Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS)

Summary

International staff and students are a vital part of university communities, but our institutions understand overseas recruitment is not without risk. The Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) requires many international students and researchers intending to study or research almost any STEM subject to undergo enhanced scrutiny. It is an important part of efforts to counter potential hostile activity and protect the UK's national interests.

Universities work closely behind the scenes with the Counter Proliferation and Arms Control Centre (CPACC) on this scheme and others to keep us safe. However, severe ATAS delays have caused significant problems for individual students, research projects and universities. These problems risk undermining efforts to bring leading scientific talent to the UK and are an obstacle to our science superpower ambitions. Delays have already led to businesses retracting funding, and PhD applicants and highly qualified researchers withdrawing from opportunities in the UK.

To help tackle backlogs and ensure robust ATAS checks are agile enough to support secure international recruitment, Government should:

Overhaul communications to applicants to reduce confusion and cut numbers of unnecessary duplicate applications.

Work with the sector to enhance guidance and ensure consistency of advice to reduce errors leading to processing delays.

Work with the sector to improve the ATAS application form and make sure it is fully accessible for all staff and students.

Ensure CPACC and the FCDO teams administering ATAS have the resources required to meet processing targets without compromising necessary scrutiny of individual applications.

Action is required now to avoid significant disruption to UK R&D as ATAS applications increase ahead of the 2023 academic year.

Processing delays

A survey of 1,465 students and staff from 21 UK higher education institutions, including 17 Russell Group universities, on their experience of the ATAS system in 2021 and 2022 revealed significant increases in the number of applicants experiencing delays, and longer average processing times.

On average, it is now taking 53 working days for a student application to be processed, greatly exceeding the FCDO's 30 working day target. Russell Group students experiencing ATAS processing delays in 2022 were waiting an average of 80 working days for a decision to be made. This is an increase of 18 working days from 2021.

Five universities reported cases of students waiting over 110 working days for a decision.

Staff applications are now being processed on average in 35 working days, more than double the average 15-day processing time achieved in 2021. More than one third of staff (38%) reported having to wait more than 30 working days for their application to be processed.

Impact on UK research

Survey responses showed increased delays to ATAS approvals and longer average processing times are already impacting on research projects in strategically important sectors such as chemical engineering.

Examples of projects facing significant difficulties as a result of ATAS problems include:

> Delayed ATAS approval blocking the recruitment of a specialist PhD candidate to support industry-sponsored research into the safety of titanium alloys, with further delays likely to lead to the cancellation of this work.
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> ATAS delays forcing the abandonment of one planned programme of aerospace research, and another university department being forced to suspend a computing PhD programme.

Impact on international students and secure overseas recruitment

Survey responses showed ATAS delays are having a substantial impact on international students, leading to increased costs and stress for applicants. University staff reported that in a number of instances, delays led to highly qualified candidates abandoning applications.

Examples of the challenges ATAS delays present to individual applicants and secure overseas recruitment include:

> A six-month delay in ATAS approval putting a materials science student at risk of losing scholarship funding and multiple reports of PhD candidates and other students deferring or withdrawing due to ATAS problems.
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> At one university, 75 students within a single university faculty were waiting for an ATAS decision on 3 October 2022 - just three days before their courses were due to begin.

Supporting an efficient, effective ATAS

Issues contributing to processing delays identified in survey responses included inconsistent communications with applicants leading to a high volume of duplicate submissions, and a lack of clarity in guidance and confusing application questions leading to errors.

Addressing these problems is a low-cost solution for Government that would reduce the administrative burden on civil servants significantly and lead to performance improvements against processing targets. Ministers should also review the level of resource provided to CPACC and FCDO teams administering the scheme.

ATAS delays are undermining efforts to bring leading global talent to the UK. **Action is needed now to address these issues ahead of the 2023 applications cycle and ensure the immigration system continues to support secure overseas recruitment.**