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Managing Change in Higher Education: Leadership Challenges in UK University Recruitment Amid International Student Visa Policy Reform

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Abstract

This paper discusses the leadership issues encountered by UK university recruitment teams in light of recent changes to international student visa policy. Frequent reforms to international student visa policies have significantly influenced, and in many cases destabilised, the sector. The Immigration Act 2014 marked a major shift by introducing a more restrictive migration-control model, including landlord checks, NHS surcharges, and tighter monitoring of visa overstayers. These developments have affected students' access to study in the UK, universities' capacity to achieve recruitment and enrolment goals, and the workload of teaching and professional services staff. Using qualitative research, the study examines leadership and change management, international student recruitment, and the consequences of government policy changes for student visa applications, mediated by legislation such as the Immigration Act 2014 and Tier 4 visa rules. Drawing on thematic analysis and examples from UK universities, the study identifies key obstacles and adaptive strategies, and offers suggestions for future research and practice. The findings show that agile leadership, effective stakeholder communication, and strategic planning are necessary for navigating a changing regulatory environment concerning UK immigration visa reform and its effects on universities, international student recruitment, and enrolment.

Keywords: managing change; leadership and management; international student recruitment; education; immigration reforms; visa applications

Introduction

International student recruitment is a key aspect of UK higher education, forming a cornerstone of institutional diversity, financial viability, and international reputation. Over the last twenty years, international students have not only contributed to the academic and cultural life of UK universi-

ties but have also added an estimated £42 billion to the UK economy each year through tuition fees and local spending (London Economics, 2023). For many institutions, particularly those whose operational survival relies on regular intakes of large numbers of international students, such as the three universities mentioned in this paper, international enrolments have been necessary to counteract dwindling public funding and rising operational expenses (Boliver, 2015; Cantwell et al., 2022).

Frequent reforms to international student visa policies have significantly influenced, and in many cases destabilised, the sector. Amendments to legislative measures, including the Immigration Act 2014, restrictions to Tier 4 visa rules, and subsequent changes within the Points-Based Immigration System, have created new compliance pressures and changed the strategic environment in which universities operate (GOV UK, 2013; UKCISA, 2026).

The Immigration Act 2014 marked a major shift by introducing a more restrictive migration-control model, including landlord checks, NHS surcharges, and tighter surveillance of visa overstayers (GOV UK, 2013). These developments have significantly affected students' access to study in the UK, universities' capacity to achieve recruitment and enrolment goals, and, more specifically, the workload of teaching personnel. Institutional leaders have therefore had to make strategic staffing decisions to reduce costs, guarantee continuity of educational provision, and support institutional survival. The reforms were complemented by the abolition of post-study work rights in 2012 and increased attention to institutions' sponsorship obligations, which together contributed to a decline in non-EU student numbers in the mid-2010s (Migration Observatory, 2016). The regulatory environment was further complicated by subsequent changes to Tier 4, including the implementation of credibility interviews and additional English -language proficiency requirements (Ducu et al., 2024).

Literature review

As the analysis above demonstrates, international student recruitment is a sensitive aspect of UK higher education because it supports institutional diversity, financial sustainability, and global reputation. Nevertheless, the sector has been severely affected by repeated changes to international student visa policies, especially the Immigration Act 2014 and Tier 4 rules (Tiernan, 2023). These policy changes have created serious operational and strategic issues for university administrators responsible for maintaining recruitment levels while ensuring compliance.

The following literature review sections examine existing literature within this area of interest.

International student recruitment

International student recruitment refers to the coordinated and planned activities of higher education institutions that target, recruit, and enrol international students in line with organisational objectives, market dynamics, and global mobility trends (Maringe & Foskett, 2010). Recent studies show that international student recruitment is no longer limited to marketing. It now also involves long-term relationship building, compliance with visa laws, and institutional reputation management. It is increasingly shaped by policy changes, digitalisation, and international competition for talent (ICEF Monitor, 2023; Falcone, 2017).

The literature on change management and leadership in higher education has expanded considerably in recent years, especially in relation to the internationalisation agenda (Jones, 2017; de Wit & Hunter, 2015). Adaptive and transformational leadership play key roles in helping institutions respond appropriately to external shocks (Bolden et al., 2009), including abrupt and continued shifts in government visa policy. Changes in visa policy in UK universities have disrupted traditional recruitment channels, requiring new approaches to market engagement and regulatory compliance (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Recent studies emphasise the role of regulatory uncertainty and institutional resilience, indicating that effective leadership depends on flexibility, stakeholder involvement, and efficient risk-management systems (Randeree & Narwani, 2009; Cantwell et al., 2022).

