

Foreign students at London Metropolitan University threatened with deportation

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The UK Border Agency (UKBA) has prepared the way for the deportation from Britain of up to 2,600 foreign students at London Metropolitan University (LMU).

On Thursday, the UKBA revoked the LMU's licence to authorise non-European Union (EU) visas, on the basis that it had failed to monitor student attendance. The visas of all LMU international students from outside the EU are now invalid.

The university is one of London's largest, with more than 28,000 students. In 2010-2011, it had had 3,100 full-time foreign students. The university also caters to many working class students, with 96 percent of its entrants from the state sector. LMU has more than twice as many mature students as the average for English universities.

The decision to remove LMU's "highly trusted sponsor" means that students, despite having paid tens of thousands of pounds in tuition fees, face a precarious future. In a letter issued just days before the new academic year at universities through Britain, the UKBA informed students that they would be contacted after October 1 before warning, "We will ensure that you have 60 days to make a new student application or to arrange to leave the UK. This 60 days will start from the date we write to you."

In a dress rehearsal of last week's decision, the LMU had its licence to teach foreign students temporarily suspended earlier this summer. The UKBA claimed LMU had "failed to address serious and systemic failings" identified six months ago and now "posed a threat to immigration control".

Immigration Minister Damian Green said LMU's visa licence had been terminated on a number of grounds, including the claim that among a very small sample of 101 students, more than a quarter of them

were studying at the university but had no leave to remain in the UK. Another discrepancy, this time from an even smaller sample of 50 checked files, claimed there was "no proper evidence" that mandatory English levels among 20 students had been reached. It is also claimed that of 250 students, 142 had "attendance monitoring" problems. The government claimed that this meant LMU was unable to know whether students were turning up for classes or not.

Once again, universities are being corralled into acting as an adjunct of repressive measures by the state. First, they were instructed to monitor suspicious political activity on campus, especially relating to Islamic groups. And now they are being told to act as an extension of the immigration service.

In response to the decision, dozens of LMU students protested, with tape over their mouths, outside Prime Minister David Cameron's residence at 10 Downing Street.

Donna Marie Winstanley, from Hong Kong, told the *Independent* she was in the third year of an international relations course at the university. She said, "I'm just here in shock. I've already paid £16,000 in fees and was preparing to pay £8,000 for this year's fees. I don't want to leave."

Overseas students at higher education institutions throughout the UK now potentially face the same threat. The UK's 1.8 million full-time undergraduate students enrolled in higher education last year included more than 104,000 international students.

The move against LMU is a naked attempt to stoke up anti-immigrant sentiment. The announcement was made on the day that figures were released on net migration to the UK in 2011 standing at 216,000. The Conservative/Liberal government is pledged to cutting net immigration to fewer than 100,000 per annum and

by 2015 down to just tens of thousands.

International students accounted for two fifths of total immigration in 2010-2011. The Institute for Public Policy Research said that achieving this target could result in slashing international student numbers by about 50,000, at an annual cost to the economy of between £2 billion to £3 billion.

Under the government's "highly trusted sponsor" regime, introduced in 2010, any institutions wishing to take on international students must fulfil the strictest conditions. In 2011, the Home Office introduced a cap on the maximum number of students that each institution can take on. The rules stipulate that students can enter the UK for up to three years to study and stay for up to four months afterwards. Beyond this, students are required to apply for a separate visa. The UKBA policy restricts students to spending "no more than three years in the UK studying below UK Bachelors degree level in his/her lifetime".

In the year to June, the number of visas issued was down by a fifth to 282,000.

It is estimated that foreign students contribute around £12.5 billion to the UK economy every year. International students can pay many times the amount in tuition fees paid by UK-based students, and have become critical to the income stream of many of the UK universities. Without these revenues, even the largest universities face bankruptcy and closure.

In 2011-2012, international students studying at English universities accounted for more than a tenth (£2.7 billion) of their £23 billion total income. In 2010, when UK undergraduates were forced to pay £3,290 a year in tuition fees, Cambridge University was charging overseas students £18,573 to study science.

Leading immigration lawyer Edward Wanambwa pointed out that the unless the LMU "can very quickly overturn the decision in the High Court, it faces the prospect of being sued for tens of millions of pounds—not to mention having to repay some or all of the fees paid by international students. It seems quite likely given the approach being taken that similar decisions will be threatened or taken against other institutions in the near future."

The National Union of Students (NUS) has refused to mount a campaign to demand the reinstatement of all the students affected at LMU and has only opposed the government's decision on the basis that it would have a

detrimental impact on the economy. Nine of 10 officers of the LMU NUS executive are international students.

In a statement, the NUS said it had "contacted David Cameron and [Home Secretary] Theresa May to express anger at the way that decisions have been made in recent weeks and to reiterate the potentially catastrophic effects on higher education as a £12.5bn per year export industry for the UK."

NUS president Liam Burns said the NUS would work with university authorities "to support affected students" and to "ensure *as far as possible* that they can continue studying in the UK" [emphasis added].

Sally Hunt, general secretary of the University and College Union, concurred with the emphasis on the move's economic impact, stating, "No matter how this is dressed up, the damaging message that the UK deports foreign students at UK universities will reach all corners of the globe".

The *Financial Times* warned that the government was aiding the UK's competitors such as Australia, Canada and the United States. There is "no good reason to treat students like permanent migrants", it stressed, as "[m]ost leave the UK shortly after receiving their qualification, posing no threat to British jobseekers."



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