UK Council for International Student Affairs

Students' experiences of extending their visas in the UK under Tier 4

UKCISA

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all UKCISA members and contacts who forwarded the survey link to their students; to i-Graduate for incorporating a link in their International Student Barometer survey, and to all the students who provided comments on their experiences.

Foreword

As the report indicates this is the second UKCISA survey of the experiences of international students with the newly introduced Tier 4 of the Points Based System (PBS). The first considers those applying from overseas: this looks at those applying to extend their visas from within the UK.

UKCISA recognises that this is a complex process with the UK Border Agency operating in an environment which is increasingly sensitive to any sign of weakness or flaws in the immigration system.

We also recognise that the system has become increasingly complex with additional requirements over recent years - including clearance under the Academic Technology Approval Scheme, biometrics and ID cards and now the new Tier 4 rules. These have all, clearly, played a part in lengthening the process of extending a visa to, according to our findings, typically between two and three months and often longer.

It may also be that the Agency does not have sufficient staff resources to provide an efficient and timely customer service or that some tasks, such as processing visa applications for international students, do not attract sufficient priority compared with other work.

UKCISA's Board is of the opinion however, looking at these results, that **it is difficult to think of any other public body or service provider which would not radically re-engineer their processes in response to such overwhelmingly negative feedback.**

Whilst we therefore recognise the challenges which the Agency faces – and the efforts of many individuals within the service – we would encourage government to take **a fundamental look at these processes and procedures** (and best practice in other industries) to see how a far better service can be provided to those valuable and well-qualified international students who make such an important contribution to our universities and colleges, our society and our economy.

Professor Christine Hallett
Principal & Vice-Chancellor, University of Stirling and Chair of UKCISA Board of Trustees

Introduction and summary of findings

With all due respect to the Home Office, I realise that they are trying to cut down on illegal immigrants, but it is quite unfair to subject us international students to such tough rules. We make a major contribution to the country's economy and to the universities especially due to the alarmingly high fees we pay. I only ask that we be treated with a bit more respect and understanding. We only come here to get knowledge and then leave. Don't make it impossible for us to do so.

The introduction of Tier 4

Following the introduction of the Points Based System (PBS) at the end of March 2009, UKCISA undertook to track students' experiences of "Tier 4" (the student route under PBS) both overseas and in the UK. We issued a report in December 2009 on the experience of students who had applied from overseas (available at <www.ukcisa.org.uk/files/pdf/about/tier4_student_survey.pdf>). The current report supplements that with the experiences of students applying to extend their visas in the UK.

Summary of findings

One of the most striking findings of this report is that **perceptions of the standard of service in the UK are more negative than those of the service overseas**:

- only 36% found the **process** quick and efficient in the UK compared to 59% overseas.
- only 50% of those applying to extend in the UK found the **application form** easy to complete, compared to 68% applying overseas.
- only 15% applying in the UK thought the **cost** was reasonable compared to 33% applying overseas. 48% strongly disagreed that the cost was reasonable in the UK compared to 24% of those who applied overseas.

It is puzzling to applicants that the process of extending a visa should be longer, more complex and more costly than the original application. As one student wrote, *"I think the process should not take as long as it does specially if the student has received student visa previously because the records should be available within the Home Office".*

It was not only application fees but also **incidental costs** that were higher in the UK. 63% of students in the UK students spent more than £50 on additional costs such as travelling to biometric appointments, compared to 52% of students applying overseas.

Of all the aspects of the application process, the greatest discrepancy in the levels of difficulty reported were over **biometrics** where 26% of those in the UK compared to 12% of those overseas reported major difficulties with the cost and time involved in travelling to appointments.

Help and **advice from institutions** made some difference to the experience: students applying through the Batch scheme found the application form easier to complete and reported fewer problems with the application form, guidance and instructions.

ID cards did not provide significant benefits to students: few had used them to prove entitlements to work or healthcare. On the contrary, additional delays and problems were caused by the ID card process. One in ten students had needed to travel before their ID card arrived; crucially, given that the bulk of students submit their applications to extend at the end of October, many students were unable to travel home over the Christmas vacation.

Fewer than half of students had **received their passport back** within two months and fewer than half had their **ID card** within three months of their application. Many students wrote of the stress of being in limbo over their application and the inconvenience of being without their passport for long periods.

There were comments about **poor service** and in some cases allegations of racism from UKBA staff. Students were clearly well aware of the need for a thorough and secure immigration system, but also of the significant amounts they were spending in the UK, and many felt their treatment by officials was unnecessarily hostile, demeaning or rude. The negative **impact on the UK's reputation** is potentially damaging to the education sector, and undermines the efforts of government and institutions to build the UK education brand abroad.

Recommendations

UKBA should consider how it can improve the process of applying for extensions of leave to remain, in the light of feedback from students:

1. **Speed up** the process and provide means for students to **track applications' progress**.

2. In particular make sure that properly trained extra staffing is available at **peak periods**. Might UKBA consider, as has been done with police registration in many areas, providing mobile units to deal with bulk applications at peak times **on campus** for institutions and locations where the numbers justified such a presence?

3. Continue to increase the range of locations and availability of **biometrics appointments** to reduce the cost and inconvenience to students.

4. Start to consider applications **in parallel with the biometrics process** so that the latter does not delay the former.

