A Knowledge Exchange and Impact for NRPF Policy Change Workshop Findings Report

Introduction

IS (IS) are estimated to contribute £42 billion to the UK economy, yet the systems and infrastructures in place to support these highly diverse communities are insufficient, especially in the current context of heightened need in a post-pandemic cost of living crisis. Loss and lack of employment opportunities are increasingly manifesting as hunger, inability to pay rent and physical and psychological stress. The concentration of IS populations in specific London Boroughs – East Ham has the second highest number of IS in London, and West Ham has the third – means that this need is locally concentrated. Correspondingly the burden of support for IS has fallen on Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector (VCFS) groups, and these organisations are reporting increased demand for not only food but also other essential items, advice on employment, housing, and wellbeing, as well as opportunities for advocacy.

Set within this context, this knowledge exchange research project aims to:

1. **Co-Create Evidence**: On the scale, extent, and nature of economic hardship experienced by IS; this evidence will inform our understanding of the problem and help shape targeted, effective solutions.
2. **Map Resources**: We will map the existing provisions that address poverty and identify gaps in services. This will allow us to understand the current landscape better and identify areas where additional support or resources are needed.
3. **Leverage Opportunities:** We aim to identify and explore opportunities to leverage these resources to alleviate pressure on local governments and the voluntary sector. This includes considering new partnerships, funding opportunities, or strategies for resource allocation.

Involving stakeholders from a diverse range of organisations (see appendix 1), breakout groups discussed three key questions, identifying (i) key vulnerabilities faced by IS regarding food, housing and employment vulnerabilities; (ii) the support mechanisms available to them to cope with these vulnerabilities, and (iii) the potential role of key stakeholders – government, universities, food banks – in facilitating more robust systems and infrastructures to support IS in the UK.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. In your experience, what kinds of vulnerabilities are international students facing with regard to food, housing and employment vulnerabilities?

2. What kinds of support are most effective in responding to these vulnerabilities?

3. What kinds of support are needed from other stakeholders – central government, universities, food banks?

1. Vulnerabilities faced by International Student (IS)

International Students (IS)

IS in the United Kingdom (UK) constitute a significant and diverse population within the higher education landscape. While they embark on their academic journeys, these students often encounter multifaceted challenges that extend beyond the academic realm. The workshop revealed a complex interplay of factors that shape the experiences of IS. The workshop discussions revealed several critical findings that shed light on the multifaceted nature of the challenges IS face in the UK and their apprehensions to openly disclose the realities of the hardships they endure.

Food Insecurity

The demand for food aid among IS has exhibited fluctuations in response to external factors. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, there became an exorbitant reliance on food banks, possibly due to heightened awareness of food banks and their increased availability. The food bank reliance was reduced for a short burst in early Summer 2022; however, this trend has continued, primarily driven by the persistent cost-of-living crisis in the UK. Rising living expenses, coupled with inadequate financial resources, have placed IS in a precarious position, where they once again rely on food banks to meet their basic nutritional needs.

"We received WhatsApp messages all day and throughout the night saying, 'we need help, we are starving', this was during the lockdowns, they said 'we cannot get in touch with the universities. Students said, 'We are stuck, we have no income, we have bills to pay, we have landlords on our case, we are starving', and since then it's just been ongoing and it's increased. There was a time we were feeding over 3,000 international students every week. It went down, but now in the past six months it's just gone up again." Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector Organisation.

Notably, our research highlights the particularly vulnerable subgroup of pregnant IS. These individuals not only suffer from food poverty themselves but also face significant challenges in procuring essential items such as nutritious diets and necessities like nappies, formula milk

and food for their children. The intersection of pregnancy and food insecurity creates a unique set of difficulties, compounding the overall impact of food poverty.

Interestingly, the workshop revealed that many IS are proactive in addressing their anticipated food insecurity and possess knowledge about food aid programs before arriving in the UK. IS employ resourceful strategies such as "pre-ordering" foodbank meals to augment their quality of life when they arrive in the UK. This proactive approach underscores their adaptability in overcoming challenges and emphasises the persistent issue of food insecurity they encounter.

The discussions continued extending beyond food insecurity and encompassing the broader issue of the Cost-of-Living crisis. The discussions unveiled how IS encounter underestimated living expenses and the overarching complication of their instability. They are often drawn to the vibrant academic and cultural landscape and are frequently unprepared for the exorbitant costs associated with the initial allure of London. This underestimation creates a significant disconnect between their expectations and the financial resources available to them, making it a formidable challenge to maintain a decent standard of living.

Further conversations continued around the underestimation of living expenses and further addressed the currency exchange fluctuations, again placing students in financial peril whilst negatively impacting their academic experience. Moreover, the wider complications of instability, particularly in accessing essentials and secure housing, add layers of complexity to their journey.

