



Home Office

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Tier 4 sponsors network – open letter

Dear partner,

We hope you and your families are well, and would like to thank you for your continued efforts and willingness to adapt during these challenging times.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been an unparalleled event, and the Government is all too aware of the global hardship it has caused. We recognise Covid-19 will have a substantial impact on global and UK economies, and will affect the operational environment of the higher education sector. The sector is one of our country's best assets, and this is why we have been working closely with you to monitor the impacts of Covid-19.

In the International Education Strategy (IES), the Government committed to increasing UK educational exports to £35 Billion by 2030, and increasing the number of international students within the UK to 600,000 per year. These ambitious targets remain, and we will ensure the sector continues to attract talented and high potential students from around the globe. We wish to assure you we stand ready to help our world-leading sector to mitigate the challenges posed by the pandemic and the possible reductions in international student numbers. As you will be aware, Sir Steve Smith was recently appointed as the International Education Champion to support us in achieving these ambitious goals. The role of International Education Champion will be to work with organisations across the breadth of the education sector, including universities. The Champion will also target priority regions worldwide to build networks and promote the UK as the international education partner of choice.

We have been clear, where possible institutions and students should not be penalised for factors outside of their control. To support the sector, we have adopted an unprecedented approach in publishing temporary concessions through our Tier 4 coronavirus guidance. We will continue to keep these concessions under review. Published guidance can be viewed here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-tier-4-sponsors-migrants-and-short-term-students>.

Through this guidance, we have exceptionally permitted individuals within the UK on Short-term study or Visit visas, to switch into the Tier 4 route, provided they meet the necessary requirements of the route. Students intending to switch from the Visit or Short-term study visa routes must have entered the UK prior to 31 July. We have also permitted Tier 4 students at all academic levels to apply for further courses of study within the UK, provided they can demonstrate they meet the academic progression requirement. This increased switching provision will be in place until the launch of the Student route under the new points-based immigration system, at which time it will become policy.

Under normal circumstances, a further course of study would need to commence within 28 days of the visa expiry date; however, this requirement was relaxed to permit students to apply for further study commencing no later than 31 December. We have also extended the exemptions to the principle of academic progression, so as to allow those who require more time to complete their course of study due to the impact of Covid-19, or who would have otherwise had to make a visa application overseas to study a further course at the same level where this represents a genuine career aspiration, to make applications to the Tier 4 route. The exceptions to the academic progression rule include permitting students to complete their course if they are downgrading within an integrated programme to qualify with the lower level qualification. These concessions ensure no student who has been unable to travel due to restrictions on flights and border closures, is unable to regularise their status in the UK.

To further support the sector, we have announced concessions permitting distance learning – which is usually prohibited under the Tier 4 route – will continue for the duration of the 2020/21 academic year. Not only can students access tuition remotely in accordance with social distancing measures, but they can also commence new courses of study via distance learning, either from within the UK or abroad; this allows students to continue to study via a blended learning approach for the entirety of the 2020/21 academic year. Moreover, students will be able to commence a degree at undergraduate level or above via distance learning, and still be eligible for the forthcoming Graduate route (explained below), providing they enter the UK prior to 6 April 2021, and complete their course within the UK.

In addition, a temporary extension has been granted to allow Higher Education Providers (HEP) to self-assess the English language ability of their students; this encapsulates students applying for pre-sessional courses, in addition to students studying at degree level or above. To ease the reporting duties an institution is required to adhere to, the attendance monitoring policy has also been relaxed in accordance with the challenges posed by Covid-19. Institutions are not required to report students if they miss expected contact points due to the impacts of Covid-19, and can record online study as contact. Institutions are also not required to withdraw sponsorship for individuals who defer their studies for a period in excess of 60 days due to the impacts of Covid-19. These measures enable institutions to retain their current international students, instead of being required to withdraw sponsorship under the rules of the Tier 4 route.

As part of the Covid-19 extensions, we extended the visas of individuals who were unable to leave the UK within the validity of their leave due to travel restrictions and border closures. The visa extensions were initially restricted to Chinese nationals who were unable to return to China due to the stringent lockdowns in mainland China and travel restrictions imposed on the Chinese border. Due to the severity of the global pandemic, the extensions were extended to all nationalities in March, as global travel restrictions and lockdowns made it particularly difficult for individuals within the UK to return to their home countries. Visas were further extended in May until 31 July as the global situation had not improved to the extent which extensions could be discontinued.