5. Consider whether students could be exempted from **repeating the biometrics process** where these have previously been given. If it is necessary for students to give these each time, ensure students are given an explanation so that it does not simply seem like another needless expense.

6. Publish **end to end processing times** to ensure applicants' experiences are properly reflected in monitoring statistics.

7. **Simplify and shorten the application forms** (especially for dependants) to remove duplication and reflect that the scrutiny of the initial visa application has already covered much that is currently included. If the sponsor confirms the need for a student to extend their visa for a given time and the student demonstrates their ability to support themselves, can such straightforward applications be fast tracked?

8. Consider whether a streamlined process would in fact be cheaper, and enable the service to be more **reasonably priced**.

9. Examine whether a less rigid approach should be taken to deal with **minor errors in applications**, allowing students to resubmit corrected paperwork within a stated timeframe as part of the original application, ie without incurring a further fee or having their application deemed out of time or having to submit an appeal.

10. Consider how the **financial documentation requirements** can be better framed to detect those without adequate funds while also facilitating the entry of genuine students with a range of sponsors and financial circumstances.

11. Remove the requirement for students to provide **photographs** now that students provide biometrics.

12. Ensure **UKBA staff** are appropriately trained and provide a courteous and efficient service with due regard to equal opportunities. Ensure applicants have an opportunity to give feedback anonymously about the standard of service and any complaints of racism, as few are likely to feel confident in making complaints if identifiable.
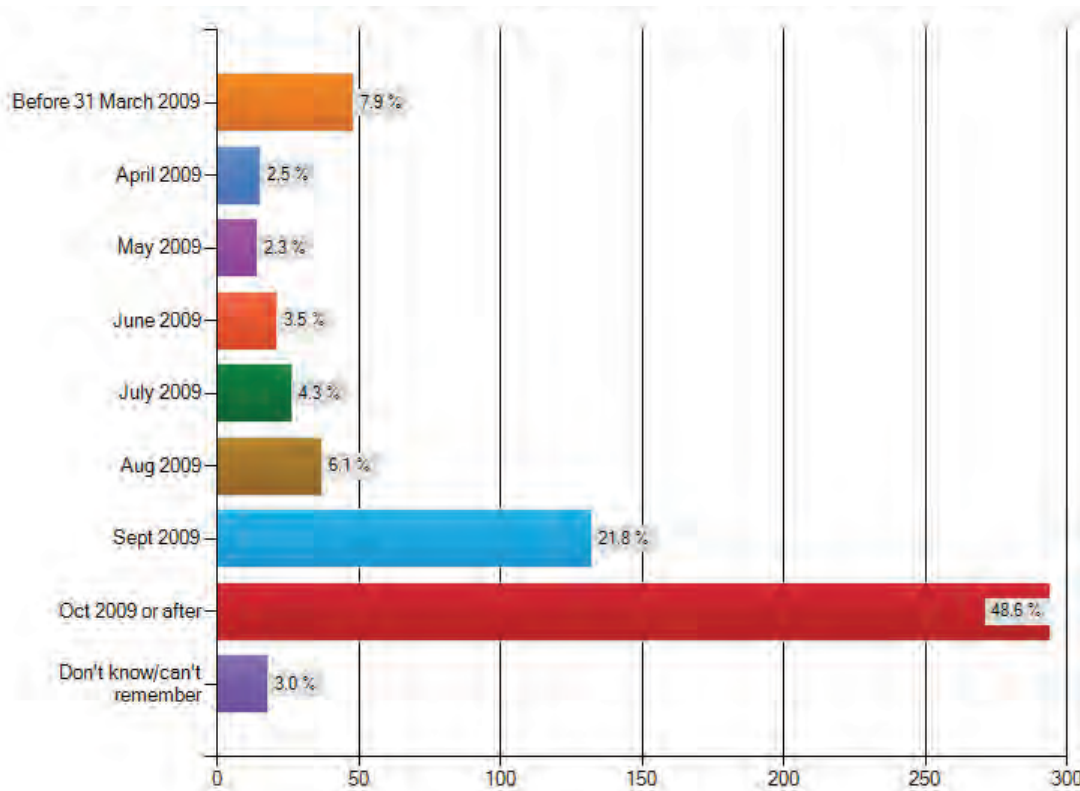
About the survey

UKCISA conducted this survey using an online questionnaire. Students were informed about the survey either directly by their institution, or via the i-Graduate International Student Barometer, which linked to it.

The survey opened in October 2009 and was held open until February to allow responses from students who had applied during the peak period, which falls at the end of October, with students often not receiving the results of their applications until the following calendar year.

Figure 1   **Approximately when did you submit your application to extend you student visa?**

We received 567 responses to our online survey, from students of 67 nationalities, the largest groups of which were Chinese (156), Nigerian (40), Indian (33), Pakistani (29) and Saudi Arabian (21).

The vast majority were studying at higher education level, mostly at postgraduate level (46% at taught postgraduate level, 19% on research programmes and 27% on undergraduate degrees).

The survey findings

The cost of the visa extension process

Only 15% thought the **fee for an application extension** was reasonable. Of the 83% who disagreed that the cost was reasonable, 48% strongly disagreed.

The costs involved were not only the application fees. 39% of students spent more than £100 on **additional costs** such as travelling to biometric appointments. 82% of respondents had costs only for themselves, but 14% had costs for a spouse/partner and/or dependants (on average 1-2 children).

