

A photograph of an airport passport control queue. The queue is formed by a series of metal stanchions with a black belt. People are standing in line, some with luggage. In the background, there are passport control booths with signs that read "Passport Control" and "All Passports". There are also signs with the EU flag and "EU EWR CH".

**UK Council  
for International  
Student Affairs**

The UKCISA Tier 4 student  
survey 2011

**UKCISA**

## **Acknowledgements**

**We would like to thank all the sector bodies, universities, colleges and schools which publicised the survey. Above all, we thank the students who took the time to share their experiences with us.**

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# Foreword

It is widely understood that international students are enormously beneficial to the education sector and the UK more widely, for the intellectual, cultural and financial capital they bring to our universities and to UK society. It is therefore in the national interest to ensure that the education sector continues to recruit successfully, and one key determinant of its ability to do so is the student immigration system.

All concerned with recruiting and supporting international students in the UK agree that this needs to be effective in weeding out those who try to abuse the system, but that this function must not override the equally important role of welcoming and facilitating the arrival of the majority of well-qualified and well-intentioned students. Many in the education sector have expressed fears that recent changes to the student immigration system have, on the contrary, made the UK appear less welcoming, or even “closed for business”. This survey is therefore a welcome attempt to understand how international students perceive the visa application process.

This is the second major survey UKCISA has undertaken of international students’ experience of visas. It includes some encouraging improvements since the last one, but also many areas of continuing concern. Principal among these are:

- the confusion caused by **frequent changes to the immigration rules** and guidance
- the **lack of clear information and advice** for Tier 4 applicants
- the additional burdens on students in terms of **cost and effort required to assemble the necessary supporting evidence** (of financial means, language capability and qualifications) in the required format (including translations)
- the cost and inconvenience of **travelling for biometrics**, or to deliver or collect documents from visa application centres
- and the higher than necessary proportion of applications which are **rejected initially on the basis of minor errors** or omissions

As well as the application process, students are influenced by the publicity given to changes in UK immigration policy. Respondents said that the most recent changes have made the UK appear less welcoming. In particular, the abolition of the **Post**



*Professor Paul Webley  
Chair, UKCISA Board of Trustees*

**Study Work scheme** is widely lamented. The lack of clear information about successor arrangements under Tier 2 means students have no reassurance that any alternative will be available to them.

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.

Moreover, it must be borne in mind that this survey only included students who chose to come to the UK and were successful in gaining a visa. A more negative response might have come from those who chose not to come or were unsuccessful in getting a visa.

This survey also gives no indication whatsoever about the numbers of students recruited to the UK this year. It is hoped that demand continues to be strong but there have been extensive reports that numbers from India (and possibly Bangladesh and Pakistan) are significantly down in many institutions.

Some have also argued that the UK may not feel the worst of the impact until next year. By the time the visa rules were changed earlier this year, many international students had already made such detailed plans and commitments to come to the UK that it was then too late for them to opt for alternative destinations. 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 impact of recent rule changes on private colleges – as was probably planned and certainly predicted – has also been dramatic with recruitment to many of those institutions decimated as students conclude that without part-time work, the cost of study in the UK is no longer affordable. To date, some 30 colleges have closed with up to 5,000 students currently attempting to find places in other colleges (or having to return home). It is feared this pattern may continue.

The potential damage to the UK's education sector from all these factors is a very real concern. We hope that the voices of students in this report will be heeded, and that our next survey will show real improvements in students' perceptions of the UK immigration system.

**Professor Paul Webley**

**Chair, UKCISA Board of Trustees**

**Director, School of Oriental and African Studies,  
University of London**

**Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of London**

# Introduction

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In March 2009, the UK government reformed its student immigration policy, bringing into effect Tier 4 of its five-tier Points Based System to cover international students. Later that year UKCISA conducted surveys of students who had applied for entry clearance or visa extensions under the new system to assess its impact on the student experience, gauge levels of satisfaction and identify areas in need of improvement<sup>1</sup>. The surveys identified a number of areas of concern.

In October 2011 we conducted a further survey to see whether, two years on, initial teething problems with the system had been ironed out and satisfaction levels had improved. The survey was conducted online using Survey Monkey. It was publicised via UKCISA's member institutions and other sector organisations. Over 5,000 students responded (over 50% more than in 2009) including 720 who had applied in the UK and 4,500 who applied overseas.

Some of the survey's findings are quantitative. However, we also included open questions for students to tell us what had caused them difficulties and what could be improved. An illustrative selection of these comments are included in this report to give a flavour of the individual experience. Students were not asked to tell us what had worked well, so we received relatively few positive comments. The quantitative data do, however, indicate good levels of satisfaction in many areas so the comments should be seen as illustrative of points where there is room for improvement, not representative of the student experience as a whole.

We found that for many students the visa application process is fairly straightforward, and there has been a real perception of improvement in speed and efficiency compared to 2009 when the newly introduced "hub and spoke" system was causing problems and institutions had to produce hard copy visa letters rather than the current more efficient system of electronic Certificates of Acceptance for Study (CASs). Perceptions of university and college advice services, always high, have improved still further. These things are to be welcomed.

However, a significant minority of students still experience problems – often apparently unnecessarily – particularly in relation to poor information and advice. It would seem that many of the issues we identified two years ago have not been addressed and some, such as the high total cost of making a visa application, have got worse. Other problems have been created by changes to the rules, such as restricting institutions' ability to make their own academic decisions about English language proficiency. In summary, our report shows real areas of concern.

In this context, we cannot overlook that the immigration rules affecting Tier 4 students have changed eleven times in two and a half years (plus numerous changes to guidance). It is easy to understand why some systems and processes have not improved, as there has been no period of stability in which consolidation or improvement could have taken place. We hope that by the time of our next survey, the rate of change will have slowed and that the issues identified in this report will have been successfully addressed.

<sup>1</sup>UKCISA (2009) *Tier 4: students' experiences (applying from outside the UK)* and UKCISA (2010) *Students' experiences of extending their visas in the UK under Tier 4*. Available online at <[www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/material\\_media/research\\_reports.php](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/material_media/research_reports.php)>.

## Key findings

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1. 70% of students applying overseas found the visa application process **quick and efficient**, up from 59% in 2009
2. 75% were satisfied with the standard of **customer service from visa application centres**
3. Over 50% of students reported **confusion or difficulty resulting from changes in the rules**
4. Colleges and universities were both the most widely used and the highest rated **source of information and advice** about Tier 4 visas
5. Students repeatedly underline the **difficulties they faced in obtaining clear and correct information**, especially from UKBA
6. Providing **evidence of qualifications** was the most straightforward part of the process (79% found this easy)
7. Providing **proof of funds** was straightforward for 55%, but 13% reported major difficulties
8. The main areas of difficulty in the application process were the **application form and instructions** (55% had some problems), the **Tier 4 policy guidance** (46% had problems) and the practicalities of biometrics (47% had problems).
9. Although 90% were successful on their first application, **7.5% had to apply a second time** and a further 1% were successful in administrative review
10. Of those applying from overseas, **only 28% found the cost of a visa** reasonable in 2011, down from 33% in 2009. 35% of those applying to extend visas in the UK **strongly disagreed that the cost was reasonable** (compared to 30% of those applying overseas)
11. The **additional costs of obtaining a visa have risen steeply**. For those applying outside the UK, the proportion with extra costs over £200 has increased from 16% to 29%. For those applying in the UK, those incurring more than £200 additional costs rose from 23% to 46%
12. More than 10% of students were affected by the **changes in English language requirements**
13. As a result of the new English language requirements, **5% had to repeat a test to get a higher score, 4% had to take a different language test** because UKBA would not accept the test which the institution had originally accepted and **3% of respondents unexpectedly had to attend a pre-sessional course**
14. **One in ten of all respondents required two visas** in order to attend a pre-sessional English course prior to their main course
15. 74% of students said they **found immigration procedures at port of entry** easy and straightforward
16. A quarter of those who had to **register with the police** reported problems
17. Most students were aware of **receiving information from their sponsor institution** about their responsibilities as a Tier 4 student but 16% weren't sure, or thought they had not received information on this
18. Of the recent rule changes, **the abolition of the Post Study Work (PSW) route** was rated as having most negative impact on their decision to study in the UK (in all sectors), followed by changes to the **rules on working while studying**
19. The **changes affecting dependants** were rated as having a moderate impact on students' perceptions of the UK welcome, although the number actually bringing dependants was very small
20. About 60% of students believe that **the UK welcomes well-qualified international students**, but 20% neither agree nor disagree and a further 19% actively disagree

# Recommendations for UKBA and government

1. **Rules should be changed less often** (ideally no more than once a year, in line with the admissions cycle), and with more notice
2. **Improve and streamline the information and guidance** provided to applicants
3. Use the introduction of online forms as an opportunity to review and revise **Tier 4 application forms** and instructions for both entry clearance and extensions of leave to remain, and to streamline the latter in particular. Ensure changes are made in consultation with advisers and students to ensure the new forms are simple to use and understand
4. Ensure **requirements for proof of funds** are clearly spelt out in terms of amount needed and ways in which it can be demonstrated, including how dates are counted and how exchange rates will be calculated.
5. Ensure that the **format of bank documents** required is realistic in terms of what banks are prepared to issue.
6. Consider whether a **broader range of evidence** can be accepted, both in terms of the funds available to students and their families, and evidence of financial sponsorship by a third party and of loans
7. Minimise the need for students to provide repeat **biometrics** and extend the network of biometric centres to more locations
8. Review whether required **SELT scores** are appropriate for all sectors and levels of study, eg in terms of requiring uniform minimum scores across all four sections
9. Consider how the system can more flexibly recognise **native English speakers** and those whose **education has been wholly or substantially in English**
10. Review whether the extension of the **SELT requirement** has prevented abuse, and if so whether this has been proportionate to the additional inconvenience and expense to genuine students and to sponsors
11. **Administrative review** should be speeded up so that students who have been refused in error can use this route to get decisions corrected, without having to apply and pay twice
12. ECOs should wherever possible allow students to **rectify minor errors and omissions** in an application to bring down the number of unnecessary refusals
13. To reduce **unnecessary costs** to applicants and lessen **dissatisfaction with visa fees**, UKBA should
  - a. Be more up-front to applicants about which visa fees are above and which below cost-recovery levels to avoid perceptions of profiting from applicants
  - b. Minimise, and be as transparent as possible, about additional costs such as biometric appointment fees, bank charges and fees for services
  - c. Offer services such as online tracking and SMS or email notification within the standard service rather than charging extra
  - d. Include within the main application fee the cost of providing free or local rate telephone helplines which can provide well-informed responses to individual queries
  - e. Review how fees in sterling are converted into local currency to give a fair exchange rate while avoiding unexpected changes in fees, especially taking into account that applicants may have had to arrange some forms of payment in advance
  - f. Review charges for dependants, and most specifically infants and children
14. Address current confusion amongst both students and Border Officers about what **documents an applicant may need to present on arrival in the UK**, as well as explaining why students need to show documents which have already been scrutinised as part of the application process
15. Do more to ensure all UKBA staff and contractors abide by **customer service**

