

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Student visas: technologies of control?

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:**

This paper illustrates how the UK Tier 4 student visa scheme can highlight conflicting messages embedded in neoliberal ideologies of international higher education. On the one hand, international students are constructed as a lucrative market. On the other hand, they are represented as a potential security risk. This paper suggests that student visas are an example of regulation and control in higher education. Control is exerted through diverse organisations including the UK Home Office, visa processing agents and UK universities. Not all international students require visas, and the rules are differentiated depending on an applicant's citizenship and country of domicile. Classifying students in this way can evoke emotions including fear, shame, competitiveness and pride. The paper concludes with some thoughts on how student visas lead to the construction of an idealised international student and questions the consequences of UK universities involvement in the management and administration of student visas.

**Paper:** Applying for, and successfully obtaining a student visa is a key component of many international students' journey when preparing to study in the UK. Existing research does not focus on the importance of being granted entry to a country in understanding the entirety of international student experiences (Lee, Paulidor, & Mpaga, 2017, p. 1). This paper shows that navigating the student visa system is not just an important process in the pre-arrival stage for international students in the UK but is a process that is embedded throughout a student's course of study. Furthermore, investigating international students experience of the Tier 4 visa shows that layers of control can be identified in the management of international student visas. The data used in this study draws on twenty-nine qualitative interviews undertaken with visa required international students who studied in the UK between 2012 and 2017. 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). The interviews were designed to describe and discuss international students' experience of the Tier 4 visa, presenting questions that allowed participant's views to be expressed openly. 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).

## Student visas as an example of control

The Tier 4 student visa is a tool used to determine who enters the UK for study purposes. Its existence, and the various checking points embedded within the Tier 4 visa highlight that not everyone is equally welcome to become a student in the UK. During the process of securing a Tier 4 visa, a student will complete an online form, account for 10 years of previous travel, present financial documents that evidence sufficient funds to support their studies, provide evidence of health tests, in some cases undertake a credibility interview, and submit biometric data to visa processing agencies in their home country. A Tier 4 applicant will receive a decision on their visa application before they are permitted to travel to the UK. Not all international students require a visa though and therefore the requirement to obtain a Tier 4 visa is the first step in a ‘sorting of individuals’ (Broeders & Hampshire, 2013, p. 1213).

## Layers of control

Chronologically, on an international student’s journey, the visa centre in their home country is the first organisation that a Tier 4 applicant will encounter. While a visa centre may be serviced within a UK Embassy, they are frequently outsourced to a visa processing company called VFS Global who manage the administrative tasks related to visa processing. The VFS website assures that “VFS Global does not play any part in the decision-making process behind visa applications being granted or denied.” (VFS Global, 2019). A key theme that emerged in this study is the commercialisation of the student visa, established through constant up-selling by VFS. One participant who self-identified as a ‘VFS guru’ explains:

“Every step of the way, they try and sell you something. So, it was like, do you want to upgrade it to VIP service and then you must wait 20 minutes less? And would you like us to deliver the passport to your house, it's only 40 Riyals. ... It's very commercial. “Saqib, Riyadh

Terms such as ‘VIP service’ and ‘fast-tracked’ services were discussed by many participants. While VFS does not make visa decisions, a decision may be affected by how an applicant’s documents are presented to the border control agent and so the power here, while subtle, should not be overlooked. At this very first stage of the visa application, applicants are being sorted into those who can pay for a premium service, and those who cannot.

UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) is the explicit agent of control in the student visa process. Border agents are tasked to check each applicant’s visa application to determine whether they meet the 40 point requirement stipulated by the Tier 4 Guidance (UK Home Office, 2017). These points are

awarded for having a Confirmation of Acceptance of Study (CAS) from a licenced institution (30 points) and meeting the financial requirements which includes being able to show course fees and stipulated maintenance fees (10 points) (UK Home Office, 2017, p. 15). As well as controlling which students are granted entry to the UK, the UKVI also controls which institutions can host international students. The latest Register of Sponsors issued in June 2019 lists 1,205 sponsors who are licenced to host international students under the Tier 4 (UK Home Office, 2019).

Finally, and perhaps less well understood, is Tier 4 visa sponsors responsibilities in managing international students' visas. As Tier 4 sponsors, UK 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. The visa application is viewed as a revenue generating process, with applicants unsure as to whether their university profits from visa fees. 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 illustrates that universities have become "border zones", places where inclusion and exclusion are defined as distinct from belonging (Villegas, 2018, p. 2).

## Conclusion

When international students choose to pursue studies the UK, the Tier 4 visa directly leads to the positioning of some students as 'immigrants', an arguably negative position in UK society. As one participant describes:

"International students are categorised as migrants as well now and that makes us sound like dirty little things" Nikeeta, Malaysia

Not all applicants for a Tier 4 visa are treated equally. The Tier 4 requirements evidence that international students need to do more than just meet academic entry requirements in order to take up their studies in a process which is redefining of the identity 'student' (Jenkins, 2014, p. 265). The shame of being classed as an immigrant, the fear of not being granted a visa, and the pride instilled in those who are deemed 'low-risk' are all affective ways in which the political economy of neoliberalism is being enforced in UK higher education.

## References

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