The literature also identifies institutional inertia, resource limitations, and competing policy concerns as major obstacles to successful change management (Lumby & Foskett, 2015). These factors can positively or negatively affect educational provision depending on whether they support targeted and planned action. Case-based studies of university responses to visa reform reveal a range of responses, from proactive market diversification to reactive, compliance-driven adjustments (Beech, 2017). These responses reflect strategic leadership decisions and influence changes in practice designed to accommodate shifts in education provision, student recruitment, and staffing. However, relatively little research has examined the lived experiences of university recruitment leaders as they navigate present and emerging challenges. This gap justifies the use of qualitative inquiry.

Despite ongoing changes in visa policy, universities' educational priorities remain a key focus for leadership and management, with overseas students continuing to study in the UK. This supports normal operations, growth, and institutional success. The three universities cited in this study continue to expand their operations and attract overseas students, primarily to achieve profit, growth, and expanded service offerings aimed at international students.

In managing change, these institutions are committed to addressing turbulence in education caused by changes in immigration policy. Educa-

tional leaders may handle change in various ways, including by exploring approaches to managing organisational activities such as recruitment and enrolment in order to sustain the institution. Change can be gradual and positive if communicated effectively, but it can also produce negative reactions if communication is poor. Change involves helping an organisation adapt to new circumstances, whether gradual or radical. It can produce positive outcomes when communicated well, but negative reactions may occur if institutional staff are not informed or prepared for the need for change. Sudden visa policy changes have made preparation difficult. However, such changes are no longer a matter of choice; they are part of the reality of managing change in a climate of government-led immigration law reform aimed at reducing migration, often without sufficient regard for the impact on universities that rely heavily on international students.

Changes to student visa policy can lead institutions to reduce staffing budgets, resulting in redundancies and an overall reduction in staff numbers. Although some universities have sought to avoid layoffs, these changes can become unavoidable under pressure to adapt. When international student recruitment is affected by government policy changes to visa regulations, institutions must respond to, and in some cases embrace, such changes. This is what the universities highlighted in this study have attempted to do. Leadership and management therefore need to implement rapid changes to prevent institutional closures or staff layoffs, while also avoiding disappointment for students who remain interested in studying in the UK.

Impact of change on educational leadership and management

Reforms in higher education institutions have had a sizeable impact on leadership and management practices, especially in student recruitment and enrolment. Organisational change may significantly interfere with operational continuity and student recruitment, as shown by changes to immigration policy affecting international students and their visa requirements for study in the UK (Scott & Asavisanu, 2021).

Resistance to change is typically driven by uncertainty and fear of the unknown. This can affect academic and administrative staff whose functions and duties may be directly affected by policy changes. Reluctance to embrace change may hinder the adoption of new strategies and institutional adjustment, particularly in leadership and management.

Any change in policies or requirements for obtaining student visas or entering the country can reduce student enrolment, create fiscal challenges, and increase institutional pressures. Moreover, these interruptions often increase workloads for remaining staff, create scheduling issues, and reduce motivation, making the institution less effective (Moallem et al., 2024). In the most difficult situations, universities have been forced to re-

trench employees, further straining organisations and reducing their ability to deliver high-quality education on a sustainable basis.

Strategic roles of leadership in implementing visa policy

Educational leadership and management can play vital roles in mitigating the impact of sudden change. Leaders' ability to adapt, develop a strategic outlook, and engage in collaborative decision-making is essential for maintaining organisational resilience (Jerab, 2023). Leaders and managers can ensure continuity in teaching, learning, and student support through open communication, promotion of professional development, and inclusion of stakeholders in adaptive planning, even when regulatory volatility occurs.

The effectiveness with which educational leaders strategically manage change influences not only the stability of the institution but also its image and competitiveness in the global higher education market (Piatanom, 2025). The relationship between managerial action and leadership foresight therefore emerges as central to institutional sustainability and to the protection of ongoing education delivery, which is critical to long-term business success. The question here is how sudden alterations to immigration visa regulations influence international student recruitment, and what strategic role leadership and management can play in alleviating the problems caused by this situation while continuing to provide education to international students in ways that can also support the financial performance of the organisation.

