



Universities as bordering spaces: internationalisation, immigration and the affective realities for students

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Internationalisation and Border Control

Universities promote internationalisation and global mobility

At the same time, international students are governed through immigration regimes

Universities increasingly implement these controls themselves

How do international students experience universities as *bordering spaces*?

Internationalisation of higher education



“The process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education.” Knight (2004)



Global student mobility surged from 0.3m (1963) to 6.4m (2021).



International students central to university funding, rankings, and global competition



Marketisation of higher education and students increasingly treated as consumers



Student mobility is highly concentrated geographically: Nearly half of internationally mobile students' study in four countries: the US, UK, Australia and Canada



Internationalisation of higher education in the UK

The UK is one of the world's major destinations for international students

732,285 international students in UK higher education (2023/24)

656,795 from outside the EU

International fees contribute over £10 billion annually to UK universities

Political tensions around immigration, Brexit

Increasing revenue through internationalisation – ‘the best and the brightest’

HESA; UK Commons Library; UK Home Office statistics.



Researching international student experiences

Drawing on my experiences of working in UK international offices

Qualitative interviews with 29 students

Research question: How do international students experience and navigate the UK student visa system?

Visa required students

Located around the UK

Time sensitive (2015 – 2017)

UK student visa rules

TIME OF DATA COLLECTION

- Student visas issued under the Points-Based System (Tier 4)
- Universities required Highly Trusted Sponsor (HTS) status
- Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) required
- Financial maintenance and English language proof required
- Universities required to track attendance, report non-compliance and maintain records.
- No post-study work visa after the 2012 abolition of the Post-Study Work Route
- International students **could bring dependants** on many postgraduate programmes

2026

- Student visa route (renamed in 2020 but structurally similar sponsorship system)
- Graduate Route visa introduced in 2021 allowing 2 years post-study work (currently under political debate)
- Dependants restricted since January 2024 mostly to PhD/research students
- Universities remain licensed student sponsors issuing CAS
- These monitoring obligations remain and are institutionalised within university compliance systems



Universities as bordering spaces

Universities in the Student Visa System must:

- obtain a student sponsor licence
- issue Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS)
- verify students' academic and financial eligibility
- monitor attendance and engagement
- report visa non-compliance to the Home Office
- Universities become part of the everyday administration of immigration control.
- Impact on universities and impact on students



Responsibilities and risks for universities

- Universities act as student visa sponsors
- Expansion of visa administration units in universities
- Must monitor attendance and engagement
- Required to report visa breaches to UKVI
- Academic staff increasingly involved in immigration compliance
- Tension between educational roles and migration enforcement
- Students from countries with a higher refusal risk become less desired

- Non-compliance can lead to loss of sponsor licence
- Example: London Metropolitan University licence revocation (2012)



Immigration compliance and ethical concerns

*“I have heard that international students are not allowed to miss more than 20% of the classes. So, they're supposed to take attendance and then turn over that information to the immigration authorities. I've only ever had a roll-call taken in my one module, my court module for my class. And that was just in the first semester....So, I don't know if that information was actually going somewhere, or the university was keeping track of that or they're still complying with it. **But I do know that one of my friends at UCL said that her professor who taught law refused to do it. And he was like, you can fire me, but I'm not going to report on my students. So, I know there all these examples of pushback. Yeah, but I personally have not been a part of any of that.”** Divya from India*



Impact on students

Role Confusion: Students struggle with the blurred lines between university responsibilities and government immigration control, fostering mistrust.

Perception of Threat: Government and media discourse around international students emphasises threat and risk, affecting students' sense of belonging (Baker & McEnery 2005; Brooks 2017; TSO 2006).

Emotional Impact of Migration: The emotional and psychological journey of crossing borders reflects a deeply **affective** adaptation process among migrants (Ahmed 2000).

Financial Burden of Visas: The high costs associated with UK student visas and the requirement to prove substantial financial resources pose significant barriers to education access (Brown 2015; Tannock 2013).



