

Student article

The Graduate Entrepreneur Visa: My journey from an international student to a career in the UK

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A decision to come to the UK for education, I believe, is hard for every student to make. Having stayed in the UK for 9 years, from studying an English course to having my own business, I have faced so many challenges and witnessed many changes around me. Despite these challenges, I have managed to build a successful career via the less well-known Tier 1 visa route. I am sharing my story here, to raise awareness of this opportunity and offer some thoughts on how people working with international students can help them prepare for post-graduation employment in the UK. I will start this article by introducing changes in the immigration policies that affect international students after graduation. Then I will share my personal career journey and offer some advice for helping students prepare for future employment.

Work visa changes and their effects on international students

Before 6th April 2012, graduates holding a Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, PhD, Post Graduate Certificate or diploma from UK higher education institutes were offered the opportunity to apply a Post-Study Work (PSW) visa (Workpermit.com, 2013; UK Visa Bureau, 2014). This type of visa was specifically designed for international graduates from universities to gain some work experience before returning to their home country. Much more freedom and flexibility in relation to work was offered under this scheme. Unfortunately, the PSW visa route for international graduates to gain work experience was cancelled in 2012. As a result, international graduates intending to live and work in the UK have to apply for Tier 2 work visa instead: "You can apply for a Tier 2 (General) visa if: you've been offered a skilled job in the UK; or you're from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland" (GOV.UK, 2014). However, the difficulty in applying a Tier 2 visa is significantly higher than for a PSW visa as Tier 2 applicants will need a skilled job offer from a sponsoring employer under a points-based system. As the employer has to make the visa application, the high cost and difficulty is likely to put employers off recruiting international graduates. Less well known is the Tier 1 Graduate Entrepreneur visa introduced as an alternative in 2012, aiming to attract investors and graduates with innovative ideas into the UK. Successful applications to Tier 1 Graduate Entrepreneur are difficult, but the route can be rewarding in the right circumstances.

Due to these visa changes, it is a challenge for international students to stay and work after graduation. As a result, fewer international graduates plan to stay and work in the UK. Many friends and students I have met have said to me that they do not plan to stay and work in the UK because it is too hard to overcome the visa issue, and many think they do not stand a chance of competing with home students due to the language barrier. Some have also mentioned that they intend to go to the USA or other English-speaking nations as it is easier to get settled and to find a job there. I personally think the UK is wasting an opportunity and losing talented international graduates.

A journey from making job applications to establishing my own business

I was not very aware of visa issues at time of graduation. At the time I thought my good academic background in medical science at Master's level would be something many firms were looking for. They were, but that was not the issue. I only became aware of the problem when I received many replies from firms saying "unfortunately we cannot proceed your application further as we cannot support the Tier 2 work visa". This was already after 3-months of making job applications and my Tier 4 student visa was about to expire. I started to realise that I was not prepared enough to overcome this issue. I strongly believe that if I was made more aware of this specific issue for international students long before my graduation, I would have prepared myself more by learning about different options available for graduates who want to work in the UK.

I then quickly changed my career plan and got in touch with people from the Career Development Service in the University of Leicester for more advice and help. Fortunately with all the support from family, friends and the University, I was brave enough to take a big step forward, which was to set up my own business. Having gone through the preparation of business proposal and interview, my business idea was approved for making a Tier 1 Graduate Entrepreneur visa application. This does not require any investment money (unlike Tier 1 Entrepreneur visa) and I was eligible to join the Enterprise Inc. programme. Here I would strongly recommend teachers and academics to encourage students to find out and use the career development service available in the University as the first step to learning about career routes in the future.

Regarding my business idea, it originated from the fact that the options for international students have also seen a big change. We have witnessed the rise of tourism specifically for international students. Most international students studying in the UK only stay here for a relatively short period of time. They want to travel around the UK during their limited time of stay. As a result, travel agencies/principals specifically targeting this market have been established to offer many different holiday packages, and they have recruited tour guides/leaders with similar language and cultural backgrounds, to enhance the service offered. Travel agencies/principals offering easy and good transportation tend to get good recognition by international students, who usually do not have a car in the UK. Now international students get more chance than before to explore many famous attractions and meet more people from different backgrounds within the UK.

Having identified the potential in tourism services, I have now set up my own company, called Red Apple Travel, as a travel agency/principal with an office based in Leicester, targeting this international student market. We advertise and sell many professional travel arrangements specifically for international students. As a company, we are now collaborating with the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) of the University of Leicester to facilitate travel arrangements as well as support the university life for international students. We are also collaborating with international student associations at universities to help students understand British culture and make contact with people from different backgrounds in the UK. I believe what we are doing is not just to offer excitement and joy, but also to make connections with students in order to assist them with their study and future employability through many of our communications with them.

How can international students prepare for entrepreneurship?

There was a time when I was like every other graduate who is making job applications and trying to find a place in the society. When I now look back at myself, that period of time was

tough and I would have hoped someone was there much earlier to guide me. Teachers and academics could really be one of these people.

With regard to international student life in general, the extra-curricular and leisure activities nowadays have become more diverse. As a result of globalisation and advances in technology, people with better knowledge of different cultures and languages are more connected. Thus, there are volunteering opportunities specifically available for international students to help British people become global citizens. For instance, during the week of Universal Children's Day, many schools would invite international students with different cultural backgrounds as volunteers to come to their class and teach young pupils about their languages and cultures. I learned about these opportunities through the institutional newsletter email circulated every week, and I would recommend that teachers and academics encourage students to spend a little time reading through such newsletters or similar media: this could potentially make a big difference in their student experience and career prospects. In addition, enhanced awareness of environmental preservation in recent years leads to many volunteering projects and activities for all students to join. These activities offered by universities, colleges, schools and many others, can be put on the CV and are great opportunities to enhance various transferable skills of students. It is therefore important for teachers to be aware of these opportunities, so that they can encourage students to participate in different extra-curricular activities, which would really increase their employability in the UK.

While we are seeing cuts in educational funding, international students are also facing great difficulties in finding ways to work and stay in the UK at the same time. Perhaps it is impossible for us to change the policies, but there are always ways we can prepare ourselves for coming challenges. As I have successfully applied through Tier 1 Graduate Entrepreneur route myself, I have become aware that this route has remained unknown for most international students. I would therefore advise teachers and academics to point out the opportunity of this visa route to their international students and have the information in hand to direct them to places where they can find out more. I would also recommend teachers and academics to be proactive in finding information about routes where students can find the services and volunteering opportunities available in their schools, colleges and universities, and then to continuously pass this information around at the early stage of their study. This would really make a big difference for international students when they start to prepare themselves for future employment.

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