

Government proposals on student visas may have serious unintended consequences, says Parliamentary committee

The Government has been warned against introducing changes to student visas which could damage the UK's international education sector.

In a wide-ranging report, published today (Thursday March 17) the Home Affairs Committee says the international student market, estimated to be worth £40 billion to the UK economy, is a significant growth market.

It points to the experience of visa reform in the US and Australia, which led to a fall in applications, and says that some of the UK Government's proposals could have "serious unintended consequences". It says any cap on student visas is undesirable and unnecessary, and says there has been a "lack of clarity" about whether this is the Government's principal aim.

The committee is also calling for the extended Student Visitor Visa to be made permanent, warning that if the Government abolished this and raised the minimum language requirement there would be a "potentially calamitous" impact on the English language sector.

Keith Vaz MP, the Committee's chair, said: "The Government's policy ought to be evidence-based. Generating policy based on flawed evidence could cripple the UK education sector. In the case of international students this could mean a significant revenue and reputational loss to the UK. We strongly urge the Government to examine the data which it currently uses to extrapolate migration figures and recognise that for any genuine student the doors to Britain's fine education institutions are always open. If the door is shut they will simply study elsewhere." Students were not migrants, he added.

Tony Millns, chief executive of English UK, who twice gave evidence to the committee, warmly welcomed the report. He said: "The committee is absolutely right in its analysis both of the vital importance of this sector to the UK economy, and of the potentially disastrous consequences of some of the Government's proposals. We are calling on the Coalition to read this report carefully before finalising any policy changes around student visas."

The main points and recommendations of the committee are as follows:

Language level: the committee "strongly recommends" that the level is not increased for Highly Trusted Sponsors at any level of course. If the Government does choose to raise the level from B1, the committee recommends that the Student Visitor Visa entitlement be extended to 18 months, with English language and pathway students entitled to use it. The extension should be made permanent "to ensure certainty for providers" but there will need to be close monitoring of how this is used for pathway courses. "The proposal to increase the minimum language level would mainly have an impact on those students coming to study the English language. English

language schools contribute roughly £1.5 billion to the economy and are estimated to be responsible for 30,000 jobs. It is a sector which boosts tourism and provides a vital route for international students to achieve necessary language skills for UK degree courses,” says the report. It further notes that a raised language level would impair recruitment in non-English speaking countries with little evidence of abuse of the current student visa system, without having an impact on higher-risk countries where English is routinely spoken.

Secure language tests “There thus appears to be scope for confusion not only about which secure English language tests would be appropriate but also about the standard required. The Government must clarify these issues before introducing any change to language requirements.”

Accreditation of language schools: the report supports the Government’s proposals to tighten accreditation, and calls for a single, streamlined system. It is concerned that Government approval of the current accreditation bodies has lapsed. “It would—to put it mildly—be inconsistent to introduce stricter accreditation procedures without re-approving at least one accreditation body, be it an existing body or a newly-created one. We are seeking urgent clarification on this issue and expect the Government to close any gap in regulation immediately and to improve the efficiency of its accreditation systems. We also expect that, in future, approval will not be allowed to lapse,” says the Committee.

Students should not be classified as migrants: They should be excluded from net migration numbers, says the report.

Recommends English UK’s Partner Agency Scheme The committee became aware that one of the weaknesses of the current system was potentially overseas agents. It says: “Whilst we accept that the majority of educational agents are legitimate business people, the importance of the role within student immigration means that UK Border Agency ought to investigate options for tightening up the system. These options do not necessarily have to include further regulation but instead publicising available schemes such as the Partner Agency Scheme to Tier 4 sponsors.

Data Collection: “Any policy which is based on flawed data has the potential to create significant unintended consequences. We are broadly supportive of the Government’s policy of reducing immigration, but we believe that policy decisions ought to be based on the best possible information. We therefore urge the Government, as a matter of priority, to investigate whether a more reliable system of data collection than the International Passenger Survey can be used upon which to base immigration policy.”

Exit Checks: “We suggest the Government make the introduction of exit checks a priority. We recommend that the Government deliver a timetable for the reintroduction of exit checks as soon as possible.”

Impact assessment: “We believe that any changes in student immigration policy ought to be accompanied by a publicly-available impact assessment. As we noted in [an earlier report] “There has been a consistent tendency, under both current and previous Governments, to rush through complex changes to the immigration system... Such unnecessary haste leads to poor decision-making”. We welcome the Minister’s commitment to the publication of an impact assessment when the policy is announced. We also recommend that the student immigration system be reviewed on a regular but infrequent basis—for instance, once a Parliament—in order to ensure that the system is suitable for requirements.”