UK tightens rules at FE colleges

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The UK Home Office has announced a series of measures to restrict non-EU students at publicly funded FE colleges, including the removal of work rights and progression routes, drawing criticism from the international education industry.

Under the new rules, presented to the House of Commons yesterday in a written statement by Immigration Minister James Brokenshire, non-EU students will no longer be able to work part-time during studies from August. Currently, students at publicly funded FE are permitted to work 10 hours per week.

Non-EU students at FE colleges will be prevented from extending studies in the UK unless they are at a registered institution with a formal link to a university. Brokenshire confirmed that students at embedded colleges on pathway programmes to progress into higher education will be protected. Furthermore, the validity of Tier 4 visas for further education study will also be reduced from the current lengths of three years to two years.

The reforms will also prevent non-EU students from applying for a work visa after study at FE college level unless they leave the country first.

Brokenshire said the rules were being introduced because of increased evidence of fraud in the publicly funded FE college sector, including immigration advisers offering colleges visas as a means to work in the UK.

³Immigration officers want to sell illegal access to the UK jobs market and there are plenty of people willing to buy,⁴ said the Minister. ⁵Hard-working taxpayers who are helping to pay for publicly funded colleges expect them to be providing top-class education, not a back door to a British work visa.

³Our reforms which include introducing English language testing, removing sponsorship rights from hundreds of bogus colleges, and restricting students’ access to the jobs market are all [part] of our plan to control immigration for the benefit of Britain.⁶

However, Martin Doel, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges (AoC), which represents the publicly funded FE institutions, staunchly defended the sector and called for urgent reconsideration.

³International student make an important financial and educational contribution to the country and colleges take their work as sponsors of non-EU students very seriously,⁶ said Doel. ³Publically funded, Ofsted-inspected further education colleges provide high-quality courses for all students, not least international students. Colleges have well-established and stringent attendance systems in place to mitigate against any potential abuse and the sector is keen to see any evidence that it is being used as a ‘back door for bogus students’.

Doel said the changes of progression and extension rules would ultimately limit options for international students and affect the whole education sector. ³Preventing international FE students continuing to study in the UK after they have finished their studies will limit the progression of students from colleges to universities. The government risks seriously restricting the UK’s ability to attract international students. A-levels and International Foundation Year courses represent
legitimate study routes for international students with many going on to successfully complete degrees at top-ranking universities.²

Over 70 per cent of AoC members offer Level 3 courses and higher education programmes to international students, according to the results of a member survey published at the recent AoC International Conference.

Graham Able, Chair of Exporting Education UK (ExEd), which represents institutions from a cross section of the international education industry, criticised the lack of sector involvement in the drafting of legislation.

³Once again the Home Office has announced new rules for international students without proper consultation or apparent concern for the devastating impact they will have on colleges and universities across the UK. These rules will place impossible obstacles in the path of international students hoping to progress through sixth form and FE into UK higher education, and will drive them by their thousands into the open arms of our global competitors.³ He added that British students could be threatened by the potential closure of courses that are sustained by international student enrolments.

³The UK education sector is complex, interconnected and sensitive to change. Due to the failure of the Home Office to consult with those who understand it best, these proposals are ill conceived and have not been fully thought through,² said Able.

³If implemented in their current form, they will fatally undermine the UK's attractiveness as a destination for international study. The damage to our sector and our standing in the world could take more than a decade to undo. We urge the Government to reconsider this policy and to work with the sector on a balanced approach to achieving its aims.²

The changes are due to be implemented in the autumn. A Home Office spokesperson confirmed to StudyTravel Magazine that non-EU students at universities are not affected by the new rules.

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