Financial Stability
Subject to stereotypical beliefs, IS often lack the financial stability to study in the UK and frequently rely on loans and funding from other sources, including family and friends, to meet their cost-of-living expenses in the UK. This dependence on financial aid stems from insufficient preparation for the cost of living in the UK, in particular, being ill-informed of the current UK economic crisis. This leads to food insecurity, particularly for IS with dependents, which emerges as a substantial barrier to their well-being.

"We have started providing travel expenses, so Mothers don't have to decide between paying bus fares or buying their baby a rattle. Babies had no toys, not even a rattle. So, we now give out baby rattles with our things. We started doing things we would never have done, and the pressure on our services is immense". Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector Organisation.

Financial commitments are often insufficient to cover the high costs associated with international education, including tuition fees, accommodation, and living expenses. This financial strain not only compromises their ability to access nutritious food but also places them at risk of falling into the abyss of food insecurity. For IS with families, the situation is even more dire, as they must provide for themselves and their dependents, amplifying their vulnerability.

"We support no recourse to public funds because these are the people who are not accessing services. We are a co-produced service with lived experience and are regularly feeding their input to meet the needs of the community and have a steering group." Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector Organisation.

Housing Challenges

Housing issues were raised in the workshop as a significant challenge that IS face when pursuing education in the UK, particularly in London, being a significant concern.

One of the foremost issues IS face regarding housing concerns is the fear of speaking up about exploitation when dealing with private rented accommodation. Many IS, unfamiliar with local laws and tenant rights, are hesitant to assert themselves in rental agreements. Rogue landlords often take advantage of this vulnerability, subjecting students to subpar living conditions, unfair rental terms, and, in some cases, outright exploitation. The fear of eviction or deportation looms large, pushing many students to endure unjust situations silently.

Rogue landlords further exacerbate housing issues by exploiting IS through severely overcrowded accommodations. Inadequate living spaces with limited access to shared amenities like kitchens and bathrooms are common problems. Students often find themselves crammed into tiny rooms, sometimes sharing with multiple roommates. The living conditions negatively impact their physical and mental well-being and can have a detrimental effect on their academic performance.

IS with families, including dependents and children, face an additional layer of complexity when it comes to housing. The exorbitant cost of childcare often forces one partner to reduce their working hours or forgo employment entirely. This financial strain not only affects the family's standard of living but also places added pressure on the student-parents, who are trying to balance academics, work, and childcare responsibilities. The challenges of balancing work, studies, and childcare responsibilities often lead to a breakdown in family communication. International student parents may find it difficult to be available for their children at the same time due to their varying schedules. This can strain family relationships and impact the overall well-being of both parents and children.

Rising rental costs add to the housing woes. Some IS are paying exorbitant rents, with some cases reaching up to £1,200 per month. The high cost of housing not only puts a strain on their already tight budgets but also limits their ability to enjoy the full cultural and educational experience of studying abroad.

Employment

Employment was also discussed in detail for IS studying in the UK. They often face various complications and challenges when it comes to employment. These challenges also have a significant impact on their overall experience and financial well-being.

Among IS seeking employment, they often find themselves confronted with the prevalence of 0-hour contracts. Such contracts offer minimal job security, as they do not guarantee a fixed number of working hours. This precarious nature of employment contracts places IS in a vulnerable position, subjecting them to income instability and an uncertain future. During the Covid-19 pandemic, these students were among the first to lose their jobs as the economy crashed, and with 0-hour contracts they were unable to furlough.

Furthermore, discussions around the susceptibility of IS to exploitation by unscrupulous employers was agreed could not be understated. Instances of employers offering cash-in-hand jobs at significantly lower wages, as low as £1.50 per hour, than the statutory minimum wage are not uncommon. This practice is not only economically detrimental but also places IS at risk of legal repercussions. The fear of losing their employment authorisation and visa status often deters students from reporting such exploitative practices, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability.

Restrictions on Work Hours were also voiced as among one of the foremost challenges faced by IS in the UK pertaining to the stringent restrictions imposed on their working hours. According to current regulations, IS are permitted to work a maximum of 20 hours per week during term time. These restrictions significantly curtail their ability to secure substantial employment opportunities and may hinder their financial stability during their academic tenure.

The competitive nature of the UK job market further exacerbates the challenges faced by IS. With a plethora of students seeking part-time employment to support their studies, the competition for available positions is fierce. Consequently, employers are often able to offer wages at the lowest end of the spectrum, exploiting the desperation of IS who are financially reliant on such opportunities. This combination of low wages and intense competition perpetuates further economic hardship.