**standards** to treat all users with dignity and respect

16. **Replace police registration with a simple online process** which enables all Tier 4 students to keep UKBA updated with their addresses
17. **Provide all students with a leaflet on the rules and restrictions** which apply to them, together with a **checklist of what will be required at ports of entry**, when returning their passport
18. As a matter of urgency, **monitor the impact on recruitment of the abolition of the Post Study Work Scheme** and **publish the rules for international students wanting to work after their studies under Tier 2**, for the benefit of both students and employers
19. Given all the recent negative publicity surrounding student visas, UKBA needs to work with the FCO and British Council to develop a **positive communications strategy** clarifying areas of concern and uncertainty and emphasising that the UK, after a period of visa reform, continues to encourage, value and positively welcome well-qualified students

# Findings

## Satisfaction with the visa application process

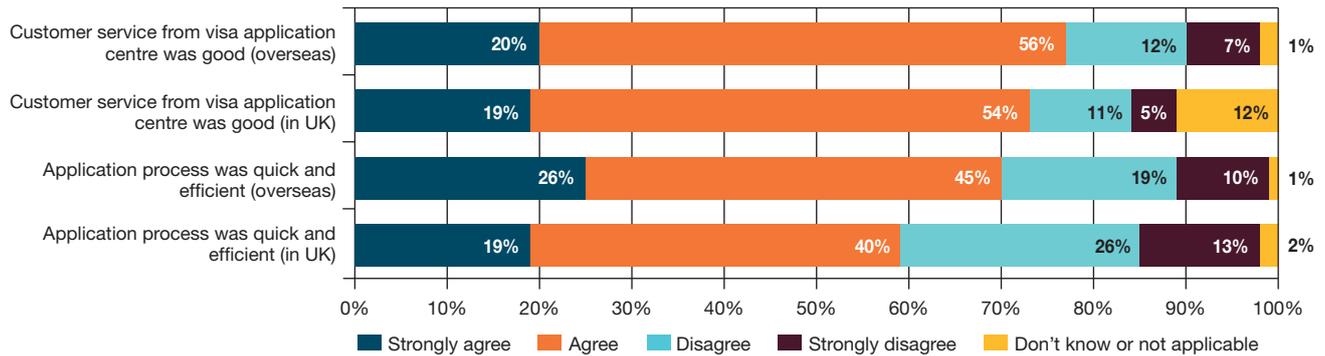
The experience of the visa application process overseas has improved between 2009 and 2011, with **70% of students finding it quick and efficient** (compared to 59% in 2009).

For those extending visas in the UK, this figure has risen from 35% in 2009-10 to 59% in 2011, which is very encouraging, but as the 2011 survey closed before the usual bottleneck at the end of October, whereas the 2009-10 survey ran until March, it is likely that the experiences of those responding were not comparable and these findings should be treated with some caution.

**75% were satisfied with the standard of customer service** from the visa application centres, with similar levels of satisfaction in both the UK and overseas offices (although in both 2011 and 2009 there were also many negative comments, especially about commercial partners).

Figure 1

Satisfaction with the visa application process



The **hub and spoke system**, which caused problems in 2009, now seems to be working effectively, with no significant reports of delays. However, there were some complaints about having to travel long distances to drop off and collect passports and application documents (as well as to give biometrics), concerns about the safety of passports and original documents, especially when sent to a third country, and occasionally frustration that applicants could not speak direct to visa staff locally for advice.

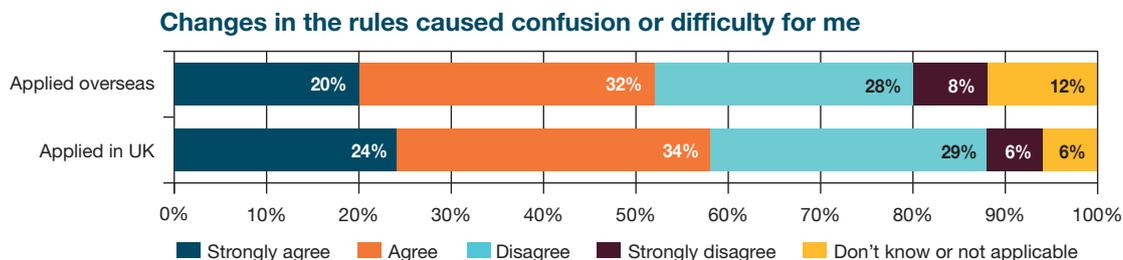
Although much of the rest of this report focuses on the aspects of the process which have room for improvement, we should record here that many students do seem to have had an acceptable experience with their visa application, and that some aspects of the system are working well.

As found in previous surveys, **satisfaction is higher among those who applied overseas** than those who applied in the UK (only 59% thought the process was quick and efficient in the UK compared to 71% overseas).

## The impact of changes to the rules

Despite broad satisfaction with customer service and speed, **over 50% of students reported confusion or difficulty resulting from changes in the rules** even though 70% did not submit their applications until July or later. This underlines the need for a long lead in time for any changes, as students are making plans on the basis of the current rules several months before actually submitting their applications.

Figure 2



Frequently cited difficulties as a result of rule changes included:

- unclear and inconsistent guidance on websites and from staff in visa centres and helplines, and lack of authoritative answers to questions
- difficulty obtaining the correct forms in good time
- delays or additional expense and inconvenience in responding to new or changed requirements
- staff – especially in visa application centres – who were unaware of changes in regulations, and lack of clear signposting for applicants about upcoming changes, for instance dates on which old forms would cease to be valid or new requirements would take effect

*Especially with the recent (July 2011) changes to the requirements. I felt as though I had to visit several different websites and they all said slightly different things, and nowhere did I find a single straightforward list of directions*

*It was difficult for me, when I was finishing the application and one day before I checked the website and it changed, not just the price, the application form as well.*

*I had my entire package rejected the first time because the proof of maintenance rules had changed (after I mailed in my materials) and was not given the opportunity to amend my application, but had to resubmit from scratch.*

*Due to changes there were a lot of rumours, when I tried to ask the visa application centre for guidance, they seem not to know anything this caused a confusion for me.*

*I was also caught in the middle of the changes in the rules re: providing proof of maintenance funds/evidence of qualifications and again no-one I spoke to understood the changes, nor was it clear from the website or the application forms how the changes applied to me.*

*It was a daunting task collating information as changes were implemented. In addition, it was difficult finding and identifying the appropriate forms to complete as I got the correct forms just a day before I applied.*

Sometimes the changes had a material effect on students, leading to delays in getting a visa, refusals, and or even having to change their plans:

*Due to a change of policy a minor evidence was not provided in my first application therefore being refused, had to apply again with no refund and paying the fee twice. Same as my mother who applied with me for visiting. Twice amount of money had to be paid.*

*I was given the wrong information on the website and my visa got refused 2 weeks later, then when I looked back to the website all the information had changed, and I had to re-apply (cost me over \$800AUD total). They should've mentioned on the website that the rules were changing.*

*Rules changes after applications were in forced me to change which schools I attended (so that my master's program was more than 1 year long, so my wife could join me in the UK).*

*The frequent changes in Tier 4 rules caused me serious problems and it cost me complete one academic year plus some financial loses as well*

## Recommendations

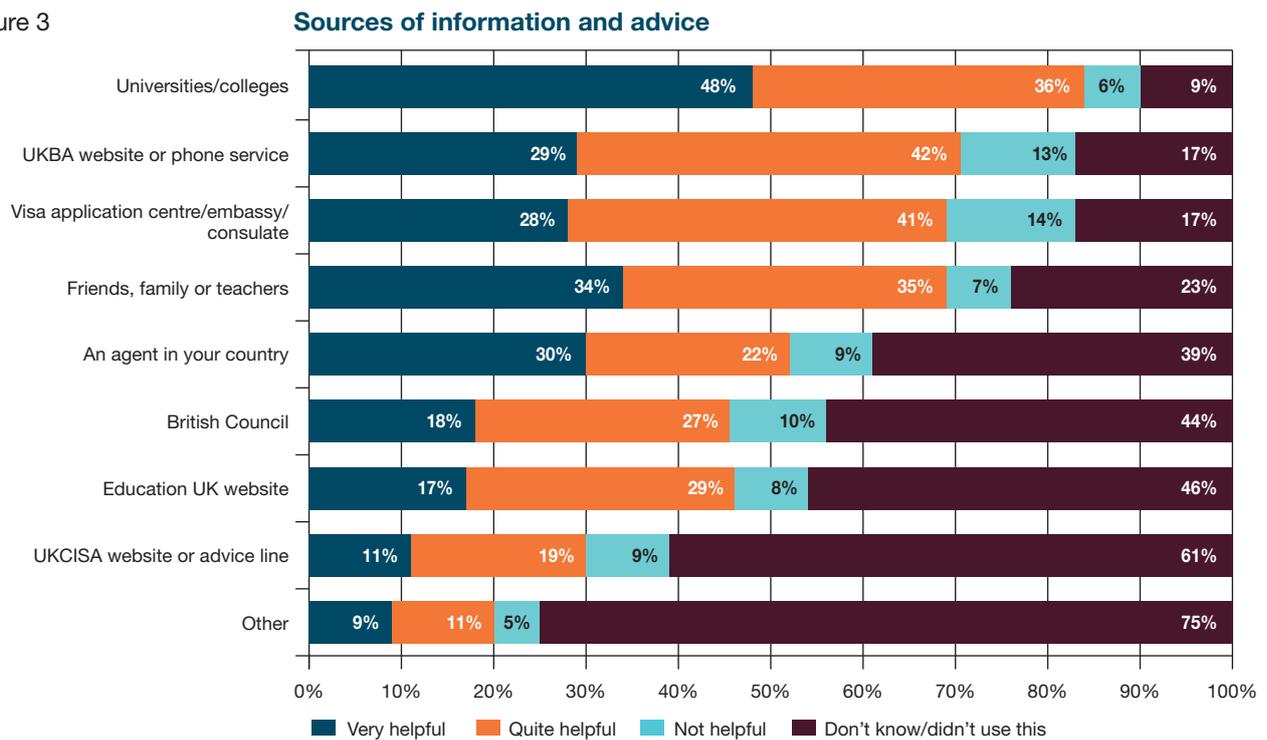
1. Rules should be changed less often (ideally no more than once a year, in line with the admissions cycle), and with more notice. Minor changes to the application requirements need to be flagged in sufficient time for students currently preparing applications, eg a change in the SELT tests might require 3 months notice to ensure students could book the required test. Major changes which affect a student's choice of course or country should be flagged at least 12-18 months in advance, eg rules concerning the ability to bring dependants or work during or after study.

