

Types, modes and timeframes of immigration advice to international students (Boston University and Vanderbilt University, USA)

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Introduction

Described at the 2009 UKCISA conference as a sleeping giant awakening (in terms of marketing), the United States is the primary destination for international students and the main competitor of the UK. With the introduction of Tier 4 in the UK the role of International Student Adviser (ISA) has been catapulted to a level of critical importance in terms of providing immigration support and documentation so that students can obtain a visa to take up their place on a course.

My study visit aimed to look at the types, modes and timeframes of the provision of immigration advice to international students requiring non-immigrant visas to study in the United States. I was interested in investigating how US universities balance and manage their sponsorship responsibilities and their interaction with the students as clients. I also wanted to speak with international students to understand their perception and experience of US universities' role in facilitating their visa applications and compliance with US federal law.

Summary of outcomes

I learned a lot about the US student immigration system and was able to contrast it with the UK system. This enabled me to understand the context in which International Student Advisers work and I was able to gain valuable insight into the role of an International Student Adviser in the US. I had the chance to examine the processes and systems in place in each university. By speaking with international students and recruiters (centralised and academic) I was able to understand the interplay of decision factors in students opting to study in the US. Student focus groups gave me the opportunity to evaluate customer satisfaction.

The universities

Boston University has a large and diverse international student population with almost 5,500 students from 137 countries. Their International Student and Scholar Office boasts 17 staff, eight of whom have an immigration advisory role assisting students, scholars and their families pre-arrival as well as during and after their studies. Vanderbilt is smaller, with an international student population of around 1,000 and offers similar services on a smaller scale.

The organisational structure at each university was similar. The International Student and Scholar Office or Service dealt solely with incoming international students and was a distinct and separate entity to the Study Abroad section dealing with outgoing students, although each was situated alongside the other with a shared reception area. There is an upper limit placed on the number of ISAs a US university is allowed to employ and Boston had the maximum number with six student advisers, two scholar advisers and a director and assistant director who also advised. Vanderbilt had three student advisers as well as a director and assistant director. Much of the work related to student work permission applications.

Both universities divided their students between ISAs - Boston by academic programme and Vanderbilt alphabetically by family name. The larger university, Boston, had a highly-structured appointments system with each adviser meeting one-to-one with students in 45 minute or one-hour appointments with a maximum of six appointments a day. Vanderbilt's student advising was less formalised, with the majority of student advising undertaken on a

drop-in basis with only very complicated or sensitive issues being dealt with by appointment. At busy times Boston's appointments could be booked up to two to three weeks in advance and they therefore also operated an 'adviser on call' system rotating this duty around the ISAs. In addition to its team of advisers, Boston had four front-line co-ordinators who ran the reception area and dealt with enquiries and letter requests. Both universities organised travel signature days for students to get the correct documentation to travel and also ran workshops on work options.

Working while studying in the USA

There were some similarities and some fundamental differences between working permissions for students when comparing the US and UK. Whilst both immigration systems allow up to 20 hours of work per week during studies, in the US this must be undertaken on campus unless permission to work off-campus is applied for and granted. Boston's computer system will not allow payment of more than 20 hours' payment to any international student to ensure compliance with this requirement. If student records and payroll could be linked in this way in the UK then we could go some way to ensuring that those students working on campus do not breach their 10 or 20 hours working permissions.

In the US there are two main types of student working permissions – Curricula Practical Training (CPT) and Optional Practical Training (OPT). CPT is work specifically linked to the student's study, for example, recital work for a music student, and is therefore of limited scope. Students are also allowed up to one year of OPT which can be pro-rata eg half-time work over two years. This is divided into two categories: pre and post-graduation. It costs \$340 per application and can take up to three months to be granted (there is no in-person appointment system in the US). Once permission has been given it cannot be delayed and it is therefore quite a balancing act when students are approaching completion of studies but may not be sure when they will graduate. Under OPT, training must be related to the student's studies - I met a student of philosophy who was going to find it difficult to be able to undertake OPT due to this restriction! Under OPT if a maximum period of 90 days unemployment is exceeded, OPT is lost; also a student may not re-enter the US with OPT if they are not employed. Unlike post-study work in the UK, whilst on OPT, students remain the responsibility of their sponsor university.

The immigration system

The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) has been in operation in the US for seven years now and the government is working on the introduction of SEVIS2. Boston has a full-time member of staff to manage SEVIS. Whereas the UK system of CAS's is currently focussed on visa applications and extensions, the focus of SEVIS is on interfacing with universities' record systems to ensure that students are 'maintaining status', for example, being continually enrolled full-time. Visas cannot be extended or applied for from within the US and even if a visa expires, as long as status is maintained, a student is there legally. To apply for a visa an offer letter from the University and a specific government document (eg I20) must be submitted. SEVIS does not extend outside the US other than payment of a SEVIS fee at the time of application. It makes the UK's Sponsor Management System look hugely ambitious with simultaneous UK and global roll-out.

US universities are also required to report 'no show' students and transfers within a specified time-frame which varies between 15 and 30 days. This is similar to the monitoring requirements of Tier 4 and, like us, they have some discretion on how this is organised. At Boston, for example, they require each student to physically sign in each semester at either the international office or their department.

Continuing professional development

In terms of training for ISAs there are parallels between NAFSA and UKCISA. Each offers an annual conference and training sessions as well as providing a network. The system of support of ISAs is less formalised in the US with experienced advisers taking on a mentoring role for others in the sector. NAFSA has an online instruction manual which deals with all aspects of student visas and to which ISAs can refer. Local arrangements had been set up; at Boston, they had 'third Thursday' meetings with colleagues in the local area, while staff at Vanderbilt met with colleagues in the Nashville area each month. This is similar to AISA regional meetings.

