

Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee

Inquiry - Immigration

Written submission from Universities Scotland

Universities Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee on immigration. Scotland's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a long and proud history of welcoming people of talent, both staff and students from around the world. Many of our institutions have been doing this for centuries with a huge benefit to the institutions themselves as well as their wider communities. Our institutions are significant drivers of economic and cultural activities in Scotland and, with the correct immigration policy, we believe this contribution could be even greater.

Immigration policy affects universities, and through them the skills and demographic challenges that Scotland faces, in three ways:

- the attraction and retention of staff, from staff exchanges through to permanent employment;
- the attraction of international students, both undergraduate and postgraduate; and
- the ease with which those students can secure visas following their studies so that they can make an economic contribution through employment or entrepreneurship.

Universities attract students and staff who are globally mobile. Nations across the globe recognise the value of attracting university staff and students and have adopted immigration systems to support this outcome. Therefore immigration is a strategic issue for universities as it is for Scotland.

The following points are important context to considering the options set out by Dr Hepburn:

1. The immigration system should recognise fully the distinct status of a student and take this out of consideration of any policy for the control of the overall volume of migrants.
2. As recognised in the Fresh Talent initiative, post study work visas offer a targeted route to address Scotland's demographic and skills needs. Analysis¹ of the drivers for the renewal of cities and regions acknowledges the attraction of young wealth creators as a key driver and that competition to attract them is fierce. Our visa system should support the attraction of those individuals, not deter them.
3. There is considerable focus currently on the 'disrupted' character of our economy. However, policy on immigration in the UK, and in some of the systems examined by Dr Hepburn, focuses on the identification of shortages in specific jobs. In a period of marked and disruptive change it is extremely challenging to predict specific skills needs in sectors and to operate a

¹ <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2015/03/magnet-cities.pdf>

complex administrative system to be responsive to needs in a timely manner. Recognising the changing economy, and through listening to employers, contemporary graduates are equipped for a world of change. Drawing on a body of knowledge, hard and soft skills, they are equipped to adapt and to be lifelong learners. Our immigration system might usefully incorporate that need into its criteria.

Taking these observations together, alongside the capacity of study and academic links to deliver economic and social integration on the one hand and paradiplomacy and international outreach on the other, we suggest that student and graduate immigration should be a prominent element of a differentiated approach.

We offer the following comment on the options set out in Dr Hepburn's paper:

Migrant Integration and Reception Policies

Universities invest significantly in attracting and supporting international students and staff. Together, the sector has launched a campaign, Scotland's Universities Welcome the World² to celebrate the diversity and inclusivity of Scottish higher education. Every one of Scotland's HEIs has united as a group to share a message of welcome with the world.

The sector has also developed guidance for the sector in providing asylum seekers and refugees with Access to Higher Education³.

International Outreach Activities in Immigration

Under the recent Enterprise and Skills Review the sector has set out a number of ways in which universities could enhance Scotland's international outreach activities and promote Scotland's place in the world. The attraction of student and staff talent is an element of that.

As part of the enhancement of current international activities noted at para. 228 of Dr Hepburn's report, the Scottish Government could consider:

- enhancing Saltire Scholarship Scheme⁴ to give it stronger international prominence and prestige rivalling schemes such as Chevening. Under a differentiated system, the scheme could be linked to ease of access to / automatic issue of study and post study work visas; and
- provide parallel investment to complement the UK Rutherford Fund⁵ to attract researchers from across the globe.

Increasing Scottish influence in UK decision-making

There is merit in the Migration Advisory Committee seeking a stronger understanding of labour shortages and skills gaps across the whole of the UK. However, as noted

² www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/scotlands-universities-welcome-world/

³ www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Guidance-on-Providing-Asylum-Seekers-and-Refugees-with-Access-to-Higher-Education-Nov-2016.pdf

⁴ www.scotland.org/study-in-scotland/scholarships/saltire-scholarships

⁵ www.gov.uk/government/news/100-million-rutherford-fund-to-attract-best-researchers-to-the-uk

above, might the MAC place greater emphasis on the value of graduate attributes more broadly in the context of a disrupted economy?

Sectoral agreements

As noted in Dr Hepburn's paper, the Fresh Talent initiative offers a model which could be built upon and there is already wide support for a Scottish post study visa at both Holyrood and Westminster.

For post study work, Dr Hepburn's paper notes that the Scottish Affairs Committee concluded that any challenges associated with the movement of those holding visas to other parts of the UK could be overcome.

We suggest that a Talent scheme might also be developed to support universities as a sector in continuing to attract staff from across the world. It should apply to academic and non-academic staff.

Scottish administration of work permits

We can see merit in new administrative arrangements if they would speed up processing times. They might also complement a differentiated system.

Scottish Visa Sponsorship Scheme & a Scottish Immigration System

These options are illustrated by schemes in Australia and Canada which address the same demographic and economic challenges facing Scotland. Both are also nations that have adopted policies to attract international students who have a global choice in where they wish to study.

As noted, a Visa Sponsorship scheme could support a post study work visa route. With additional scope to determine selection criteria, as is the case in the Canadian PTNP system, Scotland could choose to take a more strongly differentiated approach, for instance by giving stronger weight to general factors such as age and qualifications.

Both options appear to offer an opportunity to meet Scotland's demographic challenge through a growth in the number of migrants to Scotland who meet the criteria that Scotland would decide. Given the strategic context set out above, criteria that focus on young, highly qualified individuals (alongside other needs) would position Scotland well.