

Kevin Foster MP
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30 June 2022

Dear Sir/Madam,

We hope this letter finds you well. We are writing to update you on several current issues that we know will be of interest to you and your members.

Over the course of the past two years, UK Government has supported the higher education sector as it dealt with the impact of the pandemic on student recruitment and retention. This support has taken the form of comprehensive concessions covering immigration and visa policy, as well as communications campaigns, informational material, and bespoke support to individual providers. It is because of this support, along with the world-leading standard of higher education offered by UK universities that we have seen significant growth in volumes of international students and have achieved the International Education Strategy target of hosting 600,000 international students per year ahead of the 2030 ambition.

Student visa processing over the summer period

As you will be aware, UKVI staff across the entire organisation have recently been deployed to case working teams on our Ukraine humanitarian routes since March this year, which has resulted in some applications made on other visa routes, including the Student route, being delayed. At the same time we have also seen a significant surge in volumes of applications from students outside of the usual surge period of July to September. This has seen May intake reach approximately 18,400 applications as compared to May 2021 which saw around 6,900.

We would always encourage students to apply for their Student visa as early as possible, and for institutions to issue Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) in good time to allow students to do so. Since the start of the pandemic we have allowed applications to be made up to six months in advance of a course start date compared to the previous maximum of three months. This policy was adopted formally as part of the Student route which replaced the former Tier 4 study route in October 2020 after extensive engagement in which representative sector bodies cited the increased flexibility it would provide in planning student intakes and peak visa periods.

We are pleased to be able to confirm that Student visa applications are now back within the service standard of 15 working days and UKVI staff continue to return to

study case working teams as we bring in additional resource to handle the surge period. However, we would recommend students intending to make an application over the summer to apply in July if they are able to, rather than waiting until August if they need to travel in time for their September course start date. UKVI are experiencing record-breaking demand and applying as early as possible will ensure students are able to receive a decision on their application in good order and travel according to their course timetable.

We would also like to encourage sponsors to continue to support their students' applications, by helping them ensure they include the correct supporting documents, as a decision on an application from which documents are missing may take longer.

Lastly, on this topic, Priority (PV) and Super Priority Visas (SPV) are currently unavailable due to delays across the visa system more generally following the prioritisation of the response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. Our officials continually monitor application volumes and will update customers when these services resume. In the meantime, students should not delay submitting visa applications in order to wait for the reintroduction of PV or SPV services.

End of distance learning concessions on 30 June

Throughout Covid restrictions, we have supported students and sponsors by allowing students to engage with their course either by distance or blended learning. Presently, students who are in the UK are permitted to follow a blended learning model with some on-campus attendance expected. Students who are sponsored but not present in the UK are permitted to engage entirely by distance learning. These concessions will expire on 30 June.

Outside of these concessions, sponsors are not normally allowed to offer courses consisting entirely of distance learning to sponsored overseas students under the Student route. Students who have been granted a Student visa would not be permitted to study their course from overseas unless taking part in a permitted study abroad programme.

However, we accept recent visa processing delays may mean some students who began their course online from overseas prior to 30 June may still be awaiting a decision on their application at the point the concession expires.

As such, if an application has been made before 30 June and this has not yet been decided due to delays, UKVI will exceptionally allow sponsors to not withdraw sponsorship provided the student will travel to the UK as soon as they are able to enrol and continue study in-person if their visa is subsequently granted.

Furthermore, if an application has been submitted before 30 June, any short period of study which takes place overseas, before a student departs for the UK, as a result of delays after that date will not prevent a student from being eligible for the Graduate route in future, as they would otherwise fail to meet the study in the UK requirement for courses lasting 12 months or less. Sponsors are also able to agree a short authorised absence or deferral from a course as set out in sponsor guidance in line with their academic engagement policy if this is preferable for record keeping duties and, in due course, notification a sponsored student meets the requirements of the

Graduate route.

Students who are still awaiting a visa decision which has been delayed, but who have not yet started their course, should await a decision on their visa and only begin studying after arrival in the UK. If they are delayed in travelling to the UK as a result, sponsors should be mindful of their reporting duties around delayed enrolment as set out in row C of the “changes to student circumstances” table in Document 2 of the sponsor guidance. Case study 5 in the same document gives an example of when a new enrolment date can be agreed upon without withdrawing sponsorship as a result of travel delays outside of a student’s control.

Students who hold a Student visa and who are in a vacation period, or whose study for this term has ceased on or before 30 June, are not required to enter the UK on their current permission until they are due to resume their course in the next term or academic year. Those who have come to the end of their course and who wish to qualify for the Graduate route will however be required to enter on or before that date and meet the other requirements of the route in order to make a successful application.

CAS allocation requests and forward planning

Lastly, we would like to take the opportunity to remind institutions to ensure they are undertaking robust planning and preparation of their obligations under the immigration system when looking to recruit students from overseas, particularly when seeking to rely more heavily on multiple intakes throughout the academic year.

UKVI have seen increasing cases of sponsors requesting several in-year requests for further CAS allocations, often for high numbers and within several weeks of expected course start dates for which those CAS are intended to be used for. If you are planning to make such requests, you should provide UKVI with details of your recruitment plans and measures being taken to safeguard immigration compliance in order to minimise further questions from operational staff. We would also encourage you to consider practicalities for both students preparing their application and UKVI decision making teams when issuing CAS shortly before a course start date.

With our very best wishes.

Yours sincerely,



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