

Investigating the Impact of the Tier 4 Policy on International Students at Private Colleges in the UK

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, the United Kingdom government introduced the Tier 4 (general) student visa policy for foreign students, out of European Economic Area and Switzerland, aged 16 or over. According to this policy, any institution recruiting international students must be a highly trusted sponsor - a status determined by the UK Border Agency. Further, right to work during study was totally denied for the non-EEA students of private colleges in 2011. This study explores the experiences of non-EEA students of private colleges in the wake of such changes. The research objectives were met through conducting individual interviews with 45 students from ten different countries studying at two private colleges in London. The results showed that the Tier 4 policy had negatively impacted the ambitions of studying in the UK at private colleges. About 97% of the interviewees said that they would not recommend private colleges to similar prospective students because of this policy.

Key words: International students, private colleges, agents, diplomas, college education, university education, Tier 4 visa policy

The United Kingdom is the second most popular destination among international students, after the United States of America, for higher studies (The UK Government, 2013). Academic degrees from UK universities are recognised worldwide for their high standards and the quality of education. Every year, more than 430,000 overseas students from 180 countries come to the UK to study (The UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2015). These international students contribute to the country's culture, social life, and the economy (Wiseman & Davies, 2013) . The economic benefits

derived from their presence are multiple. In the UK, the value of the education-related export market is estimated at £14.1 billion, and is projected to reach £26.6 billion by 2025 (Conlon, Litchfield & Sadlier, 2011). Education is the fifth largest service export sector in the UK (The UK Government, 2013). Foreign students not only boost the UK economy but also introduce their own diverse cultures and knowledge which benefit home students with an enhanced understanding of the wider world (Malik, 2014). Volet and Ang (1998) state: “International and multicultural student campuses represent ideal social forums for understanding; fostering tolerance of diversity; discovering alternative ways of thinking and developing intercultural skills.” (p. 6).

Education is comparatively expensive in the UK when compared with the prices charged by universities located in USA, Australia and Canada (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). Non-EU students who cannot afford the high tuition fees at public colleges and universities apply for admission to private colleges, which are relatively cheaper and typically offer diploma courses, commonly in business management and tourism. Some of the private colleges are affiliated with publicly funded universities and offer graduate, postgraduate and PhD level courses. The students who have taken undergraduate degrees in their home countries take diplomas with certain credits in private colleges in order to become eligible for Master’s degrees offered by universities, as the most cost effective way to obtain a UK university degree. In the UK education system, a Master’s degree consists of 180 credits; 120 credits are obtained from study modules and the remaining 60 credits from a dissertation. Students can complete a postgraduate diploma worth 120 credits at a private college, and then transfer to a university to complete the dissertation and earn the remaining 60 credits to claim a Masters degree. This is known as a top-up postgraduate degree and is very popular among the international students with less financial sources.

However, it is generally assumed that some private colleges enrol ‘fake learners’ and abuse the immigration system for their own financial gain. It is also thought that, on occasion, fraudulent students deceive trustworthy private colleges by pretending to be genuine learners and use them as an easy route by which to enter or remain in the UK (Slack, 2014). In 2009, the UK government introduced the Tier 4 policy as deterrent to these practices (Wiseman & Davies, 2013). According to this policy, any institution recruiting international students must be a highly trusted sponsor - a status determined by the UK Border Agency (UKBA, 2014). In 2011, the UKBA imposed further restrictions on Tier 4 adult students (16 and older) intending to study in the UK and their maximum stay on student visas was restricted to eight and a half years. Subsequently, however, PhD candidates were exempted from this restriction. Also, the students at

publicly funded Further Education (FE) colleges were limited to working a maximum of 10 hours per week during term time. Before this policy, they had the right to work up to 20 hours in term time. They were permitted to spend a maximum of three years on undergraduate courses and five years at graduate level. The students attending private colleges are subject to the same restrictions and in addition their right to work was totally denied. At this time, the Post Study Work (PSW) Visa, which allowed graduates to take employment for up to two years, was also terminated. The students of FE colleges faced further restrictions in bringing their dependents to the UK during study. Where, the students at private colleges were not permitted to bring their dependents into the UK (UKBA, 2014).

