

Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill Second Reading

May 2020

International students and staff contribute greatly to the UK and our universities. In 2018-19 there were 485,645 international students in the UK delivering more than £26 billion to the economy, and around a third of academic staff were from outside the UK. These students and staff will be more important than ever for fueling economic growth, developing and providing skills, and contributing to world-class research as universities play a key role in the UK's recovery from Covid-19.

Research by Universities UK (UUK) shows that between 2010 and 2017, the UK lost market share in 17 of the top 21 countries for sending international students abroad. There is a significant risk that Covid-19 could further damage international student recruitment and may also harm universities' recruitment of top international academic staff. While the pandemic means the new immigration system will now be introduced during a very challenging time for the sector, this new system offers an excellent opportunity to make the UK a more attractive destination for international students and staff. Government and universities must therefore work closely to ensure the transition to a new immigration system does not damage our universities when the UK will need them most.

UUK acknowledges that the role of the Immigration Bill is primarily to align UK legislation with the UK's exit from the EU and European Economic Area of free movement.

UUK and the sector has a package of policy proposals and questions to the government on two areas relating to UK immigration policy:

- The UK's recovery following Covid-19
- The implementation of a points-based immigration system (PBS) following Brexit

We do not feel that primary legislation through amending the Immigration Bill is the required route to achieve these policy changes. However, we value and appreciate the role the parliamentary process and passage of a bill has in raising important issues and opportunities relating to the theme of the bill, in this case, immigration policy. In that context, UUK would ask parliamentarians to raise the following during the second reading debate:

1. Extending the current arrangements for EU students for the calendar year of 2021

EU students make up around 30% of the UK's total international students. Currently, these students do not require a visa to study in the UK and pay home fees. UUK accepts that this arrangement will change when the new PBS is introduced, however Covid-19 has created some unique challenges for those looking to commence study in the 2020/2021 academic year.

With many universities exploring options for a delayed start to the new academic year or the option of blended learning (where a course begins remotely), prospective EU students –

who would normally have arrived in the UK during the Autumn of 2020 under the current arrangements – now face having to make decisions about whether they wish to study at a UK university without information on how to apply for the new PBS and what criteria they will need to fulfil.

The government could smooth the transition of EU students into the wider immigration system by extending current free movement arrangements to EU students for the 2021 calendar year. This would include eligibility for the EU Settlement Scheme and see EU students charged home fees for study.

If this is not possible, UUK would encourage the development of a ‘Tier-4 light’ visa system, where EU students are not required to fulfil all of the same criteria as non-EU students and their applications can be processed faster.

2. Confirm immigration rules for the two-year post-study work visa

UUK has welcomed the announcements of the new Graduate Immigration Route, allowing those who have studied in the UK to remain here for two years after graduating and to access the UK labour market restriction-free. Attractive graduate visa systems are vital to making the UK competitive in the international student market and the UK’s share of certain international student markets (particularly India) declined after the removal of the previous post-study work visa in 2012.

The introduction of the new graduate route should be accompanied by better promotion of it abroad as well as further details on the route for prospective students. QS’s 2020 International Student Survey found that only 6% of prospective international students interested in studying in the UK are aware of the time frame they would be allowed to stay in the UK to find work after their studies through the route.

The Graduate Immigration Route also needs to be responsive to current complications caused by the pandemic, including providing certainty that international students who conduct part of their course online due to travel restrictions will still be eligible.

3. Ensure the best international teaching staff continue to be eligible

To be eligible for a visa in the current immigration system, international teaching staff are required to earn a minimum salary, which is decided using well-established sector pay scales. The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) advised that the criteria used to set this minimum salary threshold should be changed to use a different dataset (from the Annual Survey for Hours and Earnings (ASHE)). This change increases the minimum salary requirement by over £7000. The government followed this advice on the basis that academic staff would still be eligible in the PBS by holding a PhD.

All academic teaching staff are highly-qualified, but only around 49% hold a PhD. 27% of current international staff, or 7800 people, would not be eligible to come to the UK under the new proposals. UUK is aware the government wants to attract such staff and so would encourage a revision of this requirement to avoid any unintended consequences. It must be noted that the impact is particularly severe in subjects including allied health, the discipline

encompassing nursing. Higher education is the only area of the education sector that does not receive an exemption from ASHE-data measurements in the proposals.

4. Regular evaluation of the Shortage Occupation List (SOL)

The SOL sets out professions where applicants do not need to reach the salary threshold as there is particular need to attract professionals from abroad in these areas. UUK would encourage the government to more regularly revise the SOL and will work with government so that this is frequent enough to guarantee the UK has the skills it needs. The importance of this will be amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, when areas such as research which may suffer jobs shortages will be instrumental to the recovery.

5. Reduce visa costs to match international competitors

The UK currently has higher visa costs than competitors with strong research and higher education sectors and additional expenditure such as the surcharge is paid up front.

During and after the Covid-19 crisis, international staff and students may be more reluctant to travel abroad, but they may also be more sensitive to the costs of visas owing to the economic implications of the crisis. To avoid deterring such people away from the UK, visa costs should be more palatable, either by aligning them with rival countries or by introducing incremental payments to reduce the difficulties of a large lump sum for the visa.

The graph shows the total visa costs for a one-year international (non-EU) postgraduate student in the UK and rival international student markets:

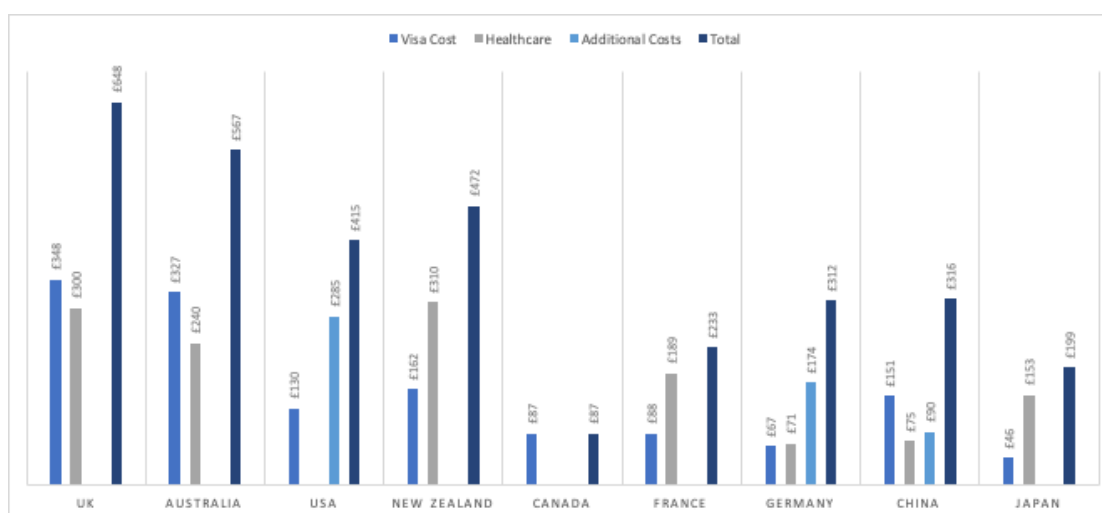


Table compiled by UUK, this is an estimate as some costs vary depending on destination of student in the country and where the student is from (2020)

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