

## HOME OFFICE REASSURES ELT SECTOR ABOUT FUTURE IMMIGRATION POLICY

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Public reassurance that immigration policy makers are aware of the needs of the UK ELT sector came during a London event focusing on international education.

Answering a question from English UK about how much the UK Government was aware of the needs of the ELT sector as it consults on its immigration White Paper, Paul Jeffrey, the Home Office's head of student migration policy, said: "In terms of recognising the sheer numbers and differing issues, we know that a couple of hundred thousand European students come on ID cards and they are mainly are short term students. We know there are slightly different problems there.

"It is a sector we don't want to see damaged by this. Generally speaking Brexit is going to have some impact but we are on that, and working closely with English UK and others to see what we can do to help. We are going to have bespoke forums on short term study," he promised at the Westminster Higher Education Forum seminar on international student recruitment and the impact of the immigration white paper.

English UK revealed the plan for bespoke forums last week, suggested in the light of chief executive Sarah Cooper's lobbying for the needs of ELT to be fully understood, particularly as the ID card entry for students will disappear once entry systems are unified for students from the EEA and the rest of the world.

The answer from Mr Jeffrey was both reassuring and a useful reminder at a conference largely attended by policymakers and representatives of UK HE of the importance of ELT as a feeder route to HE. Jane Dancaster, principal of the Wimbledon School of English, was also making points for ELT, tackling Professor Alan Manning of the Migration Advisory Committee and saying she thought the sector had been "overlooked".

These are some of the other relevant points of the session.

### "Pretend the net migration target doesn't exist"

Alan Manning said the MAC committee's rationale for not recommending the removal of students from the net migration figures was that "they come and they go home again... any method you use wouldn't make much difference to the figures because they leave. And if you stay to work, you count them."

He said the MAC report had recommended no cap on the number of international students, and added: "My advice to people is not to worry about the net migration target and pretend it doesn't exist. The government doesn't pay attention to it any more. It was conspicuous by its absence in the White Paper and the Home Secretary was evasive on the topic. I would say it's not influencing the policy on student migration and if you mention it, you're making it a problem when it actually isn't."

Paul Jeffrey, head of student migration policy at the Home Office, confirmed there was no intention to limit student numbers, said the UK was currently an attractive destination and hoped that would continue. Students were "a very compliant cohort" as far as immigration was concerned and "gives us scope to do more, looking at ways to improve the offer but we need to make sure there is no return to the issues we saw in the past."

More institutions would be allowed to offer students T4, including work rights and the ability to switch to different visas, and the Home Office, the DIT and the DfE were working on an international education strategy.

"The White Paper is a starting point for discussion. We want to engage with anyone and everyone and I hope your institutions will have opportunities to feed some views to Home Office: we are looking for the future system to be something that works for everyone in the UK. The government is listening and continuing to support the international education sector."

### Fewer, wealthier international students in universities?

Nick Hillman, director of HEPI, criticised the MAC report. He thought there would be 11,000 fewer international students coming to UK universities post-Brexit, but those who came would be wealthier. He added: "The mistake we make in this country to give complete control of student migration to the Home Office – in other countries it's shared with the education department and the treasury and it's collective responsibility. The Home Office thinks every foreigner is a security risk. I don't have a problem with that but we have to have other voices around the table."

"Although I've suggested a nearly 60% drop-off in numbers an optimist might say that if we go and find students and tell them about strengths they might still come in significant numbers. I'm confident about our sector – we can attract people to study if they don't get too bamboozled by negative messages."

He said nobody should be interviewing students at the border unless they had spent "at least a day in a university" and understood that ordinary students didn't know the name of the vice-chancellor or all the bus routes.

### Enormous potential of future immigration system

Adam Haxell of Million Plus thought there was "enormous potential" for the future if the government got it right, with the hard work starting now. He said reform of Tier 4 was long overdue with too much "subjective and arbitrary decision-making" reducing trust and slowing the system.

Hollie Chandler, senior policy analyst for the Russell Group, said the White Paper was an important opportunity. "To welcome prospective students from around the world we need government rhetoric to change... and if the government says there's no cap on numbers they need to be removed from the net migration target – it doesn't make any sense for them to be there if they are also a target for growth. We need to make them welcome, make the application process more straightforward and link datasets so applicants don't have to put in the same information twice."

### Be prepared for the new system

Pat Saini, Head of Immigration at Pennington Manches, said immigration problems usually happened at around the time of government changes, and advised institutions to prepare for compliance.

The Government assumed that people would have applied for pre-settled status but there could be problems if they went on holiday abroad and got a three-month entry stamp in their passports on return, and institutions should consider writing letters for the students or staff to take with them, explaining their situation.

She said the Home Office might say one thing but the rules another: they needed to be clearer, and the government needed to consult with the sector.

### **What students think**

Riddi Viswanathan, the first international students' officer at the University of Manchester students' union, described her "uncertainty and constant fear of not knowing what's going to happen to my visa next year." Students valued global classrooms, which is why they wanted to come to UK universities. She added: "It will not remain Great Britain without international students."

### **Lord Bilimoria's summing up**

Lord Bilimoria, President of UKCISA, summing up the conference, said: "When Alan Manning says there is no cause for panic I think there is a huge cause for panic... he said one of the reasons students weren't removed from the net migration figures is that we cannot rely on the International Passenger Survey. How can we have a government which can't check people in and out... it's negligent not to have it. To rely on the IPS is a joke."

"The problem on the net migration figures is perception – the perception if there is a target and students are included the perception is that it wants to reduce them. Just remove it when calculating figures."

He said the "elephant in the room" was whether EU students would still come: there was a need to have targets for recruiting students and they needed to be implemented. "The Australian High Commissioner in India said 'thank you for what you're doing, you're sending students to us.'"

"One of the things I didn't like about the MAC report was there were 2,000 pages of submissions from hundreds of our leading institutions and the bottom line is that they didn't listen."

"At the moment the responsibility for students is purely with the Home Office: it's got to be shared between different departments – trade, treasury, everyone has got to own international students. The perception is we have a hostile immigration policy on the whole. That's the perception of the world. Whenever you survey the public 75% want international students and say they are a benefit and 75% say they should be allowed to stay on. The government is out of line with public sentiment."