The UK Council For International Affairs Tier 4 student survey in 2011 found that the closing down of the PSW route had a strong negative impact on international students considering coming to the UK to study; meanwhile, changes in dependent visas had a moderate impact (The UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2011). During 2011-12, as a consequence of the policy changes, the number of postgraduate students in the UK from non-European countries fell by 1% for the first time in sixteen years (Taylor, 2013). The number attending publicly funded FE colleges also decreased because of the changes in Tier 4 regulations. FE education colleges reported:

... concerns about the reputational impacts any further restrictions to Tier 4 learners would have, with the UK being perceived as 'unwelcoming' to Tier 4 learners. Colleges believed this would be off-putting to genuine learners which would lead to further reductions in Tier 4 learners. (Wiseman & Davies, 2013, p.6)

Within the UK context, the existing literature emphasises the impact of Tier 4 policy on non-EU students at FE colleges and in Higher Education (HE), both at universities and elsewhere in the public sector, but not to the same extent in the private sector. Generally, while a robust body of qualitative research looks at the cross-cultural difficulties of international students, too little attention is given to the examination of visa policies on students' lives and experiences.

This study aims to discover how the new policy changes have affected the lives of the international students studying in Tier 4 highly trusted private colleges in the UK. The main purpose of the Tier 4 policy was argued to control abuses in the education sector. Most certainly, however, not all private colleges are bogus, and not all students are fraudulent. The genuine low-income students suffer most when private colleges lose their Tier 4 sponsorship (either because they proved to be

bogus, or because they have registered some illegitimate learners knowingly or unknowingly). Although the main purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the Tier 4 policy on non-EU students studying at private colleges, motives beyond going abroad to study and the main challenges faced by international students at private colleges in the UK were also included in the research objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Keeping the research objectives in view, the literature review is divided into two sections: the motivations beyond going abroad to study, and the main challenges international students face in their home country.

Motivations beyond going abroad for study

Some researchers have used a push-pull model to explain international students' migration patterns (e.g. Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Push factors induce home students to go abroad to study, whereas pull factors relate to the host country and the attraction it has to foreign learners (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) describe various push factors as follows: for example, a lack of courses in the home country; the availability of better courses abroad; failure to gain admission at local institutions; the wish to migrate; to enhance the study experience; or to explore the Western world. Pull factors include, for example: a better learning environment; advancement in knowledge and technology; their good reputation; geographical attraction; cost effectiveness, recommendations from a friend or relative; and good social links. There are additional pull factors, such as the ease of attaining visas and immigration in some countries (Chen, 2007). Chen also identified the desire to settle in the host country on a permanent basis as another significant pull factor. Part-time work opportunities, to help cover the cost of higher study in the host country, also attracts prospective students (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

Bhattarai (2009) states that employers in Nepal prefer foreign degree holders over locally educated applicants. This motivates the more affluent parents to send their children abroad for their further education, perpetuating the trend. He further states that aside from learning, earning is another incentive attracting Nepalese students to the UK (Bhattarai, 2009). Generally, the students believe that with a foreign qualification they will be able to enhance their career options and acquire new skills that are more compatible with the international market (Chang, 2012). However, they encounter numerous challenges in the host country.

Main challenges faced by international students in the UK

International students face a variety of challenges in the UK: language and communication barriers (Bamford, 2008; Keele University, n.d.); homesickness and stress; family worries; financial problems (Keele University, n.d.); culture shock (Bamford, 2008; Furnham, 2004; Keele University, n.d.; Scandrett, 2011); and difficulties adjusting to the different study methods being the main problems (Bamford, 2008; Scandrett, 2011). Bamford further argues that although admission to a university is conditional on the achievement of a minimum IELTS score, this is not a guarantee that the student will be able to meet the oral and written requirements necessary for academic progress.

