

BETWEEN THE LINES

Index

1. THE ARTWORK
2. THE SYSTEM
3. THE VOICES
4. THE DEMANDS

1. THE ARTWORK

'Between the Lines' is a creative intervention responding to the lived experiences of International students who have been impacted by the influence of the UK border control regime on universities, in the context of Post Brexit UK and the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The UK border regime is a name for the overall system that controls people's ability to move and live in the UK, depending on their immigration status.

'Between the Lines' explores the Home Office's requirement that university administrative processes become a tool to enforce border control, and the subsequent impact on international students.

This document contains a collection of first-person accounts from international students whose testimonies have been encoded into synthetic DNA and embedded into pen ink. The pens have been covertly distributed throughout the administrative centres of UK universities, infiltrating the systems that are now tasked with upholding the UK border control regime.

In the same way that the UK border control regime has infiltrated the administrative systems of Higher Education institutions, this artwork similarly uses infiltration as a delivery mechanism to put the voices of those impacted back into the bureaucratic system they are policed by.

'Between the Lines' is inspired by steganography, the practice of concealing information within another apparently ordinary message or object. In this case, the ordinary object is a disposable pen, the ink of which contains this document which has been encoded into synthetic DNA.

If you are reading this document there is a good chance you have successfully decoded the synthetic DNA from some of the ink to recover this text.
Congratulations!

The students' personal accounts throw light on the issues facing international students in the university system in 2021.

Sarah Selby 2021

2. THE SYSTEM

The UK Home Office requires UK universities to undertake a series of compliance measures to maintain their 'privilege' to 'sponsor' students to study at their university.

The compliance is underpinned by a strict set of rules outlining the duties and the responsibility each UK university has, requiring them "to act in accordance with the Immigration Rules" and to "fulfil certain duties, in order to ensure that immigration control is maintained."

UK universities are required to report to UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) using an online tool: A Sponsorship Management System (SMS) with which they are required to "report day-to-day sponsorship activities and report any changes." (3.1)

These duties include (but are not limited to):

- Reporting on "all Students and Child Students that they are sponsoring." (7.1)
- Reporting to UKVI if a student has "mistakenly been granted permission to work".
- Reporting how the student's English language ability was assessed. (3.11 a)
- Explaining how the student's ability to follow the course was assessed (3.11 b).
- Explaining "how the course represents academic progression when this is required, including for students applying in the UK who come under the differentiation arrangements." (3.11 c)
- Reporting "if the Student misses a scheduled contact with you without reasonable explanation and you are subsequently unable to make contact with them." (4.61)
- Reporting if there is "reason to believe that a Student is breaching conditions of their permission either during or after the completion of their course." (4.63)
- Reporting if "the migrant [student] is breaching conditions of their permission." (4.65)

UK universities are also required to "co-operate with the Home Office by allowing its staff immediate access to any of its sites on request (whether or not visits are prearranged) and complying with requests for information, including in connection with the prevention or detection of crime, the administration of illegal working civil penalties and/or the apprehension or prosecution of immigration offenders" (2.3)

Failing to adhere to these measures can result in universities being deemed 'a risk to immigration control' (3.4) resulting in non-compliance sanctions. Sustained non-compliance or a number of isolated or minor issues that indicate 'a serious or systemic failing' may result in the revocation of student sponsorship licenses (3.7). This instance may lead to a situation in which "the student will have to leave the UK or face enforced removal." (6.5)

3. THE VOICES

The following section contains first-hand accounts of international students' lived experiences. They illustrate a range of issues faced by international students on a daily basis.

Surveillance:

International students have reported their experience of living under compulsory surveillance measures and the impact this has had on their mental health, their physical wellbeing and their freedom to travel.

“As an international PhD student I have experienced the use of supervisions as a tool for surveillance. We are required to meet with our supervisors at least once a month and send the minutes of each meeting to the university administration. Home students are permitted to attend supervisions online; however, for international students these meetings must be held in person. Many PhD students are not based in the city in which they choose to study, but for international students it limits them to the area because they need to attend these in-person meetings each month.”

“It is compulsory for a foreign national to register with the police. The UK government says that if they don't, their permission for staying may be shortened and they must leave the UK. In addition, they may be prevented from obtaining or extending a UK visa in the future. I used to live in a very international apartment and all of my flatmates in Russia, China and South Sudan had to register with the local police. I don't understand why someone should be forced to register with the police based on their country of origin?”

Threats and Reporting:

Many students have been threatened with being reported to the Home Office. Their testimonies describe the impact this has on their dependents and themselves, alongside the stress and fear created by the lack of stability and security they experience.

“A close friend of mine faced a situation caused by an administration error which resulted in her receiving a letter from the home office telling her that she needed to leave the country by the end of the week. She was in the UK with her family members - her children were in school, her husband was working, but they were all here because of her visa. So imagine the stress this situation caused as she tried to resolve it with the university. It was a really awful time for a couple of weeks until they could resolve it. It illustrates the fear that at any minute you are on the verge of losing your position - your whole life here - and having to return home.”

“You receive emails from the administration department threatening to report you to the home office for not meeting the criteria they have defined. We are also restricted when applying for a leave of absence. International students are only entitled to a 60 days of absence - any more can again result in the university reporting you to the home office. If you have a medical issue or are dealing with mental health issues, two months may not be long enough to recover; but you return to your studies out of fear of losing your visa.”

Financial pressures:

Testimony from students highlighted the additional financial pressures they face as international students and the discriminatory barriers to education this creates.

