

UK GOVERNMENT OUTLINES REFORMS TO STUDENT VISA SYSTEM

Committed to quality, the United Kingdom strengthens requirements to ensure genuine students receive high quality education.

In December the UK Government launched a consultation on the reform of the student immigration system. On March 22nd, the Home Secretary announced to the UK Parliament the results of this extensive consultation process. The changes not only minimise abuse of the student immigration system but also builds on the global reputation of the UK as a provider of high quality education.

Home Secretary Theresa May said: "My aim is not to stop genuine students coming here - it is to eliminate abuse within the system. Our stricter accreditation process will see only first class education providers given licences to sponsor students."

The reform focuses on three main areas: accreditation, entry requirements and entitlements (the ability to work during and following graduation and dependents).

Accreditation

- From April 2012 all institutions wanting to be sponsors will have to be Highly Trusted Sponsors and become accredited by statutory education inspection bodies by the end of 2012; the current system does not require this and allowed too many poor quality colleges to become sponsors.
- This will allow universities, independent schools and public sector further education colleges to prosper under a revised student visa system. It will mean that the UK can continue to welcome high-quality international students.

Entry Requirements

- The UK Border Agency will streamline the requirements for the lowest risk students to make the application process easier. More details will be published in due course.
- A good standard of English will be crucial. Those coming to study at degree level will have to speak English at an upper intermediate (B2) level.
- UK Border Agency staff will be able to refuse entry to students who cannot speak English without an interpreter and who therefore blatantly do not meet the required minimum standards.

Entitlements (ability to work and dependents)

- Students at universities and publicly funded further education colleges will retain current work rights but all other students will have no right to work, and restrictions will be developed on work placements at courses outside of universities.
- Still allow new international graduates to stay in the UK to take up skilled jobs. But will end the system where graduates were able to do any level of job, including unskilled work or no job at all for two years.
- In future they will have to secure a skilled job with a Tier 2 sponsor. This will ensure that international graduates undertake work that is valuable to the UK and to them or return home.
- Only postgraduate students at universities and Government sponsored students will be able to bring their dependants. At the moment all students on longer courses are able to bring dependants.

American Students enrolled in UK Universities and US Universities offering study abroad programmes in the UK:

- In the 2009/10 academic year more than 47,000 American students entered the UK as either Student Visitors or through the Tier 4 Student Visa route.
- The Student Visitor route is unaffected by these changes.
- American students are engaged in study abroad programmes, exchanges and enrolled directly in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in UK universities.

- Most of the changes will affect private further education colleges that few US students attend.
- American students with Tier 4 Visas attend institutions classed as *Sponsors, Trusted* and *Highly Trusted Sponsors* which are British universities, and American institutions' "island campuses" subject to public accreditation systems.

NOTES

1. Previous Tier 4 and student visitor visa requirements can be found here - <http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/studyingintheuk/>
2. B2 is upper intermediate level English, a more advanced level of competency than B1 lower intermediate. B2 requires a learner to be able to converse on a wider range of topics. B2 equates to approximately 500-600 hours of study, compared to B1 which equates to 350-400 hours.
3. The Highly Trusted Sponsor (HTS) licence was introduced in April 2010. From April 2012, all education providers will have to be highly trusted (in other words demonstrate a proven track record of student retention and compliance), and must be inspected, reviewed or audited by Ofsted, or one of its devolved equivalents, the Quality Assurance Agency, the Independent Schools Inspectorate, the Bridge Schools Inspectorate or the Schools Inspection Service.
4. The Impact Assessment will be published when the rules are laid in Parliament on 31 March.