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Disrupting or reinforcing (im)mobility in UK higher education? Exploring the impact of the Ukrainian conflict.

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

Since February 2022, an estimated 5.7 million people have fled Ukraine in the fastest exodus globally since World War II (Siegfried, 2022). This refugee movement surpasses the 2.5 million people who entered Europe in 2015/16, fleeing the civil war in Syria and displacement from the MENA region. However, the response to the displacement of Ukrainian nationals has been notably different, in that they have been granted social and economic rights not typically afforded to people fleeing conflict.

This paper explores the history of the higher education (HE) border. It interrogates how restrictions have been resisted by young people with experience of displacement, whilst also exploring how disruption created by granting rights to Ukrainian nationals could achieve different outcomes across HE: i) systemic change that transforms access through dismantling its borders OR ii) the reinforcement of racialised bordering, elevating Whiteness as an explicit border.

Full paper

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This paper explores the history of the higher education (HE) border. It interrogates how restrictions have been resisted by young people with experience of displacement, whilst also exploring how disruption created by granting rights to Ukrainian nationals could achieve different outcomes across HE: i) systemic change that transforms access through dismantling its borders OR ii) the reinforcement of racialised bordering, elevating Whiteness as an explicit border.

The foundations of the higher education border were laid in the Teaching and Higher Education Act (1998), which simultaneously (re)introduced university tuition fees for all home students studying in the UK and reclassified anyone seeking asylum as an international student. An immigration status binary has evolved that differentiates between settled (home student) / unsettled (international student), and in doing so determines eligibility for student finance, often essential to pursue a degree qualification. Embedded in this Act (1998) were two key elements of the higher education border constructed from deficits in the capital held by people experiencing forced displacement – settled immigration status interwoven with a lack of material assets. Legislation, policy and practice implemented since this point, has resulted in a raft of punitive restrictions contributing to a culture of ‘unbelonging’ in higher education for people with lived experience of displacement (Morrice, 2013; Murray, 2018). The ‘higher education border’ (Murray, 2018; 2021; 2022) is a tangible example of the UK ‘hostile environment’, a description utilised in 2010 by Teresa May in her role as Prime Minister. The hostile environment denotes the orchestrated exclusion and

marginalisation of select groups, such as people who have been displaced and sought sanctuary, from all sectors of civil society including post-compulsory education (Yuval-Davis et al, 2019).

2005 onwards, saw the inception of advocacy initiatives led by young people with experience of forced displacement, in response to practices of exclusion within HE. This resistance was enacted in tandem with increasingly malleable and sophisticated forms of (im)mobility imposed by the HE border. Murray's (2019) study explored the activities of UK universities and reported on a decade of "sanctuary scholarship" initiatives for people with precarious immigration status from 2008 onwards. Sanctuary Scholarships were the result of grassroots campaigning merged into a social movement led by young people with migration experience, university students and a wide range of organisations invested in breaking down barriers to university (Murray, 2022). The confluence of technologies of restriction manifest in border controls with resistance from the grassroots level, provide the higher education backdrop against which the UK government has responded to people displaced from Ukraine.

The UK has effectively 'upended' previous entitlements (or lack of) for people with unsettled immigration status, through the selective dismantling of key bordering practices in higher education by affording Ukrainian nationals 'home' student status and access to student finance. The UK government's focus has been on how to increase the mobility of Ukrainian nationals in a context of entrenched and enduring (im)mobility. However, bordering practices in HE are diverse, malleable and have become increasingly sophisticated in not only 'preventing' but also 'deterring' access. The HE border has grown to encapsulate capital deficits additional to immigration status and economic capital, including but not limited to: linguistic capital or language ability; knowledge capital to meet entry requirements or the validity, transferability, or even physical copies of prior qualifications; social capital required to navigate and negotiate the HE border and the quasi-border officials responsible for its implementation (Murray & Gray, 2021:10).

Recent developments highlight a response driven by pressures from international actors and public opinion, as well as the complex interaction between the wide ranging 'everyday (HE) borders' and territorial borders, which risk reinforcing instead of decolonising hierarchies that privilege whiteness and nationality. The current crisis in Ukraine presents UK universities with the opportunity to resist these hierarchies by recognising: i) the legacy and expertise developed by the grassroots 'access to higher education' movement; ii) the opportunity to implement inclusive initiatives and reject narrow eligibility criteria; and iii) the importance of people with lived experience holding the power to lead and shape the response.

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