## Information and guidance

The previous section demonstrates some of the reasons why good information and guidance is central to the application process. When we look at how students rated the information they received, we see that **colleges and universities are both the most widely used and the highest rated** source of information and advice about Tier 4 visas, followed by friends and family, both rated above visa application centres and the UKBA website and phone enquiry services.

Whereas satisfaction with UKBA information and advice is unchanged since 2009, satisfaction with universities and colleges has risen slightly. They are rated more highly by those applying to extend from within the UK (62% rated very helpful compared to 45% of those applying overseas), reflecting the extensive assistance provided by international student services.

Figure 3



Comments from students repeatedly underline the difficulties they faced in obtaining clear and correct information, especially from UKBA which should have been the definitive source. They also report the impact this had on them in terms of applications being unnecessarily refused, with all the extra cost, inconvenience, delay and stress this entailed (see also below p22).

*Every source of information contained contradictory information or was not complete. I had to use multiple sources and contact multiple people just to understand what I had to do to apply.*

*In the end, only a visit to the visa office could clear the doubts I had. I have to say the people in the office were excellent and could provide the answers i needed. If only what information provided in the office could be translated to the phone call would have saved me two trips.*

*I found it extremely difficult to obtain information from the service provider and also had to pay a per minute charge to ask the questions by telephone. The costs ran to several hundred dollars and I still did not get a clear answer. Very frustrating.*

*I should have qualified for the 'differentiation arrangements' which means I should have not have had to submit as many supporting documents. But I saw conflicting information on what I had to submit, even under the 'differentiation arrangement' headline, and different places on website said different things (some places said I still had to submit proof of financial ability to support myself, other places said I didn't have to). Also, you could only phone the visa application office for help once you had an application number. But you couldn't get that number until you had partly completed the application process, so it was a real catch 22.*

*There was no good guidance on information for students with families.*

## Recommendations

2. Improve and streamline the information and guidance provided.

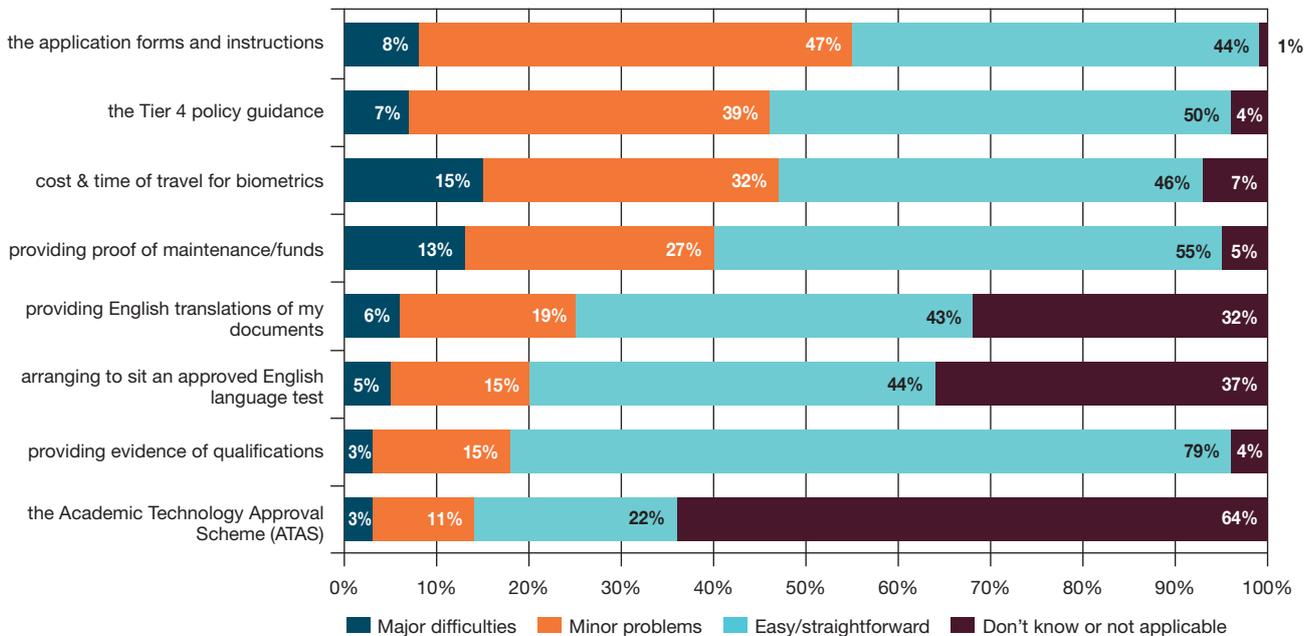
For a more detailed and extensive list of the changes students recommended, see alongside this report on our website at [www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/material\\_media/research\\_reports.php](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/material_media/research_reports.php)

## The application form and instructions

The main areas of difficulty for applicants were the **application form and instructions** (55% had some problems) and the **Tier 4 policy guidance** (46% had problems). This shows that many of the problems are essentially ones of process rather than principle, as by comparison students had fewer problems providing evidence of their qualifications and funding (the two most fundamental requirements for the integrity of the system) than completing the form or understanding the guidance.

Figure 4

### What was your experience of the following aspects of the Tier 4 visa application process?



The difficulties students had with the forms and instructions had not changed significantly since the 2009 survey. Key complaints included:

- lack of clarity about which forms to complete, how to complete them and what additional documents were needed at each stage, with no clear checklists or FAQs available
- websites which were contradictory, unclear and sent students in circles
- phone “helplines” which were expensive and where staff could only repeat information from the websites, not answer individual queries

*The application process was extremely cryptic. For example, when reading the “How to Apply for a Visa” documents, they would often direct you to another article for further information on a particular topic, and I would go to that article only to find that it redirected me back to the first article for the information I was looking for.*

*Information placed on the website is provided as a labyrinth (at least on the Canadian UK Border Agency site). VERY confusing, with no consolidated COMPLETE list of the documents you need for application, or clarification for “in case of...” if your situation does not fit exact descriptions on the website.*

*Instructions are not straightforward or in easily accessible locations on the web. The policy guidance was written in language that even an intelligent, well-educated, English-speaker like myself had trouble understanding. it’s not clear what documents you need to prove your funds if you are self-funded. Some sites said you needed endorsements/stamps, some said you just needed a letter. and it was not clear when you needed to show you had the correct amount of funds. The directions for the biometrics was completely non-existent until you made your appointment. At least a brief explanation or a “what to expect” area should be available. Free, general, step-by-step guidance should be provided too.*

*In general, it is unreasonable to expect the process to be clear/easy/straightforward when the provided guidance is 80+ pages!*

In some countries, tracking and notification systems were in place, possibly a little more widespread than at the time of our last survey, but it seemed they were not universal and were not always reliable, with students sometimes being told to collect documents which were not yet ready.

We hope that the introduction of online application forms will significantly improve matters, but this is dependent on their design; we urge UKBA to consult extensively with advisers who understand the areas which students find difficult, and pilot both forms and instructions with real students. If done well, this should create efficiencies by reducing the number of unnecessary enquiries by phone and in person, generating higher quality applications on which decisions can be made more quickly and reducing the number of unnecessary refusals.

## Recommendations

3. Use the introduction of online forms as an opportunity to review and revise Tier 4 application forms and instructions for both entry clearance and extensions of leave to remain, and to streamline the latter in particular. Ensure changes are made in consultation with advisers and students to ensure the new forms are simple to use and understand.

## Evidence of qualifications and translations

Providing **evidence of qualifications** was the most straightforward part of the process (79% found this easy see Fig 4).

However, providing **translations** (of qualifications or other documents) was a source of some difficulties. Although a third of respondents ticked “not applicable” in relation to this, a quarter of all respondents had some problems. These largely relate to:

- receiving conflicting advice about what translations are acceptable
- high costs of obtaining translations,
- English language versions of degree certificates or transcripts issued by the awarding institution not being accepted

A few comments suggested students sometimes felt pressured to use the translation services offered by visa application centres.

*At the meeting organized by British Council in Moscow, where Border Agency representative presented, we found out that there was no need to provide officially translated docs which are quite expensive. Instead, we could have translations done by individual translators, even ourselves, providing the qualifications permitted.*

*It's still ambiguous whether to provide a translation, performed by an applicant himself or notary certified translation is needed (requires additional funds). Some people in forums write they have submitted their own translation, but there isn't any official precise confirmation, that it is ok.*

*The agent has all standardized translation forms. If UK visa application only accept translation done by agent or translation companies, please make the requirement clear instead of confusing.*

*I provided English translations of my documents but they were not accepted because they were issued by my university.*

*It seems that I can only have my documents translated in the centre when I send my application which cost both time and money.*

## Proof of funds

Although the majority of respondents (55%) reported no problems with providing **proof of funds**, 13% reported major difficulties with the inflexibility of the system. The principle issues quoted were:

- UKBA requirements about format of bank statements and letters were not clearly explained and were too rigid. Some banks simply would not issue documents in the required format
- insufficient flexibility in types of account that were acceptable, eg not accepting fixed deposit accounts or investments
- applying the exchange rate on the date the entry clearance officer looked at the documents instead of the date students submitted their statements made it impossible for applicants to anticipate whether the amount would exactly match the required minimum
- there was confusion about how dates were calculated, eg in terms of how "date of application" was calculated (submission of the online or the paper part of the application?)
- some students who were funding their studies through loans appeared to have difficulty getting their documents accepted
- students who were being sponsored by someone who did not fit UKBA categories often had difficulty eg students funded by a family member other than a parent (eg a grandparent), by an employer which was not an international company, or by a regional government

*Proof of funds documents have some really specific criteria which are not mentioned in the policy guidance, guidance notes or anywhere else eg the letter from the bank requires a colour logo of the bank and the statement that these funds 'can be withdrawn at any time' should be present.*

