

Not that simple: the case of Scotland

Ignoring the advice of five select committees and the top management in the British academia (see www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-21592765), the UK coalition government has recently reconfirmed its intention to keep including certain student categories among the net migration figures, which the UK Border Agency has been asked to reduce (with students providing a relatively easy target). The wide-spread indignation, caused by the related government measures that are aimed at the student community, has initiated – in some quarters at least – the rhetoric which is not helping the cause. We are told, incorrectly, that ‘foreign’ (or ‘international’) students are affected, whereas the EU passport holders (or citizens of the EEA and Switzerland, to be precise) are free to come and go as they please – it’s the non-EU students in need of entry visas who come under special scrutiny. We are also told that these (non-EU) students are forced by the educational institutions in the UK to sign in every week in order to

prove their bona fide-ness, whereas in some university departments students are only asked to do so twice per semester (and the attendance register should be routinely filled in every class anyway). We are told that the universities are colluding with the government and becoming instruments of student oppression, whereas the universities realise full well how counterproductive the policy in question is, serving as a disincentive to valued customers, whose tuition fees are much higher than those of the rest of student population in the country (the estimated 300,000 non-EU students in Britain are reportedly worth £5bn a year to the economy). Yet the universities have little choice in the matter, fearing that if they do not co-operate their visa license will be revoked, as it happened to the London Metropolitan University in July last year (see www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/aug/30/London-metropolitan-university-visa-revoked).

Is the situation in any way different in Scotland, where Scottish

undergraduates are exempt from tuition fees and the issue of looming Scottish independence, tightly linked to Scottish nationalist sentiments, may give an impression that foreigners are not particularly welcome? Not really. First of all, the notion of Scottishness in its application to domestic undergraduate students goes far beyond narrow ethnic principles. Whatever your origin may be, Russian, Chinese or Pakistani, you are considered Scottish for fee-paying purposes if you obtained a Scottish secondary school certificate enabling you to pursue a higher education degree. As far as nationalism and independence are concerned, things are not that simple either. Historically, owing to an uneasy relationship with its southern neighbour, Scotland felt more internationally-oriented than that neighbour (to what degree this self-perception was justified is another matter). And Scottish universities – in days of old, Scotland had four while England only had two – have traditionally been

championing internationalisation. Furthermore, in a mock referendum held among students at the University of Glasgow in February 2013, 62% answered no to the question “should Scotland be an independent country?” and only 38% answered yes (see www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-21539995). Undoubtedly, there were ‘foreign’ students among some two and a half thousand of those who took part in the poll – but non-Scottish residents of Scotland will also be allowed to vote in response to the same question in the real referendum of 2014! While the outcome of the forthcoming referendum is hard to predict at this stage, doesn’t a close analysis of the situation – in the case of the alleged Scottish parochialism and that of universities blamed for policing their ‘foreign’ students – teach us that facts should take precedence over rhetoric, and slogans, assumptions and generalisations are best to be avoided?

Grumpy Scholar: Senior Lecturer affiliated with a Scottish University



‘Friends and fellow students of today will be your contemporaries in the cultural workplaces of tomorrow.’ Artwork by Feline Vomitus, University of the Arts London

From foreign students to immigrant university workers to border agents: an ordinary story

We each arrived in the UK in the late 1990s as foreign students, A as EU (from the troubled South, but still), B as ‘good’ Commonwealth – Canadian – and thus exempt from the degrading requirement that we register with the police. We also arrived in a Britain which, under New Labour (at least compared to their Tory predecessors and successors), was trying to embrace the diversity and multiculturalism of the post-colonial era, globalization and the EU. We met through the foreign student network, more vibrant and less alcohol-fuelled than its native equivalent, and bonded over countless common interests as well as our immigrant experience.

