

International Education Council Working Group: attracting legitimate international students to the UK

Introduction

Kit Malthouse, Deputy Mayor of London for Business and Enterprise and member of the International Educational Council (IEC) led a working group on behalf of the IEC from October to December 2013 to consider practical measures that could ease the process for legitimate international students coming to the UK to study.

Background

Trends in immigration patterns of international students in the UK are a cause for concern for many working in the education sector, yet data from different sources paint a complex and nuanced picture of global trends.

According to HESA data, the total number of international students studying at HEIs in both the UK and London has declined for the first time since records began in 1994 (by 1.8 per cent). Home Office data, on the other hand, shows a 7 per cent rise in 2013 in the number of visas issued to international university students.

Despite the mixed data, it is clear that growth in student numbers from China, Hong Kong and Malaysia are masking huge drops in numbers from India, Pakistan and other South Asian countries (according to HESA, numbers have fallen by 25 per cent and 21 per cent respectively since 2008). This demonstrates a worrying failure to tap into these growing markets, where economic prosperity is creating a growing middle class market hungry for education abroad.

Furthermore, according to Home Office data, consistent falls have been recorded in study visas for the further education sector, English language schools and independent schools (-31 per cent, -8 per cent and -2 per cent respectively in 2013). While falls in sponsored visas at English language schools will have been partly off-set by the increase in student visitor visas (+15 per cent in September 2013), these visas are only valid for 6 months and occasionally 11 months.

Many factors are clearly at play in the stalling numbers of international students choosing the UK, and visa rules are not the sole driver behind the trend (illustrated by the fact that numbers of EU students have also fallen according to HESA data). This working group has looked into what it considers to be one contributory factor - how the immigration process for non-EU students could be improved to boost numbers across the education sector. Further, and joined-up, consideration of additional ways of attracting more international students is needed.

IEC working group

The working group's investigation has found that the immigration system through which non-EU students must pass is considered by many to be prone to frequent change and over-complex; it is perceived to give an unwelcoming message to students and to be disproportionately costly to some (particularly smaller) providers. This frustrates the Government's agenda to attract more legitimate international students and is bad for the business of the education sector. The overall view of the respondents was that where possible the principles of stability, simplicity and positive messaging should underpin the system, and efforts to improve mutual understanding between Government and sector stakeholders should be made.

Based on written evidence collected from key stakeholders (see Annex 1) and discussions at a roundtable meeting, attended by diverse representatives of the UK's education sector (see

Annex 2), a number of practical policy recommendations could improve the UK's offer to international students without diminishing border security and scrutiny. The recommendations are set out in Part 1. Part 2 includes a discussion about the tensions that need to be considered managed between improving the business environment and creating parity for providers, while also restricting abuse.

PART 1: Policy recommendations

Frequency of change

Recommendation 1: Frequent changes in immigration rules are costly for institutions and make the system difficult to understand for potential students. Where possible, rule changes should only be introduced once per year, in line with academic cycles and with an adequate consultation period (while maintaining flexibility for rule changes to correct mistakes).

Recommendation 2: A group of sector experts should be consulted by the Home Office to discuss and test proposals for changes in a practical way from the point of view of practitioners, to pre-empt mistakes and reduce the need for frequent changes in a meaningful way. The re-activation of the Home Office Joint Education Taskforce policy subgroup is recommended as the right conduit.

Credibility interviews

Recommendation 3: Sector experts strongly recommended increased training and guidance on credibility interviews. They are offering to support the production of sector guides for staff conducting or designing credibility interviews to explain key issues with which 'generalist' staff may otherwise not be acquainted (eg about typical features of English language learners). Such information, provided by practitioners in the field, should accompany appropriate staff training for those involved in the interview process.

Recommendation 4: To aid mutual understanding, it would be useful if channels of communication between sponsoring bodies and those conducting interviews were opened up before the point of rejection, eg a university should be given the chance to explain the rationale for its decision if a scholarship student looks likely to be turned down (as awarding scholarships is usually a very rigorous process). As disputes will be inevitable in some cases, interviews should be recorded to facilitate fair resolution.

Accommodating difference

Recommendation 5: While credibility interview rejections rightly count against HTS status, for very small institutions, one rejection can constitute a high percentage of their overall candidates, and thus inflicts disproportionate damage. The Home Office should consult with smaller HTS sponsors on a more proportionate way of accounting for rejections at institutions which allocate few Certificates of Sponsorship.

Working rights

Recommendation 6: Post study working rights should be awarded to vocational students whose final qualification requires them to spend time in industry (without which they are unable to qualify), eg architecture.

Recommendation 7: More graduate working options should be introduced to recognise the working patterns of graduates in the creative field, who do not conform to standard working patterns or salaries.

Recommendation 8: There is a need for information about graduate working opportunities to be better publicised among education agents and providers, businesses and graduates.

University careers services should be improved to advise international students about obtaining employment overseas as well as in the UK in order to equip them for a global career. And as a way of bolstering the UK's creative sector, the full quota of visas for creative candidates with exceptional promise should be awarded. HEIs running creative courses can offer useful insights on the potential of their recent graduates, and as such should have the right to nominate appropriate students to the Arts Council for consideration.

