

Study destinations such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand have recently been concentrating on finding ways to streamline their student visa processes as part of wider promotion campaigns to encourage international students to their shores. However, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in September last year, the USA has been forced to take a fresh look at its visa issuing procedures.

Since last September, the USA has introduced extra security checks for students from certain countries, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. Visa applications from students in these countries now take longer to process in order to check applicants' details against government watch lists. So far, this new policy has resulted in delays for some students. "The effect has been that students must apply earlier to assure the receipt of their visas so they can arrive in the USA to begin classes on time," comments Nancy Lemelman, Director of Admissions at Mount Ida College in the USA.

It is not only Middle Eastern markets that have been affected. "Even with complete documentation and the form I-20, some students have travelled to Bogotá to get their visas but have been refused," says Henry Caro, from Learning-Estudios en el Exterior in Colombia.

The terrorist attacks have had a significant effect on US immigration policy over the last few months and existing plans to introduce a student tracking system have now been accelerated and are due to come into effect by the end of the year (see right). However, the absence of a comprehensive list of requirements for US student visa applicants means that many students with the correct documentation can be refused a visa if they are unable to convince a visa officer of their genuine status. "As far as I know, the student visa rate for the USA is below 30 per cent for China," says Maggie Ren from Beijing Hanyin Consultant Company in China. "The reasons given by visa officers [for refusals] are very common and general such as 'Not satisfied on the basis of information provided that the applicant would observe the conditions of the visa' or 'Not satisfied that you or your sponsor has adequate funds to pay for your expenses'."

Prior to the events of September 11 in the USA, some study destinations had been trying to get around the problem of visa issuance by identifying certain nationalities as "high risk" in terms of visa overstay once in the country. In July last year, Australia introduced widespread changes to its student visa application system which previously categorised countries as gazetted and non-gazetted (see *Education Travel Magazine*, October 2001, page 19). The new system gives each country an assessment level, ranging from one to five, with five being the most stringent.

Industry sources in Australia have welcomed the transparency of this new student visa application system, which grants applicants a visa as long as they can fulfil their specific application requirements. Michael Holder, Marketing Officer at Wide Bay Institute of TAFE in Australia, reports that, so far, his institution has seen "no visa refusals yet based on the changes".

Visa developments

The ease with which students can get a visa to study overseas has a great effect on where they eventually choose to study. The largest study destinations have recently been trying to streamline visa procedures for genuine applicants, while also successfully screening out those that are less genuine.

However, while these changes may be good news for students from low-risk countries, visa applications from countries such as India, which has been assessed as high risk and therefore has tougher requirements for students to fulfil, have been more adversely affected. "It is a general anticipation now that the total number of students who will go [to Australia] from India this year, compared to 2000-2001, will be at least 60 per cent less," says Ravi Singh, Managing Director of Global Reach agency in India. "The [toughest] issue is the requirement for funds to be held in cash, in a bank, for six months. Assuming that the costs for an undergraduate degree, along with living expenses, are AU\$75,000 (US\$38,344), for any student to have [this] in a bank without investing in higher rate investments is actually irrational."

Meanwhile, the new visa-issuing strategy implemented in the UK in 2000, as part of the Blair initiative to increase the number of international students in the country, seems to have had a positive impact on applications for visas, and this has been largely unaffected by the events of September last year. According to the UK Foreign Office, there have been no changes to visa requirements for students since September 11, although some students may have experienced delays due to the temporarily reduced visa services at diplomatic missions in Pakistan. In Colombia, Caro attests that, "at the moment, the UK is the easiest country for getting visas".

Under the new strategy, the British Council increased its collaboration with visa offices and improved the information and advice available for visa applicants to ensure that genuine students were given the greatest chances of success. "I can say that I find the British Consulate very careful, systematic and fast," says Mehmet Catalagac from Yurtdisi Egitim Servisleri agency in Turkey. "According to my impression, the British Consulate really tries to understand the students' situation."

Recent changes in New Zealand's visa policy have also had a positive affect on visa applications for some nationalities, especially students from China. The introduction of a non-transferable "limited purposes" visa - which allows entry into the country for a specific purpose only - as well as the

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abolition of quotas for Chinese students, has resulted in a huge upsurge in the number of visa applications from China. "As quotas have been lifted from the Chinese, we have seen a huge increase," says Marilyn Taylor, Executive Administrator of Overseas Students at Tairawhiti Polytechnic in New Zealand. "However, purely because of the high number of applicants, we also see the highest number of refusals."

In some student markets, the problems of getting a student visa for certain destinations are such that many students look around for easier alternatives. "Malaysia is the country for which our clients find it easiest to get student visas at present," says Ren in China. "The whole visa application time is only two months and the Malaysian immigration authority gives [the] visa result to the agent directly."

Ren adds that Ireland and Japan have become more popular in recent years. "If a student has adequate financial resources and [their] application is true and authentic, the student can obtain a visa [for Ireland and Japan]," she says, acknowledging that there have been lengthy waits for visas from the Irish Embassy. "I learned that Ireland will add two or four visa officers to the Irish Embassy in Beijing this year," she says, "hopefully accelerating the speed of the procedure." ○

Keeping track of students

The next major visa development in the USA which will affect international students is the implementation of the Student Exchange and Visitor Information Service (Sevis). This student tracking system has generated controversy in the US industry (see *Education Travel Magazine*, July 2001, page 16) but it has achieved more support of late, and President Bush allocated US\$36.8 million to the project under the new US Patriot Act last year. In January this year, a compromise bill on border security was introduced calling for the system to be up and running by 2003.

"I do not think that any of us opposes the tracking system," says Jane Howard, Director of International Student Affairs at Mount Ida College in the USA. "If a person enters the USA on a student visa and then decides not to study, the system will spot this. Although abuse is done by a small minority, the majority must often pay the price."

However, some agents believe that the extra fee and delays involved, through students having to send their fee and receive a receipt before they can apply for a visa, will have a negative effect. "[Sevis] will change the preferences of students to countries [other than] the USA," says Henry Caro from Learning-Estudios en el Exterior in Colombia.