

# DESTINATION FOR EDUCATION RESPONSE TO THE HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE'S INQUIRY ON THE HOME OFFICE'S PREPAREDNESS FOR COVID-19 (CORONAVIRUS)

## Introduction

1. Destination for Education welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry into the Home Office's preparedness for COVID-19 (Coronavirus).
2. This response sets out our feedback on the Home Office's ongoing response to COVID-19, specifically focusing on the immigration and visa system and how it has impacted the higher education sector and education pathway providers.

## About Destination for Education

3. Destination for Education is a coalition of three pathway providers working together to ensure that Britain's higher education sector can compete globally. These pathway providers include: INTO, Kaplan and Study Group.
4. Pathway providers prepare international students for study at UK universities. We help international students to develop the study and language skills they need to succeed at degree level which they have not had the opportunity to attain in their local education systems. A full list of these institutions can be found in **Appendix A**.

## Response

The Home Office's ongoing response to the pandemic; specifically regarding immigration and visas

5. We understand that COVID-19 has put an unprecedented level of strain on the Government and the UK's public services. Our number one priority is public safety and we fully support the Government's effort to suppress this virus.
6. The Home Office is a crucial stakeholder for Destination for Education and the wider international education sector. Its role in managing Britain's immigration and visa functions has a significant impact on the way international students can arrive, live and study in the UK and subsequently, has a major impact on our sector.
7. We have welcomed a number of steps the Home Office has taken since the start of the pandemic, including the introduction of the new Student Route visa (which opened in October 2020), the extension of visas for students who were unable to return home due to COVID-19, and permitting visa switching from the UK for students currently residing here for study.
8. However, we believe more could be done by the Home Office to ensure the higher education sector continues to function properly and grow amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.
9. With this in mind, we would like to outline to the Committee the issues we have faced, and are still facing, with regards to the Home Office's response to the pandemic, specifically focussing on the immigration and visa system.

## **Lack of communication and notice to education providers and students**

10. Whilst we welcome some of the Home Office's response to the pandemic, the lack of notice given to the education sector on changes to visa and immigration guidance for international students has been concerning.
11. Given the unprecedented circumstances the sector is currently facing, advance notice of Home Office guidance to student visas for example would have helped the sector and pathway providers prepare and translate the necessary guidance to pass on to students, and in turn ensure prospective students have the most stress-free and organised student journey possible.
12. On numerous occasions the Home Office's guidance has also been issued with large amounts of complex, and sometimes unnecessary administrative detail (excluding the additional COVID-19 guidance). We are concerned that the complex layers of detail will bury the excellent progress that has been made in streamlining the application process for students looking to enter the UK, and hinder the performance of the UK's education export sector.
13. This has been coupled with a lack of communication issued to student's in prospective markets. We believe that the higher education sector and Home Office, alongside other key government departments such as the Department for International Trade and Department for Education, should be issuing a single coherent, reassuring message to prospective students who are considering coming to study in the UK. On the occasions when this collaboration has occurred, the higher education sector has been able to effectively deliver and promote messaging from the government to prospective students in countries across the world. Given the recent developments with COVID-19 infections rising through Winter, this reassurance has become more important than ever.
14. As noted above, this lack of notice and communication could result in deterring international students from coming to the UK to study in the upcoming academic years – something which has already been fed back first-hand from international students in a number of different countries. Prior to the pandemic, studies showed that increased unnecessary barriers for international students have come at a cost to the UK economy; a study from ExEdUK and EY estimated the UK's perceived falling status as a higher education study destination came at a cumulative cost of £9bn to GDP<sup>1</sup> over a 6 year period. These barriers are harmful to the profitability of the education export sector in the medium term, the sustainability of the UK's higher education sector in the long term and could potentially have long-term consequences for the perceived status of the UK as a desirable destination for international students.
15. This is in addition to the ongoing financial pressures facing UK universities during the pandemic. Research undertaken by the British Council has highlighted that UK universities should expect a sharp fall in the number of international students coming to the UK to study in the upcoming academic year, which in turn could cause a loss of income of up to £460m from students from east Asia alone<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Supporting International Education in the UK, ExEdUK, June 2016

<sup>2</sup>[UK universities face at least a £463 million shortfall in coming academic year](#), June 2020, British Council

## Conclusions

16. We believe that with the necessary actions the Home Office could make the experience of studying in the UK even more positive for students and sponsors, helping universities, the wider International Education sector and the local economies they benefit during these uncertain times.
17. There is also a shortening window of opportunity to capitalise on more restrictive measures that have been placed on international students' ability to travel and study in competitor markets, by doing all we can to present the UK as the number one destination for international study.
18. The impact of COVID-19, alongside the uncertain consequences for higher education providers due to Brexit, could result in a relegation of the UK's 'ranking' as a leading provider of education to the international markets. It is crucial that we take collective steps to mitigate to the fullest extent possible, the impact of these kinds of damaging scenarios.
19. We have summarised our recommendations below:
  - i. Improve the Home Office's relationship and communications with all providers so that they have ample time to inform current and prospective international students of changes to the visa process.
  - ii. Ensure that the Home Office is issuing clear and prompt communication to enable universities and pathway providers to produce an agreed communications strategy and single coherent message to deliver to prospective students who may be considering other competitor markets over the UK.
  - iii. Reduce the high levels of bureaucracy associated with current immigration rules for international study, which has so far proven to be a waste of resources for both sponsors and UKVI.
20. We urge the Home Affairs Committee to call on the Government to take these recommendations on board in order to strengthen and protect the future of the UK's higher education export sector.
21. We would also welcome a separate inquiry undertaken by the committee into the student visa regime.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **STUDY GROUP'S UNIVERSITY PARTNERS:**

- Durham University
- Cardiff University
- Coventry University London
- University of Huddersfield
- Keele University
- Kingston University, London
- Lancaster University
- Leeds Beckett University
- Liverpool John Moores University
- Royal Holloway, University of London
- The University of Sheffield
- University of Leeds
- University of Lincoln
- University of Strathclyde
- University of Surrey
- University of Sussex

### **KAPLAN'S UNIVERSITY PARTNERS:**

- University of Nottingham
- University of Glasgow
- University of Liverpool
- University of York
- University of Bristol
- University of Essex
- University of the West of England, Bristol
- Bournemouth University
- Nottingham Trent University
- University of Brighton
- University of Birmingham
- Queen Mary University of London
- University of Westminster
- City, University London
- Cranfield University

### **INTO'S UNIVERSITY PARTNERS:**

- University of East Anglia
- University of Exeter
- Newcastle University
- The University of Manchester
- Queen's University Belfast
- City University
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- University of Gloucestershire
- University of Stirling