International students also enter UK universities having had an entirely different learning experience in their own culture. Cultural difference has a major influence on international students in a host country. Students are unfamiliar with the social norms, environment and foreign culture; they may find everything different and experience culture shock. Asarabadi (1994) describes culture shock as: "... (differences in expectations and social norms); loss of social support systems (particularly from family); miscellaneous factors such as education and immigration difficulties; making friends and establishing social support networks." (as cited in Furnham, 2004, p.17)

Attitude to knowledge also varies across the cultures; therefore, international students often have to address not only language difficulties, but must also adjust to a different education system within a diverse academic environment. There are significant variations in the teaching, learning, and examination systems to those they have been familiar with at home.

According to Rushton (2006), in some cultures teachers are considered the ultimate authority. Their knowledge is not challenged, and it is inappropriate to ask questions. Similarly, critical thinking is not encouraged and the class environment is typically silent. By contrast, in the UK, critical thinking and personal contributions to a seminar are highly valued. Thus, the majority of international students initially struggle to participate actively in seminars and tutorials (Rushton, 2006). The non-EU students in the UK universities lack analytical and critical thinking approaches because their home institutions do not promote and encourage such skills (Shaheen, 2012).

Subhash (2013) reported that penalization for plagiarism, communication, and the diverse examination/evaluation system were the major learning problems encountered by Indian students at Bangor Business School, Bangor University, UK (Subhash, 2013). Li, Chen and Duanmu (2009) identified cultural related factors that had impacted on the academic

performance of international students studying at Masters level in the School of Management at the University of Surrey. They reported: “The perceived significance of learning success to family, proficiency in English and social communication with compatriots were the most significant predictors of academic performance of all international students in this study” (Li *et al.*, 2009, p.13)

However, the problems and challenges faced by international students at private colleges in the UK has yet to be explored. This research endeavours to fill the gap in terms of understanding the experiences of these students, with particular focus on recent Tier 4 policy changes. To begin an investigation into this issue, the researcher established four objectives:

1. Understanding problems encountered by international students at private colleges;
2. Learning about pull-push factors of foreign education for such students;
3. Investigating the impact of the Tier 4 policy on these students; and
4. Presenting alternate policy suggestions based on students’ own perspectives.

RESEARCH METHODS

There are two main research approaches, quantitative and qualitative, which help in understanding a phenomenon of human and social sciences. The quantitative approach implies the understanding of a social or human problem based on testing a theory or hypothesis, dealing with variables, numbers and statistical procedures to analyze the generalization of a theory (Creswell, 2014); the qualitative research approach helps to understand the point of view of the participants (Bryman, 2012). In the words of Holloway (1997): “Qualitative research is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live” (p.1). The qualitative approach fits for the purpose of exploring experiences of international students at private colleges.

Research methods offer techniques for collecting data (Bryman, 2012). Becker and Bryman (2012) state six methods of collecting data in qualitative research, including: unstructured and semi-structured interviews; ethnography; focus groups; biographical methods; documents; and internet sources. The unstructured or focused interviews are open-ended and offer interviewees a space to talk in their own context. The semi-structured interviews are specified but allow the interviewer to think beyond the answers. Focus groups or group interviews are largely used in market

research or in discussing a topic of common interest (May, 2011). The focus group method is useful to assess group opinion. Where, ethnography is usually used in understanding people and culture. Document analysis method mainly looks at events, actions and occurrences.

Research Procedure

Two private colleges in London were selected for this study. The researcher was teaching at one of the colleges during the period spent conducting the study. The students often held informal discussions on the impact the new Tier 4 policy was having on their lives, and the experience that was gained during these classes led the researcher to pursue this topic. However, such discussions were not part of the curriculum. They were mostly done during breaks or sometimes during classes if some relevant issue was raised during teaching.

The researcher realized that some students did not feel comfortable revealing their personal problems and experiences or information about themselves in the presence of their classmates, so over 100 students from ten different countries were approached for individual interview. Of these, 46 responded (22 males and 24 females) and agreed to an in-depth interview. A semi-structured interview technique was applied in order to offer the interviewees an opportunity to think beyond the scope of the questions. This method allows the interviewer to further investigate the answers (May, 2011). Initially, the participants were engaged in discussion throughout the specified questions and then additional questions were asked in order to fully understand the topic under investigation.

