

The vanishing Vietnamese students



A 15-year-old girl went missing from Abbey College in Malvern. Thi Trang Le, above, went missing aged 15 in January 2017 and Thi Huong Nguyen, below, vanished from DLD College in London

Three Vietnamese teenagers who entered the UK on child student visas disappeared from a private college in London in one year.

The Times has linked two of the students to missing persons appeals, one of which showed a 15-year-old girl who had not been seen since January 2017. The other featured a 16-year-old girl who was reported missing in the same month and was later found in the back room of a nail bar in the Midlands.

Thi Huong Nguyen was 15 when she travelled from Vietnam to Britain on a student visa sponsored by DLD college. Within a few weeks she had vanished.

DLD boasts of being one of the oldest and most prestigious colleges in the country and is owned by the same group as Wetherby, the Notting Hill prep school attended by princes William and Harry.

For £30,000 a year DLD students are promised a university-style experience while studying for GCSEs and A levels. Alumni include the writer and director Phoebe Waller-Bridge. In recent years the college has looked to the international market to

boost intake numbers and offers space for 200 students to board for £18,000 to £29,400.

During the first school term in 2016, when she was 16, Thi Huong Nguyen stopped showing up to class and disappeared from her accommodation. The school reported her missing to the police and the Home Office.

A charity worker involved in the case said that she was found at a nail bar in Coventry in December 2016. She was taken into care and placed in a residential home in Enfield, north London, but disappeared again in January 2017 and remains missing.

Another Vietnamese student, Thi Trang Le, went missing from the college when she was 15. The charity Missing People put out an alert in January 2017 but her whereabouts remains unknown. A spokesman for DLD college confirmed that a third Vietnamese pupil absconded in the same period.

While it is not known if the students were victims of trafficking, it is thought that thousands of Vietnamese children are trafficked each year to the UK. Cannabis farms and nail bars are the most common industries in which they are put to work. Many report being promised earnings of £1,500 a month. In reality they may not be paid at all.

Nail bars largely operate on a cash-only basis and may have under-age workers living on site. The first successful nail bar prosecution occurred in January when three people were found guilty of conspiring to facilitate the movement of people for labour exploitation. Police found two Vietnamese girls working 60-hour weeks at the Nail Bar Deluxe in Bath. One was being paid about £30 a month while the other was not paid at all and slept on a mattress in the attic of the nail bar owner's home.

The charity Epcat, which works to protect children from trafficking and exploitation, found that a quarter of trafficked children put in the care of local authorities went missing last year. The number of Vietnamese victims of child trafficking referred to the charity increased from 135 in 2012 to 704 last year. Catherine Baker, Epcat's senior parliamentary and campaigns officer, said it was a "hidden scandal" that so many child-trafficking victims disappear in the UK care system.

"There is a significant lack of funding and resources dedicated to these children. They go into the care of the local authority but the care is not adequate and those responsible have little training in child trafficking. Extremely high numbers of these children go missing and end up back in the hands of those that exploit them," she added.

A DLD college spokesman said: “The safety and wellbeing of our students has always been our No 1 priority. In each case, their absence was immediately reported by us to the police and we followed all the appropriate procedures and guidelines. Following these events in 2016-17, we took a series of steps which included creating a revised admissions and sponsorship policy for Vietnam.”

Robin Fletcher, chief executive of the Boarding Schools Association, said that the body was aware of a growing number of cases “where there have been issues with students from Vietnam”.

He added: “We have advised all our members to be vigilant when recruiting any students from Vietnam and have also worked with schools to inform the Home Office about any issues.”

Analysis

One thing the Home Office should have learnt in the past nine years is that eternal vigilance is required in the operation of the immigration system (Richard Ford writes).

There has been plenty of evidence of abuses in the student visa route. More than 700 bogus colleges have been banned from bringing in students from outside the EU. Abuses included students failing to attend class or even register, and others who could barely speak English.

The system is based on a sponsorship regime that puts the responsibility on the institution to ensure the student or child is qualified and actually turns up. Applicants for child student visas must be able to show they can pay the school fees and support themselves but only have to show they have had the cash in a bank for 28 days in a row.

Schools must report if a child goes missing but it is not clear what the threshold is for removing one from the list of sponsors.