Even when IS manage to secure employment, they often face challenges in terms of career progression. Some employers may be reluctant to invest in training or offer opportunities for advancement to temporary or part-time employees, making it difficult for IS to gain valuable work experience in their chosen fields.

University Support Services
One of the critical findings from this workshop is the significant lack of support specifically tailored for IS. This lack of support pushes them perilously close to the precipice of destitution, forcing them to rely on food banks as a last resort. While universities in the UK offer various support services; asserting that support services for IS vary across universities due to factors such as institutional resources, location, lack of awareness and understanding, and cultural diversity regarding IS's specific requirements, they result in an ineffectively addressed range of divergent support, including well-being services, academic support, limited-scale financial assistance programs designed to provide targeted short term relief to individuals facing specific financial challenges of unforeseen circumstances.

"The university offered us a free meal. But it was inconvenient, and also I had to eat there, but what about my husband and my children? I had to travel and take my ID, I didn't have travel fare. If I would go and come back it would take me more than two hours. That's the only thing the university provided during the pandemic. The university broadcast that we are providing free meals, but it was so inconvenient that not even ten people could go there."
Pandemic International Student

These services do not adequately address the unique needs and challenges IS face. Consequently, they often find themselves navigating a labyrinth of bureaucracy and uncertainty, leading to heightened food insecurity.

Universities and their Agents
One recurring concern that emerged during the workshop pertained to the apparent inadequacy of universities in providing accurate and current information regarding the ongoing cost of living crisis. IS, when contemplating studying abroad, face a considerable lack of clarity regarding the actual expenses they are likely to incur. This knowledge gap not only hinders their ability to plan their finances effectively but also increases the risk of experiencing financial hardships during their academic pursuits

Participants shared their service user's experiences of feeling ill-prepared to navigate the academic, cultural, and logistical challenges they encountered upon arriving in their host countries. This void in information has significant implications for student's ability to make well-informed decisions about their education. To address this, universities should establish collaborative partnerships with educational institutions and organisations in students' home countries. Through these partnerships, universities can disseminate comprehensive information that encompasses academic expectations, cultural nuances, and logistical details. This proactive approach would better equip students for a successful transition to studying abroad.

A notable source of frustration among workshop participants centred on the exorbitant tuition fees charged by universities to their international student service users, often accompanied by demands for a significant portion of the total fees to be paid upfront. The financial burden imposed by these policies can act as a deterrent for highly qualified and motivated students seeking to pursue higher education abroad. It is incumbent upon universities to explore more flexible payment options, scholarship opportunities, and comprehensive financial aid packages. These measures would enhance accessibility to higher education for a broader spectrum of IS and reduce the undue financial strain on those pursuing academic excellence.

Workshop participants further spoke about instances where their service users had shared information that they had received false or misleading information before their arrival at their host university. This misinformation led to unanticipated challenges and frustrations, ultimately undermining students' educational experiences. The information had been provided to them by the agents employed by the UK universities.

During the workshop, concerns about university agents employed abroad arose several times, and key issues pertaining to agents were discussed. One of the prominent concerns highlighted was the miscommunication and misinformation provided by these agents to IS regarding the reality of life in the UK. Many participants also raised concerns about agents not adequately preparing IS for the cultural adjustment challenges they may face in the UK. This includes issues related to language proficiency, social norms, cultural shock and academic expectations.

It was further noted that some agents provide incomplete or misleading information about the financial aspects of studying in the UK. This can lead to IS underestimating the actual costs and struggling with financial difficulties once they arrive in the country.

Participants shared the experiences of their international student beneficiaries, that they were placed in courses that were not suitable for their academic backgrounds and career goals. This mismatch often arises from agents' limited understanding of the diverse range of courses available at UK universities. Furthermore, the discussion is that some agents exert undue pressure on students to make hasty decisions and enrol quickly, often for financial gain. This practice can lead to students making rushed decisions without fully considering their options.

Culture Shock

Adjusting to life in a foreign country can be overwhelming for IS. Many experience a culture shock, which involves disorientation and stress due to differences in customs, language, and daily life. Additionally, students often face separation anxiety, as they are physically separated from their families and familiar support systems. This separation can intensify feelings of homesickness and loneliness, making it challenging to adapt to their new environment.

IS often experience significant financial strain while pursuing their education abroad. One key concern is the fear that their family members back home will find out about these financial difficulties. This fear stems from the belief that such revelations could lead to family dynamics breaking down and result in feelings of alienation or disassociation.

Students worry that their inability to meet their financial obligations may be seen as a personal failure or disappointment to their families. They also contend with the pressure to live up to the high expectations set by their families. Families often make considerable sacrifices to send their children abroad for higher education, and as a result, students may feel immense pressure to excel academically and socially. This pressure can lead to stress, anxiety, and a fear of disappointing their loved ones. IS may also feel a sense of guilt if they struggle academically or emotionally.

