

Home Affairs Committee Inquiry
Managing migration: the Points-Based System

Campaign for Science and Engineering

July 2008

Introduction

1. Campaign for Science and Engineering is pleased to submit written evidence to the Home Affairs Committee. CaSE campaigns to improve the health of science and engineering in the UK. It is supported by over 1,000 individual members, and over 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies and companies.

General Points

2. The Government has the ambition of making the UK a world leader in science and innovation. For this to happen, the UK needs to be able to attract the best and brightest from around the world to study and work here. Scientists and engineers in the UK must be able to collaborate with leading counterparts in the rest of the world.
3. Migrants benefit the UK by bringing their diversity and opening up opportunities for international collaborations. Unfortunately, in some sectors the UK is now dependent on their presence and this dependence brings with it a vulnerability to factors that might impact upon immigration rates. Many university courses are dependent on international students to fill up places and bring in high levels of finance, and the academics teaching these courses are often also migrants. This is particularly true of the many STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects that the Government has recognised as both strategic and vulnerable. Furthermore, the presence of an international workforce in the UK is critical for industry to choose to locate here, or for those currently here, to stay. Large UK firms (over 5000 people) now look abroad to fill their STEM vacancies, with over a third recruiting from India and a quarter from China (CBI Education and Skills Survey, 2008).
4. The UK is currently one of the top destinations for international scientists and engineers. The benefits of being an internationally competitive place for science and engineering are clear. It helps the UK build international networks. It brings new ideas by increasing the diversity and quality of the workforce. CaSE wants to see that the new immigration system supports the flow of scientists and engineers. As it stands, many of our members have voiced concerns over the new system and the existence of such anxiety can be detrimental to overseas recruitment.

The implementation of Tier 1 (highly-skilled migrants)

5. CaSE welcomes the recognition of academic qualifications in counting in the points based system. However, we are concerned that many highly-skilled academics do not attain the income levels that might be expected for their skill levels as early career positions in academia are underpaid in comparison to other sectors. This is particularly likely to affect applicants coming to the end of a period of study.

The effect of the proposed changes on science and engineering education and research

6. The UK higher education system is now highly dependent on international students and academics, particularly in many science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. Not only do students bring significant income, which can help sustain some departments on the brink of fiscal crisis, but they also boost student numbers. Overseas students fees were estimated at almost £1.5bn last year and more than 60% of higher degree students are now from outside the UK. In addition, increasing numbers of international academics make significant contributions to research and teaching in the UK. 27% of academic appointments were international last year and all STEM subjects show increasing percentages of international academic staff from 2001-2004 (HEFCE).
7. While numbers of international students are increasing, our market share is decreasing and it is critical that we are not complacent about our attractiveness to students and academics. As more countries offer courses in English, and the higher education of developing nations improves, it is critical that the UK maintains our competitiveness.
8. There is concern about the rate at which the system is being introduced, with an apparent lack of appreciation of the time-table of the academic year. This timetable also limits the extent of trouble-shooting that can occur, particularly with the introduction of the new IT system.
9. The anxiety and uncertainty around the new points based system must not negatively impact upon our attractiveness as a small decrease in numbers in certain disciplines could have significant consequences. For example, there have been instances of international summer students being turned away and these students will be discouraged from trying to return and may share their negative experiences. It is critical that the international perception of the UK as a desirable destination for under-and post-graduate education is not diminished.
10. We are concerned over the proposed limit on the length of stay for visiting academics, which may be shortened to three months. CaSE wants to see visiting academics have the right to stay for 12 months, which is the current length. In addition, the proposal for a third-party sponsor separate from the host institution to sponsor visiting academics seems an unreasonable burden.
11. We welcome the provision for allowing post study working. However, we need to be aware that some students have had their studies paid for by their home government with the expectation that they will return and contribute to their nation's scientific or technical development.