Within the last month, the global position on travel has improved significantly and the UK has come further out of lockdown. Many borders have reopened, and flights have resumed, as such we do not believe it is suitable to continue extending visas under the Covid-19 concessions, although we remain clear in our position confirming individuals will not be penalised for overstaying their visa if they are unable to leave the UK prior to 31 July. We have implemented a one-month grace period for all individuals whose leave has expired since 24 January or has been extended on the basis of the Covid-19 extensions, which will ensure any period of overstaying between 31 July and 31 August will not be subject to sanctions. Students who are unable to leave the UK prior to 31 August, but intend to leave a short time afterwards, can apply for an indemnity which will be considered on a case by case basis. Further guidance can be viewed [here](#).

On 13 July, the Government published further details on the UK's new points-based immigration System. As part of this system, a new future Student route is set to be launched in October 2020, followed by the launch of the new Graduate route in the summer of 2021. There will be no limit on the number of international students who can come to the UK to study, and we will continue to seek to increase the number of international students in higher education as set out in the International Education Strategy, published in March 2019. Details of the Student route and the Graduate route can be viewed within the policy statement [here](#).

To help prepare EU students who will need to apply through the points-based immigration system from January 2021, the Government has created tailored guidance, which can be found [here](#).

The new Student route will build on the current Tier 4 system, in line with the Law Commission's report on simplifying the Immigration Rules. The core tenets of the Tier 4 route will remain: sponsorship at a licensed provider, demonstration of English language ability, and the need for the student to support themselves in the UK. However, the Student route will improve on the Tier 4 system, streamlining processes for sponsoring institutions and their students, creating clearer pathways for students, and ensuring the UK remains competitive in a changing educational global market. As part of the Student route, we will extend – from three months to six months – the period in which a student outside of the UK can apply for a visa prior to the commencement of their course; this change will enable students to apply earlier and provide certainty of their immigration status prior to commencing their course. We intend to bring this change in from October 2020.

We also want to ensure we attract and retain highly talented students so they continue to contribute to the UK post-study, which is why we are also launching the new Graduate route in the summer of 2021. This route will allow those who complete a degree at undergraduate level or above with a UK Higher Education Provider with a track record of compliance, to stay in the UK for two years (three years for PhD graduates) following their studies, and to work at any skill level or switch into work routes if they find a suitable job. This represents a significant improvement in our offer to international students and will help ensure our university sector remains competitive internationally.

In the meantime, we shall continue to monitor worldwide border, travel, and public health restrictions, and shall resume normal services as soon as we are able to. We recognise international students make a significant commitment to embark on a course of study at a UK higher education provider and have made moves to reassure the international student community they can apply for, and receive, their Tier 4 visas in good time before commencing their programme of study in the UK.

From 1 June, we began reopening Visa Application Centres through a phased approach. The majority of our overseas application centres are now open, with 154 locations live across the globe. Where centres are open, UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) are processing applications as quickly as possible. For the remaining locations we remain committed to opening these as soon as local restrictions allow.

As part of the visa application process, students are required to submit their biometric information (fingerprints and a facial image). To assist in processing this season's in-country student application peak, UKVI will be reusing fingerprint biometrics previously provided by some of our Tier 4 customers since July 2015. This will enable UKVI to make decisions on applications without the need for customers to attend service centres in person to enrol biometrics.

In order to improve how students collect and receive their Biometric Residence Permits (BRPs), we are encouraging all Higher Education Providers to sign up to the Alternative Collection Location (ACL) scheme. The ACL scheme was set up in 2015 to allow overseas students to collect their BRPs directly from their institution, and 80 percent of the sector now implement this scheme. In light of social distancing concerns, a larger uptake in institutions on the ACL scheme will reduce pressure on local Post Offices which usually accommodate large queues of overseas students, and increase protection of local communities from the spread of Covid-19. If 100 percent of the sector were to sign up to the ACL scheme, then we could significantly reduce this risk. If you are not already registered on the ACL scheme, you can submit a request to become an ACL to the following email address:

HEICollection@homeoffice.gov.uk.

UKVI are also exploring the possibility of offering an alternative 'Post Arrival Process' for ACLs: this will allow UKVI to deliver BRPs directly to students at their UK residential addresses, rather than requiring students to collect BRPs from ACLs in person. To take advantage of this Post Arrival Process, ACLs will need to confirm with UKVI the UK addresses of their students. ACLs will still be required to carry out the normal validation checks on students – such as confirming student arrival in the UK, providing student UK residential address and email contact details, and informing UKVI – though this will be able to be done remotely where concerns over social distancing arise.

We hope this letter reassures you of the immigration concessions the Government continues to make to support the education sector at this time.

With our very best wishes.

Yours sincerely,



Kevin Foster MP
Minister for Future Borders and Immigration



Michelle Donelan MP
Minister for Universities