UK Visa and Immigration

Upon their arrival in the UK, IS often grapple with the fear of deportation. This trepidation is not merely rooted in the fear of violating visa regulations but is closely tied to the reality of

their hardships. Many IS are fully aware that their financial struggles, if brought to the attention of authorities, universities, or the Home Office, could result in immigration and visa concerns. Thus, they find themselves ensnared in a precarious situation where they endure silent suffering to avoid the dire consequences of deportation. This dynamic serves as a powerful impetus for concealing their food insecurity, even when it becomes overwhelming.

2. **Effective Support Mechanisms**

The workshop provided valuable insights into the development of effective support mechanisms for IS within UK universities. Conversations emerged into a number of crucial strategies for addressing the vulnerabilities of IS.

Establishing trust and tailoring University support services for IS was emphasised. Tailored support services, including academic guidance, cultural integration programs, and mental health support, are essential in addressing IS needs. Establishing a sense of belonging within the university community was recognised as a crucial factor in promoting trust.

Workshop participants highlighted the importance of efficiently signposting IS to the appropriate support services. Clear communication, user-friendly guides, and online resources were considered essential in ensuring that IS are aware of the available assistance and can access it easily without the need to assume the alternative to no support or guidance was to drop out of university. The need for vigilant monitoring of IS drop-out rates was emphasised as a critical indicator of the effectiveness of support services. Regular analysis of these rates would allow universities to identify at-risk students promptly and provide targeted interventions to prevent dropouts.

Participants recognised the significance of conducting regular surveys to comprehensively understand and map out the evolving needs of IS. These surveys can serve as a foundation for evidence-based decision-making, allowing universities to adapt their support services effectively. The workshop discussion identified several key strategies for enhancing support for IS in UK universities, as mentioned. By focusing on trust-building, effective communication, and data-driven decision-making, institutions can better address the vulnerabilities that IS may face during their academic journeys. These strategies aim to create a more inclusive and supportive environment that fosters the success and well-being of IS.

The group discussed the need for stricter penalties for universities that enrol IS (IS) but fail to meet the established criteria as a critical aspect of ensuring the well-being and academic success of these students.

Achieving consistency across universities in the provision of equal opportunities for IS students is paramount. Currently, there exists a noticeable inconsistency in how different institutions address the needs of IS. To rectify this, regulatory bodies must establish uniform standards and guidelines that ensure every university adheres to a set of minimum

requirements in terms of support services, academic accommodations, and cultural integration programs for IS students. This would promote a more equitable educational experience for all IS, regardless of their chosen institution.

Universities must shift their priorities from primarily marketing courses to placing greater emphasis on settling and supporting IS. This means allocating more resources and attention to orientation programs, mentorship initiatives, and counselling services that facilitate the integration and well-being of IS. By doing so, universities can create a more welcoming and inclusive environment that fosters a sense of belonging and reduces vulnerabilities associated with cultural adjustment and isolation.

Involving IS in the design and development of support services is a fundamental approach to addressing their unique needs effectively. This co-creation process ensures that support mechanisms are tailored to the specific challenges and to their preferences. By actively engaging IS in decision-making and feedback loops, universities can create a more responsive support system that genuinely addresses their vulnerabilities and concerns.

Managing the expectations of IS regarding the support they will receive is crucial. Universities should provide clear and transparent information about available support services during the admissions process. This includes outlining the scope of assistance, response times, and the responsibilities of both the university and the IS themselves. By setting realistic expectations from the outset, universities can mitigate potential disappointments and frustrations, contributing to a more positive overall experience for IS.

Based on the discussions held during the workshop on IS support in UK universities, feedback pertaining specifically to financial support for addressing vulnerabilities faced by IS was discussed in detail. It was noted that while Voluntary and Community Funded Services (VCFS) support can provide valuable financial assistance, mostly in the form of tangible provisions to IS, there exists a pressing concern regarding the restrictions and eligibility criteria associated with grants provided to VCFS. Participants emphasised the need for greater flexibility and broader eligibility criteria to ensure that a wider range of IS can access these funds and their services.

A consensus emerged during the workshop regarding the urgency of enhancing hardship funds to alleviate the financial burdens associated with travelling and cost of living crises for IS. It was suggested that universities should consider revising their hardship fund policies to offer more substantial support and ensure that these funds are readily available to IS facing such challenges.

Participants highlighted the importance of IS finding minimum wage jobs to sustain themselves financially. However, it was pointed out that many students face difficulties in securing such employment due to various barriers, as discussed earlier in this report, including language proficiency and unfamiliarity with the local job market. It was recommended that universities should provide comprehensive job search assistance, language

support, and workshops to equip IS with the necessary skills to access part-time work opportunities that pay at least minimum wage.