All the open and semi-structured interviews were held in the colleges during break times, to ensure the best possible availability of the students. A separate and quiet room was selected for the interviews. To analyze the interview transcript data, thematic analysis technique was used. First, the interviews were transcribed and texts were reviewed and separated into short paragraphs. Secondly, the data was hand-coded by the researcher in accordance with the concerns for the respondents and separated according to the emerging themes as suggested by Creswell (2014). The themes were refined and categorized systematically to make their meaning and explanation clearer.

All ethical considerations were observed during the process, including obtaining prior consent, protecting the confidentiality of data, explaining the purpose of the study and stating that the interviewees were at liberty to refuse to answer any question and exit the interview if desired. Also, the interviewees were informed that all interviews were to be tape-recorded and transcribed.

The interview transcripts and analyses were presented to the participants to ensure reliability and validity of the results. They were asked to reflect on their experiences and make necessary corrections if they had any objections in interpreting the data and presenting the results.

Participants

The purpose sampling was adopted to recruit the potential participants. The sample was chosen by country and gender and then purposefully in order to ensure representation across gender, age group, country of origin, and program of study. The interview questions were provided to the participants before the scheduled interview time so that they could think about them in advance. Each interview lasted for about an hour. All the questions were open-ended. All the participants were above 18 years of age, and were studying at different levels including diploma, undergraduate and graduate courses. When approaching students for interview, a representative sample of respondents from each country of origin was included where possible. At both colleges, the proportion of Indian and Pakistani students was highest; therefore, they were given higher representation in the sample. One female interviewee was excluded from the sample as she had spent less than one year in the UK. Only students with a minimum of two years of study experience in the host country were included in the interview process. Similarly, gender equality was also considered, so that male and female students could be given almost equal representation. Thus, the final sample included 45 students with between 2 and 9 years of study experience in the UK.

Table 1 Nationalities and gender of interviewees

No	Country	Male	Female	Total
1	India	5	12	17
2	Pakistan	9	3	12
3	Bangladesh	3	1	4
4	Sri Lanka	-	1	1
5	Philippines	-	3	3
6	Nigeria	2	1	3
7	Cameroon	-	3	3
8	Trinidad	1	-	1
9	Nepal	1	-	1
10	Japan	1	-	1
Total Participants		22	24	46

The two colleges selected for this study were trusted higher Tier 4 independent education providers, located in London. The distribution of participant from each college was almost equal. The colleges shared similar characteristics, for example, all the management, administration and teaching staff were Asian. However, the students were from a mixture of Asian and African origin. There were no home students enrolled at either college. For the convenience of our analysis, we will refer to the colleges as A and B. There were 1,600 students in College A and 800 in College B. The average fee for undergraduates and postgraduates per diploma course was £2,500. The duration of the courses ranged from 12 to 18 months. The colleges were offering professional courses in business management, accounting, hospitality and tourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first question was asked about their educational background when they decided to go the UK for further education. It was revealed that 15% of the respondents had completed postgraduate studies, 57% graduate, 7% secondary school, and 9% nursing degrees in their home countries before moving to the UK. 65% of the respondents had taken the IELTS test as part of the application process for admission to the UK. When they were asked how they got information about the colleges to get admission, 61% of the interviewees reported that they had been admitted to colleges via individual agents or agencies, 26% through family or friends in the UK, and only 11% had completed an online search to select a suitable institution.

The results revealed that majority of the interviewees had earned graduate degrees before they moved to the UK. However, only a small proportion of them selected colleges through online search. Most of them had taken admission through recruiting agencies or individual agents. It implies that recruiting agencies in home countries play main role in enrolling students for private colleges in host countries. One possible reason for this trend is handsome commission offered by the private education providers to recruiting agents based in home and host countries. Family members or friends already studying in the host country also create attraction for prospective students.

According to the new Tier 4 rules, students at private colleges are not allowed to work in the UK; nevertheless, 96% of respondents admitted that they were engaged in some form of cash-in-hand employment. Some small businesses prefer to recruit casual employees and give them wages in cash to avoid taxes. This is an unregistered employment where both the employer and employee avoid taxes and national insurance contribution.