*My bank refused to provide certified financial documents, and there was nothing I could do about it. No one gave me any other options besides having the bank sign the statement, which they refused to do.*

*Why did I have to sell all my investments and hold these in cash, thus losing income, in order to prove I have funds?*

*I had enough funds as proof of maintenance but since they were on a savings account (the best place to keep them, btw) rather than in my debit card account, they were not considered valid.*

*Many US students borrow money for graduate school. These funds, however, often are not disbursed until the term begins in the fall. Thus, proving availability of these funds to the satisfaction of the UK over the summer was quite difficult.*

*I thought my parents' bank statement is all that I need as a proof of funds. Instead, I was told that I needed to submit all original bank fixed deposit slips.*

*I had money with a relative who lives in UK so I had to get the money from his account put into my own account then put into his account again because I did not have a UK bank account. The money is in my account now after opening a UK account which I could not do from my country.*

*The problem I encountered was my maintenance/funds was being paid by a sponsor, my employer. As a result I was refused a visa based on the immigration rules paragraph 245zv. I'm a final year student. I think I could have been interviewed by an ECO and asked questions or produce proof to determine that I was genuine.*

*It was never made clear that the proof of financial support documents were to be dated to the original time of application and not to the date the paper application was sent in.*

## Recommendations

4. Ensure requirements for proof of funds are clearly spelt out in terms of amount needed and ways in which it can be demonstrated, including how dates are counted and how exchange rates will be calculated.
5. Ensure that the format of bank documents required is realistic in terms of what banks are prepared to issue.
6. Consider whether a broader range of evidence can be accepted, both in terms of the funds available to students and their families, and evidence of financial sponsorship by a third party and of loans

## Biometrics

No students protested against the principle, **but 47% reported difficulties with the practicalities of biometrics:**

- the cost and inconvenience when students have to travel long distances to provide these, including having to take time off work
- frustration that such a quick and simple process could not be done in more locations
- students who have provided biometrics for a previous visa or application did not understand why this needed to be repeated each time (especially within

a period of weeks), or why a set of biometrics should “expire” if the visa application was not then submitted within a set period

- students applying in the UK also recorded problems with biometrics including lack of appointments in nearby cities, having to travel twice when biometrics were not successfully recorded and appointment letters which were missing the vital page with the bar code

*I had to travel 2,500km back and forth (Porto Alegre to São Paulo, Brazil) just to get my fingerprints taken in 5 minutes. I found this quite unacceptable.*

*As I was studying in a country where there are no British embassies, I had to fly to another country just to get my biometrics done. I had enquired about getting them done earlier, while I was at home in Canada, but since it was 6 months before the start of my UK course instead of 4, I couldn't. It would have saved me a lot of time and money had I been able to do the biometrics a bit earlier in Canada.*

*I had to fly to Moscow from Vladivostok. The flight takes 9 hours, and the cost of it is around £700! All this just to give my fingerprints and be insulted at the visa centre.*

*I have to travel 1000km to get to my nearest biometrics recording area despite there being a UK consulate in my city.*

*I was also perplexed as to why I had to have my biometrics taken for each visa application ie three times, noting that on each occasion I had to have the morning off work.*

*I had to have my biometrics taken three separate times because my educational institution did not provide the required paperwork within an appropriate timeframe. Thus, every time I had my biometrics taken, they expired before I could actually submit my visa. The nearest biometrics station to my home was 350 miles away.*

*The biometrics centre was only open during extremely limited hours, so it was hard to get an appointment and once I did get one, I had to take off several hours of work in order to make it.*

## Recommendations

7. Minimise the need for students to provide repeat biometrics and extend the network of biometric centres to more locations

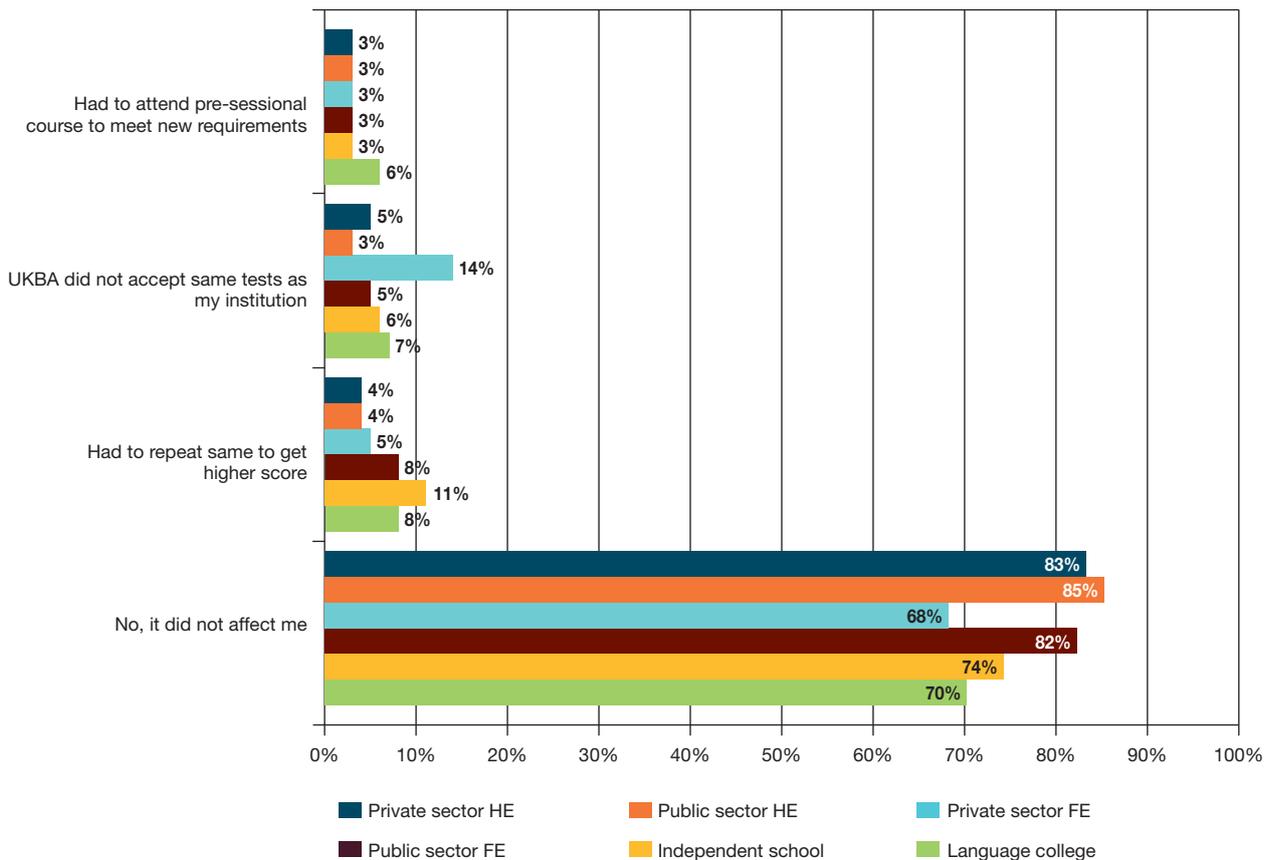
## English language tests

About two-thirds of respondents reported that they needed to sit an English language test (see Fig 4), and 20% of respondents reported some difficulties with arranging this.

More than 10% of students (11% of those applying overseas and 15% of those applying in the UK) were affected by the **changes in English language requirements** in April 2011 (see Figure 5). Even on the basis of a conservative estimate of 200,000 new Tier 4 students arriving in 2011, that would have affected 20,000 students.

Figure 5

**Were you affected by changes to the English language requirements in April 2011?**



On average **5% had to repeat a test to get a higher score**, but the figures were much higher in some sectors: 8% in English language colleges and public sector FE, and 11% for independent schools. Many respondents commented on having an average score well above the required level, but just missing on one component of the test. A number of students commented on the levels not being equivalent in the different SELTs, having had experience of failing one test and immediately after being able to pass another. We are glad to note that UKBA has already worked with the test providers on this issue.

**4% had to take a different language test** because UKBA would not accept the test which the institution had originally accepted, but again there were sectoral variations with HE and public sector FE least affected and private sector students most affected at 14%. Those with UK qualifications such as A levels, often taken at international schools, were baffled that their qualifications were not accepted.

Many students from countries such as Singapore and South Africa were affronted at being required to take a test having lived in **majority English-speaking countries**, having done all their education in English.

The system of SELTs is insufficiently flexible to take account of these cases in the way that institutional admissions systems routinely do, and creates an additional burden on students (perhaps in part explaining the increased additional costs cited below, on page 22).

In particular, **3% of respondents unexpectedly had to attend a pre-session course**, perhaps because institutions thought this was preferable to asking them

to re-sit a SELT, for example where a student had narrowly missed a score in one test section. This requirement was particularly burdensome for students where institutions were not able to give a combined CAS for both courses (see next section).

Some students reported delays in being told about new requirements. This was hardly surprising given the introduction of the changes at short notice, mid-way through the admissions cycle. UKBA clearly had no understanding of the number of offers institutions had already made (many thousands in some cases), each of which had to be gone through manually to check whether the students met the UKBA requirement as well as the institution's. The amount of staff time in checking and reissuing offers was considerable. It did not help that the rule changes introducing stricter language requirements were very poorly communicated, with a number of versions being issued in short succession which were at times ambiguous or contradictory, and where one version was replaced by another without notice.