The issue of affordable childcare was discussed extensively, recognising that it is a crucial factor in the well-being and academic success of IS who are also parents. It was suggested that universities should explore partnerships with local childcare providers to offer affordable options and that childcare subsidies or grants should be made available to assist with the associated costs.

Conversations continued in the context of addressing IS vulnerabilities within UK universities, and the workshop discussions centered around the provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes as a fundamental component of support for IS. These classes should cater to various proficiency levels and be readily accessible on campus. Additionally, they should be tailored to address academic language skills, allowing students to engage effectively in their coursework.

With the increasing reliance on digital platforms for education, it is imperative to enhance IS digital literacy skills. This includes providing training and support for navigating online learning tools, accessing e-resources, and effectively participating in virtual classrooms. Special attention should be given to addressing any technological barriers they may encounter. Although the discussion led to digital education becoming a norm. Recognising the importance of in-person teaching is essential. Universities should facilitate a smooth transition for these students back to physical classrooms. This may involve orientation programs, language support, and cultural acclimatisation to ensure a seamless return to on-campus learning.

Furthermore, to alleviate financial vulnerabilities, universities should establish food banks and outreach programs that specifically cater to IS in need with culturally appropriate provisions. These programs should be sensitive to diverse dietary preferences and provide essential food items, thereby ensuring that students can meet their basic nutritional needs.

The financial discussions led to some IS finding it difficult to balance family responsibilities, so offering wrap-around childcare services is crucial. These services should be accessible and affordable, enabling students to focus on their studies. In addition, employability workshops should be tailored to the unique needs of IS, offering guidance on job-seeking in the UK and integrating them into the local workforce.

In examining the workshop's discussions on effective support mechanisms for addressing the vulnerabilities of IS in UK universities, one notable consensus was the imperative need for universities to enhance their mental health support services for IS. Participants underscored the importance of providing timely and easily accessible mental health resources. They emphasised that IS facing cultural and academic transitions often experience heightened stress and anxiety. Therefore, universities should allocate sufficient resources to ensure that IS can readily access counselling services, crisis intervention, and other forms of mental

health support. Immediate response mechanisms, such as 24/7 hotlines or online counselling platforms, were suggested as effective means to address the unique mental health needs of IS.

Another critical aspect discussed during the workshop was the necessity of providing comprehensive support for mental health support workers, including counsellors, therapists, and psychologists. It was recognised that these professionals play a pivotal role in assisting IS in their mental health journeys. Participants emphasised the importance of ensuring that mental health support workers are adequately trained to work with IS who may have diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. This includes providing ongoing cultural competency training to enhance their ability to understand and address the specific mental health challenges faced by IS. Furthermore, participants highlighted the significance of addressing the potential burnout and emotional toll that providing mental health support can have on professionals. Strategies to mitigate burnout were suggested, such as regular supervision, peer support networks, and access to their own mental health services.

Another topic arose in the discussions about the most effective responses to IS vulnerabilities as communication and networks. The importance of recognising the significance of connecting IS with diverse networks within the university community was discussed in detail. These networks should extend beyond nationality, encompassing academic, cultural, and social groups. Encouraging IS to participate in various student organisations, clubs, and societies can foster a sense of belonging and integration. Facilitating mentorship programs that pair IS with peers or faculty members can enhance their support system and enable them to navigate academic and cultural challenges more effectively. In doing so, universities can create a welcoming environment that promotes cross-cultural understanding and enriches the overall educational experience for IS.

Effective communication regarding academic expectations, grading criteria, and university policies is essential in mitigating vulnerabilities faced by IS. Universities should provide clear and comprehensive information through orientation programs, academic advisors, and online resources. Furthermore, it is vital to address common misconceptions and cultural differences that may affect students' perceptions of their academic progress. Regular feedback and open channels of communication between students and faculty can help in identifying and addressing issues related to expectations promptly. By managing expectations transparently, universities can reduce stress and improve the overall well-being of IS.

To address the vulnerabilities faced by IS effectively, there is a pressing need for the establishment and support of independent advice centres. These centres should serve as confidential and trustworthy sources of guidance on matters such as visa regulations, housing, legal issues, and mental health support. Adequate funding is crucial to ensure these centres can offer comprehensive services. Additionally, fostering partnerships with local NGOs and government agencies can enhance the breadth and depth of support available to IS. Building trust in these advice centres is essential for IS to seek assistance and guidance when needed, promoting their overall well-being and academic success.

