Briefing for the Lords on the Immigration Bill: January 2014

NHS Charges for international students

The University of Sheffield is a Russell Group institution with a population of over 25,000 students including more than 6,000 international students from 120 countries. Over the past two months Sheffield Students’ Union has been consulting with students regarding the proposed changes laid out in the Immigration Bill which stand to affect the University’s international student population.

Sheffield Students’ Union has identified three main areas of concern among students:
- Landlord and bank account visa checking,
- The removal of visa appeal rights for international students
- The potential introduction of fees for using the NHS.

This briefing will focus on the impact that these changes will have on international students, the rest of the University and local community, the economy of Sheffield, and British business as a whole.

**Visa checking: landlords**

International students already face difficulties in securing accommodation and are *often made to pay large fees and advance rent payments*. This bill may result in landlords/agents refusing to even consider international students as tenants or charge additional fees to cover the extra administration costs. In the student sector, tenancies are entered into often months in advance of the actual tenancy start date. International students may not be able to prove their immigration status that far in advance and so would be prevented from signing up for properties with their friends who are home students or miss out on the best accommodation.

Sheffield Students’ Union believe this proposal will affect all students whether home or international as landlords would have to check all passports of prospective tenants regardless of nationality to comply with the Equality Act. We anticipate this will lead to more students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds being discriminated against when looking for housing.

*The bill will only promote institutional racism in housing. It will also promote public hostility to immigrants, legal or illegal.*

Home Student, University of Sheffield

*There are already strict laws to check illegal migrants such as the CAS number, ATAS cert. etc, in addition to reports on every international [student] which the Universities are required to send to border agencies.*

International Student, University of Sheffield

There are hundreds of different documents that confer the right to live in the UK. It is unlikely that landlords, who are not themselves regulated, will have sufficient knowledge of these documents to be able to judge which of them would allow their prospective tenants to take out a lease. In addition, while checking they will be in possession of their tenants most private and valuable documents. We cannot be sure that some ‘rogue landlords’ will not misuse this information.

*The reason that visas are issued is to indicate that students have the right to live in the UK - it is redundant to have these checked by landlords and unfair to expect landlords to assume this responsibility.*

International Student, University of Sheffield

**Removal of visa appeal rights**

Some 89% of our students described the decision to restrict the right to appeal as “unfair”. If this becomes law, international students will be left without a safety net against mistakes. Our staff at the Student Advice Centre

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1 Immigration Bill Survey – 1251 students took part between November 2013 and January 2014
have been supporting international and home students with immigration appeals since 1991. In our experience **over 99% of these appeals have been successful** which indicates that the decision-making is flawed and not the applicant. Many of our cases involve family members of students and there is no doubt that without a right to appeal these decisions we would have lost many valuable PhD students as these students would have withdrawn from their studies rather than face separation from their families.

The reality of the UK Border Agency is that it is a hugely flawed organisation – the words of the Home Secretary, Theresa May, on 28 March 2013:

“The agency is often caught up in a vicious cycle of complex law and poor enforcement of its own policies... UKBA has been a troubled organisation for many years...it will take many years to clear the backlogs and fix the system,”

Of 28,300 appeals determined in 2012/13, **nearly 50% of all managed migration and entry clearance appeals were successful.** We simply do not have any confidence that the UK Border Agency will be able to fairly review its own decisions via the Administrative Review process based on our experience of supporting students and their dependants who have been refused entry clearance or leave to remain. Instead, the Home Office should focus on increasing the numbers of high quality decisions to reduce the number of appeals.

**NHS Charges**
When asked about charging for healthcare, 88% of all students said international students should not be liable to NHS charges. At the same time, **77% of international students said that £200 per year would be either “unaffordable” or “very unaffordable.”**

*International students already pay grossly unfair fees that rise every single year, they don't need additional financial pressure along with all the other stress that accompanies being an overseas student living away from home.*
International student, University of Sheffield

*I need medical healthcare. I can't afford that. I have debts to pay and it's hard enough to get any sort of job as an international student.*
International Student, University of Sheffield

*I strongly disagree with them, as the tuition fees have been increased recently, and in my opinion, this makes a great contribution to the economy of the country, which should allow me to use the NHS for free.*
International Student, University of Sheffield

Sheffield University Students’ Union would also like to agree with the British Medical Association and other health bodies that NHS charging will bring both the cost of added bureaucracy, and the risk of further expense to the health service as migrants (including international students) avoid taking preventative action on low-level health issues, potentially leading to more severe, and costly, conditions later on.

**Effects of the Bill on the international student population**
International students have indicated to Sheffield Students’ Union that the proposals laid out in the Bill send out a negative image of the UK to those thinking of studying here. Our updated research indicates that the Bill proposals, including NHS charging, have already been damaging to the UK’s reputation by making students feel unwelcome.

*Today if I had to choose again I would NOT come to UK, not because the country, but because of the impression that they do [it] just for money. [In comparison] France and Germany [offer] Postgrad study [which] is really cheap and with quality.*
International student, University of Sheffield

*I already live on very limited income, so I'd even consider [going] back to my country and study[ing] over there which at least wouldn't make me feel like second class "cashmachine"!*
International student, University of Sheffield
Of the 514 international students who took part in the research 75% said that had the changes outlined in the Immigration Bill been in place when they were deciding where to go to University, they would have reconsidered their decision to come to the UK. Only 10% said it definitely would not have affected their decision. As more universities across Europe begin to offer postgraduate qualifications in English, the UK can no longer rely on its linguistic advantage alone.

**Effect of a reduced international student population on academia and community**

University provides an opportunity for home and international students to share ideas and learn from each other, and the UK would miss out if international students were encouraged to go elsewhere. At Sheffield, international students are an important part of our academic community, making up some 46% of our postgraduates and 24% of our student population overall. Moreover, in our research **89% of home and international students said international students had a “positive” or “very positive” effect on the UK as a whole:**

*Allowing international students to study in a country shows its power and confidence. Britain can benefit from allowing a larger pool of talented individuals to develop and share their ideas within the British educational system.*

Home student, University of Sheffield

*Multiculturalism and an open, enriched society is its own justification. International students bring money into the country and make universities the successful educational institutions that they are by bringing diversity and experience to the campus and the classroom.*

International student, University of Sheffield

*Openness to talented young people from around the world is at the heart of the UK’s world-leading universities. It is a powerful source of international collaboration and understanding as generations of leaders in every sphere of life have been given the opportunity to learn from and alongside the most able people from every continent.*

Professor Sir Keith Burnett, Vice-Chancellor University of Sheffield and Alasdair Buckle, President Sheffield Students’ Union

**Effects of a reduced international student population on the economy and business**

The government’s own figures estimate that the national economic contribution of all international students is £17.5bn. Similarly, a 2013 independent report commissioned by the University of Sheffield found that international students brought £120 million to the local economy, taking into account any costs to the NHS:

> [F]rom the perspective of the employer the impact [of international students] is unambiguously positive. The boost to the labour supply should enable better job matching, thereby boosting productivity.

A reduction in the number of international students coming to the UK would therefore **adversely affect both local economies and the businesses and their employees that depend on them.**

**Conclusion**

Our research indicates that there is already mounting feeling among many international students that they are being charged too much in university fees, visa charges and other costs associated with coming to Britain to learn. **The Immigration Bill’s proposals could be a tipping point for many international students**, encouraging them to apply elsewhere to study, leaving not only the economy but also the diverse academic community we currently enjoy much poorer as a result.

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