It was not all plain-sailing. We both witnessed and experienced incidents of racism and xenophobia, sometimes indirectly as we were told that we were ‘good’ immigrants, a compliment that highlighted our difference, the conditions placed on our acceptance and made us complicit in our interlocutors’ xenophobia. We also witnessed the shift from a progressive, inclusive ‘Cool Britannia’ to growing Islamophobia and suspicion of foreigners following 9/11 and 7/7, not to mention Iraq. This was something that affected us not only as immigrants here (and at airport security as we travelled to visit family and friends), but as students in a context where anti-war sentiment was high and the authorities were increasingly concerned about ‘radicalisation’ on

campus: this usually meant anti-war and Muslim, so we were safe being only anti-war.

Many years later, we entered the academic job market as (still) accented foreigners. Getting married meant that, after a complicated and expensive administrative process, B received permission to indefinitely remain in the UK, thanks to A’s EU sponsorship, and was no longer obligated to reapply annually, as he had done for years. Canadians, although from a former colony and part of the Commonwealth, are not entitled to live and work in Britain without a visa. It was the age of casualization, so our employment was fragmented, precarious, often exploitative and as a rule badly paid. Maximum flexibility was expected from us if we were to remain in the good books of department heads and programme leaders. We were often hired to teach unfamiliar subjects, which required endless hours of preparation, were called to participate in a variety of assessments sometimes with days’ notice and considered ourselves lucky to be assigned the same introductory courses year after year, despite finding them mind-numbingly unstimulating. Many desperate job applications later and years of living as students post-PhD graduation, in terms of budget if not social lifestyle, we finally landed our first full-time permanent posts within a year from each other and, miraculously, within an hour’s commuting distance. So we relocated

across the country, happy as clams. We gradually discovered that starting over in your thirties may have been necessary but far from easy. At this point, our friends had dispersed across the world in pursuit of academic career opportunities and were facing similar problems, including sometimes loneliness.

Living together and in full-time academic employment, it all seemed to be going well. Yet, we were unprepared for a number of significant developments: the Greek economic crisis and, from 2010, the Tory-led coalition government, the introduction of anti-immigrant xenophobic policies and increased scapegoating. The curry houses that New Labour had championed as the producers of Britain’s favourite dishes were now viewed as part of a network of undocumented immigrant labour. Bad news was coupled with good news as we welcomed our son into the world. We were already acutely aware of xenophobic conspiracy theories about foreigners coming here to not only steal jobs, benefits, housing and school places, but also to have children and through them acquire the right to remain and be entitled to all that Britain has to offer (at least until the coalition cuts hit). We now discovered first-hand just how untrue these theories were: despite our full legal status, our son was not automatically entitled to British citizenship or a passport. In a reversal of fortune, it was B’s resident status that eventually allowed

our child to claim British citizenship, not A’s EU status thanks to which she was able to sponsor B’s application for residency in the first place. In the meantime and as the Greek economic crisis and Tory Euroscepticism escalated, David Cameron warned about possible restrictions on Greeks. A applied for British citizenship at considerable cost and was successful. Her application was not based solely on fears about her status but a desire to vote at national elections.

While our status is now secure, we find ourselves compromised and potentially complicit in ways that we cannot rationalise or compartmentalise. We were foreign students who became immigrant workers and eventually a citizen and resident, and are now lecturers who are being asked to partake in a humiliating and xenophobic practice: monitoring Tier 4 international students as secondary ‘border guards’, based on government fears that university places are used as a back door to ‘illegal’ immigration to this enviable land of plenty. We are facing renewed calls for academics to look out for and report on possibly ‘radical’ or ‘radicalised’ students. The irony does not end there, as B’s research is on extremism and terrorism, but with a focus on right-wing extremism – the xenophobic and Islamophobic type, with which such government policies increasingly overlap.

By A & B, Lecturers affiliated with universities in Scotland

Administrative mistakes

Shihui Yan dutifully signed in at her college however, she received an email warning her of the consequences of missing a session (see below). The tone of the letter is bullish and threatening. But her own views are as follows: “I think it is ridiculous that ‘continued unauthorised absences may lead to your withdrawal from the course, your withdrawal will be reported

to the UK Border Agency and you will be required to leave the UK.’ There are many reasons for a student to not attend tutorials, and it does not mean that I am not working on my projects if I am not in the university. I do not understand why my stay or withdrawal of the course is determined by my attendance and not by the quality of work that I can produce.”