Experience of the application process

The majority of respondents had applied by post either via the Batch scheme (38%) or independently (49%), while 13% had paid for the Premium in person service.

Those who applied with the help of the **Batch scheme** found the application form easier to complete and had fewer problems with the application form, guidance and instructions, probably due to the advice and guidance given by advisers operating the batch scheme at their institution.

> *The batch service offered by [name of institution] and visa course were invaluable, because the form is very ambiguous and complicated.*

However, there was no indication that respondents applying via the Batch scheme received a quicker service.

Approximately half of respondents agreed that the **application form** was easy to complete. Others complained about the length and complexity of the forms, and some suggested ways in which these could be simplified or shortened:
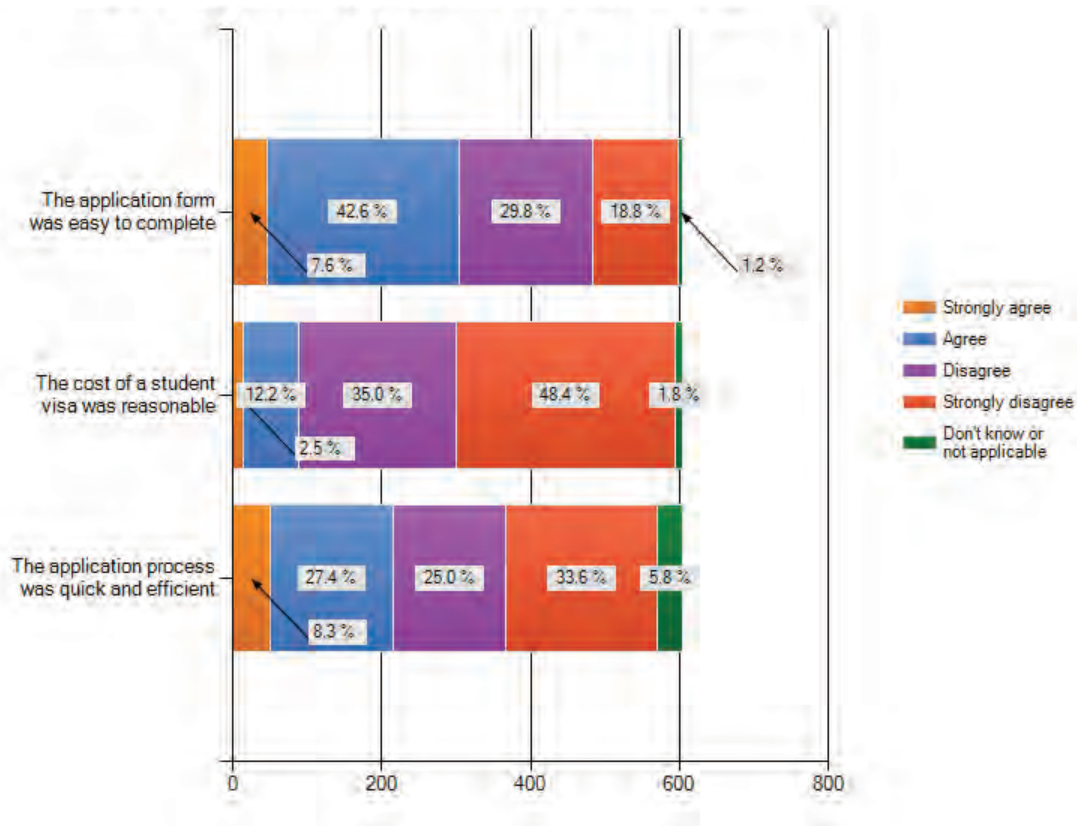
> *The application form is not easy to fill and is extremely long (it requires so much paper that it has to be an ecological crime!). I was not sure if I needed the ATAS certificate or not. It is one of the most frustrating and long forms I have had to fill in my life.*

> *It took a week to read the policy and law, and to complete the 41 pages form for myself, 50 pages for each dependant and 14 pages for my domestic worker.*

> *On average an application for my wife and daughter requires about 150 pages of forms. Most of these are just repetitions, some simple addition to the main applicant's form would have been adequate.*

Figure 2   **What was your experience of applying for a UK student visa?**

The application form was easy to complete
7.6 %   42.6 %   29.8 %   18.8 %   1.2 %

The cost of a student visa was reasonable
12.2 %   2.5 %   35.0 %   48.4 %   1.8 %

The application process was quick and efficient
8.3 %   27.4 %   25.0 %   33.6 %   5.8 %

Legend:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know or not applicable

Students commented on **confusing wording** in the application form

> *The money section is not easily understandable. Now the new form 10/09 is more confusing by saying new words such as "established" and "unestablished" presence in the UK.*

> *Evidence of Funds and what applies to who is very confusing. Student re-sitting either modules or doing projects are left out.*

Some considered there to be an **inflexible approach to minor errors**:

> *Why must the Home Office be adamant about regulations and all that just because I missed out a single tick. This meant that, I had to get all new documents again so as the dates were recent and it was such a waste of my time.*

> *I got refused once and I had to pay £357 again. I could appeal against the decision but my agency told me that it would take longer time. so I reapplied and I paid £357 again. It was just misprinted letter from university so there should have been something different for example I should have been able to send just new letter or something like that.*

