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Internationalisation and immigration processes: exploring UK universities' involvement in administering the Tier 4 student visa (0523)

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Abstract

The Tier 4 visa sets out a multitude of rules that many international students must navigate in order to undertake their studies in the UK. This paper explores international students' perceptions of who manages and implements the visa rules directed by the UKVI. Qualitative interview data undertaken with 29 international students who successfully navigated the Tier 4 visa between 2012 and 2017, shows that the role between immigration officers and university staff is at times blurred. Drawing on these students' understanding of how the UK student visa system is operationalised, this paper argues that universities have become overly involved in "bordering processes" (Villegas, 2018) due to the responsibilities endowed by their Highly Trusted Status.

Introduction

International students are a key concern of higher education (HE) research and policy due, in part, to the contribution of international student fees to fund UK universities (Tannock, 2013, p. 454) and, to the increased emphasis on internationalisation as a key part of universities strategic ambitions (Delgado-Márquez, Escudero-Torres, & Hurtado-Torres, 2013). Through the immigration policies of the UKVI, the UK government manages a perceived risk associated with immigration, and specifically has implemented a period of visa tightening to address the risks associated with mobility into the UK for education purposes. Changes within the student visa system has resulted in delegated responsibility to UK universities and therefore universities within the UK are now managing risks associated with the responsibilities of their highly trusted status (HTS). In this context universities are deemed to sponsors of Tier 4 visas, and universities who are found to be non-compliant by the UKVI risk losing the right to host international students. This paper aims to describe UK universities' immigration responsibilities and explore international students' blurred understanding of who exactly is implementing the UK student visa.

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from a qualitative study designed to investigate how international students experienced the student visa system in the UK between 2012 and 2017. This specific time period was selected due to the changing immigration rules applied to international students through the Tier 4 visa rules during this time. The study aimed to capture responses from international students based throughout England, and therefore the study was advertised widely and primarily through a Call for Participants webpage which was then promoted on Twitter and also advertised on the UKCISA (UK Council for International Student Affairs) webpage. The final sample included twenty-nine participants representing seventeen countries of citizenship, domiciled in eighteen countries. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to co-generate meanings with respondents providing the researcher space to explore the points of view of the respondents in an authentic manner (Silverman, 2006 p.87). While retaining an objective viewpoint the interviews were designed to describe and discuss international students' experience of the Tier 4 visa, doing so with depth and detail in order to represent the participant's views fairly. Exploring international students' understanding of their experiences was the main aim of this research, and therefore pursuing a qualitative approach was appropriate, allowing an exploration of "the subjective meanings through which people interpret the world" (Jupp, 2006, p. 249). Coding using NVivo was both an inductive and a deductive process, as some codes were designed by examining topics raised and meanings conveyed by participants, while others were generated to compare responses to the same questions. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times, and the list of codes was added to, refined, and re-applied to the data in an iterative fashion. The study is also informed by Tier 4 policy documents that outline policy details to applicants, universities and UKVI staff.

Findings

Discussions on who specifically is responsible for implementing the UK student visa system emerged as a theme in several of the discussions within this study. Universities are involved in students' visa applications both prior to arrival through their obligation to issue Confirmation of Acceptance of Studies (CAS) statements and after arrival due to their obligation to report on visa-holders' attendance. Not all participants understood that the CAS statement came from their university and not the UKVI showing that there is a confusion over the role that universities play in the visa application. This confusion creates tension between students and their university before they have arrived in the UK. The visa application may be viewed as a revenue generating process, with

applicants unsure as to whether the university profits from visa fees paid. The visa process is also viewed as a method of control. Visa monitoring processes are carried out through attendance checks and reported by university staff therefore immigration practices have clearly moved into university environments. The issue of reporting attendance is particularly worrying illustrating that universities have become “border zones”, places where inclusion and exclusion are defined as distinct from belonging (Villegas, 2018, p. 2).

Implications of study

Analysis of UK universities’ HTS responsibilities and international students’ responses to these responsibilities contributes to scholarly debates in the field of research on higher education in a number of ways. The paper adds to the growing body of work on international students, specifically exploring the UK student visa system as an example of immigration regulations facing globally mobile students (Marginson, 2012, p. 498). The current hostile policy environment creates narratives that construes international students as “undesirable, risky immigrants” (Lomer, 2018, p. 321). Participants within this study echo these narrative constructions. Ambiguity and confusion that students’ experience is detrimental because of the risk that a visa issue could lead to a student not starting or continuing with their studies (Lee, Paulidor, & Mpage, 2017, p. 8). With HTS responsibilities, the risk of students experiencing a visa problem is heightened for universities as the consequences could affect an individual university’s ability to host any international students. This leads universities to take a risk management approach to engaging with their international student population. This paper contributes to a wider debate on bordering processes and the movement of these processes into educational spaces (Jenkins, 2014; Villegas, 2018). A final contribution of this paper is to shed light on the less widely understood elements of UK universities’ involvement in administering the UK’s immigration policy and I propose that while unequal treatment of international students is being directed by UK immigration legislation and the rules of the Tier 4 visa, UK universities play a substantive role in implementing these rules. 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.

References

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