



The All Party Parliamentary Group for International Students

13 May 2024

The Rt Hon James Cleverley MP
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Students regarding the policy of your Department in relation to **postgraduate students** in the UK and their family members, following representations we have received from some of the most prestigious higher education institutions on the unintended consequences of the decision to bar PGT students from eligibility for dependants' visas.

We do understand the background to this decision but ask that you consider changes to this policy which will address your concerns, while maintaining the viability and financial sustainability of key postgraduate courses, and institutions.

As you know, the UK is fortunate to be one of the most sought-after destinations for higher education and vocational training by students and emerging professionals from around the world. Our traditions of excellence and scholarship, our appetite for innovation and industry, and our friendly and welcoming communities have for many years put this country in pole position in the global race to educate and attract the most talented and most ambitious individuals to our shores.

As well as sharing a **£41.9 billion** (HEPI/London Economics) net dividend to the national economy each year, international students support the viability of courses in key subjects such as business, engineering, technology and health sciences. The breadth and quality of the UK's Master's degrees is one of our critical competitive advantages in the global education marketplace as they can be completed in a single year and can command a significant premium, particularly for our specialist institutions.

There are many courses that are designed for professionals who are already quite advanced in their careers and looking to the UK to develop the next-level skills, confidence and connections required to step up in their chosen fields. These mid-career students in their late 20s, 30s or beyond are more likely to have dependent

family members, and will choose study destinations that allow family members to join them for the study period.

The APPG held a roundtable last month at which we heard from some of the most prestigious higher education institutions in the country, all of whom raised the alarm about the impact that your Department's restriction of **dependant visas** since January has already begun to have on the financial sustainability and international reputation of many of their most valuable postgraduate programmes. It is changing the profile away from experienced professionals and emerging leaders, threatening the viability of key courses, and contributing to the growing financial stress experienced across university education as the cost of living increases.

The roundtable discussed a range of proposals, building on the commitment of your predecessor to "*work with universities over the course of the next year to design an alternative approach ... while continuing to reduce net migration.*" Many at the roundtable, but especially those representing smaller specialist institutions, urged us to act quickly to stem the decline that institutions are experiencing to their global reputations and the viability of their programmes.

Firstly, we recommend that you establish a **small pilot group** of postgraduate education providers to explore the development of a scheme by which **maintenance funds** are deposited in a dedicated fund in advance of the application for a visa, ringfenced, and gradually drawn down over the course of their programme of study to pay for living costs which include the support of dependants. For this limited pilot, dependants would be permitted to join the postgraduate student in the UK provided the requisite amount of maintenance funds for the programme length were securely deposited for all relevant applicants.

Secondly, we recommend that you expand the definition of "**government scholarship or sponsorship**" in your operational guidance for Home Office staff to cover the full range of government-funded organisations and sponsored scholarship programmes understood in the common parlance of the sector to be included within such a description. Specifically, dependants should be permitted to accompany students to the UK who enjoy the financial support not only of a central government department, but also of regional governments, public sector employers and state-owned businesses such as the very well-known example of **Saudi Aramco** – a regular and reliable sponsor of international students who are currently caught out by the restrictive definition in use. We understand that the UK is in the foothills of a very promising and rewarding long-term strategic partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in relation to education, for which the overly or arbitrarily prescriptive application of rules such as these may prove diplomatically unhelpful.

Finally, we urge you to open the exemption within the rules to **students funded through employers**, as we understand almost all of these students to have clauses in their funding agreements requiring their return to employment in their home country after the completion of their studies. Many well-established business postgraduate programmes recruit primarily employer-funded students and have been disproportionately impacted by the changes. Given the positive contribution of these students to the UK's soft power and business relationships, they represent a significant asset at no cost to our net migration balance.

We would be pleased to discuss these recommendations with you at your convenience, and are grateful for your careful consideration of this letter. We believe the above proposals to be moderate and balanced measures which would have an undetectable impact on the ONS's migration statistics but which would nevertheless provide vital lifelines to some of our most prestigious and valued postgraduate programmes.

Yours sincerely,



Lord Karan Bilimoria CBE

Co-Chair
APPG for International Students



Paul Blomfield
MP for Sheffield Central

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