Collaborations between universities and local employers or businesses can significantly benefit IS. Such partnerships can create internship and employment opportunities that align with students' academic goals and career aspirations. These collaborations should focus on facilitating internships, part-time jobs, and post-graduation employment opportunities that are accessible and accommodating to IS. Transparent communication between universities, employers, and students is pivotal in ensuring that students are aware of available opportunities and the necessary requirements for employment. By forging strong connections with the local job market, universities can support IS in their career development, alleviating vulnerabilities related to post-graduation prospects.

During the workshop on addressing the question of vulnerabilities among IS, it became evident that one of the most effective strategies to combat these vulnerabilities is the implementation of training and upskilling initiatives. To empower IS and enhance their resilience, upskilling workshops were identified as a key intervention. These workshops should be tailored to address specific needs, including academic, cultural, and practical challenges. By providing IS with the necessary skills and knowledge, they are better equipped to navigate the academic environment and the broader societal context. Topics covered in these workshops may include language proficiency, academic writing, time management, cross-cultural communication, and career development. Furthermore, these workshops should be regularly updated to align with the evolving needs of IS.

Equipping frontline workers with the tools to identify and respond to vulnerabilities among IS is another vital aspect of support. Establishing clear escalation pathways ensures that frontline staff, including academic advisors, counsellors, and administrative personnel, can effectively address issues as they arise. These pathways should include guidelines on identifying signs of vulnerability, reporting mechanisms, and access to support services. Training programs for frontline workers should be comprehensive, covering cultural sensitivity, effective communication strategies, and knowledge of available resources. Regular training updates and feedback mechanisms can further improve the effectiveness of these pathways.

3. **Support from External Stakeholders**

The workshop discussions highlighted the critical importance of emphasising preventive actions and sustainable interventions in supporting IS in the UK, particularly regarding the funding of food banks. Stakeholders, including central government, universities, and food banks, play essential roles in addressing the challenges faced by IS. The workshop's discussions underscored the need for a holistic and sustainable approach to support IS in the UK. Preventive actions, including policy changes, financial aid, and support services, can alleviate IS' immediate challenges, reducing their dependence on the Voluntary Community and Faith Sector (VCFS), predominantly food banks. Moreover, ensuring the sustainability of food banks through diversified funding sources and cultural sensitivity is crucial to meeting the long-term needs of this vulnerable population. Universities are at the forefront of

international student support, and they can take proactive measures to ensure the well-being of their diverse student populations.

IS are a valuable asset to the UK, both economically and culturally, bringing £42 Billion to the economy each year. The workshop highlighted the following three categories and recommendations to ensure their well-being and successful integration.

1. **Central and Local Government Support**

   - **Policy Frameworks:** Develop and enforce policies that promote the welfare of IS. This includes measures to address financial hardships and food insecurity, such as grants and loans specifically tailored for this demographic.
   - **Public Awareness:** Promote awareness among the general public about the benefits of supporting IS, dispelling misconceptions that may lead to reluctance to fund food banks.
   - **Allocate Adequate Funding:** Adequate financial support from the government is essential to fund initiatives aimed at assisting IS, including food banks. Sustainable funding models should be developed to prevent overreliance on local communities.
   - **Financial Assistance:** The central government can allocate specific funding or grants aimed at supporting IS. This financial assistance could be through scholarships, grants for basic living expenses, or subsidies for health insurance, which can alleviate the financial burden on IS. It was evident that many IS face financial constraints. Therefore, the sustainable solution framework should include provisions for affordable tuition fees, scholarships, and part-time job opportunities.
   - **Visa Policies:** Streamlining and simplifying visa policies can significantly reduce the bureaucratic hurdles that IS often face. Creating a more welcoming and straightforward visa application process can encourage more students to choose the UK for their education.
   - **Employment Opportunities:** Central government policies can be tailored to facilitate part-time work opportunities for IS. This could include more flexible work visa regulations and cooperative education programs that allow students to gain valuable work experience while studying. To enhance the employability of IS, the framework should facilitate internships, work placements, and job search assistance while ensuring compliance with visa regulations.
   - **Mental Health and Well-being Initiatives:** The government can invest in mental health and counselling services specifically designed for IS. These services should be affordable and accessible to address this demographic's unique challenges and stresses. Mental health support services should be integral to the framework, offering counselling, workshops, and stress management programs.