Theoretical model

The literature identifies various theoretical models for managing organisational change, including:

- Kotter's (1996) model of change management.
- Kurt Lewin's three-stage model of managing change (Lewin, 1947).
- Transformational leadership and management theories (Bass & Riggio, 2006).
- Policy-feedback theories (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004).
- Institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

This paper draws on some of the above theories, particularly Kotter's Eight-Step Managing Change Model (Kotter et al., 2021) and transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Kotter's model offers a systematic approach to organisational change, beginning with the creation of urgency and extending to the embedding of new practices. The method explains the sequential and integrative mechanisms required to achieve a supportive climate for coping with policy reform. This model can assist in understanding how universities respond to policy-driven change.

Elements such as creating urgency, forming guiding coalitions, and communicating the vision are particularly significant when institutions must rapidly alter their recruitment strategies in response to external regulatory shifts.

Meanwhile, transformational leadership theory focuses on the significance of vision, inspiration, and personalised support in mobilising teams during times of uncertainty (Karimi et al., 2023). These theories provide complementary perspectives on leadership issues and responses in university recruitment contexts. The application of situational leadership is also relevant to organisational responses to impromptu changes, as it offers an adaptable, situation-based leadership style that responds to prevailing circumstances.

Policy feedback theory (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004) indicates that organisational behaviour, resource allocation, and stakeholder expectations are influenced by public policies. Immigration policies therefore not only regulate entry but also actively shape institutional strategies, market positioning, and leadership priorities. In the UK higher education context, visa reforms have created feedback loops that alter recruitment patterns, institutional risk, and long-term planning (Scott, 2018). To remain viable in a turbulent, unpredictable, and policy-driven environment, an organisation must adjust to the changes it experiences; leadership and management functions are therefore central.

Institutional theory proposes that organisations respond to external pressures through compliance, mimicry, and strategic differentiation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Visa policy reforms generate coercive pressures that push universities to alter recruitment practices, compliance systems, and international partnerships. They also encourage education leaders to act quickly. Together, these frameworks demonstrate how policy reforms influence education recruitment, students, and leadership responses.

International student visa policy reform and the impact on higher education

Immigration Act 2014 and Tier 4 reforms

The Immigration Act 2014 introduced measures such as landlord checks, NHS surcharges, and tighter monitoring of overstayers. These changes increased universities' administrative workload and contributed to a decline in non-EU student numbers between 2012 and 2016 (Migration Observatory, 2016). Tier 4 reforms, including credibility interviews and stricter English-language requirements, further heightened compliance challenges (Ducu et al., 2024), severely affecting university recruitment targets and leading to staff layoffs, role changes, and leadership adjustments to ensure effective implementation.

Graduate route and recent restrictions

The reintroduction of post-study work rights in 2021 temporarily increased the UK's appeal, resulting in record international enrolments. However, the 2023-24 reforms limiting dependants and suggesting possible changes to the graduate route have created renewed uncertainty (GOV UK, 2014). Universities now face greater volatility in recruitment estimates and strategic planning.

Leadership challenges in managing change

Strategic uncertainty and risk management

Leaders must operate under uncertain policy conditions while still achieving recruitment goals and financial sustainability. Studies indicate that universities are increasingly using scenario planning, market diversification, and enhanced compliance systems (Cantwell et al., 2022; Boliver, 2015).

Communication and stakeholder management

Visa reforms require effective communication with prospective students, agents, academic departments, and professional services staff. Miscommunication can lead to reputational damage and loss of applicants (UKCISA, 2026).

Organisational culture and change resistance

Internal resistance to policy-driven change is common, particularly when employees perceive reforms as imposed by a higher authority or as contrary to institutional values (Scott, 2018). Leadership should therefore create a culture of flexibility and shared purpose among employees.

Organisational case examples

Case Example 1: University of East London

The literature identifies organisations that have taken steps to respond to changes in their provisions. For example, UEL responded to the 2014 reforms by investing heavily in compliance infrastructure, including automated attendance monitoring and enhanced oversight of agents. This enabled the institution to maintain its sponsorship licence and stabilise recruitment (Ducu et al., 2024). Without such responses, institutions could face closure, heavy staff layoffs, and reduced student numbers.

Case Example 2: University of Glasgow

Following the reintroduction of the graduate route, the University of Glasgow expanded its South Asian recruitment strategy by leveraging alumni networks and targeted marketing. However, the 2023-24 restrictions forced a rapid recalibration of messaging and market focus. The use of recruitment agencies has also enabled some affected universities to recruit students

overseas. However, there is no guarantee that these students will be granted visas to enter the UK.

