

UCAS evidence for an inspection of the immigration system as it relates to the higher education sector, Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration – November 2021

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for post-18 education. This service spans undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship pathways, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories, with more than 400 different verified qualifications, to access UK higher education (HE).

At the heart of UCAS' strategy is our ambition to connect the world to UK higher education. UCAS is the single largest channel for international students entering UK study. Over the past decade, we have helped 1.3 million students from around the world secure their place in UK higher education. Approximately 95% of undergraduate entrants from the EU, and 60% of entrants from outside the EU, apply through UCAS.

Myriad by UCAS, our new single postgraduate gateway under the trusted UCAS brand, is now live. It allows international postgraduate applicants to search courses, research universities, make multiple applications, get matched to funding, and find jobs and accommodation all in one place. We aspire for Myriad to have a wide, diverse user base in support of the International Education Strategy's objectives. Since launch, the platform has attracted users from 128 countries.

UCAS welcomes the Independent Chief Inspector's inspection of the immigration system as it relates to the higher education sector, and shares our aim of improving the experience of international students wishing to benefit from UK HE. As indicated in the February 2021 update of the UK Government's International Education Strategy, UCAS has a role to play, in collaboration with the Department for Education and the higher education sector "to ensure there is clear, more accessible information for international students wishing to study in the UK. This will include information and advice tailored to students' needs, including links to the immigration system."

To help inform the Independent Chief Inspector's work, we are pleased to submit the following document, which focuses on how UCAS, alongside the Home Office and other government and sector partners, can help ensure the robustness of interactions between the UK's immigration system and the higher education sector, as well as the quality of the experience of international students dealing with immigration-related matters as part of their study journeys.

Recommendations

- Improve communication and engagement channels between the Home Office and the higher education sector by forming a joint group between the Home Office, higher education sector representatives and UCAS to promote a joined-up journey and experience for international students, and to ensure international students are receiving clear, consistent and accurate information on the Student visa process from trusted sources

- Ensure the wider journey for international students is a core consideration for admissions reform activity being led by the Department for Education (DfE). While DfE indicated international students “were not currently in scope” of its consultation on admissions reform conducted earlier this year, any changes to how domestic students apply to UK HE will inevitably impact on international students – including the ways in which international students interact with the immigration system
 - In our [Reimagining UK Admissions report](#), UCAS proposes four options that will help maintain the UK’s competitiveness as an international study destination and provide certainty for international students
- Continue the collaborative efforts between the Home Office and the higher education sector to ensure the UK’s immigration offer to international students does not impede on the challenges these students may continue to face in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to articulate that the UK is a welcoming place to study for international students

What does UCAS know about how international students interact with the immigration system as part of their application journey?

- In 2020, UCAS undertook research on the requirements and expectations of students related to international student recruitment. As part of this work, a survey was sent out to 330 international undergraduate and postgraduate students from eight key countries and regions (China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Malaysia, the United States of America, and Hong Kong) who are currently studying in the UK.
 - When asked which parts of the decision-making process and application they found most challenging, 42% of students who applied directly to a higher education provider, as well as 27% of students who applied through UCAS, and 27% of students who applied via an education agent or professional adviser, indicated this was the completion of the Student visa application. As UCAS provides the highest overall positive experience relative to other application routes, according to students surveyed, there is an opportunity to leverage UCAS’ products and services to provide international students with the support they may need through the Student visa application process.
 - The top areas where students would have liked help with the Student visa application include a thorough understanding of the process itself; the duration of the process; a greater understanding of what needs to be provided as part of the application process, as well as assistance in preparing the documents required for the application.
- In 2021, we undertook additional research on the experiences of international students applying to UK higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. 54% of respondents indicated that future employability in their country of study was an important factor in making decisions about their study destination. We applaud the launch of the Graduate route earlier this year, which will help support international graduate employability.
- As part of the information, advice and guidance [offered on its website](#) aimed at applicants, UCAS does provide some information on the Student visa process, and signposts to the appropriate UK Government websites pertaining to the Student visa.

What can be done to improve the ways in which international students interact with the immigration system?

- With the International Education Strategy commitment to improve the information international students receive as part of the higher education application process, there is an opportunity for the Home Office to work more closely with higher education sector bodies and stakeholders, including UCAS, to provide applicants with clear, consistent and accurate information on the Student visa process. While we have appreciated initial interactions with the Home Office and UKVI on possible solutions, we would welcome greater engagement with government officials to ensure the links between the application process and the immigration system are appropriate, recognising the value UCAS can bring through acting as the largest gateway for international students entering UK HE.
- Through its products and services such as the [UCAS Hub](#) for undergraduate applicants, and the [Myriad by UCAS](#) platform for international postgraduate applicants, UCAS is well placed to work with the Home Office and others to provide international applicants with tailored information that meets their needs. We would welcome the opportunity to further collaborate with the Home Office and use our communication channels, such as e-mail messages to applicants and virtual and in-person events, to transmit messages the Home Office and UKVI wish to communicate to international applicants.

More information

UCAS is ready to expand on any of the points in this document by participating in other activities the Independent Chief Inspector is undertaking as part of this inspection, and by meeting with the Independent Chief Inspector and his team to provide additional information.

We regularly update our [consultations page](#) on [ucas.com](#) to reflect our recent work in informing policy makers and other stakeholders' activities.