs to be broadened. More worryingly, is the issue of the toll on these student’s mental health and wellbeing that these feelings of insecurity and anxiety can cause.

Further, research undertaken by HSBC in 2014 found parents tend to significantly underestimate the costs associated with their child studying abroad⁶. Meaning maintaining financial support throughout an undergraduate degree could be challenging for some international students. Research also by HSBC in 2017 found that 82% of parents admitted that they were willing to make personal sacrifices to fund their children’s education; including 38% that they would sacrifice pension contributions⁷. It would be unwise to assume that international students studying at UAL are not aware of the sacrifices their parents are making to allow them to study in the UK and to underestimate the emotional impact this can have.

This research coupled with the SU research that suggests that international students are taking on part time work in the UK to ‘top-up’ their parent’s contribution, shows that annually increasing fees can create uncertainty and has the opportunity to push students and their families into hardship. It could be argued in effect this situation would cause some international students to take on part time work to try to make up the difference annual tuition fee increases make themselves, in an attempt to relieve their parents of further financial burden.

The SU continues to lobby for the introduction of an international hardship fund and recognises as it recognises that fixing international tuition fees in itself will not solve the issue of international student hardship. Nevertheless, the SU believes that by taking a cohort approach for international student fees this will lessen the financial burden and will also provide greater clarity and security. For these students it will demonstrate that their institution recognises the additional emotional as well as financial burdens on them and will seek to lessen this.

Benefits to UAL

Sector practice on a cohort approach to international tuition fees is mixed, in 2014 a survey by Universities UK showed that 44% of members offered a fixed fee for

⁶ <http://www.hsbc.com/-/media/hsbc-com/newsroomassets/2015/pdf/value-of-education-2-international-university-education-cost-09-09-15.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.hsbc.com/-/media/hsbc-com/newsroomassets/2017/pdfs/170628-the-value-of-education-higher-and-higher-global-report.pdf>

international students for courses lasting longer than a year⁸. Since then more universities have chosen to fix their fees including UCL and Dundee University. The SU were unable to obtain exact figures of the number of institutions however, an educated guess would put this figure just over 50%; notable institutions include direct competitors such as Glasgow School of Art, Norwich University of the Arts, Teeside and Russell Group institutions such as Edinburgh, Manchester, Cardiff and Liverpool. This suggests that the direction of travel within the sector, albeit slowly, is towards fixing fees for international students. This travel is slow so there is a potential for a reputational benefit to UAL in taking a cohort approach. It could be argued that UAL would be seen as being proactive, being ahead of the trend, demonstrating leadership within the sector and that this could influence other institutions to also fix international fees, particularly amongst peer institutions.

Interestingly, arts based intuitions are not well represented in the fixed international tuition fee list, for example Goldsmiths, Central School of Speech and Drama, Ravensbourne, Manchester Metropolitan, Plymouth College of Art and Falmouth have not taken a cohort approach at present. This presents UAL not just with a reputational benefit but with a competitive edge as well, if the institution were to fix international fees then it would be the only London based arts institution to offer this benefit. Therefore, UAL would be able to use the cohort approach to international tuition fees in its recruitment practices and marketing. While the UK is the third most popular destination for study⁹, it is the fifth most expensive place to study¹⁰ and seen as the sixth worst in terms of value for money¹¹. Advertising UAL as an institution that aspires to give parents and families who are making a significant contribution sometimes through personal sacrifices to their children's education a sense of certainty through fixing international tuition fees could be a key marketing tool.

Conclusion, Options and Recommendations

Studying at UAL and in London as an international student provides additional financial and emotional burdens that Home and EU students may not face. While these burdens are multifaceted and should be tackled through a variety of approaches, including introducing an international student hardship fund, there are small immediate steps that UAL can take to lessen this burden. In the grand scheme of the level of international tuition fees annual increases may seem small but they create an additional pressure on students that need not exist. Were UAL to take a cohort

⁸ <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2014/international-students-tuition-fees-survey-results-2014-2015.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.hsbc.com/-/media/hsbc-com/newsroomassets/2017/pdfs/170628-the-value-of-education-higher-and-higher-qlobal-report.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/study-abroad/the-cheapest-and-most-expensive-countries-in-the-world-to-be-a-university-student-revealed-in-new-a6675006.html>

¹¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/value-of-education-uk-and-us-parents-in-top-ten-countries-that-think-university-offers-poor-value-10419399.html>

approach to international tuition fees this would signal to those students both current and future that UAL takes their needs seriously and seeks to act in their favour.

To achieve this, the SU believes that there are two options open to UAL:

Option A

A full cohort approach – This means that once fees are set for new international students, students will pay that same fee throughout their three years of study. This would require UAL to write off any loss of income that annual increases provide.

Option B

Absorbing the loss approach – During the fee setting process for new international students UAL would apply a 3% inflationary increase to each year of study working out the total cost of tuition for students three years in advance. International students would pay a fixed but increased fee for each year of study.

The SU's preferred option would be **Option A**. The figure supplied for the inflationary increase is less than that currently applied to international tuition fees; this is because the SU believes that UAL should only apply a strictly inflationary increase. While Option B would mean no financial loss to UAL, it would make the tuition fee setting process more complex. Whereas, Option A is a more transparent approach and presents real tangible reputational benefits. The SU believes that the potential increases to international student wellbeing and satisfaction far outweigh the financial loss. Finally, UAL could choose to offset the loss of funds through the increased recruitment of international students more generally.

The Students' Union Recommends that UAL:

1. Investigate taking a full cohort approach to international tuition fees starting from academic year 2018/19.
2. Approve the writing off of any loss of tuition fee income that arises from this action.

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