“As a doctoral student it was difficult to find a funded doctoral position for non-European foreigners, as a lot of funding is intended for home and European students. Some universities I applied to had international scholarships, but their number was very limited. And in some universities, I was not even eligible to apply for international scholarships because I am from a rich country in Asia. But why is "nationality" a primary criterion in deciding whether one deserves to apply for funding? I wish there was more support for international PGRs. And I hope it's not just based on where one was born and what nationality they hold.”

“Basically I am same as UK student using UCAS to apply for uni. And then when I got my uni offer, I went to British embassy to apply for my visa which is T4 student visa for 3-4 years. I need to pay probably 100 pounds for visa and then 1000 pounds for insurance which means I can enjoy same NHS service as British citizen when I am in UK.”

Discrimination and Equality:

Students have reported how they experience discrimination, which inevitably undermines equality.

“The element of discrimination is very strong because you're just making the same effort as everyone else in your office, but then seeing that some people are having a privilege of not needing a visa and it makes their life much easier. I know personally, lots of EU students who just do their PhD, part of it from their home, they don't necessarily need to be in UK to do their PhD. And imagine the comfort that it brings the possibility of going home whenever you want and not having these sorts of limitations. So for me, the specific problem is their sense of discrimination. I think it can, yeah, really be very stressful.”

“We do have issues of discrimination, issues of international students not having a level playing ground where then they can have equal chance of giving academic studies and academic life a chance. So being a black person from Africa, I think some of us also have other layers to these complications. When we look at feminism and the gender studies, we have something called intersectionality and this can be used to describe how various types of discrimination converge in particular set of individuals, particularly women in that regard.”

“Being a black student from Africa studying in a British university means that you have all these kind of disadvantages and discriminations converging in you. And continually, you got to have this struggle to prove yourself, to have to go an extra mile here, you got to pay extra money, you have visa restrictions, and all these kinds of things. So I mean, all these things converge and they really make it so difficult for any student from outside, particularly those of us who are coming from Africa, to really compete with our counterparts in this part of the world and also excel in that regard. So, you have to put extra effort, extra resources, extra time for you to actually achieve anything.”

Proposed changes and solutions:

Students are clear and insightful about the changes they would like to see to university policies for international students.

“The change that I would probably want to see is for them to lobby for a better condition for international students, trying to decrease the discrimination, not just by some marketing or PR campaigns to just make publicity for the university itself, but actually making changes that can make the life of students, PhD or undergrads or post-grad students easier.”

“These are issues that are deeply embedded in the structures and the systems of the university system. It's an urgent issue that I think universities need to give the weight that they deserve and we see more action in that regard. But also, we are looking at issues to do with people having fair chance, fair opportunities, people having a clear path towards their career progress, especially those who are in postgraduate levels.”

“What we want to see is most structural shifts, policy decisions that we want to start, challenging things like the discrimination around a fee, want to see issues around the universities not being used by government to do surveillance, or to track how international students live and operate in this country, so that they feel that they are free, and that they can also do their work without having somebody monitoring them because it does have huge implication in terms of even in the mental well-being of students, but also having this situation with the uncertainty of the visa regimes, the issues around feeling you are being surveilled and people are tracking you, and that you are not free, to leave you alive, to study, to be like any other student.”

4. THE DEMANDS

With this pen, we give you the responsibility to uphold education as a public good. With this ink, you carry the words and experiences of those impacted by the administrative processes imposed upon them as a tool to maintain immigration control.

As the bearer of this pen, we entrust you with the responsibility of maintaining Universities as a centre for critical research and learning, as well as ensuring the well-being of students and staff and fulfilling a broader mission of social good.

As the bearer of this pen, we task you with enabling access to higher education for all. Many BAME students face a heavily obstructed path to gaining settled status and citizenship. Restrictions on visa sponsorship have encouraged discriminatory barriers to admission for international students.

As the bearer of this pen, we implore you to turn actively against the trend of exclusion and instead pledge support to young people encountering these financial and legal barriers to education. We urge you to commit to defending the social and political freedoms that undergird democracy and critical scholarship.

As the bearer of this pen, we urge you to give primacy to legislation protecting human rights, civil liberties and equality over compliance particularly with respect to the UK border regime. We urge you to do your utmost to protect students and staff from the systemic abuses of detention and deportation, and to ensure that freedom of association is upheld in the university.

As the bearer of this pen you are helping to put the voices of the students back into the bureaucratic systems that uphold the border regime.

This pen and ink have now become embedded in the system that comprises the UK Border control regime in the same way the UK border control regime has become embedded in the administration of UK universities. As the bearer of this pen you are also an integral component in this process. We ask you to consider the role you may play, knowingly or unknowingly, in the barriers and opportunities for each of the voices contained in this ink and all future international students.

5. THE REFERENCES

Corporate Watch. The UK Border Regime: A Critical Guide. London, Corporate Watch, 2018, https://corporatewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/UK_border_regime.pdf.

Home Office. Student Sponsor Guidance. Document 2: Sponsorship Duties. 30 June 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/997895/Student_Sponsor_Guidance_-_Doc_2_-_Sponsorship_Duties_2021-07_FINAL.pdf.

Home Office. Student Sponsor Guidance. Document 3: Student sponsor compliance. 1 December 2020, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/939470/Student_Sponsor_Guidance_-_Doc_3_-_Compliance_2020-12.pdf.

People and Planet. Undoing Borders Action Guide. 2020. People and Planet, <https://peopleandplanet.org/system/files/resources/UB%20Action%20Guide%2020202.pdf>.

People and Planet. Undoing Borders - Reclaim your university! 2019. YouTube, <https://youtu.be/xkAVs2pLpw4>.