The students were, however, earning below the minimum wage rate. One student reported that he was working at a grocery shop and getting £2.50 per hour. Another female student of Asian origin was working for £3 per hour at a utility store owned by her compatriot, and said that her employer treated student workers as personal servants. She further reported that private employers took advantage of poor students and exploited them badly. The minimum wage rate for 21 years and above is £6.50 per hour in the UK (Gov.UK, n.d.), but students generally work for less, because they are illegally employed. However, students who arrived in the UK before the change to the Tier 4 rules reported satisfactory work experience. All the students who had previously worked legally commented that they had been able to improve their communication and professional skills while working in a multicultural environment, for example in supermarkets and well-known companies.

Although the international students of private colleges have no right to work under Tier 4 policy, it has impacted their accommodation and employment trends. They look for the cheapest housing options and seek employment in other cities away from their colleges. This trend also affects their studies.

When the respondents were asked about their house share experiences, they expressed different views. The majority of them appeared to be happy in shared accommodation, claiming that their housemates were helpful and supportive. Some of them were dissatisfied and reported many problems such as dirtiness, food stealing, jealousy and mockery. They reported that they were forced to share rooms with similar students to minimise the cost. They could not enjoy privacy and the environment of the shared houses was not supportive for studies.

When asked how far they lived from the college, only one student was living within walking distance. More than 70% of the students travelled for two hours daily to attend classes, surprisingly, 29% of students from other cities. Two students were travelling from Newcastle and one from Glasgow. The students at private colleges prefer to live where they can find the cheapest accommodation and work opportunities, therefore, they do not mind travelling for many hours. However, it is very expensive to travel from Glasgow and Newcastle to London. The students had to attend classes at least twice a week to meet the minimum requirement of 15 hours' teaching per week. At both colleges, a full teaching day consisted of seven and half hours. During the interview the students admitted that it was not practical to travel from Glasgow and Newcastle to London every week and therefore, their attendance was irregular.

The Motivation behind Studying in the UK

This question was asked to identify push-pull factors among adult international students at private colleges in the UK. The pull factors included attraction towards a foreign education (24%), finding a career or work in the host country (16%), searching for a better life (5%), being motivated by family or friends already in the host country (16%), a desire to explore student life (9%), or seeking independence and adventure in the host country (4%). The push elements described by the interviewees were financial problems (11%), the trend for going abroad (9%), and in order to compete with rich relatives and friends at home (9%). One Japanese student reported that he came to the UK because life was so hard and busy in his country. Some highly educated married Indian female students reported that their husbands had pushed them to accept places in the UK because they wanted to join them on dependent visas in order to earn money.

Thus, this study found that only 24% of the interviewees were inspired by the possibility of attaining an education in the UK. The remaining 76% of the respondents narrated different pull and push factors for coming to the UK by using student visa route. Their primary objective was not seeking education but they were attracted by some other factors.

The Main Problems Faced by International Students

Exploitative agents, the suspension of fraudulent colleges, immigration problems and difficulty in finding work were all reported as major problems encountered by international students at private schools in the UK. One female student from the Philippines who was taking a postgraduate diploma at College A and had spent four years in the UK said:

My agent charged me £8,000 to get an admission in the UK, but when I arrived here he had not paid a single penny to the college. I had to pay my tuition fees again to continue my studies. Later on I learned that he had done the same thing with more than one hundred prospective students in my country.

Most of the students complained about exploitation by agents, both in their home and host countries. They charged heavy fees to students but paid a lower amount, or as in the above case, nothing, to the colleges. These agents were the main sources of recruiting students for the private colleges.

The second problem reported by students was the suspension of colleges by the UKBA. A large number of students complained about this. During the interview process, both the colleges selected for the study were also suspended by the UKBA, causing increased frustration by the interviewees and they spoke openly about this problem. Once a college is

suspended or revoked, the students lose their fees, because there is currently no refund policy in place. One female Indian student at College A reported that she had paid £5,500 in tuition fees to a private college for a three year undergraduate course, but it lost its Tier 4 Highly Trusted Status within three months of her arrival and the college now no longer existed. She was unable to get her money back. Her visa was curtailed by the UKBA and she was advised to gain admission to another college within sixty days. She had to arrange funds for a new visa application and for tuition fees for a new college. The new college (the current one), however, had also lost its Tier 4 sponsorship before she had completed her undergraduate course; as a result she seemed to be totally frustrated.