The knock-on inconvenience, confusion and cost for students is evident from students' comments:

*I had already received the UNCONDITIONAL offer in February and the new rule was applied sort of retrospectively in my case. That was unfair and ridiculous.*

*I had a really hard time to come to the UK because changes in the rules were just announced 3 month before I planned to leave. Enrolment offer was cancelled, I had to apply to another country's university, re-take English ability test (IELTS) although I scored enough in TOEIC iBT in terms of converted score of IELTS.*

*I did the Toefl IBT twice and I didn't get the score, then I did the IELTS without studying and I passed, I think there is no equal levels between the exams*

*I wrote TOEFL and had a good score of 99.. But was told I had 1 mark low in writing.. So 3 weeks of pre-sessional course.*

*In my country, the test is done only in April and November month. And for me I missed the test in April since then it was not required. When the rules were changed and the English language proficiency certificate I had from my government did not work, I had to struggle to get my IELTS done in Silguri, India (the nearest test centre).*

*It was not easy to get a language test and as all of my schooling was in the English medium including my GCE 'O' & 'A' levels it seems quite crazy that I had to sit a SELT.*

*I have completed all my studies since the age of 7 in the English medium and yet I had to take an IELTS test & on arrival in the UK the Immigration Officer did not speak English to my level!!!!!!!*

*I am a native speaker of English, but from SA. If I hadn't already done an MA I would've had to do an IELTS test. For which I was a certified examiner for three years or so. Completely ridiculous.*

*I could not understand, why is this same for those students who have finished their semester and are just working on dissertations. This is totally unfair, for those who are applying for extensions.*

### Recommendations

8. Review whether required SELT scores are appropriate for all sectors and levels of study, eg in terms of requiring uniform minimum scores across all four sections
9. Consider how the system can more flexibly recognise native English speakers and those whose education has been wholly or substantially in English
10. Review whether the extension of the SELT requirement has prevented abuse, and if so whether this has been proportionate to the additional inconvenience and expense to genuine students and to sponsors

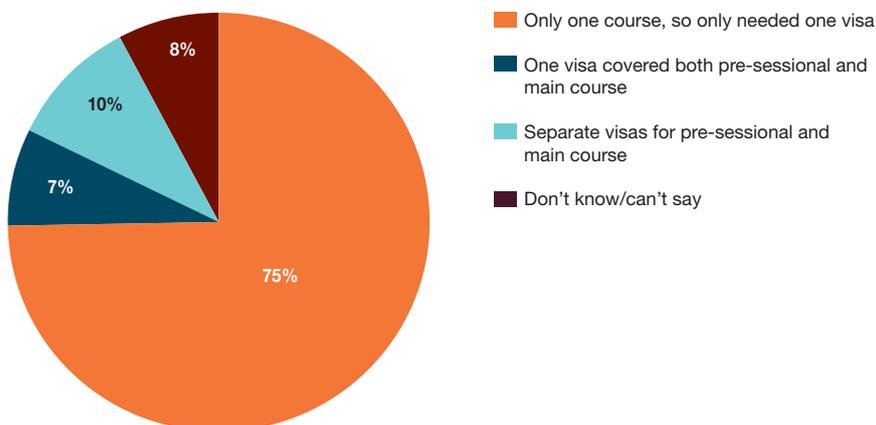
### Pre-sessional courses

18% of students attended a pre-sessional course in addition to their main course, and the majority of these **(one in ten of all respondents) required two visas in order to do so**. This represented an enormous additional expense and inconvenience to students and an additional pressure on UKBA processing capacity at peak time.

Given that the overwhelming majority of those attending a pre-sessional will have progressed successfully to their studies, the efficiency of such a system is questionable. If it is possible for students to have a visa which lasts for the duration of their course, but is subject to satisfactory progress at the end of each year (as is normal practice), it should similarly be possible for institutions to give a single CAS for a pre-sessional and main course, with the proviso that progression from one to another is conditional on satisfactory progress.

Figure 6

#### Did you have to make separate visa applications to cover both a pre-sessional course and your main course of study?



### Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS)

The proportion of respondents who had needed to apply for ATAS was higher than in 2009, having risen from 15% to 36%, though it is not possible to tell whether that is representative of applicants as a whole. The proportion citing major or minor problems was similar to before – about a third – with the most commonly cited complaint being the time the process took (longer than the 20 day target), but also some complaints about poor information and communication in what is, perhaps inevitably, a rather opaque process.

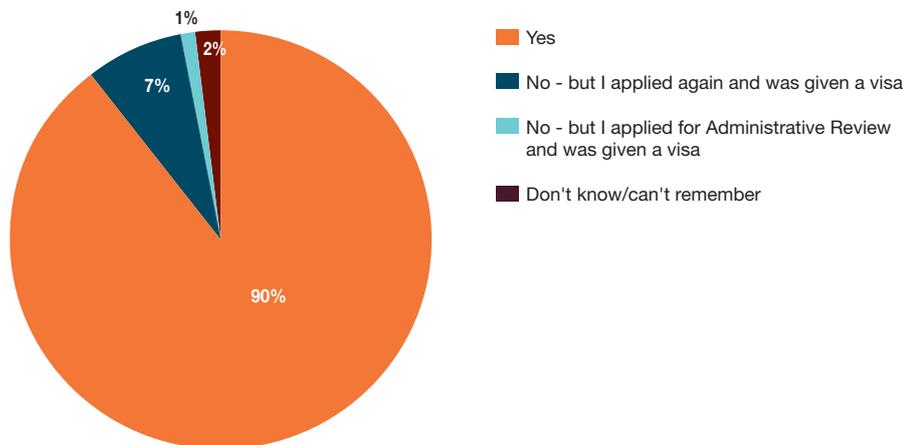
## Application success rate

Although **90% of respondents were successful first time in applying for a visa**, 7.5% had to apply a second time and a further 1% were successful in administrative review. There were some sectoral differences, although they were not large: 91% of students at public sector universities were granted visas first time, compared to 89% in public sector FE and language schools, 87% in independent schools and private sector degree level study, and 85% of students doing non-degree level study at a private college.

Overall the figures are very similar to 2009, when 88% were successful first time, 10% gained a visa on second application and 1% got a visa after administrative review. This suggests that the factors causing unnecessary refusals have not been adequately addressed.

Figure 7

### Was your visa application successful first time?



Those students who had to reapply raised a number of issues:

- for most administrative review was too slow to be an option as their courses were starting imminently
- a number had to reapply, with extra time, expense and stress, when they were not responsible for the errors which led to the refusal:
  - where it was due to unclear or contradictory information from visa centre officials, websites or other sources of what should have been reliable information
  - where they were caught out by regulations changing without due warning
  - where the refusals were due to errors from UKBA staff (eg not understanding documents) or errors from their institution in the issuing of the CAS
- in some cases the initial refusal was followed by entry clearance being granted on a second application, even when no changes had been made to the application, suggesting a level of inconsistency in a supposedly objective system
- it seems Entry Clearance Officers were not consistently giving opportunities for applicants to correct trivial mistakes, supply missing documents or clarify points which might have enabled the visa to be granted first time
- those who were refused not only had the time and expense of reapplying, as a result of having this recorded in their passports they also faced additional checks every time they entered the UK subsequently (and possibly third countries), and will continue to do so in future. This is stressful for students and takes up unnecessary amounts of Border Officers' time at ports of entry

Some students reported errors in processing their applications, or rejections due lack of clear information and other factors beyond their control:

*The officers checking evidence of funds should do their calculations properly. At first I was denied a visa due to a wrong calculation, though this was later corrected but it was too late for me to join my course and I had to defer.*

*I was denied a Tier 4 Visa on my first attempt. The reason given by the ECO was naive and unacceptable, because when I applied for the second time without making any changes/corrections in my application I got my Visa.*

*I had major difficulties with Tier 4 policy guidance, as my visa was initially refused by the entry clearance officer on the basis of the policy, however when I reported the same to the entry clearance manager, he accepted that it was the mistake from their end and asked me to submit the application again without going through the Administrative Review process and got the visa in two days.*

*For courses starting in September for IB students no diploma is required as stated in the Home Office website, but the embassy refused my application for that reason.*

*Border Agency received the electronic portion of my application prior to receiving the mailed portion, and therefore cancelled the entire application and made me submit a new one and re-pay the fee.*

*My sister and I had to send the supporting documents twice and our passport again because the maintenance documents needed the bank logo so I was given 7 days to re-send the paper but the UK border rejected my visa before the 7 days even though the paper were already there, so they made a mistake and told me to send my passport again so I had to pay again.*

*I was refused because I couldn't get my financial documents to the office in 7 days. Not that I didn't meet the funding requirement but that I physically couldn't get the documents there in time.*

*In VFS-Delhi, I was amazed to know that the help-desk agents had no clear ideas on documents required for Commonwealth Scholarship Students. This resulted in denial of my visa initially. Further, I got multiple and very different information on process of administrative appeal, with a result I made a fresh application and ignored the advice given by the VFS agents during my second application and also got the visa. However, what disturbs me is that after having an extensive travel history for last two years I now have a black mark in my passport, which has surely been a damage to my otherwise clear history. To some of the embassies where I could have sent my passport by post for visa stamping, I now have to go in person to explain the reason for black mark and explain the authenticity of my application, which to me is much waste of my academic time.*

Others reported how minor mistakes on their part (sometimes as a result of lack of proper information and guidance) resulted in refusals without the opportunity to rectify the errors or omissions:

*One small mistake on 120 pages resulted my wife's and my own applications being sent back just to be sent again.*

*I got my visa denied once because I forgot a form to put into it. I realized as soon as I had sent it off that the form was missing and was still charged for it even though I called and cancelled the visa application.*

*The difficulty with my second visa application (and the reason for its rejection) was that I needed a new CAS number which was not made clear on the UKBA website and no one I spoke to (via the helpline and in person at the UK consulate in Sydney) before lodging the second visa application advised that a new CAS number was required (even though I told them all I was applying for a student visa for the second time and asked what I needed to do to ensure my second application was successful).*

*I found it pretty ironic that after getting admission into one of UK's best University and also a highly prestigious Commonwealth Scholarship to cover my the cost of my entire PhD study, I was refused visa on the grounds that I did not submitted my original LLM degree/transcript (which interestingly were in Manchester at the time with Association of Commonwealth University). Even if its not submitted, how do you think your own government was able to grant me a scholarship, without confirming if I have done my master's or not? Also if there was any doubt to this fact, a generous call from your embassy would have solved the problem, instead of stamping a black mark in my Passport.*

*I was refused in my first attempt because I provided sponsorship letter from a Government approved institution in Ghana. This was in line with the guidelines in the T4. At least the UKBA should have verified the status of the institution or invited me for interview instead of outright refusal.*

*First time this summer I was refused a visa (TIER 4) because one of the pages of an official bank statement (issued by a bank authority) was not stamped. It took a lot of effort and money from me and my parents to collect all the documents. They all were correct, except that one not stamped page. Instead of just a short call to my bank (or to me) to prove the information on the statement, I was refused a visa. No documents are given back. And I didn't have a chance just to bring the confirmation from my bank (the same page, but stamped). Since it was one month before my course start, I couldn't risk and go for Administrative Review. Therefore I had to collect all the documents again and translate them (which cost quite a big money when you ask translators to authenticate the translation they did with a stamp). And I needed to pay again for the visa. All together - the double visa price plus translations*

As all of the students in our survey who were initially refused obtained visas in the end, it would seem they were in fact both academically and financially qualified. It may be a concern to UKBA that time is being wasted rejecting a significant number on their first attempt presumably largely on technicalities. If processes and guidance were further improved this figure could well be reduced, which would be to the benefit of all concerned.

