



APPG for International Students

19 January 2023

The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP
The Rt Hon Kemi Badenoch MP
The Rt Hon Suella Braverman MP
The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP
The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
The Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP

Dear Secretaries of State,

We are writing on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International students regarding the latest government update on the International Education Strategy (IES). We appreciate the commitment being shown to progressing the Strategy and fully support its push to increase the UK's international student numbers, a key recommendation in our 2018 Inquiry *A Sustainable Future for International Students in the UK*¹. The strategy reflects evidence from our report that we must support the number of international students in the UK to grow sustainably, and continue to enhance the student experience including the creation of the new graduate visa route for work experience post study.

In doing this, we urge the government to create a more ambitious and sustainable target for the number of international students studying in the UK. We also stress the need for cross-departmental engagement to include the Home Office, to truly make the IES a success. A sustainable target for growth should include a commitment to diversifying the international students who come to the UK, where they come from and what they study. IES now has the opportunity to also shift focus to the international student experience, from visa application and experience at our borders as well as their success during and after study. The UK must continue to strive for the best offer for international students to ensure we remain competitive with other study destinations.

The APPG for international students exists to recognise the internationalisation and global prominence of UK education and to promote the value of international students to UK education, economy and soft power. We raise awareness of issues which affect international students and UK education as well as providing a platform for collaboration between parliamentarians, international students, international education institutions and professionals and business leaders.

It was great to see the progress update that the government published last May on the IES and that the UK has made positive progress against its ambitions. Setting clear targets and using data to inform the UK's policy is key to ensuring that the UK remains an attractive destination for prospective international students to study. We welcome your statements in Parliament and in the media, that you will continue to build on the success of the IES, and strive to meet the commitments of the strategy.

¹ <http://www.exeduk.com/appg-for-international-students/inquiry/report>

However, in order to truly maximise the potential of the UK's education exports sector, we feel there are some specific changes that the government needs to make.

Firstly, the IES needs to encompass all international students and not just those participating in higher education. This includes linking the Department for Education's goals on technical education and the IES' target more closely. International students from FE colleges, the pathway sector, in ELT, professional education and independent and boarding schools are all big contributors to the value of the sector and need to be counted in the numbers to accurately reflect the true potential of the sector. Whilst we're delighted that the Government has surpassed its target of 600,000 international students almost 9 years early, we urge Ministers to engage with the sector in building on this success by agreeing an ambitious but sustainable target to work towards, focused on diversification of international students and ensuring the UK offer remains competitive across all types of study.

Secondly, the majority of international students return home following study, which means increases in international student numbers will cause predictable rises in net migration continuing until those students leave. To reflect this international students should be treated as temporary migrants when government considers immigration policy interventions. Data on students is already counted separately within the migration statistics and government policy should be led by trends in this data, not by blunt tools such as overall net-migration statistics.

Thirdly, underpinning this ambition should be cross-departmental engagement with a clear focus on the student experience, from application to post-study work. While it is great to see the Department for International Trade and Department for Education working together closely, Home Office support is necessary so that the IES can truly meet its potential.

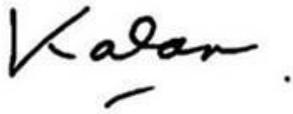
For instance, the Home Office has a key part to play in ensuring that the student visa system remains competitive with other English-speaking markets. As part of this, it must not lose sight of its Sponsorship Road Map which aims to make immigration routes more user friendly. The work being done here in exploring a fully digital process when engaging with UKVI immigration, making the process at the border more streamlined (with e-gate style experience for more nationalities) is essential to support the IES and make the UK's system more global. Further efforts to create a more efficient but robust student visa offer should consider a single visa for those students who come to study school or pathway programmes, undergraduate and postgraduate study. This would reduce the burden of the student immigration system on government and students while creating a more coherent journey for students. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy should also play a role in ensuring businesses are aware of the new graduate visa, and are collaborating to ensure international students can make the best possible contribution to the UK post study.

Fourthly, we would also welcome more detail on the Alumni activity progress report (on which the APPG specifically made recommendations in 2018) as well as the IES encouraging a return scheme for international students to study in the UK, alongside the progress report on the Turing Scheme.

As the government stated in its progress update, the UK needs to "avoid complacency" and to "take steps to maintain the UK's competitive advantage across the entire sector". We feel that setting a more ambitious target that is underpinned by diversification and cross departmental engagement is a key part of this. It would not only act as a commitment for the UK to measure progress against, but it would also send a message globally that the UK is the destination of choice for students all over the world.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you in more detail.

Yours sincerely

Handwritten signature of Lord Karan Bilimoria in black ink.

Lord Karan Bilimoria

Co-Chair
APPG for International Students

Handwritten signature of Paul Blomfield in black ink.

Paul Blomfield

MP for Sheffield Central
Co-Chair
APPG for International Students