Sharing the experiences of students from Nigeria on strict immigration rules and policy as non-EU students – and implications of ‘Tier 4’

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Dr Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu
Queen Chioma Nworgu
Helen Nworgu
This paper outlines reasons for changes to the UK’s immigration rules in 2010 and explores the experiences of one group of non-EU students: students from Nigeria.
Context: The UK’s points-based immigration system and Tier 4
Five tiers of the UK’s point based immigration system

1. Highly skilled migrants under Exceptional Talent visa
2. Entrepreneurs
3. Investors
4. Students (Tier 4)
5. Other categories of people
Students coming to the UK under a Tier 4 student visa require a university or other registered UK educational institution to sponsor them.

They need to score enough points to be accepted as an international student in the UK.

Students must provide evidence of sufficient funds to pass a maintenance test, as well as any qualification certificates or other documents used to obtain an offer from the educational institutions.
What has been the impact Tier 4?

- Since the introduction of Tier 4:
- There has been a decline in the numbers of non-EU students coming to study in the UK

(The Migration Observatory, 2014; Universities UK, 2014).
UK temporarily suspended student visa applications from non-EU students due to an apparent failure of the system allowing entry by ‘bogus’ students.
Applicants for student visas have to demonstrate a higher level of proficiency in the English language.

A time limit for study for non-EU students coming to study in the UK (3 years at undergraduate & 5 years at postgraduate level).

Non-EU students must be able to demonstrate the ability to cope financially whilst on the course.

From April 2014, only those who ‘graduate from a university’, and have a skilled job offer with a minimum salary of £20,000 (or more in some cases) allowed to continue living and working in the UK after graduating.
Methodology

- Telephone interviews with 45 students during 2015 and 2016.
- The participants were all Nigerian students studying in the UK:
  - 15 on RSSB scholarships
  - 20 RSSDA on scholarships
  - 10 private students.
  - The majority (25) were on engineering programmes or on degrees relating to work in the oil and gas industry (16).
Findings: Nigerian students’ views on Tier 4 immigration rules
UK universities remain attractive

“I was motivated by my teacher to study in the UK. My university lecturer studied in the UK and I have always admired the way he spoke and the values he attached to the UK education system. He was a role model to all the students and taught us very well. I decided to do my Master’s degree in the UK to gain a sound education that I believe will surely enhance my job opportunities in the world at large.” (S10)
“It was not easy... The fact that we are classified as non-EU students means we still have to take the English test. Coupled with the evidence that you must have sufficient funds in the account and it has to be there for 48 days has made the process too stressful to apply to study in the UK institutions. I was almost sleeping in the Board’s office submitting one document or another. Even when we arrived at the airport, we were still scrutinised and bombarded with questions. ... The UKBA Tier 4 system is too rigorous for students and needs to be made easier to encourage more non-EU students to study in the UK.” (S18)
Difficulties in getting part-time work

“Studying in the UK as a non-EU student can make you feel good when the going is fine but also sad when you cannot cope... I thought I could immediately get a part time job on arrival to support the money from my sponsor. I had to wait more than three months to get my national insurance number required by employers for me to work. When I finally got my NI, I applied for more than 20 jobs, but none of the employers were willing to employ me as a student. Some told me they wanted full time staff, but I knew it was not the case but rather the worries about breaching the immigration rules on a student visa.” (S33)
Inflexibility of new time limit for completing studies

I came on a Scholarship scheme and my award was linked to a specific course. I am not a science student but I took the offer and came over. The foundation course was tough due to Mathematics which I had to do to be enrolled in the Uni for Mechanical Engineering. I struggled on my programme for five years and exceeded my time limit... I was asked to go home to re-apply for completion. I just arrived and am now completing the course. You can see my negative experience. ... People need to understand that there are slow learners and this law cannot apply to them if people like me are to achieve a British degree.” (S30)
Conclusion: Key findings

- Tier 4 had a major impact on these students:
- Satisfying the many **entry requirements** proved a significant challenge.
- Even after starting their course they were at a **disadvantage compared to home and EU students** (UKBA paperwork, difficulties of securing part-time work)
- **Restrictions on how long they could remain in the UK as a student** caused problems if it was not possible to finish their programme of study within the intended time.
- These students reported considerable **additional stress and anxiety** that stemmed directly from the Tier 4 policy and rules.
UK higher education authorities should look at these issues and work with the UK Border Agency to make the Tier 4 requirements less onerous in order to ensure that non-EU students have the same opportunities to succeed as students from other countries.
Literature (1)

