

Let students tell their own stories on visas

More should be done to highlight the plight of individual overseas students chasing visas, argues **Simeon Underwood**.

Here at LSE we recently had to deal with the case of an overseas PhD student who had to travel out of the UK as part of his studies. This student's visa expired on 31 January 2012. Not realising this, he "overstayed" in the UK by just a few days. He then travelled out of the country. On his way back, he was asked by the immigration officer at the airport why he was returning to the UK. When he explained he was a PhD student, the officer was very friendly and helpful and she stamped his passport to allow him entry for two months. She said that she had granted him full permission to study but that he should apply to the UK Border Agency (UKBA) from within the country to sort out his slightly untidy immigration status.

The PhD student therefore booked an appointment in April 2012 to apply for his student visa in person. He was assured that his application was valid and that it was OK for him to apply from inside the UK – but he was also told that the UKBA needed to make further checks. So he cancelled his travel plans and waited.

Come July, he was still waiting. We made enquiries on his behalf and were told, to our and his alarm, that his application was about to be refused because he had

been stamped into the UK as a student visitor. So the student then had to withdraw his visa application; leave the UK; gather the necessary documentation afresh to apply again from his home country; and – because of the disruption to his PhD programme – apply to us for an extension of registration. He applied for his visa in September. It was finally granted in October.

There are plenty more stories like this. Students who get tangled up with the UKBA have to pay for the privilege and they have to be patient. But I am not telling you all this to belabour the UK Border Agency. Instead I want to argue that the sector needs to change its strategy for lobbying on student visas.

Its main lobbying line so far has been the damage that government policy may do to universities in the future. This is supported by anecdote and selective use of data, most of it year-on-year rather than trend data over a sustained period. It has not been sufficiently evidence-based and has not worked.

So what should the sector do? I would propose that its approach should have two strands.

The first is to draw up a shortlist of winnable aims. Top of my personal shopping list – although this may be

divisive – would be restoration of the concept of "highly trusted sponsor" to its first intention, which was to give preferential treatment and support to institutions with good performance indicators in the key areas.

The second is where our PhD student comes back in. Student stories can have more impact on the public and politicians than arguments based in policy. And at LSE we can trust our students to be articulate advocates for their cause.

In June 2011 the government published a White Paper on higher education under the title *Putting Students at the Heart of the System*. It could give a good example itself by putting students at the heart of its visa system. ■



Simeon Underwood is Academic Registrar and Director of Academic Services at LSE. If you think you are in a position to help the School in its lobbying efforts in this area, you are welcome to get in touch with him at s.underwood@lse.ac.uk

A longer version of this article appeared in the *Times Higher Education* on 21 February 2013 – see timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/feature-theses-of-student-visa-bureaucracy/2001710.article