One Pakistani postgraduate male student from College B said:

I have attended almost six colleges in the last seven years, and they all get closed by the UKBA, one after the other. I have spent more than £20,000 on tuition and visas fees so far. I have two dependents in the UK. I came to the UK to do my MBA at a private college because I could not afford the high tuition fees at universities. I have consumed all my family savings; even my mother has sold her ornaments and borrowed money from different sources to afford my studies, but I am still without a degree. It was my biggest mistake ever in life to come to the UK and enrol in a private college.

The third major problem identified by respondents was the immigration policy. They said that once a college was closed they had to gain admission at a new college and complete the expensive and lengthy visa application procedure again. Sometimes they did not have sufficient time to retake the IELTS and arrange the funds for the new admission and visa. They then requested help from agents who exploited them financially and cheated them by providing false documentation for their new visa applications.

Students also reported encountering problems at airports. Some students reported that they had difficulty convincing the entry clearance officers that they were genuine learners. One female Indian student said that she had left her one-year-old baby at home when she came to the UK, but had been unable to return home to see her for four years because of immigration and visa problems. She said that she was scared of the entry clearance officers.

Students at private colleges were having an increasingly difficult time because of the government withdrawing their right to work. They reported that living in the UK was expensive and that they could not survive without a part-time job. Therefore, they take menial jobs, work long hours

and work for less than the national minimum wage. They have to struggle and go to other cities to find unregistered employment.

The interviewees also discussed the differences in the education systems between the UK and their home countries. Almost all the students were from countries with an examination based education system and they initially found it difficult to cope with the assignment based exam system in the UK. When they were asked about plagiarism, more than 90% responded that they were not aware of it as an issue in their home countries. One of the Indian male students at College B reported:

We practice the worst form of plagiarism in our country, by learning content by heart, and then writing exactly the same in exam papers. We get maximum marks if we produce the same material memorised word for word from a book.

Students who had attained postgraduate degrees from good universities in the UK and again were studying the same level courses in those colleges for other purposes than education also reported this problem. Therefore, it is important for supervisors at Masters and PhD level to understand the home education systems of international students. This will help them to address the problems, particularly in academic writing, critical thinking and evaluation skills. Foreign students need extra support when writing assignments and dissertations.

Recommending Private Colleges to a Friend or Relative

If international students were satisfied with the educational standards, immigration practices, quality of life and other social facilities of the host country they could be assumed to be likely to happily recommend it to their relatives and friends for further education. Satisfied students are the best marketing tools for an educational institution. When the respondents were asked if they would like to recommend that someone comes to the UK to study at a private college, 96% said: "... *a big no*", giving different reasons for their strong negative response, for example:

- the poor quality of education;
- the problem of colleges closing down in the middle of a course;
- the difficulties of living without the right to work;
- the lack of job prospects;
- the lack of incentives after completing their degrees;
- the high living costs;
- visa problems;

- the no refund policy if colleges are closed;
- the sudden changes to immigration rules;
- the exploitation of colleges and agents;
- accommodation problems;
- the waste of money and time;
- problems with entry clearance;
- constant stress and mental pressure;
- the fear of immigration officers;
- exploitative employers;
- the low market value of the degrees completed with private education providers; and
- the irrelevant courses offered by the colleges.

One Bangladeshi male student from College A reported:

There are no English students in my college; my classmates are the same as me. I share a house with people the same as me, I work with an employer the same as me. I feel like I am not in the UK but in my home country.

Another Indian male student from College B said:

I go to college only two days a week and stay at home the remaining five days because I do not have a part-time job. I am not allowed to work. I do not have enough means to go out and enjoy my life. Sometimes I feel I am like a prisoner. I am getting sick and frustrated day by day. I am going to become a mental patient.