Application procedures

Recommendation 9: Government should take a more pragmatic view of what constitutes a period of study. For secondary education, school pupils must apply on two occasions for separate GCSE and A level visas, despite the fact that in reality both constitute their secondary school education. Students of vocational qualifications, such as NQF and QCF, must also apply on separate occasions for the different levels of their course, whereas again, in reality, the sum or three of four levels is considered to be the equivalent of a degree course.

Recommendation 10: It would be helpful to providers and prospective students if information about the status of their case were made available through an improved and more transparent Sponsor Management System (SMS).

Recommendation 11: Overall customer service should be improved across the board, for example by reducing mistakes and delays and improving staff training in the UK and overseas, as a way of making the journey through the system more welcoming for prospective students.

Positive messaging

Recommendation 12: The Government should review the need for police registration, which is perceived by students to give a particularly unwelcoming message.

Recommendation 13: Joined up Government messaging to international students should be reviewed and made more positive, to counter views that the UK is unwelcoming, which may involve the introduction of a concerted communications exercise to join up departmental messaging, for example by bringing Home Office staff messaging 'on the ground' in line with BIS's GREAT campaign.

PART 2

Part 1 sets out practical recommendations to improve the system and help attract more legitimate students to the UK.

A number of points have come up throughout the working group process that raise questions about parity between the varied and different providers and ensure a level playing field (particularly for smaller and private providers that report being disadvantaged by the current system). Given the different interests at play, consensus was not reached on the following matters, but it is vital for the Home Office, the education sector and other stakeholders to consider these matters further and help develop solutions.

- Large, well-established public HEIs (eg the Russell Group) make the case that abuse on their watch is extremely low, and for practical reasons compliance measures should be relaxed accordingly, eg by removing the need for credibility interviews.
- In some cases, the rules are already different for public and private providers of equivalent qualifications. Private HTS HEIs that award degrees and are well established report being unable to compete with their publicly funded peers in recruiting international students, as working rights for students vary between the public and private sector. Private providers

question why Government rules make this distinction, which appears to damage the competitiveness of the private sector and to distort the market for degree courses in favour of the public sector.

- On the other hand, some colleges and other institutions call for complete parity in working rights for Tier 4 students, and express dissatisfaction that a two-tier system exists in which HEIs are treated more favourably.
- English language schools face particularly harsh compliance burdens since the introduction of the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) system, to which they must subscribe alongside the well-established Accreditation UK system, run by the British Council. Together, this process is extremely costly and in many ways duplicative. It would be useful for Government to review the system and consider replacing ISI with the British Council accreditation adapted where necessary to satisfy Tier 4 sponsor requirements. While attracting Tier 4 students is under the current restrictions not commercially rewarding for these institutions, exiting Tier 4 sponsorship is not an option as many clients take HTS status as a pre-requisite despite using other legitimate study routes.

We acknowledge the tensions faced by the Government in developing rules that both deter abuse in the system while maintaining (and increasing) international student numbers in the UK's diverse and varied education sector, which includes both private sector providers and large publicly funded institutions, and ranges from small English language schools teaching non-English speakers basic language skills, to world-leading universities including Oxford and Cambridge running highly academic and competitive degree courses.

As these concerns are difficult to resolve because of the tension between abuse and openness to genuine business, it would be very useful if the Home Office made more information available about the level and pattern of abuse that remains in the system. In this way, education institutions can become more proactive partners in safeguarding against abuse.

ANNEX 1

Call for written evidence

Stakeholders were invited to respond to the following questions in the call for written evidence.

- What impact, if any, does the current process of compliance for sponsorship of international students have on your business? How could this situation be improved?
- What impact, if any, do the visa rules affecting international students during their stay in the UK have on education providers? How could this situation be improved? Your answer may cover improvements for institutions, students or both and include reference to student recruitment and/or post-graduation arrangements.
- Do students receive a good service when applying for UK visas? What improvements could be made to the UK application process for international students to make it more competitive?
- Are there any other comments you would like to make about improving efficiency in the administration of international student recruitment?

Submissions were received from the following bodies:

- Association of Colleges

- British Council Accreditation Unit
- Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB)
- London Culture Strategy Group
- Imperial College London
- Institute of Education, University of London
- King's College London
- London First
- London School of Economics
- London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
- Loughborough Grammar School
- Queen Mary, University of London
- Rose Bruford College
- Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA)
- Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA)
- School of Advanced Study
- UK Boarding Schools Association (BSA)
- University College London
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Greenwich
- Universities UK
- Uppingham School
- Warminster School

ANNEX 2: Roundtable meeting, December 2013

The following individuals represented different sections of the education sector at the roundtable meeting held at City Hall on 18th December 2013:

Chair

- Kit Malthouse, Deputy Mayor of London for Business and Enterprise

Attendees

- Jo Attwooll, UUK
- Anthony Bowne, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance
- Jane Dancaster, English UK
- Rebecca Hughes, British Council
- Paul Kirkham, Study UK
- Jill Lanning, Federation of Awarding Bodies
- John Mountford, AoC
- James Perrott, PWC legal
- Chris Ray, British Schools Overseas
- Daniel Stevens, NUS

Observers

- Elizabeth Ammon, BIS
- Vicky Elliott, BIS
- Julia Harrowsmith, GLA
- Roudy Shafie, GLA

Home Office officials from the Joint Education Taskforce were invited to the roundtable but did not attend.