- **Cultural Integration Programs:** Implementing cultural integration programs at the national level can promote cross-cultural understanding and foster a more inclusive environment. These programs can include language courses, cultural events, and community engagement initiatives. Recognising the importance of cultural adaptation, the framework should promote cultural exchange programs, intercultural training, and peer support networks to foster a sense of belonging.
- **Collaborative Support:** Collaborative efforts between universities and the central government are essential to secure funding and policy changes for effectively implementing the sustainable solution framework.
- **Involvement of Charities and Universities in Spotlighting Challenges:** Workshop participants highlighted the importance of a collective effort involving charities and universities to shed light on IS' challenges. This collaboration can take the form of joint research projects, awareness campaigns, or initiatives aimed at addressing specific challenges such as financial difficulties, mental health issues, or food insecurity. Such efforts would help raise awareness of the challenges faced by IS and enable the development of more targeted solutions.
- **Holistic Support Ecosystem:** A comprehensive framework should be established to cater to the holistic well-being of IS. This includes academic support, mental health services, career guidance, and access to affordable housing.
- **Language Proficiency:** English language proficiency is vital for IS' academic success and integration. The framework should encompass language support programs and resources to enhance students' language skills.

2. **University Initiatives**

- **Financial Aid Programs:** Develop and expand financial aid programs that cater to the unique needs of IS, including emergency funds for food assistance and other essential costs.
- **Financial Support to VCFS:** Universities should consider providing financial support to VCFS organisations specialising in international student support. This funding can help these organisations maintain and expand their services, ultimately benefiting the international student community.
- **Resource Sharing:** Universities should actively engage in resource-sharing with VCFS organisations, including facilities, expertise, and networks. This synergy can lead to more efficient and effective support systems for IS.
- **Collaboration with Local Food Banks:** Establish partnerships with local food banks to ensure their sustainability and equitable access to IS. Explore innovative collaborations that benefit both parties.
- **Collaborative Programs:** Creating collaborative programs between universities and VCFS organisations can leverage the expertise of both parties.

Universities can offer academic resources and infrastructure, while VCFS organisations can provide cultural and community support.

- **Counselling and Support Services:** Provide comprehensive support services, including mental health counselling and guidance on financial management, to help students navigate challenges and reduce the need for food bank reliance.
- **Sharing Resources:** Universities should actively collaborate in sharing resources such as information, research findings, and successful support strategies. This collaborative knowledge-sharing can help institutions learn from one another's experiences and avoid duplicating efforts.
- **Joint Programs and Services:** Participants emphasised the importance of developing joint programs and services. This includes academic support, mental health services, and cultural integration initiatives. Collaborative efforts can lead to the creation of more robust and holistic support systems for IS.
- **Student Exchange Programs:** Implementing collaborative international student exchange programs between universities can promote cross-cultural understanding and enhance the overall experience of IS.
- **Anonymous Voice for Voicing Concerns:** During the workshop, it was emphasised that establishing an Anonymous Voice platform is essential. This platform would provide IS a safe and confidential space to express their concerns and grievances. By allowing students to voice their issues anonymously, it can facilitate open and honest communication. Universities should lead in creating such platforms, ensuring they are easily accessible and well-promoted.
- **Open Forums as a Means of Communication:** The concept of open forums emerged as an effective means of communication between IS and the institutions they attend. These forums would provide students with the opportunity to discuss their challenges openly and seek solutions. In collaboration with student associations, universities should organise regular open forums where students can interact with university administrators and relevant support staff.
- **Diversity and Inclusivity:** The framework should emphasise diversity and inclusivity, promoting a welcoming environment for IS and addressing any discrimination or bias.
- **Legal and Visa Assistance:** Given the complexities of immigration regulations, the framework should include guidance on visas, work permits, and legal rights to ensure IS' lawful and secure stay in the UK.

3. **Food Banks' Sustainable Practices:** Food banks are vital support institutions, and they must focus on long-term sustainability while addressing the immediate needs of IS:
    - **Diversify Funding Sources:** Explore alternative funding sources beyond local communities, such as partnerships with businesses, NGOs, and philanthropic organisations, to reduce the burden on local donors.

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Tailor food bank services to cater to IS' dietary preferences and cultural backgrounds, ensuring that the support provided is culturally appropriate.
- **Education and Integration:** Collaborate with universities to provide educational programs and workshops that empower IS with practical skills, reducing their reliance on food banks over time.
- **Food Assistance Programs:** Food banks can collaborate with universities to establish food assistance programs tailored to IS. These programs could provide access to nutritious and culturally diverse food options, helping students maintain their health and well-being.
- **Financial Literacy Workshops:** Support organisations can offer financial literacy workshops specifically designed for IS. These workshops can educate students on budgeting, managing expenses, and making informed financial decisions.
- **Cultural Sensitivity Training:** Staff and volunteers at food banks should receive cultural sensitivity training to better understand IS' dietary preferences and restrictions. This ensures that the assistance provided is culturally appropriate.
- **Community Engagement:** Food banks can actively engage with the international student community by organising events, workshops, and support groups. This fosters a sense of belonging and encourages students to seek help when needed.
- **Partnerships with Universities:** Collaborative partnerships between food banks and universities can ensure that the specific needs of IS are met. Universities can provide resources, space, and volunteers to support the operation of food banks and related services.
- **Data Collection and Assessment:** Regular data collection and evaluation of support programs should be part of the framework to ensure continuous improvement and adaptability to evolving student needs.
- **Public Awareness and Advocacy:** Engaging in public awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts can garner support from various stakeholders, including the public, local communities, and businesses, further strengthening the sustainable solution framework.
- **Access to Food Security:** While not the primary focus, the sustainable solution framework should collaborate with food banks and organisations to provide temporary support to students facing food insecurity.