> *There is no information about exceptional circumstances where a student cannot obtain Visa letter in time and therefore has to send it later on. Although it is mandatory with the application, but where a student has fallen ill or has other circumstances and is already enrolled before expiration of his student visa has to send his form without the visa letter. There is no information on who to contact or how to send the document and in what time frame during the process.*

Students also queried some of the requirements for **accompanying documentation**:

> *As I am applying for extended visa I wonder why I need to send documents again such as academic documents, bank statements and ask for another biometric appointment, if I already did that the first time that I requested a student visa.*

> *Why does the UKBA need two passport size photograph of the applicant when that photo is not on the ID card? In fact, the photo that is taken as part of the ID card is the one that is on the ID. Many a times, UKBA rejects application on the basis of the passport photo submitted. They don't need it since they will take one when the applicant goes for biometric visa. The same photo from the ID could be use to process the application.*

Students reported that simply **collecting the documentation required** was a lengthy and complex process, made worse by poor information and changes in regulations. This was not simply a matter of inconvenience: the stress and time involved was impacting on their studies:

> *It took about a month to understand the application process and to complete and collect relevant documents to extend my visa. This had a detrimental effect on my studies, and I had a very high stress level*

> *It took a very long time to get my bank details in order which slowed up the application. Information and support has to be given at an early stage to allow students enough time to get everything in order.*

> *I found the process incredibly stressful. The information on the website kept changing, and this creates a lot of distress. The website is not friendly; its information architecture is confusing, it looks like they have made it impossible to navigate on purpose.*

> *In the end, I had to fill a new set of forms because the format changed between the time I made the appointment and the date of my appointment.*

A frequent complaint was about the **lack of tracking system** for applications,

so passports and documents were sent off for months, with no way of knowing when they might be sent back:

> *That is no guarantee how long the process takes. I understand it depends on individual application situation, but I appreciate if I can get feedback about process.*

> *We where told not to track the progress of our application; which if we do call may likely cause our application to be cancelled.*

> *I also had problems not knowing when I would receive any of my documents back. It made planning and the holidays very difficult, just an ability to get an update would have helped things enormously.*

A number of students commented on the problems caused by the **lack of transitional arrangements** when rules changed:

> *Students who were in the UK before the new system was introduced, and are extending their visa to resit a year should not be required to apply under the new programme as it make it difficult for them. I have arrangements with my sponsor (my uncle) who has been making payments for tuition every quarter as and when they are due for the last three years. When it changes all of a sudden it is very difficult to comply with this. Whereas if the rules only applied to new students they would already be aware of the reequirements and this would not cause them a problem.*
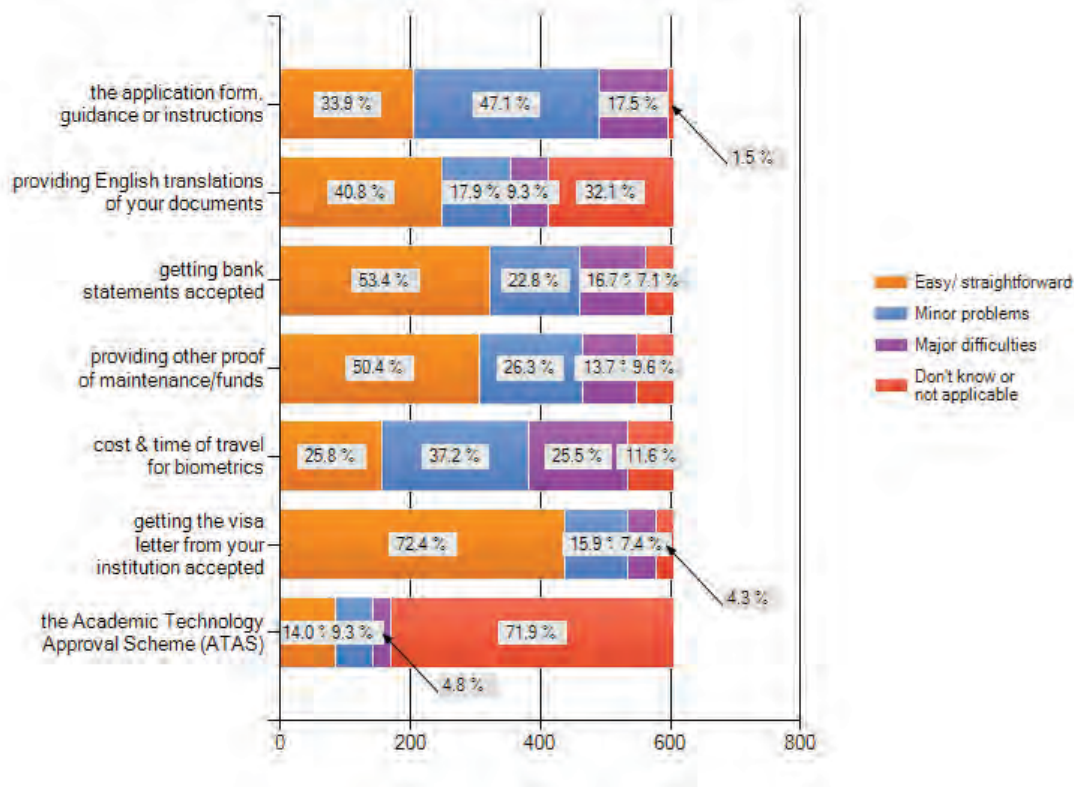
> *I am halfway through my degree course, my visa needed to be renewed. I applied through the new Tier 4 system, all well but my college has been inspected by all agencies and is simply waiting for their Registration number as a Sponsor. I have 6 days to appeal and was told that if I do not have the Sponsor number, I might just as well go home. I took this course because the college had to be on the old DFES list, and now half way through some clever people changed it all around and my career in future is ruined. ... I wanted to do it in the UK because I trusted the UK system. I've paid my own way, my college, everything and a simple thing like an actual number destroys me. My college is accredited by BAC and UCAS and degree is underwritten by Middlesex Uni. How legit do they want it to be? I am destroyed for thinking the UK is the best option for me.*

