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## Funded young researchers refused entry to UK, professional body warns



SOURCE: [PA](#)

Passport to problems: departments are struggling to recruit non-EU students  
Overly bureaucratic immigration rules are preventing world-class researchers from coming to the UK, even when they are funded by European research grants, a group of leading engineers has said.

The Engineering Professors' Council, which represents engineering departments at 78 universities, is calling on the Home Office to be more flexible in granting visas to young researchers wishing to visit the UK for training purposes or to work short-term contracts.

It follows reports to the EPC by several universities that engineers on Marie Curie fellowships - the EU's flagship pre- and postdoctoral research scheme - have been refused visas to enter the country.

UK universities have to think carefully about whether to participate in the programme, which this year will award grants worth £191 million to early-stage researchers, because the government cannot guarantee that non- EU applicants will gain visas for mandatory training visits or network meetings here, one professor told a survey taken at the council's annual conference in Portsmouth last month.

"[Visa] refusals make it impossible to comply with the terms of the grant agreements," he says.

He explains how one researcher from Colombia employed in Poland was refused a visa to join a mid-term review meeting in the UK, jeopardising the British partner's involvement in the cross-border project.

The researcher was also refused a visa to attend a short course offered by the Institution of Mechanical Engineers on the "bizarre grounds" that it is not a university and therefore is not allowed to sponsor students, the professor adds.

This was no isolated incident, the academic says. In the past 12 to 18 months the UK Border Agency had routinely refused visas for early-stage researchers, "even for specific visits, let alone for multiple entry".

Another professor told the council of his difficulties in obtaining visas for two Russian scientists "with outstanding expertise" whom he wanted to employ on short-term contracts.

"Their English is perfectly adequate for us to have very high-level discussions in science," he says. "But now I am in limbo while they see if they can pass the English test."

In all, 44 per cent of the professors attending the annual conference say that they have faced difficulties in recruiting non-EU staff, with many posts left unfilled.

Sixty-six per cent of departments have also found it tough to recruit non- EU students, with half reporting specific problems filling taught- postgraduate courses.

Many applicants from India, Pakistan and China have been unable to obtain visas before their courses, and there have also been problems with renewing visas in time because of administrative delays.

Several departments say that the number of high-calibre applicants for postgraduate study has fallen, with promising engineers heading to the US or Canada because the UK is viewed as “student-unfriendly”.

Susan Kay, chief executive of the EPC, said that engineering departments were frustrated by the “sheer bureaucracy” of the system.

“This is not about us whingeing and saying we need fees from overseas students, although these fees are crucial in keeping many courses going,” Ms Kay said.

“Our concern is that if we cannot recruit the right staff from the UK, we must not be prevented from recruiting from overseas, which is vital if we want to build research.”

A Home Office spokesman said that immigration rules allow individuals to attend conferences and meetings if these are prearranged.

There is also provision for academics to come as visitors to the UK in exchange arrangements, and institutions are able to sponsor research staff for a visa under the tier-5 points-based scheme.