



Press release
31 January 2011

English UK and Study UK this week joined other leading international education groups opposed to the Government's proposals on student visas in a national press conference.

This is likely to be the first in a series of cross-sector initiatives to raise awareness of the dramatic consequences for Britain's international and higher education sector, worth £10bn a year, if proposals including raising the language requirement to B2 for visa students become law.

The press conference was a joint initiative by Universities UK, the University of East Anglia, the National Union of Students, the UK Council for International Student Affairs, English UK and Study UK.

Each organisation expressed its alarm at the proposals in the Government's consultation, intended to cut student numbers, warned that the proposals risked seriously damaging both the fragile British economy and the university sector, and questioned whether students, 97 per cent of whom leave within two years of their courses ending, should be included in migration curbs at all.

Tony Millns, chief executive of English UK, said international education was a growth sector for the UK at a time when the economy as a whole had contracted. Demand at all levels was growing and the UK had a high reputation for quality education.

However, the actions of the Government and the constant visa changes of the past three years were leading to a perception that the UK was not welcoming to students. "There is market scepticism about whether the UK is open for business," he said.

He said the requirement that visa students must have reached level B2 in English - equivalent to a high A Level - would particularly hit international foundation year courses, which typically run for 44 weeks and prepare students for the demands of a UK degree course. At present, most of these students arrived at roughly A2/B1.

If the foundation course route was closed to large numbers of students, that would affect not only English UK members but have a "highly damaging" effect on universities, almost half of whose international students come from foundation courses. That in turn would damage university finances, as many are kept afloat by international student fees.

Susan J Hindley of Study UK said the sector would support proposals intended to eradicate abuse of the system, but the suggested changes went well beyond that.

Dominic Scott of UKCISA said the proposals on student visas were probably "the most radical for a generation" and had attracted 25,000 responses including many comments from students who had come to the UK expecting to be able to progress in their studies. "Students don't want to settle in the UK. They want to get work experience and then go back to Shanghai or Taiwan and say, 'I've got real credibility.'"

He added: "On a number of proposals I think the Government is beginning to realise it's gone too far. I hope they will moderate that. If they don't it will undermine a successful industry. Without doubt we will lose students, lose trust, lose income, lose reputation and lose business links around the world."

Nicola Dandridge of Universities UK (UUK) was equally forthright. There were three areas of particular concern: damage to the UK economy, universities' economies and a consultation document which was "inappropriate".

UUK research had shown international students brought around £5bn into the UK economy each year, of which £2.3bn was "off-campus" expenditure in the local economy. "This is a hugely significant export industry," she said.

She said international student numbers for the UK were second only to the US "which given the size of the US is quite an extraordinary demonstration of the quality of the UK higher education industry. This is a very successful industry which the Government is actively seeking to constrain. Given the economic circumstances this is quite extraordinary that the government is putting these proposals forward," she said.

Ms Dandridge added that not only did nine per cent of the sector's income come from international students, but that universities were now hugely dependent on international researchers to teach some key STEM courses.

Professor Edward Acton of the University of East Anglia warned of a "catastrophic" effect on university finances and their role in driving their local economies.

The sector representatives also agreed that students should not be regarded as migrants. "97 per cent of them are transient. If you wanted, you could tackle that other three per cent," said Aaron Porter, president of the National Union of Students.