UKBA attendance email 1 – first missed Sign In Ref: YAN12360201

Dear Shihui
Missed Sign In – initial warning

Since the introduction of the UK Border Agency’s Points Based System in March 2009, it is a requirement of the University, as a Tier 4 Sponsor, to monitor and report on the non-attendance of Tier 4 Students. When enrolling at the University you agreed to attend in accordance with the University’s attendance policy.

You have missed a Sign In at your college. This has been noted on your attendance record and you should avoid missing any future weeks. You do not need to take any action if you are going to attend the Sign In sessions in future unless you wish to submit an Application for Authorised Absence form. If you have a valid reason for missing the Sign In or you have a problem that means you will be unable to sign in during future weeks, you must email Tier4@xxxx.ac.uk and request an Application for Authorised Absence form.

Continued unauthorised absences may lead to your withdrawal from the course. If this happens, your withdrawal will be reported to the UK Border Agency and you will be required to leave the UK.

The malignant teaching factory

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How did it happen that an aspiration for education for all turned so quickly into a market fluctuation? The privatizing and commercial imperative shaping curriculum and content was not born fully formed in the current period, but has been a long time coming. Indeed, the history of the classroom could be construed as a struggle over just this. From the early efforts of the Factory Inspectors – Leonard Horner – and the imperative to school the great unwashed, all the better to fit them to machines – through to the idea of education as a vast instrument for class mobility, widening participation and access to employment – itself a mixed fortune.

In capital, volume one, chapter ten, Marx narrates a class struggle that continually impinges upon the

question of education, though fittingly, the site of the action is the factory. The Factory Acts, of 1933, 1844, 1847, 1850 etc., were in effect an effort of the factory owners lobby to mitigate, undermine and evade the constraints imposed by a concerned, if ill-informed, philanthropic tendency in parliament. The Factory Inspectors, such as Leonard Horner, reported upon the conditions in the factories where children worked, sometimes twelve and more hours per day, and it is instructive to consider the elaborate machinations employed by the factory owners to circumvent requirements that these children receive a modicum of schooling. Two hours per week in the first instance (1833 Factory Act). Among the quaint lobbying practices the owners extended to the

inspectors as they made their way to inspect the factories were invitations to dinners, visits to country clubs and horse gymkhanas, the comfort of suitable lodgings, and suitable carriage to the said inspections, including eminently helpful factory guides and fulsome explanations of any anomalies and answers to questions (Horner, Diary).

It then should be noted with no little irony that in the University today, and indeed throughout the education system, the descendants of the Factory Inspectors are guided just as much by the care with which managers attend to questions of presentation, access and quality assurance in a new era of evaluation. Aside from the media event that is an OffStead visit, in effect a form-filling exercise, and the Quality unit of the

Department of Business Innovation and Sport, with Universities governed under the same budget lines as commerce and the Olympics, we are not dealing with inspections as such, so much as reports and tabulations – drawn up according to the new guidance whereby Government turns education into a vast factory-like programme, with productivity gains and training regimes of course factored in, and with global reach.

In the universities, the pressure for academics, and by extension students, at least student activists, the SU and postgrads, to themselves become the malignant and parasitic managerial class is operative here. Becoming self-regulating means complicity in several modes. The university now demands managers to present as petty bourgeois shop

keepers, marketing specious wares; or as entrepreneurial visionary explorers tasked with terra-firming new vistas of corporate training, consultancy and product placement; as public brand-uni sprukers of tele-genic ‘ideas’ and Verso-controversy coffee chat radical publishing... etc. Privatisation as a system wide strategy is not examined by the episodic and sectoral focus of both mainstream investigators – Offcom, Offstead etc are not the investigators we need, trades union sectoralism is insufficient. The malignancy here is an emergent but hollow expertise of those who are not just measurers – if all they did was bean-counting we might more readily discount their dodgy deals.

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