International student precarity

*"I just feel like the constant precarity that I live in as a Tier four Visa student runs completely counter to the kinds of acknowledgments I would like to receive for when contributing intellectually and personally to the [university name] community. I can't hold a job. I can't be self-employed. I can't hold a full-time job to help fund the studies that I'm currently not funded for. With institutional support from [university name] I cannot own my own business. I would like to live and work here full time. **But the Tier four visa is like living a life constantly on hold.**"* Catlin from the US

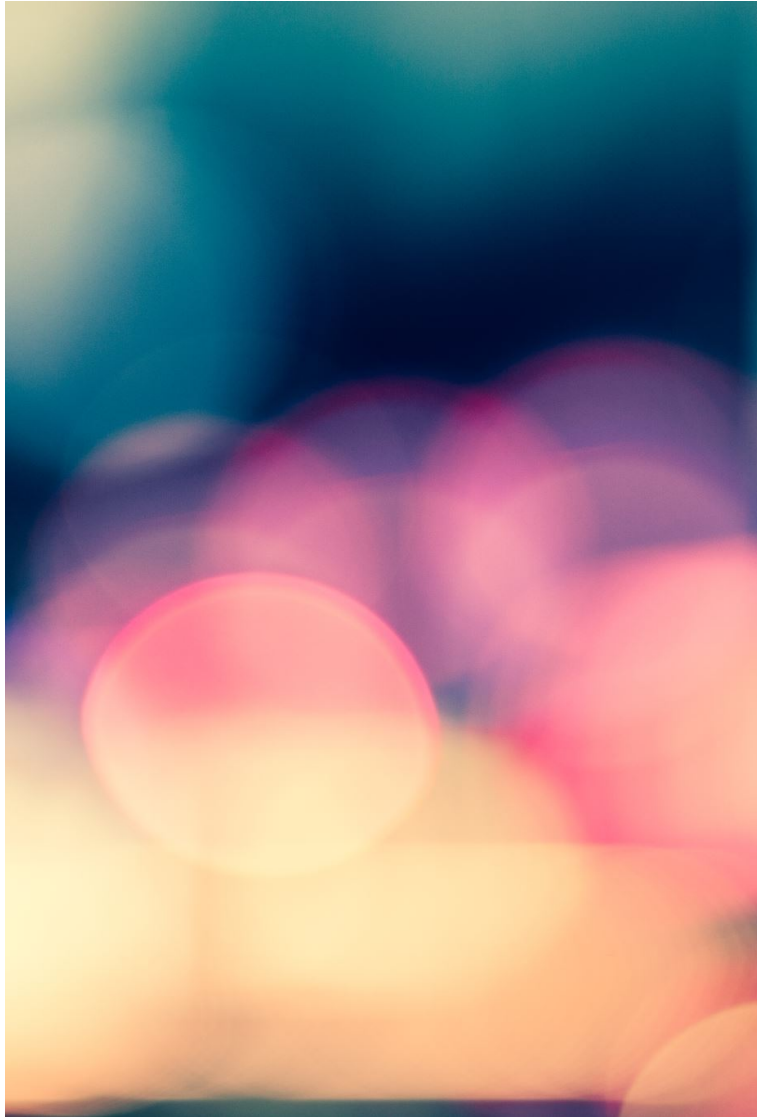


International students as strangers

A stranger is not simply someone unknown but someone **produced through social and institutional practices (Ahmed 2000)**

Stressful interactions and feelings of being treated like a criminal or an immigrant are associated with feelings of dislocation (Ahmed, 2000, p.81) and furthermore reinforce international students as strangers in higher education.

*"I just feel like, I guess, international students are categorized as immigrants, and that **makes us sound like these dirty little things** (laughs). But you know on one hand they are getting 60 million a year from international students and on the other hand - it's like we will kick them all out." — Nor from Malaysia*



The cruel optimism of international student experiences

International education is associated with aspirations of mobility, opportunity, and transformation

Students remain attached to the promise of a better future through education abroad

However, visa restrictions, financial pressures, and institutional surveillance often undermine these aspirations

Students continue to pursue these goals despite the emotional and practical costs

This creates a situation where the very object of hope, international education, has also become a source of stress and precarity

(Drawing on the concept of cruel optimism from Lauren Berlant)



The current state of research and hopes for the future

- Tensions on immigration and rising far right politics
- Researching with international students' community at the University of Manchester
- Growing visibility of international student visas as a research topic
- Accidental gatekeepers – small funded project at RWTH Aachen



Thank you

ANY QUESTIONS?