

## **Visa changes risk international reputation of UK education**

Press release

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Many international students believe recent visa changes mean the UK no longer welcomes them to study here.

A survey of 5,000 overseas students on university and college courses found that although some aspects of the visa system have improved, difficulties remain and almost one in five believe the country no longer welcomes international students, with a further one in five undecided.

The UK Council for International Student Affairs, which carried out the survey, says there are already reports of "significantly reduced" numbers of international students coming to the UK's universities and colleges from some countries, and fears that without urgent action the drop could be much larger in 2012. The sector is currently worth at least £10bn a year.

"All of the students we surveyed qualified for visas. All of them wanted to come to the UK. Many of them will be the brightest and the best, accepted by our leading colleges and universities. It is essential therefore that we get these processes right, for the sake of continued growth in the sector and promote the message that in this field the UK is very much open for business," said Professor Paul Webley, chair of UKCISA and Director of the School of Oriental and African Studies and Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of London.

He added: "It is widely recognised that international students are enormously beneficial to the education sector and to the UK more widely and therefore the findings on their perceptions, in particular, is a major cause of concern."

UKCISA, whose members include every UK university as well as many higher and further education colleges, is calling for the Government to review its student visa process, initiate a positive publicity campaign, and reject any suggestion of further controls on students or visas. It also wants an urgent announcement of detailed procedures for the new, more limited, visa routes for working after study.

Dominic Scott, UKCISA's chief executive, added: "Given the UK's relentless focus on net migration, immigration abuse and student visas, recently played out in the media around the world, it is not surprising that even amongst those who have chosen to come this year there are concerns about whether the UK continues to be one of the most attractive destinations for well qualified students.

"There is a growing concern that this could be an early warning sign of larger reductions next year unless action is taken urgently. With the announcement by Australia of its new Post-Study Work scheme, it is quite possible that significant numbers will be attracted to go there instead and that the real impact on numbers choosing the UK will only be felt in 2012."

The survey report notes that students are influenced by the publicity given to UK immigration policy changes as well as the application process. "Respondents said that the most recent changes have made the UK appear less welcoming...For many students, it would appear that the visa application system is providing an efficient and satisfactory welcome to the UK. However, unless the system is further improved, word of mouth from the sizeable minority

who had a negative experience of the system is likely to affect future numbers coming to the UK."

The survey found that while 70 per cent of students who applied overseas for visas found the process quick and efficient (up from 59 per cent in 2009), and that 75 per cent were satisfied with customer service at visa application centres, it identified many problems:

- Changing the rules in the middle of an admissions cycle caused confusion or difficulty for more than half of the students, with a further 10 per cent having to take extra English language tests or pre-sessional courses. Some of the students who had to take the extra English test were from majority English-speaking countries such as Singapore and South Africa and found it "completely illogical".
- 70% applying overseas thought the cost of a student visa was now unreasonable. Fees have increased by more than 50% since 2009. Moreover, 29 % of those applying overseas and 46% of those applying in the UK had to spend at least £200 more on documentation and biometrics, with 11% spending over £500 extra.
- Significant numbers had to travel hundreds or even thousands of miles to submit their biometrics, sometimes several times.
- 25% of those required to register with the police found difficulties in doing so.
- 8% of those who obtained visas were initially refused and had to apply a second and sometimes third time
- The abolition of the Post-Study Work scheme was cited as having the single most negative impact on decisions to choose the UK. One student said 15 of his friends had cancelled their confirmed places as a result.

#### Notes to Editors

1. UKCISA is a membership body which includes every UK university and many other higher and further education colleges which are active internationally.
2. The survey was conducted throughout October and received responses from 4500 who had applied for visas overseas and over 700 who were extending their visas in the UK. The full report with key findings and recommendations is attached. It will be launched at the British Council's Education UK Partnership conference in Edinburgh on the morning of Wednesday 30 November.
3. International students contribute in excess of £10bn annually to the UK economy. The government's official Impact Assessment of reforms to the student immigration route predicted a combined loss to the economy of £2.4bn over four years.
4. The reforms included the abolition of the Post-Study Work scheme – as the leading competitor Australia announced the introduction of theirs – a ban on most dependants, a ban on all part-time work for students at private colleges, a new Licensing system and new English language test requirements.
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