

From The Times

July 14, 2007

# Mystery of the missing overseas students

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Thousands of university places were offered last year to overseas applicants who failed to enrol, raising concerns that the student visa system is being abused.

Twenty-one out of 100 universities contacted by The Times confirmed that 11,077 foreign students who accepted places had failed to turn up. They included the universities of Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, Bristol and Glasgow Caledonian.

Eight institutions said that in the past three years nearly 30,000 foreign students had accepted an offer but had never showed up. Universities able to provide figures dating back to 2004 included Birmingham, Plymouth and Nottingham. At 8,000, Northumbria University had the most missing students over three years.

The figures have prompted fears that the system is being used as a short cut for people wishing to obtain visas to enter Britain for other reasons.

David Davis, the Shadow Home Secretary, said that The Times's research "shows that the weaknesses in our immigration control and security do not just apply to doctors, as has been highlighted in the aftermath of the recent attempted terror attacks, but that bogus student applications are an even bigger loophole.

"Previous home secretaries have all made tough promises but these figures show they have simply failed to act."

The study follows the news that 3,064 places assigned to foreign scholars at Portsmouth University since 2004 have been left unfilled.

Universities say that there may be a number of reasons why students who have agreed to places fail to materialise.

According to academics, it is normal for applicants to apply to and be accepted by a variety of institutions before making their final decisions. Some students may not inform universities that they intend to study elsewhere.

Universities, however, often do not pass on details of missing students to the Home Office. This means that neither the Government nor the universities keep track of absent students.

Rebecca Bunting, Pro Vice-Chancellor at Portsmouth, said that her university informed the Home Office twice a month about students who did not arrive or whose status changed.

"The University of Portsmouth is one of the few higher education institutions to adopt this protocol as standard practice," she said.

The Home Office said that some institutions did volunteer information about students who did not enrol or discontinued their studies and that this was followed up by officials.

Among the missing students at Portsmouth, 3 are from Iran, 16 from Saudi Arabia, 2 from Iraq and 379 from Pakistan.

At present, foreigners wishing to study here may apply for student visas once they have accepted one or more offers. But the current system does not automatically record whether they start their courses.

The Government hopes to tackle this problem with a points-based immigration system that will introduce institution-specific visas and require universities routinely to submit names of missing foreign students to the Home Office. But this will not be until 2009.

A spokesman for the Border and Immigration Agency at the Home Office said: "The majority of international students are genuine and bring substantial economic benefits to the UK, contributing some £5 billion a year to our economy. The fact that foreign students choose not to take up positions at universities is not evidence of substantial abuse."

Statistics from the Home Office show that in 2005-06 nearly 200,000 people were issued with a student visa.

Last year it emerged that a Chinese gangmaster convicted of the manslaughter of the cockle pickers who died in 2004 had enrolled at colleges in London and Manchester in order to secure an extended student visa. Rather than study, Lin Liang Ren started renting cheap Liverpool properties to house Chinese people sent from London.