Systems and processes

US University Advice Services do not have a separate regulator like the OISC; they simply operate under federal law. Procedures and best practice are written up by the service and are available for all advisers to refer to. At fortnightly meetings they share experience and address any problems. Difficult cases can be referred up to the Assistant Director or the Director. At both universities client case records were part of the student record system and all interactions were fully documented and easily viewed.

With the increased responsibilities of Tier 4 sponsors we have had to develop systems to capture additional information on students such as passport and visa details on their student records. At Warwick and probably other UK institutions this has been shaped by compliance needs and is not highly developed. We keep separate databases and paper-based client case-note records for advising purposes. Whilst other institutions will have more technically-advanced or integrated systems in place, none will have one record system which serves the dual function of case-note record-keeping and communicating of 'reporting events' to SEVIS which the US fsaATLAS or iOffice programmes are designed to do.

FsaATLAS and iOffice are software packages which can be purchased by education providers to help manage their data and to batch that data to SEVIS. They are typically used by medium-sized and larger education providers. Smaller providers would tend to enter their data directly on to SEVIS via the 'Real-Time Interactive' (RTA) interface. FsaATLAS and iOffice can be configured to be stand-alone databases where all of the input is from the international office staff, then batched to SEVIS. In this configuration, the software is used as the international office's primary record-keeping system to track and communicate with all international students and scholars.

International office staff must then monitor the school's central record-keeping system separately to know if there are changes which must be reported eg full-time/part-time course load. However, both software packages can also be configured to retrieve data directly from the education provider's central registration or record-keeping system. They include alert protocols that make separate monitoring of the institution's central system unnecessary. This configuration requires IT staff to install and maintain the system. Some larger providers have a designated member of staff to manage SEVIS, the software and the central record-keeping system to manage the flow of data between the three systems. Both increased reporting requirements and the move to an IT-centred system in the UK make the US experience and systems very relevant and one which the sector can examine, adapt and develop in order to integrate and automate these types of function.

There were other examples of advanced technology assisting the work of the US ISAs, such as appropriate automated emails to students on maintaining their status and upcoming events. Reports could be run to check that students had not fallen below a full-time study programme (other than in their final session when this was allowed). In the recruitment area,

staff could check if the I20 they had issued had been activated to obtain a visa and, if it hadn't, they sent a series of emails encouraging the student to apply for their visa.

With the introduction of CAS's we will be able to follow the US example and see how many of the CAS's we have issued have been used and this will give us exciting new data on our expected student numbers. It will also enable us, as the US does, to target our conversion activities such as calling campaigns to those students who have not yet activated their CAS. Again, if technology can be interfaced as it is in the US, a series of automated emails could be sent to 'floating' students.

At both universities, I met with those directly involved in recruiting international students and was interested to see if visa considerations and perceptions of how difficult it is to get a visa impacted on their prospective students' decisions. They all said that they field surprisingly few visa queries when they are out recruiting. Both universities are private with substantial tuition fees and generally attract applicants from fairly wealthy families who are often already well-travelled; obtaining a visa is therefore not usually a concern for them.

Students' views

At the student focus groups participants said that the experience of obtaining a US student visa was time-intensive with a huge amount of documentation and there was a difficult timeline to follow. In general, other factors such as academic course content, financial awards and peer group decisions influenced their decision to study in the US rather than the UK. There was also a low awareness of work permissions prior to arriving in the US; again, this could probably be put down to the student type who does not need to work to finance their studies. The ease with which international students in the UK can work off-campus and the two years of post-study work available to them are huge selling points in promoting UK higher education especially when contrasted with the restrictions which exist in the US; however, to most of the students I met it was not a consideration until they had actually reached the US.

Although students can bring dependants with them to the US these dependants are prohibited from working or studying full-time. I met one student whose wife held both a US student dependant visa and a PSW work visa - she visited him regularly in the US but was pursuing her career in the UK. He was well-aware of the differences in the conditions and had plans to become a dependant on his wife's PSW visa so that he too could gain some UK work experience. Currently the UK has an advantage over the US with its dependant permissions; however, if the government removes these favourable conditions, as it has already started to, it may impact on the choice of destination for those students wishing to bring family with them.

Other activities

Vanderbilt has a high ratio of advisers to international students and is therefore able to organise plenty of cultural activities for them. This includes an orientation which all new students attend; a series of free films with discussion, *'World on Wednesdays'*, a weekly presentation from faculty, staff or a student or community group, followed by lunch; cultural festival social activities which include activities for children such as cookie-making or card decorating; and the opportunity to have dinner in the home of someone from the local community. They also send an email birthday card to every international student!

Boston University has to devote most of its resources to immigration work; however, they also have a programme of monthly talks which cover subject areas requested by students and sometimes include an outside speaker such as an immigration lawyer talking about permanent residence.

Reflections

As a result of seeing what is done in the US we will be expanding our programme of presentations and workshops which currently cover visa extension and post-study work. We intend to set up a programme for the whole academic year to offer appropriate sessions tailored to the time of year, for example, a session on inviting relatives prior to graduation and talks on Schengen in preparation for summer travel. We will extend this to include cultural sessions such as presentations on UK festivals.

At Warwick we deliver cultural awareness sessions at orientation and throughout the year with sessions for support staff. Vanderbilt delivers cultural awareness training to specific academic courses, for example to the MBA students, as part of the course. This is something we and other universities could look at introducing.

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