### **Recommendations:**

11. Administrative review should be speeded up so that students who have been refused in error can use this route to get decisions corrected, without having to apply and pay twice
12. ECOs should wherever possible allow students to rectify minor errors and omissions in an application to bring down the number of unnecessary refusals

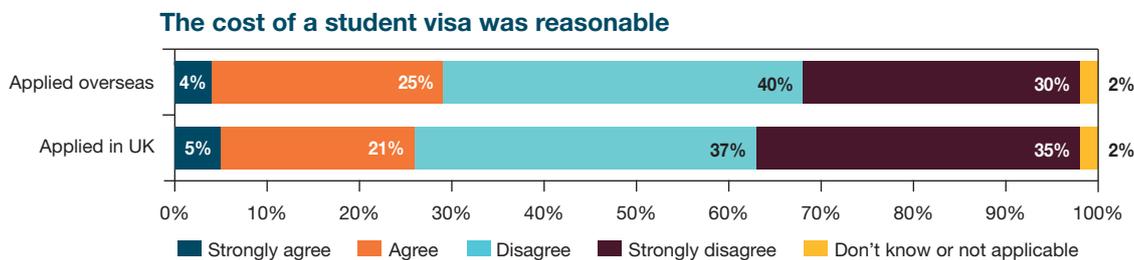
## Visa fees and additional related costs

Students continue to protest about the **cost of a visa application**, both in the UK and overseas.

Only 28% of those applying from overseas found it reasonable in 2011 compared to 33% in 2009, perhaps reflecting the fact that fees have risen far above the rate of inflation (from £145 in 2009 to £255 in 2011). Some said the UK compared unfavourably to competitors, for example Canada or other European countries. Although UKBA state that the £255 is “below cost recovery level”, students appear to believe the opposite, with a number of comments about the visa fees being a money-making operation for the UK government.

Students who applied to extend visas in the UK, (where students pay from £386 to £702), were even more likely than those applying overseas to strongly disagree with the statement “the cost of a student visa was reasonable” (35% compared to 30%).

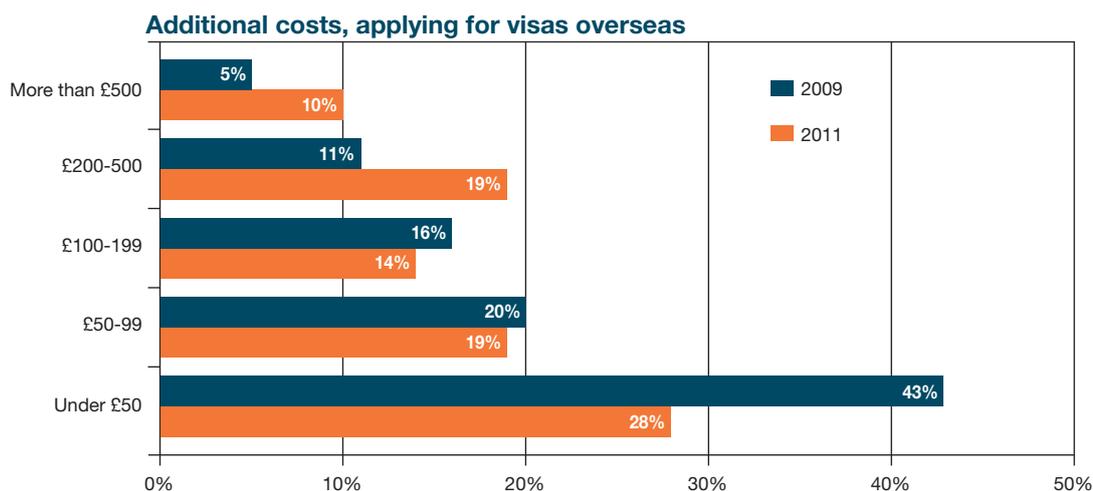
Figure 8



Perhaps of more concern than the cost of the application fee was the extent of additional costs students incurred, and the fact that costs seem to have increased disproportionately since 2009.

For those applying outside the UK, the number with additional costs of only £50 or under, has fallen from 43% in 2009 to only 28% in 2011. The number with costs over £200 has increased from 16% to 29%.

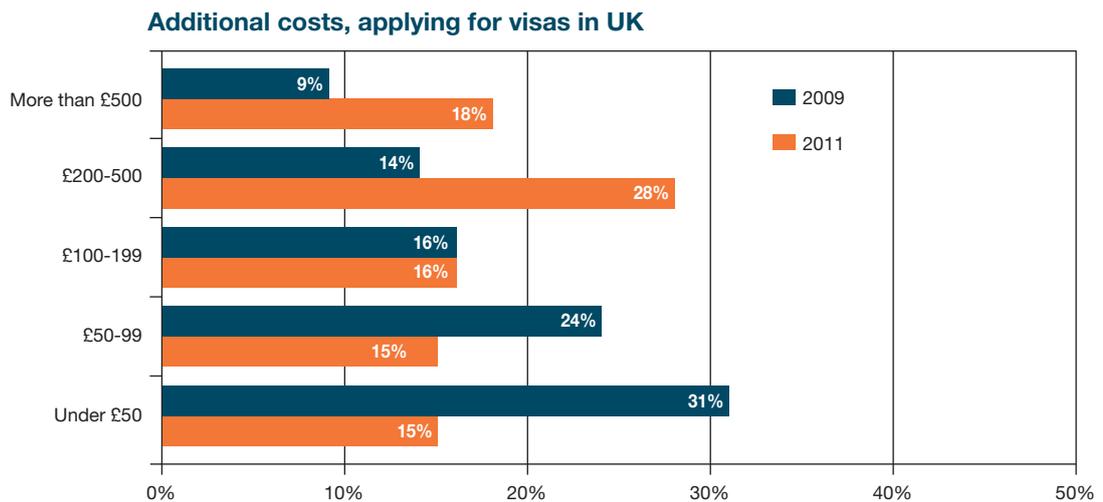
Figure 9a



For those applying in the UK, the number with costs under £50 has halved from 31% to 15%, and those incurring more than £200 additional costs rose from 23% to 46%.

This is particularly difficult for students because it is a hidden cost which they are unlikely to have anticipated and included in their budgets.

Figure 9b



**Additional costs included:**

- translation of documents (sometimes unnecessarily if information was not clear as to what was needed, or in duplicate if UKBA retained the originals with a previous application), or obtaining transcripts or certificates, or medical tests
- attending biometrics appointments, in some cases in a far off city or even another country, including travel, subsistence and accommodation costs for the student, and for some also dependants or accompanying parents
- couriering documents or travelling to deliver these to or collect these from visa application centres (in the worst cases, they were not available on the day notified and students had to incur additional hotel and travel costs while waiting).
- premium phone line costs for advice and additional fees for “expedited” services and payment costs such as bank charges
- extra English language test fees if UKBA did not recognise the test which the institution had originally accepted
- having to reschedule flights if visas were not returned within the stated times
- paying for agents or lawyers to assist with the application, often because of the difficulty of obtaining clear advice from UKBA
- having to take days off work to attend appointments

Costs for biometrics and travel to visa centres could be significant, as were the costs of calling premium rate helplines:

*At the time of applying for visa, I had to travel to another country for the biometrics. As the process took 20 days and my passport was taken by embassy, I had to live in another country for 20 days with my partner which was very costly!!!*

*I had to go pretty far for the biometrics and it was so expensive it took me weeks to pay it off.*

*It cost me approximately £2500 as I'm from Iraq, and had to travel to Lebanon for visa application and i was obliged to stay there for 16 days till I get approval.*

*More than £1500, including round trip to Moscow and staying there for one month. I would not stay there otherwise, but it was recommended, as in the visa centre they said that anytime I could be contacted and invited for an interview – that didn't happen.*

*For me, my wife and my baby it cost up to £1000.*

*We had a \$400 bill from Worldbridge (\$2 per minute including calling and holding time) for trying to get assistance.*

Costs were even higher when students were short of time and needed to expedite applications:

*Because of the proof of funds taking an entire month of sitting and waiting I had no choice but to fly to NYC from Arkansas in order to expedite my visa. This was expensive and stressful. An alternative to the month-long wait to supply proof of funds would have saved a huge amount of time and money.*

*I had to pay for a journey to New York, three days room and board, an expedition fee, extra flights to and from the UK. I was forced to spend over \$3000 in order to get back to the UK before I was un-enrolled from my courses at University.*

Students had particularly high additional costs when they had to apply more than once or resend documents which had been lost:

*Given that I had to cancel my flights and arrange temporary accommodation while I waited 8 days for my third visa application to be processed, the additional costs of the flight/accommodation were in the range of £600. I also had to pay the visa application fee three times. In total my student visa cost me about £1000 more than it should have.*

*Because of the mistakes in the processing of my visa, all of the money that I had saved in order to get through the first few weeks was expended on the visa application process itself. This has meant that even now, nearly 2 weeks after I have arrived I still lack basic needs such as toiletries, pillows, and healthy foods. My parents (who are not wealthy, as evidenced by the fact that I am receiving government-endorsed financial aid) had to get out a \$1000 loan just to pay the extra visa fees and provide a little bit of money for my survival.*

*When I applied my visa in China, the application centre had kept my translated documents on file and can only offer me the photograph of them rather than the original ones, but the visa extension I applied for here needs the original ones, so I had to call my parents to translate the same documents again and send them to me from China. That cost me a little much.*

*Also, I had to send my documents twice fed-ex because they were lost the first time, not to mention spend over 10 hours trying to get original documents that were lost by the British Consulate's office in New York, costing over \$100.*

Some students commented on unexpected costs such as medical tests and currency conversion causing additional costs:

*Cost of TB test was problematic since I was unaware. I had to borrow money to perform the test. The total costs was more than £400.*

*The costs were given to me in my local currency and not in pounds. When the bill came along it was much higher than expected and no previous alert was given that the amount wouldn't be the one informed*

*Applicants from Nigeria were not given the option of paying for the visa application fees in Pounds sterling and the official conversion rate was not used, rather the black market rate was used and this was very high, costing applicants to pay more than necessary.*