The majority of the students said that they were living under extreme stress and were prone to depression. They emphasized intensely that they would never recommend to a friend or a relative that they come to study at a private college in the UK. They stated that it would be much better to invest the same money studying at a good institution in their home country. However, they strongly recommended the publicly funded colleges and universities for those with sufficient financial resources to afford their educational expenses. Despite this, 4% of the interviewees recommended private colleges; they claimed that the quality of education was good at UK private colleges compared to that in their home countries.

When asked about their future plans in the UK, 38% said they wanted to go back to their home countries, 38% wanted settlement in the

UK, 7% were willing to continue their studies, 9% planned to go to another country, and the remainder were not yet certain. The desire to settle in the UK was stronger among students who had spent five to seven years in the country. The students who wanted to reside permanently in the UK explained that they were uncertain about the future in their home countries, commenting that it would be difficult for them to start a new career back home after such a long interruption. The students with school-age children were most concerned about schooling on their return, fearing that it would be difficult for their children to adjust to a different schooling system in their home countries. They also appeared to be attracted by the better quality of life in the UK.

Policy Recommendations Suggested by the Students

The international students at private colleges are significant stakeholders in the UK education system, despite their relatively smaller proportion compared to those studying at publicly funded FE colleges and HE institutions. Therefore, their input would be beneficial to assist policymakers to strengthen the private education sector and overcome areas for abuse and lack of clarity. The students suggested the following policy measures:

1. 99% of the respondents suggested that students' right to work in the UK should be the same at private and publicly funded institutions. However, 1% argued that their purpose in the UK was studying, not taking employment.
2. Almost all the interviewees recommended that stricter scrutiny must be undertaken before assigning Highly Trusted Status to the private institutions. The standard of private colleges should be increased both physically and academically. Private colleges should not be permitted to recruit students in excess of their physical and academic capacity. More restrictions should be imposed on private colleges and fewer on their students. When the colleges are more restricted, this will improve control over students. Policies should be introduced that enable private colleges to remain in existence for a long time.
3. All of the respondents suggested introducing a fee refund policy if a college is closed during a course. Students should be able to complete their intended courses before their Tier 4 licence is revoked. If it is necessary to close a college, some extra time should be allocated to students to enable arranging funding and admission to another institution. Genuine students at private colleges should be protected, and not harassed as though they are fraudulent

learners. Similarly, genuine students should be protected from victimization by bogus colleges. Colleges should be made liable for the actions of their agents, where necessary.

4. 80% of the interviewees proposed that a national complaint centre should be established for students, so they can report exploitation by bogus colleges and agents.
5. All the respondents recommended that they should be exempted from the English language test to gain admission to a higher level course if they have already successfully taken a recognised test and have been living in the UK for three consecutive years as a student.

The suggestions offered by the students have some significant and practical implications for the policymakers.

- The policy focus should be on improving academic and administrative standards of private education providers.
- Although such institutions are primary sponsors of international students, they should take more responsibility when recruiting to ensure the applicants are genuine learners.
- The students have genuine concerns about the abrupt closure of colleges and losing deposited tuition fees before completion of their intended courses. Therefore, the government should propose a fee refund policy if colleges are closed during an academic term.
- Moreover, the authorities should physically visit the colleges to evaluate their material and academic capacities before assigning them higher trusted status and allocating recruitment quotas of international students.
- A national complaint centre should also be formed to address the grievances of foreign student at private colleges.
- An effective and strong monitoring mechanism would discourage both fake learners and the establishment of bogus colleges.
- Furthermore, if a student has already passed a recognised English language test and has been continuously living in the UK for at least three years, he should be exempted from the same test for another academic course. Living in an English speaking country for three years is a clear evidence that a student has further improved his/her language skills, therefore he/she needs not repeat the English language test, particularly when a college is suddenly closed meaning the students have less time to take the English language test to gain admission to another institution. This is when they may seek the easy route to gain the required language certificate and become victims of fake language centres. This phenomenon also

encourages the issue of fake English language certificates by some deceitful centres.