The application process

The most problematic part of the application process was the cost and time involved in biometric appointments. Providing proof of funds and getting bank statements accepted were the next worst aspects.

Figure 3   **What was your experience of the following aspects of the visa application process?**

The biometric application process and ID cards

Of those respondents who reported problems with the biometric application process, the commonest complaints were difficulties with the **timing or location of the appointments and needing to travel before the ID card was received**.

Getting an early Biometrics appointment is not possible. I have to wait for more than one month for my biometrics due to which I won't be able to go anywhere during my Christmas Holidays.

15 working days is not enough time to make an appointment to enrol for my biometrics! It is too difficult to make an appointment within 15 working days!!

It will be nice if the biometric appointment letter post by first class, in that case, I could arrange my appointment more flexibly.

Respondents were not convinced of the **benefits of ID cards**. Only 14% had used the ID card to prove their entitlement to work and 5% to demonstrate entitlement to healthcare.

Some students suggested improvements:

> *Last time I got biometric card with all my immigration details but my passport travel document doesn't have any information about immigration. If we have some information on the passport it would be helpful because if I go to any other country while I am studying in UK if I lost my ID card how can I prove my immigration status?*

> *The information on the ID makes it difficult to get even a part time job, because I would prefer if it read, "part time during studies and full time in holidays", but it just says, "restricted work during term time".*

Figure 4

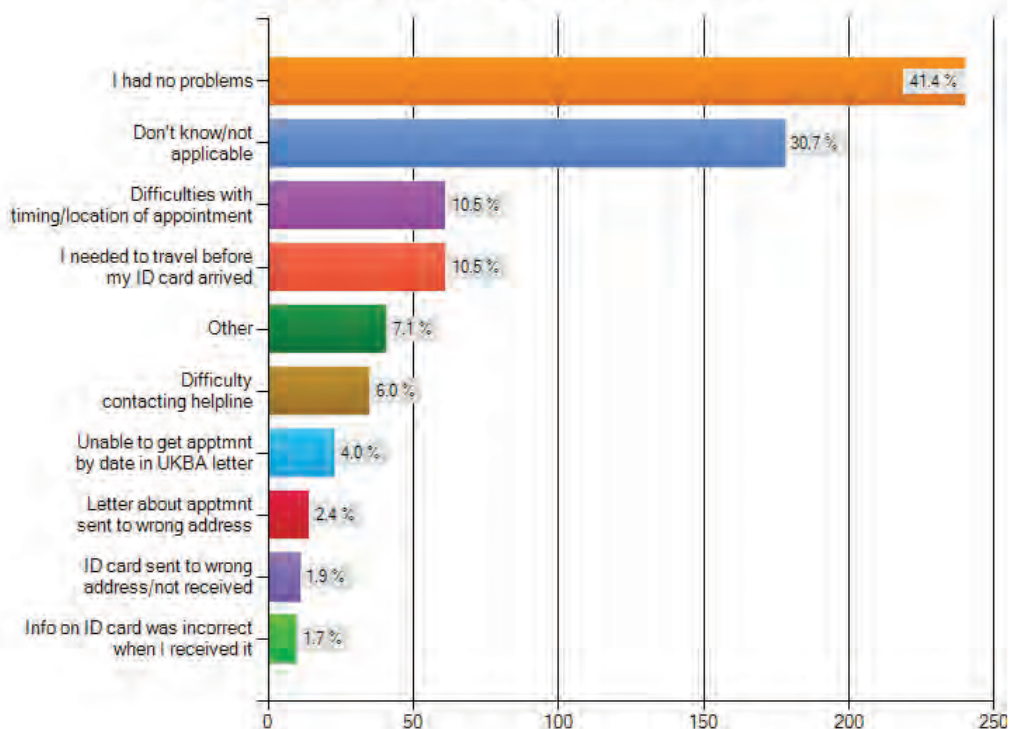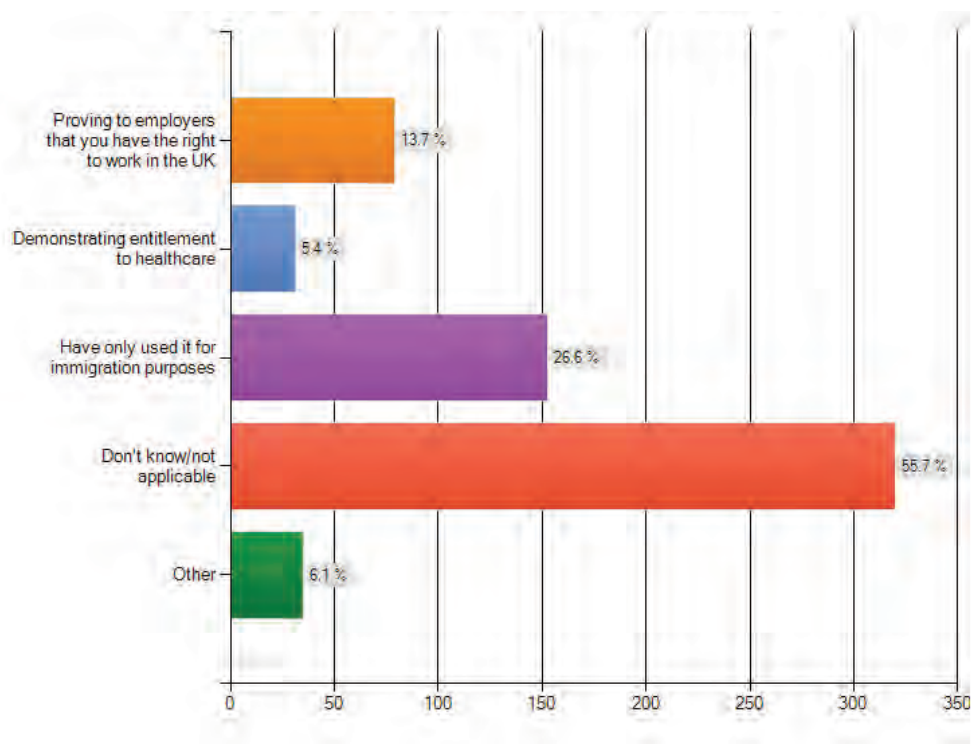**What was your experience of applying for an ID card?**