## Recommendations

13. To reduce unnecessary costs to applicants and lessen dissatisfaction with visa fees, UKBA should
  - a. Be more up-front to applicants about which visa fees are above and which below cost-recovery levels to avoid perceptions of profiting from applicants
  - b. Minimise, and be as transparent as possible, about additional costs such as biometric appointment fees, bank charges and fees for services
  - c. Offer services such as online tracking and SMS or email notification within the standard service rather than charging extra
  - d. Include within the main application fee the cost of providing free or local rate telephone helplines which can provide well-informed responses to individual queries
  - e. Review how fees in sterling are converted into local currency to give a fair exchange rate while avoiding unexpected changes in fees, especially taking into account that applicants may have had to arrange some forms of payment in advance
  - f. Review charges for dependants, and most specifically infants and children

## Ports of entry

74% of students said they **found immigration procedures at port of entry** easy and straightforward, but one in five reported minor or major problems (see Fig 10). Those who complained remarked principally on:

- long waits (sometimes several hours) and insufficient staff on duty to process arrivals at peak times (with knock-on for onward travel arrangements)
- extra time needed for checks when the student had initially received a refusal, or their details had not been updated on UKBA systems
- unclear instructions about where to queue and what forms to complete
- what documents to have ready eg being asked unexpectedly to produce documents such as CAS statements
- lack of clarity over health screening requirements
- rudeness and/or hostility of border officers

Students' comments show that neither students nor border officers appear to have consistent information about what documents may be requested on arrival:

*I was badgered at the entry port for 2 hours as they kept asking for my original CAS letter and as we all know, there is nothing like an original CAS letter, it is just a print out.*

*I was frustrated that of all the documents I had printed, the agent asked for my admittance letter for the school, and would not accept my CAS or all the other documents I had.*

*The UKBA officer asked for paperwork that wasn't returned by the consulate. It would be very helpful to know, in advance, exactly what*

*paperwork they are expecting to see to ensure we have that in our carry on luggage.*

*Immigration officer was rude and insisted on seeing all of the documentation I used to obtain the visa, including my financial documents which I didn't have as I qualified for differentiation status. When I told him I was unaware that I needed everything (believing that having the visa was sufficient) he told me that the embassy had informed me to bring my documentation which was not the case as the only option for obtaining a visa from New York was via post.*

*Upon entry I was informed by a medical officer at point of entry that I needed to supply x-rays proving I was free of TB. In fact I was almost refused entry on this basis, and instructed that upon arrival at my final destination I needed to get x-rays and mail them to the border office. At no point were medical requirements communicated to me during my application process. However, when looking at the regulations on the UKBA website, nowhere is it state that South Africans need to submit x-rays. So the wrong info was communicated to me by border officials and I was almost refused entry on this basis!*

For some, the problem was mainly lack of organisation at ports:

*I missed my flight connection because there was a big queue at the migration counter.*

*Immigration was disorganised; forms that needed to be filled were not given out; students directed to join the wrong queues.*

There were very occasional positive comments from students about Border Officers' behaviour, but complaints were much more common. These types of behaviour do not accord with UKBA's published customer service statements:

*In a new country, all alone, I was treated in a mean way by the immigration officer. There was distaste and cynicism so obvious in his voice and he told me off for not knowing how to place my finger on counter. I was especially sensitive because I had been through a long flight to a country I'd never been to before.*

*Every time I arrive in the UK there is some problem and I am stopped at the border and have to wait up to 2 hours, which is a major inconvenience, I am not treated like a student but rather as a potential criminal.*

*I witnessed an Immigration Official shout at an Asian student at the airport. This went on for some time and completely humiliated and insulted the student, who appeared to be confused and lost. It almost made me regret choosing the UK.*

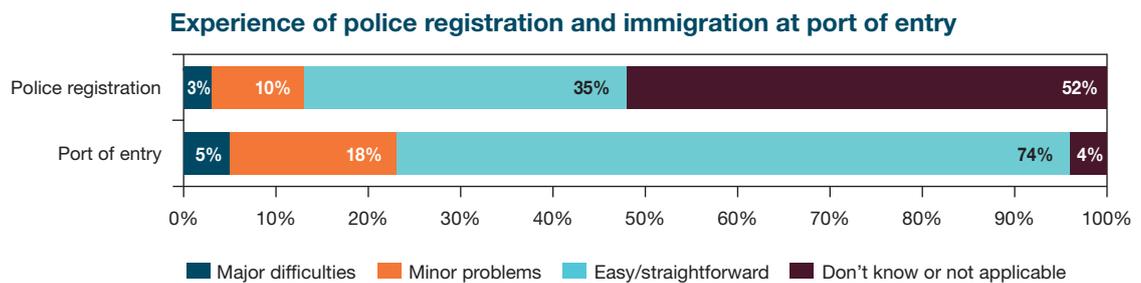
*Person in the immigration was really unkind. Asked me so many unnecessary and personal questions (about the effect of nuclear power station on me, people who died from tsunami and the earthquake, etc).*

## Recommendations

14. Address current confusion amongst both students and Border Officers about what documents an applicant may need to present on arrival in the UK, as well as explaining why students need to show documents which have already been scrutinised as part of the application process.
15. Do more to ensure all UKBA staff and contractors abide by customer service standards to treat all users with dignity and respect.

## Police registration

Figure 10



Not all students need to register with the police, and about half of our sample ticked “don’t know or not applicable” in relation to this question. Of those who had registered with the police (or attempted to do so), a quarter reported problems (see Fig 10), mainly

- difficulties getting an appointment within the required timescale (or occasionally at all)
- length of queues at police stations (up to six hours standing in some places, with no provision for students with disabilities or with small children)
- having to travel to another part of town or an entirely different town,
- missing out on lectures, tutorials or seminars in order to attend police registration
- additional costs (especially if the student had to pay more than once because of a change of address)
- being given inconsistent information about whether or not they were required to register, eg incorrect stamps in passports and inconsistent responses from police as to whether they acted on the basis of nationality or the stamp in the passport

Although the system works well in some locations, in others – particularly major cities with large concentrations of international students such as London and Edinburgh – there are very significant problems.

*Had to wait 6.5 hours (from which 4.5 standing outside of the building) due to a 400 person queue in the station). Incredibly, the 13 or so posts were manned by 5 clerks only, which of course caused this bottleneck. I had NEVER encountered such a queue before (including in my travels in India and the Far East).*

*It was horrible. It took me 5 hours to line up. I had prolapse of lumbar intervertebral disc at that moment, this experience gave me disease progression. You should really think about open a specific channel for special people. Now, I even can not go to school because of my disease progression.*

There were complaints about errors and poor organisation:

*I have a Kosovo passport and there was mistake on my visa that I have to registered to the police within 7 day of my arrival, and after six hours waiting in line for registration I have been told that I don't require to register as a Kosovan citizen. This is totally unprofessional and it has cost me a lot of extra cost and lost time.*

*Police in Edinburgh very disorganised. They set dates for people to make appointments and then cancelled them, more than once.*

*My visa required me to register within the first 7 days. As I was traveling in London before I started my course, I had to look for the immigration service in London, where they said I only could do it in my place of studying. When I arrived at my city I went to the police. The first time they said they did not know the procedure, and they asked me to come back the following day. I did so, and then they told me to wait for instructions by the university. I contacted the International Student Office at uni, and they said I would need to go to other city because the registration at uni would be one month later. I kept calling twice after that, and found out that the police registration service was closed for almost 2 weeks. I decided to wait to the process at uni, but being afraid of having to face consequences for the obvious delay in the registration, I was very worried.*

Students also commented on the inconvenience and cost of the process.

*Missed the registration on campus because of department meeting and have to go the [police] station by myself. Given a date when I have a compulsory tutorial one month later and not willing to change another date for me!*

*Why I should pay £34 every if I change my residence? It should be enough to pay once.*

*OVRO asked for proof of marriage for my wife. It's been presented when applying for visa. This is unnecessary duplication of the process. We needed to our marriage proof to embassy to translate.*

Police registration is now a duplication of resources and an anachronism. New procedures are well established – and especially the requirement for sponsors to maintain up-to-date home addresses and contact details for all international students on the UKBA's own Sponsor Management System and students also have to report all 'change of circumstances' (including changes of address) to UKBA direct. Police registration now appears discriminatory and partial (covering only a subset of nationalities) and an unnecessary duplication.

## Recommendations

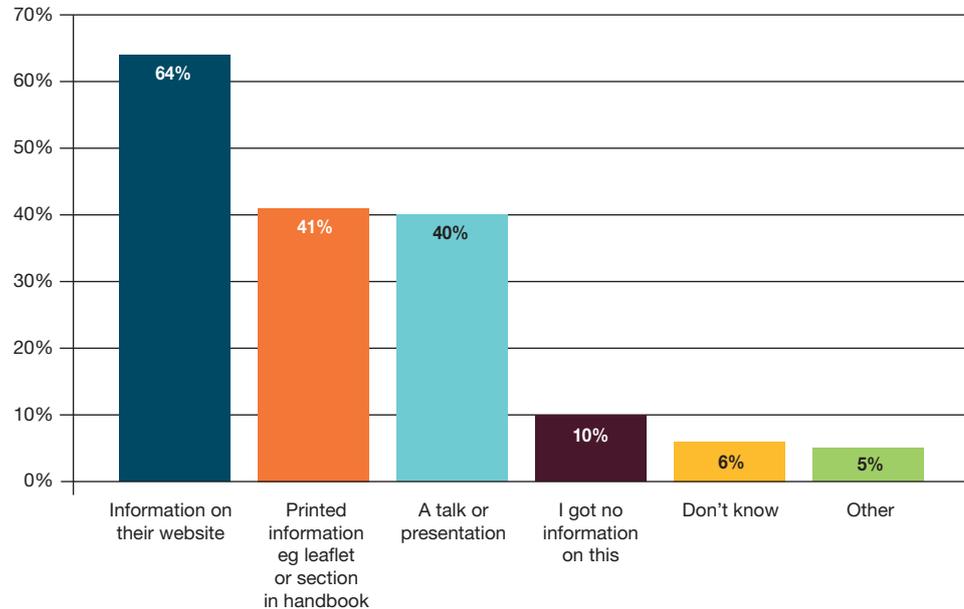
16. Replace police registration with a simple online process which enables all Tier 4 students to keep UKBA updated with their addresses.

## Briefings on Tier 4 students' responsibilities

Most students were aware of **receiving information from their sponsor institution** about their responsibilities as a Tier 4 student but 16% weren't sure, or thought they had not received information on this. The commonest means were via website (64%), in hard copy (41%), via a presentation (40%). The 5% who specified "other" had mostly received this information by email.

