



Students at risk of deportation after university breaks immigration rules

Richard Ford Home Correspondent

Thousands of overseas students face being deported after the Government stripped a university of its right to teach foreigners from outside the EU.

Ministers acted after an investigation found abuse of immigration rules, and problems with attendance and English language qualifications, at London Metropolitan University. The move has left up to 3,000 students in limbo and has been criticised by universities, which say that it threatens the country's reputation for providing good-quality higher education.

A task force has been set up by the Government to assess how many of the students affected by the decision can legitimately be reallocated to other institutions, before the UK Border Agency (UKBA) sends out notices giving them 60 days to leave or be deported.

The UKBA said that London Metropolitan University had "failed to address serious and systemic failings" identified during an inspection six months ago. Damian Green, the Immigration Minister, said: "What we found here is a serious systemic failure where it appears that the university doesn't have the capacity to be a proper sponsor and to have confidence that the students coming have the right to be here in the first place."

The recent inspection had uncovered a series of failings in three areas, the Home Office said. More than a quarter of 101 students sampled were studying at the university when they had no leave to remain in the UK. Checks of 50 separate files revealed 20 where there was no "verification" that the students had met mandatory stan-

dards of English required to study in Britain. Additionally, the university was unable to say whether a student had turned up for classes or not in almost 60 per cent of a further 250 sampled records. Home Office sources said that the problems were systemic across the university.

Professor Malcolm Gillies, the university's vice-chancellor, described the claims levelled against it as "not particularly cogent" and said that it would dispute them. "I would go so far as to say that UKBA has been rewriting its own guidelines on this issue and this is something which should cause concern to all universities in the UK," he said.

Other universities have had their right to recruit students suspended, but London Metropolitan is the first to be stripped of its ability to take students from outside the EU.

Sally Hunt, general secretary of the University and College Union, said: "No matter how this is dressed up, the damaging message that the UK deports foreign students will reach all corners of the globe. The last thing we can afford to do is send a message that international students are no longer welcome here. Yet government efforts to impress a domestic audience by sounding tough on immigration, coupled with the chaotic handling of this affair, risk doing exactly that."

The decision threatens the future of the university. Professor Gillies said that there would be a £30 million hole in its annual budget of £150 million.

Edward Wanambwa, head of the immigration team at the law firm Russell-Cooke, added that the university "faces the prospect of being sued [by students for repayment of fees] for potentially tens of millions of pounds"

unless the decision is overturned.



'It's sad. I feel completely lost'

Case study

There were tears and tirades outside London Metropolitan University yesterday (Rhoda Buchanan writes). International students said that the only help they had been given was a list of other universities. They had been told that they had 60 days to find somewhere else to study.

Phuntsok Tsering, 26, said he had already spent £60,000 on his

architecture degree and related expenses. He had one year left and had not yet been able to tell his parents in India what had happened. "I'm definitely stressed. It's totally unfair."

Anna Melnikova, 26, from Russia, said: "I don't think anywhere will take us. It's just sad. I feel completely lost. I don't know what to do."

Ms Melnikova, above, is studying for a degree in journalism and media. "There is

no such thing as journalism in Russia. I felt here I could get a good history of journalism. I felt I could go back to Russia and change things."

An Iranian student who did not want to be named said that she had paid £4,000 for a three-month course in English that would be of use only if she were to start a degree. "It's very expensive. My family support me but I have wasted my money here," she said.



London Metropolitan University, which had its visa licence revoked



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