



UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) update

1. Survey on impact of policy changes

Thank you to all who took the time to complete the survey on the impact of the July policy changes. This data we receive adds real value to our lobbying work with UKVI. It also helps us to better articulate the impact of Tier 4 on colleges with partners who are helping to represent us both in and out of government. To this end, we will be contacting you again shortly with another Tier 4 survey request and thank you in advance for your support with this.

We received a good sample from the sector through 43 respondents. The figures below are based on an approximation of these returns on a national level.

Some headlines from the survey include:

- Tier 4 is a critically important route for colleges with at least 8,000 FE international colleges studying on a Tier 4 student visa.
- The major markets for Tier 4 students at an FE college are China and the Middle East. Colleges also report that Vietnam is a growing market.
- 90% of these students are studying on a T4 General visa
- 10% coming on a Child visa, which illustrates the importance of this route for colleges' and the impact the removal, will have on international recruitment activity.
- Approximately, half of Tier 4 students are studying on A levels or International Foundation Year programme, with 77% of students progressing to university. This demonstrates the importance of progression courses for the FE international offer and the potential damage caused by the new policy requiring L3 students to return home before resubmitting their visa.
- International students at colleges are overwhelmingly successful with 93% completing and 87% succeeding.
- The financial loss to the sector caused by the changes is estimated (by colleges) at around £8 to £11 million (it is difficult to get an exact figure due to the variations of income generated by international work from college to college).
- The speed of the changes has caused a great deal of concern amongst colleges and our international students and partners.
- Although the majority of international students study on a two year programme the loss of the option to add extra EFL courses at the start of a programme diminishes the FE offer and could impact on student success.



2. Minimum English Language levels

We met with UKVI recently to discuss their proposed plans to increase the minimum English Language as an initial piece of consultation on the change. A few points to feedback from the meeting:

- UKVI is considering replacing the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) with IELTS to define English levels.
- No specific levels were mentioned but based on conversations with colleagues from UKCISA and UUK it appears that UKVI is considering increasing the minimum level for sub-degree level from 4 to 5.5 and degree level from 5.5 to 6.5
- We explained that we can't see any particular reason for this and questioned if there was any evidence that indicates that this would reduce abuse.
- We also advocated for a slightly more nuanced approach that would take into account the actual requirements of the course. Different L3 programmes depending on their academic or vocational focus may require different reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Insisting that students meet the minimum level in each of the 4 English areas rather than an average score would not take this into account.
- Any changes need to be carefully phased in with full consultation and communication with the Education sector
- Any changes need to be fully and clearly communicated to international partners and we need to be conscious that publicity materials for this academic year and recruitment cycle have been published and distributed.
- The changes will undoubtedly harm our ability to recruit international students and make the UK a less attractive study destination.
- AoC will work with other sector representative organisations to call on the Home Office to carefully consider the ramifications of any changes in minimum English language levels on the UK's education sector.

Please send john.mountford@aoe.co.uk any possible ramifications these changes could have on your international student numbers, income and partnerships.

3. UKVI meeting

We recently met with John Thompson, UKVI's Head of Migration Policy, and his officials which allowed us to discuss the following:

- Our disappointment with the language used by the Minister when announcing the July policy changes which alluded to abuse by public FE colleges. Colleges take their work as Tier 4 sponsors seriously and are only interested in recruiting genuine students.
- UKVI acknowledged that FE colleges are generally compliant and collaborative in their approach to Tier 4 and working with the Home Office.



- However, they do have concerns around the sector's resourcing and expertise and feel that those colleges who are recruiting students must have the necessary capacity to effectively recruit genuine students whilst closely monitoring their agents and systems.
- They have particular concerns about enrolling students who are already in the UK and who are now looking for a new sponsor. This isn't to say that these students aren't genuine but extra vigilance should be employed.
- We expressed our concerns that UKVI still seem unable to differentiate between private and state colleges. John Thompson reassured us that they did appreciate the different sectors but that more needed to be done to communicate this to ECOs in country. AoC would be happy to help explain the FE sector through UKVI training programmes. *Colleges should also be encouraged to visit ECOs when on overseas trips to help explain our sector's offer and robust approach to Tier 4 sponsorship.*
- Compliance rates will be more robustly applied and it is very important that sponsors meet the 10% level. If sponsors have any concerns about their compliance rates it is better that begin an early conversation with UKVI through AoC.
- *We continue to have concerns about some ECO decisions and John Thompson is very keen to have examples of questionable decisions made by ECO. **Please send john.mountford@aac.co.uk any examples of contestable ECO decisions***
- AoC continues to argue that the current approach of basing policy on sector doesn't reflect and reward good practice. A fairer system would be to reward individual sponsors based on their compliance records and not based on their entire sector. UKVI aspire to develop a system along these lines but they are not yet ready to do so.
- UKVI are keen to work with the sector and would be very happy to establish a working group of colleges to help facilitate ongoing communication.
- We also raised the issue of Educational Oversight and UKVI are set on applying the Ofsted Level 1 and 2 threshold for Tier 4 sponsors. They will consider exceptional circumstances but generally they are stepping back from taking an 'holistic' approach and will be guided by policy and regulations
- AoC will continue to contribute to the UKVI stakeholder group
- There will be regular conversations between UKVI and AoC members
- AoC also recently met with Lord Lucas who is supportive of colleges' international work and has agreed to represent the sector to Home Office Ministers