Category	Percentage
I had no problems	41.4 %
Don't know/not applicable	30.7 %
Difficulties with timing/location of appointment	10.5 %
I needed to travel before my ID card arrived	10.5 %
Other	7.1 %
Difficulty contacting helpline	6.0 %
Unable to get apptmnt by date in UKBA letter	4.0 %
Letter about apptmnt sent to wrong address	2.4 %
ID card sent to wrong address/not received	1.9 %
Info on ID card was incorrect when I received it	1.7 %

Figure 5   **Have you found your ID card helpful with any of the following:**

Financial requirements

Many respondents commented on difficulties with understanding and meeting the requirements about **proof of maintenance**, in particular the lack of flexibility in how they could demonstrate their ability to finance themselves. Although one issue raised by students has now been addressed – they are now able to use parents' bank accounts as an alternative to their own - problems remain for those financed by other family members, or in other ways which did not fit with current rules.

> *I'm so confused about the bank statement, why the deposit must be frozen 28 days started from the day when the deposit certification is sent by bank? But the document said applicants can extend their visa in person or by post within one month, so how many days in one month - 28 or 30? So if I sent my application at the no.29 or no.30 day, is that ok or not? My friend went to London in person to extend her visa, of course she made a appointment, but its the no.30 day of her frozen days, so the BA refuse her!!! so, if I sent my application by post at the last frozen day of my deposit is that ok? I mean the no.28 day?*

> *In the application, only the accommodation fees paid to the sponsor are accepted by Home office. However, if students rent a flat in a private sector, students usually need to pay 6 months rent in advance. And in this case, the accommodation fees are not included in the maintenance which I think is unfair.*

I don't know how a student is expected to leave £1,600 in account for 2 months before renewal... I knew about 5 student who are serious with their studies but today, they have become illegal in the country because of maintenance cost.
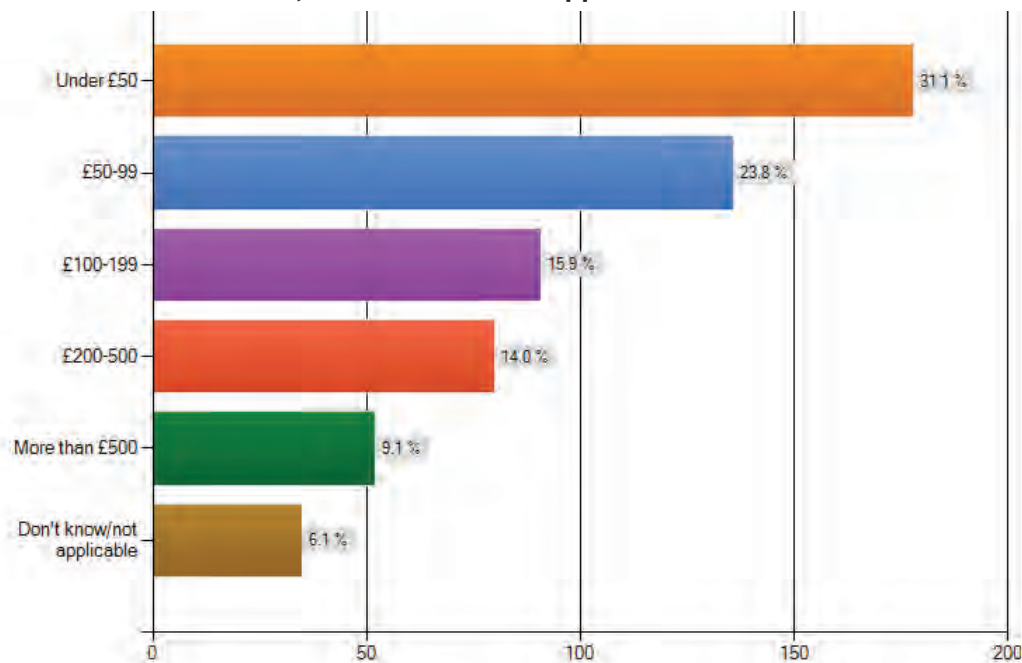
The maintenance cost need to be reviewed to realistic level if the educational institutions in the UK are to be encouraged to spread the quality education they are known for around the world. Expecting student to save tens of thousand in bank account for at least one month will certainly not help.