Post-92 universities

Universities that rely more heavily on international tuition income have been disproportionately affected by policy volatility. Many have adopted diversification strategies, targeting emerging markets such as Nigeria, Vietnam, and Kazakhstan (London Economics, 2023) to fill classrooms and meet enrolment targets. However, reaching projected student numbers has been challenging. During periods of low recruitment, there are financial implications for the institution and everyone involved.

Method of data collection (qualitative)

A qualitative research design is widely used in studies examining leadership responses to policy change, including changes to visa policy. Typical approaches include the use of secondary data, textbooks, previous research, journals, and case studies on university strategy implementation in response to change. In addition, immigration visa policy documents and regulations, institutional strategies, and recruitment reports reveal how universities interpret and respond to visa reforms. Thematic analysis is used to present the results, and this has informed the initial stage of the work. Ethical compliance is considered, applied, and observed regardless of the qualitative approach used in gathering data.

Discussion of findings from the literature and the theoretical framework

The literature indicates that visa policy reform is a major externally generated shock because it significantly transforms the recruitment and enrolment process for international students in UK higher education. These reforms change both incentives and constraints. Policy feedback theory helps explain how universities adjust recruitment policies, compliance mechanisms, and operational frameworks in response to changing regulatory environments.

As explained by Kotter's Change Model and the other models discussed above, leadership is critical in guiding change in an organisation, while communication, vision, and stakeholder involvement throughout the process are of paramount importance. This is further supported by institutional theory, which highlights the coercive pressures universities face in meeting government requirements to maintain legitimacy and funding. The issue of leadership is most pronounced in universities whose main source of revenue is international student recruitment. Strategic foresight, problem solving, and open communication are qualities of effective leaders in such an environment (London Economics, 2023). The sporadic and fluctuating

nature of UK immigration policy creates volatility, hinders long-term strategic planning, reduces the international competitiveness of universities, and, most prominently, contributes to declining student numbers.

The literature review indicates that, although universities are becoming more responsive to policy-driven changes, many continue to be threatened by unpredictable regulatory shifts. The universities discussed in the literature are not exceptions. The consequences include effects on student enrolment, staff workload, morale, and institutional reputation. The literature examined suggests that educational leadership and management play significant roles in ensuring stability, continuity, and institutional resilience in the process of managing policy and regulatory turbulence.

Conclusion

Reforms to international student visa policies have a substantial and complex impact on leadership and management in UK higher education institutions. As the findings indicate, these reforms can change international student recruitment strategies, increase compliance requirements, and test the strategic and operational capabilities of institutional leaders.

Universities with proactive and adaptive leadership capabilities are better positioned to overcome the impact of volatile regulatory change. They use organisational learning, evidence-based decision-making, and cross-sector cooperation to remain compliant and maintain recruitment flows. The continued unpredictability of immigration policy can undermine institutional trust, fiscal stability, and the UK's status as a leading education destination, so institutions must be proactive in their responses.

This paper has highlighted the importance of leadership, flexibility, communication, and strategic foresight. Legislation such as the Immigration Act 2014 and changes to Tier 4 regulations have heightened accountability pressures, requiring universities to balance regulatory compliance with innovative international student recruitment methods.

Recommendations for future research and practice

Future research should consider expanding qualitative inquiry to examine a broader range of institutions, including post-1992 universities and private providers, while also incorporating the perspectives of different stakeholders, including international students, policymakers, and recruitment agents. This would provide a clearer picture of policy effects. Further investigation should also examine the long-term effects of regulatory and visa policy changes on university reputation, student performance, institutional alliances, and international brand competitiveness.

Institutions should establish leadership and management frameworks by developing evidence-based best-practice guidelines for leadership training and development in uncertain regulatory environments. Such

frameworks could focus on institutional resilience, inclusion, and the strength of responses to changes in international student visa policies.
Policy and practice collaboration is urged between higher education institutions and the Government to facilitate coherent, clear, and sustainable visa policy paradigms that promote international education as an important economic and cultural resource.

By connecting the theoretical dynamics of policy feedback, change -management models, and institutional adaptation, this paper seeks to guide future empirical research on the effects of visa policy changes on recruitment and leadership practices in UK higher education institutions.

Combining theoretical insights and existing evidence supports the view that resilient leadership and adaptive management are essential if UK higher education institutions are to maintain the reputational excellence so highly valued by international students during a period of policy ambiguity and regulatory turbulence.

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