Figure 11

### Methods of briefing on Tier 4 responsibilities from college/university



Most – but not all – students have a general understanding of the rules and restrictions covering their visas and that most universities and colleges communicate these effectively. However, UKBA might consider whether it should itself give to each student, when their passport is returned with a visa, a brief leaflet outlining briefly the rules and restrictions which apply to them, perhaps alongside a checklist of what to take with them when presenting themselves at UK ports of entry.

### Recommendations

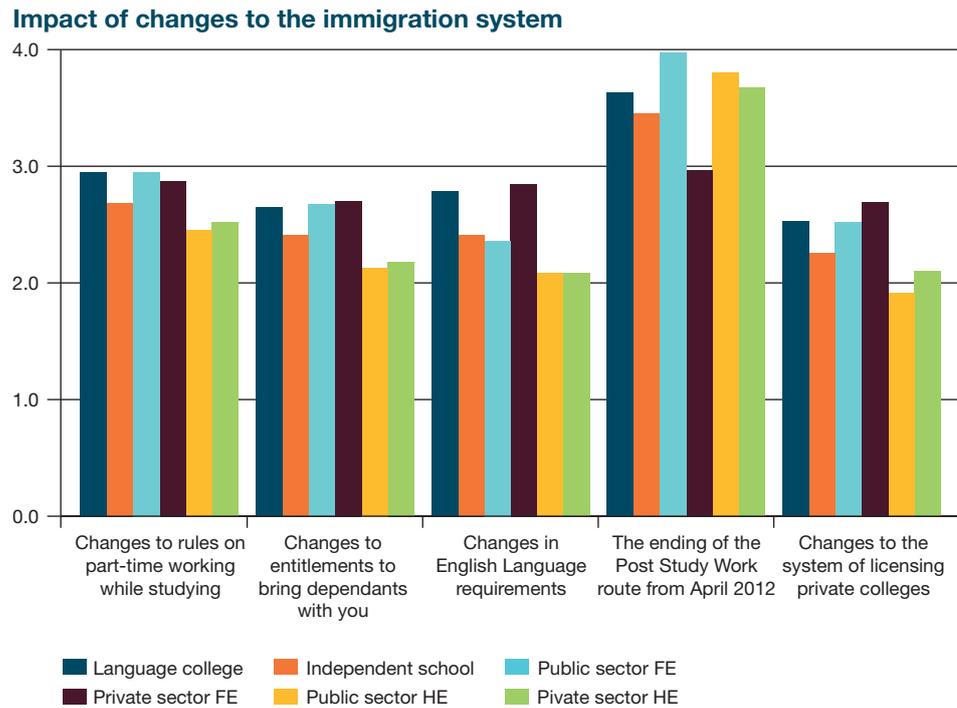
17. Provide all students with a leaflet on the rules and restrictions which apply to them, together with a checklist of what will be required at ports of entry, when returning their passport.

## Impact of rule changes on perceptions

Given that all our sample had come to the UK in spite of recent changes in immigration policy, one might not have expected to see respondents rating the changes as having much impact. However, even for this group there clearly were concerns.

Of all the changes, the **abolition of the Post Study Work (PSW)** route was rated as having most negative impact on their decision to study in the UK, followed by changes to the **rules on working while studying**. The impact of PSW is felt in all sectors, demonstrating that students often plan to progress from English language college or independent school onwards to further and higher education.

Figure 12



*The ending of the Post Study Work route from April 2012 really affected me a lot. If not for the application process I have made I would change my mind to further my study in other countries.*

*The cancellation of the scheme will affect the opportunities of UK graduates overseas students to their country and also downgrade the reputation and career prospectus of those graduate. If I knew before I made the application, I would not have come.*

*The removal of post study work visa has stranded my future...as I spent a huge amount to study in this country and had to take a bank loan to fund it. Now that PSW is closed it is making my career uncertain as I have to repay the amount but can't work here and further study is also affected due to this.*

*Although the rules say that the Tier 2 visa can be obtained upon receiving a job offer, this by itself is proving to be a hurdle as many sponsors are turning down applications as soon as they know an applicant is not from the EU. So many of my non-EU friends and I know that the Tier 2 visa conversion for students is just a mirage.*

*No PSW visas is hampering me to finish my Pre-registration training after my 1 year Overseas Pharmacy Assessment Programme. I will be unable to finish my course even after putting so much money into my studies.*

*15 of my friends who had initially planned to study in a wide range of universities in the UK and got their offers choose to drop the plans because of the cancellation of PSW.*

It is worthy of note that although the number of respondents actually bringing dependants was small: only 5% of respondents had applied for visas for dependants in addition to themselves (2% were accompanied only by a spouse or partner, and 2% by a spouse/partner and children; only 0.3% came with children but no spouse or partner, perhaps indicating how difficult the

sole responsibility role has made this), yet **changes in the rules affecting dependants** were rated as having at least some impact by more than half of respondents. This suggests that the general climate of openness to international students affects perceptions, as well as factors most directly relevant to students.

*At the beginning I wanted to take PSW but now I can't, neither can I bring my wife – I don't want to stay to the end of my studies in the UK.*

*My main issue was the change to dependant rules. I'm really not sure why taking an MPhil allows for a dependant but an MSc does not, and why the rules changes were made applicable after applications were already in. Had the new dependant rules been in place this year it is likely I would never have applied for a degree in the UK.*

*Student visa should have the right to get their dependants here in UK because it's really hard to be apart from your love-ones. I'm a married guy, and I have a newly born baby. It's hard for me that I can't get my family here, despite having a 2 year course.*

Both students and employers are currently in limbo awaiting news of the rules which will apply in April 2012 and international students are thus unable to participate in graduate recruitment activities which can begin as early as the first week of the academic year. At the very least UKBA must ensure information is made available as a matter of urgency and that progression from Tier 4 to Tier 2 is made as simple as possible for those qualified. The £20,000 minimum salary issue must be addressed so that highly qualified applicants can participate, even if in less well paid jobs, for instance those who need a period of work experience for professional training, eg in pharmacy or architecture.

### Recommendations

18. As a matter of urgency, monitor the impact on recruitment of the abolition of the Post Study Work Scheme and publish the rules for international students wanting to work after their studies under Tier 2 for the benefit of both students and employers.

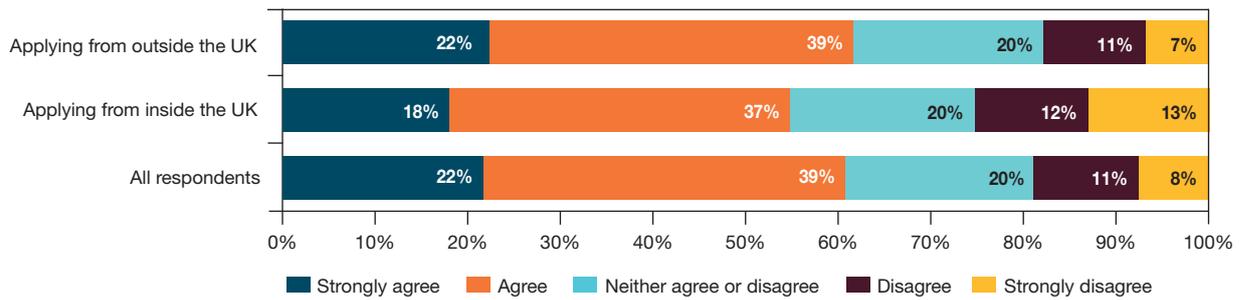
### Current perceptions of the UK welcome

All of the experiences outlined above, together with media coverage of the UK immigration debate at home and abroad, inevitably have an impact on international students' perceptions of the UK.

About 60% of students believe that **the UK welcomes well-qualified international students**, but 20% neither agree nor disagree and a further 19% actively disagree.

Figure 13

**With the current immigration rules, would you agree that the UK welcomes well-qualified international students?**



Those who had applied under previous rules and were applying for extensions from within the UK were more likely to say the UK was unwelcoming than those who had applied for the first time in 2011. Even of those who applied under the most recent rules, some commented that they had only done so because it was too late to change their plans.

It is possible to argue that the strength and attractiveness of UK courses, institutions and lifestyle are still far more influential than visa rules and that UK institutions have done well to retain their positive reputation and attractiveness, despite widespread adverse publicity about visa changes.

The fact that nearly four in ten of those well-qualified students who successfully gained places and visas did not endorse the statement that the UK welcomes international students is a very real cause of concern. The figure overall is a warning sign that these features have a powerful influence on overall perceptions of the UK. We hope that UKBA will make it a priority to address them.

**Recommendations**

- 19. Given all the recent negative publicity surrounding student visas, UKBA needs to work with the FCO and British Council to develop a positive communications strategy clarifying areas of concern and uncertainty and emphasising that the UK, after a period of visa reform, continues to encourage, value and positively welcome well-qualified students.

## Appendix: respondents' demographics

We received a total of 5,220 responses. Of these, 720 had applied from within the UK to extend their leave to remain. The remaining 4,500 had applied for entry clearance overseas. The largest number of respondents were nationals of China, followed by India, USA, Malaysia and Nigeria.

Table 1

### Main nationalities

I am a national of...	Number	% respondents
China (People's Republic of)	1,274	26%
India	519	10%
United States	450	9%
Malaysia	271	5%
Nigeria	255	5%
United Kingdom*	142	3%
Canada	138	3%
Pakistan	122	2%
Hong Kong	121	2%
Taiwan	103	2%
Thailand	101	2%

\*As there was no field for British National Overseas respondents may have used this category instead

Table 2

### Breakdown by institution type

Type of institution		
English language college	4.6%	229
Independent school (for A levels or equivalent)	3.0%	148
Public sector further education college	4.0%	200
Private sector college - non-degree level study incl foundation programmes	1.9%	95
Public sector university/college - degree level study	62.0%	3092
Private sector college/university - degree level study	18.3%	910
other	6.2%	310
skipped question		236

Table 3

### Breakdown by date of application

Date of application	Applied overseas		Applied in UK	
Before 6 April 2011	554	13%	146	20%
Between 6 April 2011 and 4 July 2011	508	12%	77	11%
After 4 July 2011	3039	71%	469	65%
Don't know	163	4%	28	4%

Table 4

### Dependants

Students with dependants	Number	Percent
Student with spouse/partner only	119	2.4%
Student with spouse/partner & children	112	2.2%
Student with children only	14	0.3%
Total students with dependants	245	4.9%
Total students alone	4,739	95.1%

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UKCISA is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

It does so through research, print and web-based publications, a national training programme, dedicated advice lines for students and advisors, and liaison and advocacy with institutions, agencies and government.

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