My parents finance my education so it is inconvenient they only accept money from my account. They normally transfer money to my account 3 times a year not the big whole amount in one go. I believe that if I have sufficient evidence, e.g. my parents' bank statement, that should be acceptable.

Although, I did my A-levels and undergraduate studies in this country, it is still so hard to extend my stay for my postgraduate course. My sponsor is my brother, not my parent. He has been supporting me since I started studying in this country, I was unable to provide evidence that he was my sponsor, apart from a letter from him. I considered to leave to USA to study at one point, to carry on my education.

Figure 6

Excluding the extension application fee, approximately how much did the application process cost you (and any dependents) in the way of additional expenses? Costs might include obtaining translations of documents, travel to biometric appointments or travel to interview
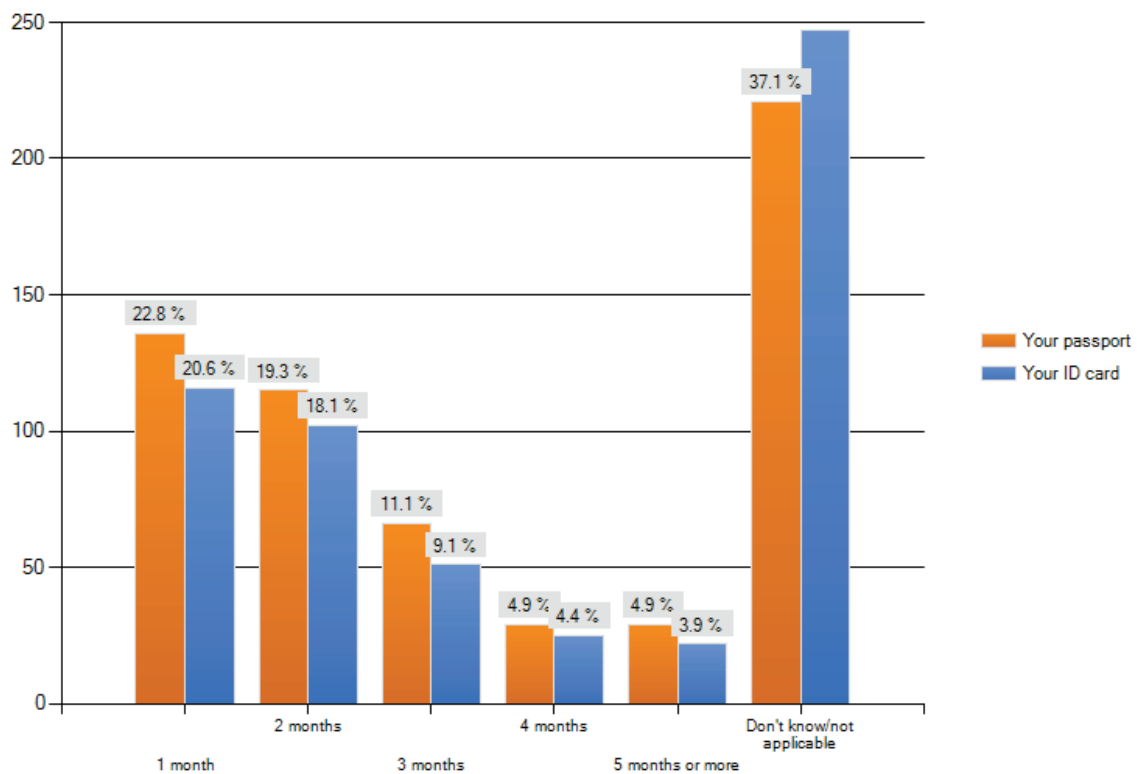
The length of the application process

The data on the **time taken to receive ID cards and passports back** is made less clear by the very large number of "not known/not applicable", although we may have to assume this group had generally not yet received a response to their application at the time of responding. It would seem that about 53% received their passport back within 3 months of applying and 48% received their ID card within this time.

Figure 7

Approximately how long did it take from submitting your application to receiving your passport/ID card?

As we saw in Figure 2 above only 36% thought the process was quick and efficient. Students complained of the **inconvenience and stress** of being without their passports for such long periods of time, and of the lost opportunities and personal difficulties caused.

> *If we are receiving a card and not a stamp in our passports I believe they should at least return the passport after observing it so that the person can travel specially during important and long holidays such as Christmas. Since the process is very long then one should be able to at least leave the country for a certain period of time specially for emergency issues not withdraw the application and apply again from their home country because it is very unfair, after waiting for this long.*

Because I haven't received my extension yet it has denied me so many things both in school and outside the school. I can't get a bus pass, I can't get a job, even my student ID card was restricted to be due on December instead of full 3 years.

