

# UK considers visa hike

An immigration and asylum bill introduced in the UK at the end of last year plans to introduce a surcharge of between UK£20 (US\$37) and UK£500 (US\$917) on all migrants coming to the UK to work, join their family or study.

If the bill is adopted by the UK government, international students face the prospect of having to pay the extra charge on top of the current student visa fee. Plans for the surcharge came a few months after the introduction of a UK£155 (US\$284) visa renewal fee last August.

Beverly Hughes, a Home Office Minister, stressed that no decision regarding the level of the fee had been made so far and any charges would be phased in over

a number of years. "The fact is that many people gain tremendous advantages from entry to the UK and the government believes an additional charge is a legitimate exchange," she said.

News of the new visa charge has provoked concern amongst international education bodies in the UK. A Universities UK spokesperson told the *Guardian* newspaper, "We are very concerned about the proposed introduction of a surcharge for visa applications by students as this might act as a deterrent... particularly coming so soon after the introduction of the visa extension fee and residence permits."

Increased student visa charges will not help to improve the country's image among

students, a significant number of whom already feel that UK education is expensive and there are not enough part-time jobs available, according to a study commissioned by the British Council.

The study also revealed that 30 per cent of students felt teaching in UK universities was "traditional" and, compared to the USA, courses did not have as many links with commerce and key thinkers. However, students felt that the UK had the best academic reputation and well regarded qualifications.

Piera Gerrard, at the British Council's Education UK Marketing group, warned that the UK had to do more to remain attractive. "There is new competition from countries like Germany, France and the Netherlands," he warned.

## Visa waiver countries likely to lose privilege in USA

Travellers who do not currently require a visa to enter the USA for a period of less than 90 days stand to lose their visa exempt status in October, under regulations put forward by the government agency responsible for the United States Visitor and Immigration Status Indicator Technology (US-Visit) programme.

The programme, which was launched on January 5 this year, requires all visitors who do not require a visa to carry a biometric passport if issued after October 26 this year. The new biometric passports are to contain a computer chip bearing a digitally encoded record of the holder's face and, possibly, fingerprints.

Almost none of the current 27 visa waiver countries – including a number of countries in Europe, as well as Japan, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and Brunei – expects to meet the October deadline for issuing the new style passports. Those holding existing passports with machine-readable barcodes will not be required to apply for a visa until it needs to be renewed.

Ministers in the UK have been lobbying Washington for an extension to the deadline, fearing that the new regulations could cause chaos for visitors. However, Danielle Sheahan, spokesperson for the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection at the Homeland Security Department, told *The Times* newspaper, "The visa waiver programme was a privilege," and added that the new requirements were "nothing more than most people needing visas go through."

The US-Visit programme is the latest in a raft of security measures introduced by the Department of Homeland Security, which was formed in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Since January 5 this year, anyone requiring a visa to enter the USA has had their photograph and fingerprints taken on entry. The data is checked against terrorist watchlists and used to ensure that visitors have not overstayed their visas.

# AUCC reports student boom in Canada

According to research conducted by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), the number of international students enrolling at Canadian universities in 2003 increased by 15 per cent compared with the previous year. Many provinces experienced increases of 20 per cent or more while individual universities reported that international enrolments had increased by up to 40 per cent.

The research, which was published in the January issue of the association's magazine, *University Affairs*, goes on to state that,

for some universities, applications from international student market showed an even higher growth rate, with the University of Manitoba reporting a 75 per cent increase in overseas applications.

Industry insiders have long feared that Canada may be getting the thin end of the international student wedge due to a lack of cohesive marketing at national level. Australia, New Zealand and the UK have all launched national marketing campaigns to promote their educational opportunities in recent years and the results are paying off. According to statistics

from the Canadian Bureau for International Education, 59,845 international post-secondary students studied in Canada in 1999/2000, compared with 209,554 in the UK and 105,950 in Australia.

However, the launch of various pilot schemes enabling international students to work in different provinces may be giving Canada's education industry a bit of a boost. In October last year, a two-year pilot scheme was launched that will enable international students in Manitoba to work off-campus for a maximum

of 20 hours a week. The programme, which is a joint initiative between the federal government and the government of Manitoba, allows full-time students who have been studying for more than one year at a university in the province to apply for an open work permit. Previously, international students were only allowed to undertake part-time work on the campus of the institution with which they were registered.

Other pilot schemes exist in New Brunswick and Alberta, although the Manitoba initiative is the first to allow international

students to work off-campus while they study. It is hoped that it will eventually be extended to include other provinces in Canada. The others schemes in action enable graduating students to stay and work in the respective provinces for two years.