Appendix i

Tuesday, 22nd of August 2023
10.30 am to 2 pm
Ascot Community Centre, Star Lane, London, E16 4PR

Agenda:

10.30 - 10.45 am   **Welcome, Refreshments and Networking**
10.45 - 11.15 am   **Introduction to Project**
Rozina Iqbal, Newham Community Project, Operations Director
Prof Kavita Datta, Queen Mary University, School of Geography
Helena Taylor, London Borough of Newham, Senior Advisor (VCS) Public Health
11.15 - 12.15 pm   **Breakout Groups** – group discussions on the wider implications
service providers have witnessed within their organisation.
Moderators:
Shubo Saiful, Research Coordinator, Newham Community Project
Moona Abood, Research Coordinator, Newham Community Project
Abeeda, Research Coordinator, Newham Community Project
David Gookey, Frontdoor Coordinator, Newham Food Alliance, Public Health, London
Borough of Newham
Matt Bury, Public Health Officer, London Borough of Newham
12.15 - 12.50 pm   **Discuss Findings from Breakout Groups**
Conversation facilitated by Rozina Iqbal
12.50 - 13.00 pm   **Summary, Next Steps, and Closing Remarks**
Rozina Iqbal, Prof Kavita Datta, Helena Taylor
13.00 - 14.00 pm   **Lunch, Networking, Depart**

10.45 to 11.00 am | In Attendance | Introductions

Name	Organisation	Workshop Association
Rozina Iqbal	Newham Community Project	Research Lead
Prof. Kavita Datta	Queen Mary University	Project Lead
Helena Taylor	London Borough of Newham	Lead Project Partner
Shubo Saiful	Newham Community Project	Research Assistant
David Goody	London Borough of Newham	Workshop Facilitator
Abidah Uddin	Newham Muslim Forum	Workshop Facilitator
Matt Bury	London Borough of Newham	Workshop Facilitator
Moona Abood	Newham Community Project	Workshop Facilitator
Altaf Shaik	Newham Community Project	Workshop Operations Assistant
Iris Lim	SOAS	Valued University Attendee
Elyas Ismail	Newham Community Project	Valued VCFS Attendee

Hayley Turner	Elba	Valued VCFS Attendee
Belinda Ngugi	Newham Nurture	Valued VCFS Attendee
Shirley Biro	NHS + London Borough of Newham	Valued LBN Attendee
Mary Young	Shelter	Valued VCFS Attendee
Bethan Lant	Praxis	Valued VCFS Attendee
George Bleakey	Bow and Bethnal Green Food Bank	Valued VCFS Attendee
Farha Naaz	Post Study Worker	Valued pre-IS Attendee
Zulfiqar Ali	London Borough of Newham	Valued Councillor Attendee
Paul Schafer	Newham Recycling	Valued VCFS Attendee
Adele Thiser	Development	Valued VCFS Attendee
Pamela Mensah	Newham Nurture	Valued VCFS Attendee

11.00 to 11.15 am | Project Introduction

Introduction
Rozina Iqbal, Operations Director, Newham Community Project
Prof Kavita Datta, Head of School and Professor of Development Geography Director, Centre for the Study of Migration
Helena Taylor, Senior Advisor (VCS) Public Health London Borough of Newham.

11.15 to 12.15 pm | Breakout Groups

Group 1
Moderators | David Gookey - Abidah Uddin
Observers | Helena Taylor - Shubo Saiful

Group 2
Moderators | Moona Abood - Matt Bury
Observers | Prof Kavita Datta - Rozina Iqbal

Breakout Group Discussion Questions:

1. In your experience, what kinds of vulnerabilities are international students facing with regard to food, housing and employment vulnerabilities?

2. What kinds of support are most effective in responding to these vulnerabilities?

3. What kinds of support are needed from other stakeholders – central government, universities, food banks?

12.15 to 1.10 pm | Breakout Group Discussion Summary:

The findings from each group, in response to the above questions, were shared by one nominated member from each group.

Group 1 discussion shared by George Bleakey
Group 2 discussion shared by Belinda Ngugi

Group findings are combined for the purpose of this summary.