- The respondents of this study also have a genuine demand of restoring the right to work. However, policy focus should be on the liability of the employers when students exceed the prescribed working hours during term time.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

International students contribute significantly to the UK economy, its culture and society. A number of push-pull factors currently attract these students to come to the UK for their education. The evidence shows that the new Tier 4 regulations have had an immense influence on the lives of international students. Public FE colleges and HE institutions have witnessed a corresponding decline in international recruitment as regulations have become more rigid. However, the impact is certainly more severe for adult students at private colleges. Tuition fees and living expenses are costly in the UK so part-time work is a common way to compensate for the high living costs in the host country. Although the government has terminated the right to work for international students at private colleges, 96% of the respondents reported that they were working illegally and below the minimum national wage rate. Therefore, on the one hand the government is losing tax revenue and the on the other hand students are being exploited by the employers; they are working long hours and getting less money. As one female Indian student reported, the employers treated illegally employed students as slaves. International students are entitled to free health services in the UK. Excessive hard work has costs to their health, but when they become ill they go to hospital and take advantage of the free treatment available. In this way the National Health Service (NHS) bears the extra burden of patients, which indirectly costs the government. Thus, ceasing the right to work for non-EU students at private colleges has multiple adverse social and economic effects.

Low cost private colleges are a better choice for those international students who cannot afford high tuition fees at public funded institutions as they offer an opportunity to gain a foreign degree at a lower cost and students have the opportunity to further their careers. However, 96% of the respondents said they would not recommend anyone to accept a place at a private college in the UK. This implies that seeking a foreign qualification will only become available to rich people from the home countries, as it used to be in the past, further dividing societies in different social classes in the poor and developing countries.

Among the interviewees, 38% wished to go back home after completing their studies. A similar proportion said they wanted to settle in the UK, which implies that not everyone who comes to the UK to study at a private college intends to stay in the country. Therefore, the general negativity regarding foreign students at private colleges is not justifiable. This study shows that those students who have spent more than five years in the UK, who still do not have a degree, have school age children, or who have used up all their savings and can see no future in their home country, are more hopeful of living here permanently. This shows that when one spends a long period of time in a host country as a student, but without any notable academic success, his desire to settle in that country becomes stronger because he considers himself to be out of the market in his home country.

However, only 24% of the respondents were attracted by attaining a foreign qualification whereas 76% gave different purposes for coming to the UK apart from education. This implies that most of the international students at private colleges have other motives than seeking education in the UK and shows that the government has a genuine concern regarding the misuse of student visas at private colleges. Although the problem of bogus colleges and fake learners is real, addressing it with a single policy that uniformly targets all colleges and students is adversely affecting the entire private adult education sector. The findings of the study reveal that the Tier 4 policy is discouraging international students at private colleges from coming to or remaining in the UK for study purposes. It further implies that the non-EU students with less financial backing will not be able to gain university degrees through private education providers in the UK. It will further increase their sense of deprivation, which may bring a negative impact to both the host and the home countries. Therefore, the UK government should consider the policy suggestions proposed by the learners, that genuine learners must be protected from exploitation by the bogus colleges and their agents. They must be provided with every opportunity to complete their education and go back to their home country. The authorities must take every step to discourage fake learners from coming to and staying in the UK, but at the same time the genuine students should be encouraged to study in the UK at private colleges. However, public policy focus should be on improving the quality of education and strict monitoring of such institutions so that they cannot exploit the system and the students.

The government should introduce effective measures to control the private bogus colleges that facilitate fake learners. The policy focus must address the private bogus colleges and the fake learners but not the genuine students who cannot afford the high tuition fees at public universities but

still wish to study in the UK at private colleges in order to further their careers. Therefore, the policymakers need to revisit the Tier 4 policy for non-EU adult students at private colleges and address the primary issues such as additional effective monitoring; a supervision mechanism for private adult education providers; the right to work; exploitative private agents, employers and English language centers; the poor quality of education; insufficient academic and physical facilities at private colleges; and the government shutdown of institutions without proposing a fee refund policy.

This research covers only two colleges with a small sample size; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized across all Highly Trusted Tier 4 private colleges and their respective students. However, the findings have helped to further the understanding of the impact of Tier 4 policy on adult international students at private colleges at the micro level. A survey study at larger scale covering a great number of international students and Highly Trusted private education providers located in different cities will further help in understanding the widespread impacts of this policy. The input from teachers and principals of such institutions will also be useful in comprehending this issue.

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