Denis Coderre, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, said, "Off-campus work programmes will help to make our post-secondary institutions even more attractive by giving students the opportunity to earn while they learn and gain some experience of the Canadian labour market."

# Standards in Oz questioned

The quality of courses provided by some Australian university departments was questioned at the end of last year when the Economics Society of Australia wrote to all heads of economics departments casting doubts about the quality of graduates, both in terms of academic achievement and in their ability to communicate in English.

The heads of departments have been encouraged to fill in a confidential questionnaire regarding the standard of work achieved by undergraduate and postgraduate students and suggest options for the improvement and maintenance of standards.

Professor Peter Abelson, Secretary of the Economics Society of Australia, said, "I wouldn't single out English language competence as the only factor affecting international students' progress, but it is a key issue." Three hundred economics students conducted a

multiple-choice test at Abelson's own university, and 37 per cent – over half the international students – were graded as having a serious likelihood of failure or worse.

Economics and business courses are popular with international students and some universities in Australia are expanding their course range in this area to cater for this market. However, there is doubt whether a rapid expansion of international places at universities in Australia can continue without a subsequent drop in quality assurance.

A study conducted by IDP Education Australia, presented at the 17th IDP Australian International Education Conference in Melbourne last year, stresses the importance of quality assurance if Australia is to compete successfully in the international student marketplace. In the study, entitled Global Student Mobility 2025:

Global Competition and Market Share, a "Quality Shock Scenario" was examined, in which Australia might be unable to maintain the quality of its higher education system. The scenario predicted a decline in Australia's global market share from the present 10 per cent to 1.5 per cent by 2025.

Lindy Hyam, Chief Executive of IDP, said, "The most serious threat that Australian higher education faces is if we were unable to maintain the quality of our higher education system. Clearly unless we continue to tackle and take seriously the issue of quality assurance, the viability of the AUS\$4 billion (US\$5.1 billion) industry is in jeopardy."

According to IDP statistics, 174,732 international students were studying at universities in the second semester of 2003, an increase of 12.5 per cent on the same period in 2002.

## Japan toughens up on visa overstay

International students wanting to study in Japan may face tough new screening measures from this academic year, beginning in April, after ministers from Japan's Justice Ministry announced plans to clamp down on students who overstay their visas.

Under the new plans, foreign students may be asked to submit documents proving their parent's income and bank account

statements for the past three years to ensure they have sufficient funds to live in Japan. Language proficiency certificates will also be thoroughly scrutinised and home institutions issuing certificates to those without the necessary command of the Japanese language will be blacklisted.

The new measures will be applied to students applying to study at universities and language

schools that have a history of large numbers of students overstaying their visa. Nationals from certain countries will also be targeted, with China at the top of the list. Statistics show that 80 per cent of students who overstay their visa in Japan are Chinese.

Currently, students at universities in Japan can get visas for one or two years, which can be renewed until graduation.

### Pune aims to attract students

The University of Pune in India set up a 10-member advisory committee at the end of last year in order to look at ways of encouraging more international students to study at the university and its affiliated colleges. The committee will identify potential courses attractive to international students so that the university can publish a detailed information brochure for interested students from overseas. Information on the university's website will also be translated into Arabic and Persian.

### International boarding school to open

The first international boarding school in Germany will open its doors to students in September this year in a private initiative largely sponsored by Prince Wolfgang of Bavaria. The school, which is situated in Berchtesgaden, will initially cater for 150 students from around the world and will follow the curriculum of the International Baccalaureate with tuition in English.

### New Zealand plans

Queenstown, New Zealand, is becoming a focus for international education development plans with two separate developers revealing

- plans to build an education campus catering for 3,000 international students, and a tertiary college that will provide pre-university courses and hospitality training for 200 students.
- Queenstown Resort College is scheduled to open in 2005 while 79 hectares of land near Queenstown airport has been earmarked for use as an education campus.

### Kaplan acquisition

- Kaplan Inc. announced the acquisition of a business college in Dublin at the end of last year, making it the company's first degree-granting institution based outside of the USA. Dublin Business School offers degrees at undergraduate and graduate level and professional development courses to 5,000 students, and also has a campus in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and relationships with a number of European business schools.

### New scholarship scheme

- A Peace Scholarship Trust has been launched in Australia to provide 1,000 university places to international students over the next 10 years. The programme was launched by IDP Education Australia, 27 Australian universities and colleges, the Queensland and Victorian governments and Ielts.