



Press Release
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English UK appears before Home Affairs Select Committee

English UK was the first organisation called to give evidence at the Home Affairs Select Committee's investigation into the Government's proposed visa changes.

Questions from committee members ranged over the issues of bogus colleges, language levels and foundation courses, but they appeared most astonished by the revelation from English UK chief executive Tony Millns that the registration of all Tier 4 provider accreditation schemes had lapsed.

"The accrediting bodies were approved for an initial term of two years. That approval has lapsed. Technically, none of the accreditation bodies are approved by the Border Agency," said Mr Millns.

"Are you telling the committee that those now doing the accreditation are doing so without proper authority?" asked Keith Vaz, the committee chairman.

"Yes," replied Mr Millns.

"Does the Government know this?" enquired a clearly startled Mr Vaz.

"Yes."

"And what has it done about it?" asked Mr Vaz.

"Nothing, actually," said Mr Millns.

"Excellent," said Mr Vaz, promising to write to the Government about the matter.

Mr Millns also brought the attention of the committee to other problems in current accreditation arrangements. While the numbers of registered colleges had almost halved in the past two or three years, with 2,292 able to bring in Tier 4 students - a move supported by English UK - there were still problems.

He said: "The Border Agency has approved a number of accrediting bodies for the purposes of the register in Tier 4. We do not believe standards in some other schemes are as high as in our scheme, which has been running for nearly 30 years and we have observed that colleges which have had registration withdrawn and failed the quality test of our scheme have subsequently got accreditation from another body and have thereby remained on the register. That is clearly a loophole."

Asked how the loophole could be closed, Mr Millns suggested that there should be no more than one or two accreditation bodies, and added that the BA is considering whether it could make an interim move so that as soon as a college loses accreditation from any body, it is removed from the register.

However, if accreditation were tightened up, it would become a very high-stakes process for colleges which would be likely to mount legal challenges against decisions. "That doesn't mean that I oppose it," added Mr Millns.

The committee also asked questions about the Government's consultation on student visas. Mr Millns pointed out that in order to meet its target of cutting net migration, "it would need to cut the student route to zero which would mean no international students would be able to come into the country, and even that might not be quite enough."

A difficulty was that numbers leaving and arriving in the UK were currently monitored using the International Passenger Survey, which measured about one in 500 people entering or leaving the country. On arriving, said Mr Millns, students would probably say they were entering for study; on leaving, that they were returning home. "Therefore for students, numbers entering and leaving do not correlate... We would really wish to see students taken out of migration statistics completely."

Asked by Cambridge MP Julian Huppert whether he had a "fundamental problem" with the immigration questions being asked, Mr Millns replied: "Is the objective the correct one in terms of immigration control? Probably not. Can it be achieved? Almost certainly not. Would we even know if it had been? No, from the statistics."

The other major area of control to the English language sector and universities, said Mr Millns, was the government proposal to raise the required language level to B2. Up to 80 per cent of students on university pathway programmes arrived with much lower levels of English. They improved this during their foundation programmes and also learned study skills vital for the degree courses that 97 per cent of them then joined.

"This is a major feeder route for universities. If the language level was raised to B2 it would cut the majority of these students," said Mr Millns. This in turn would threaten the survival of some university departments, particularly in the areas of science, technology, engineering and maths.

Mr Millns gave some support to certain areas of the Government proposals. "I think what the Home Secretary has referred to as breaking the link between temporary and permanent migration is very much the way to go," he said of the proposal that students should not be able to switch to family or work routes into the UK.

He also described as "a reasonable concession" the suggestion that pre-sessional courses might be extended from three months to a year. And he was happy with the idea of risk-assessing different countries.

Asked whether he supported the Government policy of cutting international student numbers, Mr Millns replied: "Only as an incidental consequence of tackling abuse in the system, not as a policy in itself." It was, he said, "pretty meaningless" whether a student was in the UK for 11 months, 14 months on a Masters course or three years on a PhD before departing, in the context of immigration.

Elizabeth McLaren, manager of Accreditation UK, who gave evidence alongside Mr Millns, was asked about the impact of the consultation proposals. "It will damage our reputation as the leading education provider in the world. Students will be put off by an unwelcoming reputation. If they can't start their study journey here... and have to go elsewhere to get their English medium education, they may just choose to stay there."

Should the UK be concerned about its international reputation, asked committee member David Winnick? "I think the strength of the UK's education offer is very important in terms of the reputation of the UK and has an impact in all areas of the UK economy in terms of people working with us, doing business with us, all sorts of cultural aspects."

Four representatives from the university sector gave evidence to the committee during the remainder of the session, painting a grim picture of the resulting problems if the language level was raised to B2, or overseas students were barred from working here after their graduation.

Professor Edward Acton, Vice-Chancellor of the University of East Anglia, said international students were a growth area. It was estimated that there were around 60,000 students on pre-university

pathways, and 70 per cent of those would not have come if the B2 English requirement had been in place. B2 would "suffocate" the pathway, he said.

Professor Steve Smith, President of Universities UK, said a large percentage of the student body had previously studied in the UK: "For us it seems paradoxical at a time when we are trying to find growth in the economy. Here is an export industry, by some estimates the 7th most successful export industry in the UK, the market is growing at 7 per cent a year, the UK is the second most successful sector in the world, it would be worth over the next 15 years an additional £5bn in export earnings per year to the UK on top of the £5.3bn it earns. It seems crazy to stop that development by focusing on using inappropriate methodology, something that isn't a problem."

It was using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, he said.

How could the Government be helped to achieve what it wanted to without damaging the universities, asked Mr Vaz. Professor Acton replied that he would strongly support HTS status, ask for high deposits for students, and for the UKBA to tell sponsors when CAS letters were used by students, and when they arrived in and left the UK.

Professor David Wark, of Imperial College London, said international students were "absolutely critical". They formed 29 per cent of the student body at Imperial, and provided some 62 per cent of fee income. UK students benefited from this income through higher standards of teaching. Some departments would be seriously damaged if the numbers of overseas students were reduced.

Notes to Editors

1. English UK is the world's leading language teaching association, with 440 accredited centres in membership. It covers university and further education college language departments, international study centres in independent schools, educational trusts and charities, and private sector colleges. English UK is a UK registered charity (www.englishuk.com).
2. Students who come to the UK to learn or improve their English contribute about £1.5 billion to the UK economy in course fees, accommodation and general spending. Many students go on from English language courses to UK degrees or professional qualifications. There are long-term affinity benefits to Britain as well, since many students go on to be opinion-leaders and senior figures in their own countries.
3. For further comment please contact Tony Millns at English UK on 07976511439.