

## **N8.3** Conwy 1 Thursday 6 December 16.00 - 18.00

### ***Exploring International Student Responses to Surveillance within the UK student Visa System (0323)***

**Aisling Tiernan**<sup>1</sup> *University College Dublin, Ireland*

#### **Introduction**

The UK student visa system is managed by the UK Home Office as part of the points-based immigration system, a system which regulates immigration to the United Kingdom from outside the European Economic Area (EEA). The scheme was phased in between 2008 and 2010 and is composed of five tiers which replaced all previous work permits and entry schemes. The fourth tier refers to the rules applicable to people travelling the UK for study purposes. The system was originally administered by the UK Border Agency, the predecessor of UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) and is now managed by the UKVI. International students who come to study for longer than six months are defined as immigrants and are subject to the rules stipulated by the Tier 4 visa. From a policy perspective, the rules of the Tier 4 visa are outlined within the “Tier 4 of the Points Based System – Policy Guidance”. (Home Office, 2018).

This study is situated within the complex interactions between globalisation and internationalisation debated in previous literature (Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009; Van Der Wende, 2001). While these two terms are frequently used interchangeably (Sanderson, 2011) a number of researchers have emphasized the interplay between these different but related processes. Globalisation is “positioned as part of the environment in which the international dimension of higher education is becoming more important and significantly changing.” (Knight, 2004, p. 8).

#### **Findings**

The findings of this study show that the rules directed by the Tier 4 visa are applied to students discriminately, depending on the individuals’ citizenship and their country of previous domicile. The 29 participants in this study represent citizens from 17 countries, 7 of whom applied for a visa from a country that was not their country of citizenship. Therefore, participants in this study illustrate a dimension of a globalised environment where people are frequently moving across borders and are living in countries other than their country of citizenship before coming to the UK to study. Unfortunately, the Tier 4 visa, a national level response to the internationalisation of UK HE has not been developed with this globalised environment in mind and in many ways confirms Matthews &

Sidhu's (2005) prediction that international higher education is likely to give rise to profoundly conservative ethnocultural affiliations missing the opportunity to unsettle nationalistic tendencies (Matthews & Sidhu 2005, p.50).

Six examples of surveillance within the Tier 4 visa process were identified in this study and are used here to provide the basis for this paper.

1. Extensive questioning in the Tier 4 application form
2. Evidencing financial statements
3. Interviews prior to departure
4. Questioning and checks at the border
5. Police registration
6. Attendance monitoring in the classroom

These forms of surveillance result in feelings of uncertainty, distrust, anger and disbelief and have consequential effects on their identity development through their experience of travelling to the UK to study. International students consider elements of the student visa process as forms of surveillance, and this surveillance has a negative impact on their experience of studying in the UK. The multitude of experiences captured in this study demonstrate that students' experiences cannot be viewed effectively through a home student versus international student divide. Diversity within the international student cohort exists not just in terms of a student's citizenship and previous domicile, but also in terms of the variety of unequal treatment that students experience throughout their navigation of the student visa system. Nationality is not always a straightforward categorization and several of the participants in this study identified with more than one country of citizenship. Students can hold passports from one country, while having lived their entire lives in another country yet the Tier 4 visa policy rules differentiates between students in a number of ways based on both citizenship (nationality) and domicile (country of residence).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

If the role of the public university is to perform the role of fostering critical, reflexive, independent and globally minded thinkers (Marginson, 2011; Tannock, 2017), and to support the creation of the global citizens put forward by so many UK university strategies and their promotional material, then the differential treatment of international students within UK higher education must be opened to critique. This paper draws on examples of surveillance within the student visa system to show that

international students are not currently being positioned as equals comparatively to other students within UK higher education. In addition, while this unequal treatment is being directed by UK immigration legislation and the rules of the Tier 4 visa, UK universities play a substantive role in implementing these surveillance mechanisms through the responsibilities endowed by their Highly Trusted Status (HTS). UK universities as institutions, and the senior management teams that lead these institutions are therefore complicit in the creation of inequality within their student populations.

International students, in the act of travelling to another country for their studies have asserted a desire to create possibilities for themselves that reach beyond the known and the local. The idea of possible selves might be considered with regards to intentionality, a core property of agency which accounts for students' action plans and strategies for realising these plans (Bandura, 2006, p. 164; Klemenčič, 2015, p. 16). If the decision and the action to study in another country reflects an action towards future self-development, then how do the negative perceptions associated with being positioned as an immigrant impact on this self-development? In the decision to pursue their studies in the UK, students access a range of information to make an informed choice about their study options. Participants spoke of online research, stories from friends and families, educational exhibitions and school counsellors as influencers in their decision to study, and most talked to the educational reputation of the UK as a motivation for choosing the UK. However, these participants made their decision quite a few years ago in a time when the visa was arguably less challenging to navigate. Some participants suggested that future students will decide not to study in the UK due to increasing challenges within the visa regime. The emerging argument from this research is that the positioning of international students within UK visa regulations creates inequalities that run counter to the predominant ethos and values of higher education.

## References

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