My situation is I have to wait for my passport back, in order to apply for Schengen Visa for university group study. It is possible I miss the right time to make appointment, if I can't make sure when my passport comes back. And it also will affect my trip home, sometimes there would be no seats at all even if I booked 3-month earlier before Christmas. So if I could not get my passport back before flight, I lost the money for air ticket and the plans.

It is very hard to do anything, let alone travel, as a foreigner without this proof of identification.

I had to wait 8 months for my passport and within that period had holidays and summer vacation but was not able to go anywhere,

I am not expecting my visa to be issued to me by end of January even though I had applied in mid October mainly because I could not get an earlier appointment for my biometric card. Moreover, this has resulted in me unemployed all this while (3 weeks already) as the employer I was with refused to keep me on because of my status in the country and I am having tough time trying to explain the rules to new (part-time) employers who have been interviewing me.

I may suggest that no need to hold my passport and police registration in away that I can not travel or withdraw money from a bank !

The UK Border Agency spent 4 months to process my application form then after 4 months they refused me on 29-10-2009 and give me deadline 12-11-2009 to make appeal which for me unfair because they make me lose time but they worry about their time. My time is also gold.

By the time I shall get my student visa I would have graduated long before that and would be required another £500 to get a post study visa. This personally I think is not just a waste of money but also waste of time.

Dependants

Although only a small number of students are lone parents accompanied by a child, for those few the new regulatiions can be problematic.

The requirement to prove that a child cannot live with another parent, but has to reside with her mother – UK student – is unreasonably harsh. It is hard to obtain documentary evidence of a child being under the sole responsibility of the student migrant. It would be better if the requirement meant only the need

to provide the consent from a parent that is not travelling together with the student and her child. Consent itself should suffice. Additional evidence may be very cumbersome to obtain, and its admissibility is also problematic in the light of the difference between Family Law in the UK and other countries.

Poor service/racism

Some students clearly felt the service from UKBA staff was not of an acceptable standard.

I feel if the agency charges £565 and calls it premium service then they should be able to provide excellent or rather premium service and train the staff to treat people nicely and also respect people as I felt lot of racism.

I have been struck by the lack of information available and rudeness, inefficiency and poor knowledge of immigration staff I have interacted with.

Impact on perceptions of the UK

Perhaps most worrying were the large number of comments from students about how the process had impacted on their perceptions of the UK and their likelihood of continuing their studies here or encouraging others to.

The regulation governing [the visa extension process] appears inhuman as I am African making huge commitment by paying high fees to come and study in the UK instead of France or the US. Therefore, my approach is that I should be more worried on getting my studies right rather than having to deal with complicated, insensitive visa procedure. Overall, I have the impression that the home office is a big organisation and is not accountable in regards to visa procedure. I am highly tempted in the future to tell my comrades to choose other destination rather than the UK. And I am disappointed as it is a culturally rich and diverse society.

Awful experience, personally I think it will affect the number of international students applying for UK universities. Current students will definitely transfer their unpleasant experiences to their colleagues in their home countries.

They have really made the whole process expensive and difficult for international students. If I have the choice I would have gone to the US or Canada. My visa took 7 long months. It was emotionally and financially frustrating and depressing. It was the worse time in my life since my work place would not give me work unless I got my visa back. It was not an experience I would wish on my worst enemy.

It was too expensive and was bothersome. I almost gave up studying in UK.

Countries like USA, Canada, Australia respect highly skilled post grad students unlike UK... Change your attitudes asap if you have any hope of remaining competitive and earn our respect through our future generations.

England is like my second home, but in regards to treatment I feel I am trying to be made to feel unwanted or even pushed out and deterred from being here, even if as a student or anything else. The whole process and procedure, as well as selecting certain people out of the society of internationals who are resident here is not nice at all... Over the years I have witnessed how the system has changed and become worse. it is an even bigger hassle than ever, and I feel it is needless.

The International students and their parents are bewildered and suffering silently at the hands of the UKBA! The Border Agency is riding rough-shod and is not helpful to the students and the parents who are investing thousands and thousands of pounds (to come and study at the UK Universities) to the British Exchequer. Please, my plea to all those concerned, they are requested to think positively and help international students to finish their studies instead of refusing them visa extensions on flimsy grounds as above during their studies. Either UK Govt should flatly stop/refuse students of some countries to enter/ come to the UK or the Govt. should welcome them thinking of the huge financial investment these international students are bringing into the UK's economy.

I regret wasting my time and money to come to UK to study and not choosing a different country. I had recommended my siblings and close friends to NOT come to UK to study as UK only has an" outwardly welcoming nature" for international students. Luckily I have finished Uni now so I can go back!

(The new 9 month evidence of maintenance) shows honest students from average income homes are no longer welcome to study in the UK.

Conclusion

Without in any way minimising the size, complexity and importance of the task facing the UK Border Agency, the current level of service provided to students attempting to extend their visas from within the UK would appear on the basis of this report to fall far below acceptable standards. It does not help with the UK's attempts to sustain its education industry in the face of growing competition, or to attract and retain skilled migrants, nor will it create the image of Britain we would wish to see amongst the UK's future economic, cultural, trade and diplomatic partners for such a poor service to continue. This is an issue which must be urgently addressed.