

## **AMOSSHE Futures**

Discussion paper: 'Sponsor silence: is it time for higher education providers to stop complaining about Tier 4?'



### ***Introduction***

As part of its policy work, AMOSSHE hosts a series of strategy and policy discussions, AMOSSHE Futures. The first **AMOSSHE Futures** policy breakfast took place from 10:30 to 12:00 on **Thursday 13 February 2014** at the AMOSSHE National Office in London. The topic was '**Sponsor silence: is it time for higher education providers to stop complaining about Tier 4?**' and Ben Lewis Chair of AMOSSHE and Director, Student Support & Wellbeing at Cardiff University chaired the discussion. Participants included representatives from UUK (Universities UK), the National Union of Students (NUS), and representatives of four AMOSSHE member organisations.

Participants discussed the following motions:

- a) Motion 1:  
What additional workload has Tier 4 created for universities? Has Tier 4 fundamentally shifted or damaged the relationship between higher education providers and international students? Or are we overstating the impact?
- b) Motion 2:  
What is the relationship like now between the UK Visa and Immigration (UKVI) and higher education providers?
- c) Motion 3:  
Would it be fair to say that Tier 4 has pressured higher education providers to do things they needed to do anyway (e.g. introduce clearer attendance monitoring procedures, improve data quality)? In this respect, was Tier 4 perhaps helpful to institutions?
- d) Motion 4:  
Did Tier 4, the loss of the post-study work visas, etc. seriously damage our ability to attract and recruit international students, or are universities over-emphasising the negative in relation to Tier 4 and actually putting international students off applying to university in the UK?

This paper outlines the themes explored during 'Sponsor silence: is it time for higher education providers to stop complaining about Tier 4?' The paper does not represent the policy stances or convictions of AMOSSHE or any of the groups in attendance. The paper is intended as a record of the issues considered and a starting point for further conversations.

## ***Discussion***

### **Additional workload**

Inefficiencies in the visa curtailment process since the introduction of Tier 4 has created additional workload for higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly student advisers. Oftentimes poor communication between the Home Office, Compliance Managers and Student Advisers once a visa curtailment has been issued, has resulted in the latter adopting the role of 'the voice of the Home Office'. Not only has this created an additional workload, but has put many student advisers in compromising situations outside of their remit. There are suggestions for the Home Office to improve their consistency and communication with HEIs when issuing letters of curtailment to avoid confusion and misunderstanding for both students and student advisers.

HEIs have responded to these challenges by moving towards a more collaborative approach within their respective student services. In some cases this has had staffing implications and created additional workload for existing staff. Some institutions have also invested in early intervention and financial advice for international students to avoid further visa curtailments.

The value of Account Managers remains varied among participants. While some see their value in lessening the workload through low refusal rates and record keeping, others saw inefficiencies in their work with student services. The diversity of views on the work of Account Managers suggests that the level of service may be dependent on the relationship certain student services have with their Account Manager. This reveals the need for sector-wide cost benefit analysis into the role of Account Managers within HEIs.

Some recognised that the London Metropolitan University case brought compliance to the forefront of priorities for HEIs. As a result, compliance has become deeply embedded in some institutions with Vice Chancellors and Heads/Managers of student services emphasising and highlighting the importance of sharing best practice in the higher education sector. However, the extent to which compliance is effectively addressed in relation to duty of care is an area that requires much attention.

### **HEIs and international students**

Since the introduction of Tier 4 there has been a recognisable change in the dynamics of the relationship between HEIs and international students. For example, because of notions of care and support for students, there are occasions where HEIs may be lenient on students who do not meet their financial and academic obligations. However, under Tier 4, Student Advisers are required to report breaches even though they may conflict with their duty of care to students. There are suggestions that the growing conflict between welfare and compliance is an issue the sector must address and develop guidance on.

It is widely agreed that attendance and monitoring of international students is essential to the running of HEIs and the implementation of Tier 4. However, although its implementation is up to the discretion of individual HEIs, there is an assumption that the Home Office has created Tier 4 without envisaging the diversity of the UK higher education sector. Some felt that Tier 4 had been set up like Tier 2 with the assumption

that it is easy to 'clock in and clock out' as is customary in the workplace. In the case of one particular institution this has resulted in international students travelling across the city to 'sign in' on particular days of the week. In another institution it is a requirement to sign in at the beginning of every lecture. It is understood that in such cases, the singling out of international students has led to them being ostracised and blamed by home students for inconveniences resulting from stringent attendance monitoring.

The vast differences across the higher education (HE) sector makes the process of monitoring attendance impractical. As the sector adapts to technological demands (e.g. webinars and lectures) it is understood that a student can still be engaged despite being physically absent. As a result, current processes that focus on monitoring rather than engagement may prove even more problematic to effectively enforce in the future. It was agreed that HEIs sharing best practice of their attendance and monitoring processes within the sector and with the Home Office is imperative.

## **UKVI and HEIs**

There is general consensus that there are signs of improvement in the relationship between the Home Office and HEIs. Although George Shirley's willingness to engage, and the advent of Account Managers has been received positively, there is scope for the relationship to be nurtured with more communication between the two.

Some felt that despite their Highly Trusted Status, the relationship with the Home Office is largely one sided and many still do not feel "*highly trusted*". This is in large part due to the assumption that the repercussions of mistakes made by HEIs remain greater than those made by the Home Office. It was suggested that greater transparency and accountability on the part of the Home Office would help to alter this view in the future.

## **Post-study work visas**

There is an assumption that there is a sense of frustration and unwelcoming towards international students. However, the great difficulty comes from the balance of containing the concerns directed at the government from international students. This could be improved by greater coherence in the narrative of the government, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for Business Innovation & Skills towards the recruitment of international students.

Working after studies is a common enquiry for many international students studying in the UK. The loss of post-study work visas has made the process of finding employment in the UK more difficult in the already fierce economic climate. The availability of jobs that meet the requirements of Tier 2 (finding a UKVI licensed employer to sponsor and offer a job which pays at least £20,300 per year), in the current economic climate is relatively low. This is not helped by the general public apathy towards international students, which has had a negative impact on the desire of employers to hire international students.

As a result, international student employability must be a priority for the HE sector. It is agreed that the responsibility of HEIs to prepare students for graduate employment is an important aspect of the university experience. Schemes such as an international students' portal for those who desire employment in their home countries, is understood to be a positive step in the right direction. However, with the pressure of meeting the demands for home students and the importance of the Destination of Leavers from

Higher Education Survey, making international student recruitment a priority will be challenging. Although more work needs to be done to promote international student employability it is also the responsibility of the government and higher education institutions to communicate the realities of graduate employment in the UK to prospective international students.

### ***Final comments and observations***

The session concluded that both the Home Office and HEIs must do more in the area of Tier 4. The Home Office must ensure communication with higher education institutions is timely for the implementation of Tier 4 to be both efficient and effective. The distinction between welfare and compliance is yet to be effectively addressed by higher education institutions, who might do well to encourage the discussion and share best practice across the sector.