



01 March 2023

Leo Docherty MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Europe)  
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office  
(via email: [psministerdochertyaction@fcdo.gov.uk](mailto:psministerdochertyaction@fcdo.gov.uk))

Dear Minister

International staff and students are a vital part of university communities. Our status as a world-renowned research hub hinges on our ability to work at scale and to collaborate with, and attract, the most talented people from across the world and at different stages of their careers.

Government and universities are working together to counter foreign interference and we welcome the close joint working with the Counter Proliferation and Arms Control Centre (CPACC). We recognise the peak and trough nature of the work, but in recent years there have been severe delays to the Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) which risk undermining our shared science superpower ambitions.

A sector-led survey of over 1450 students and staff from 21 UK higher education institutions revealed significant increases in the number of applications experiencing delays in 2021 and 2022. A snapshot of this data shows how serious the situation is:

- Student application approval is taking 53 working days, well above FCDO's target of 30
- Russell Group students experiencing ATAS delays in 2022 were waiting an average of 80 working days, an increase of 18 from 2021
- Universities are reporting cases of students waiting over 110 working days for a decision
- Processing times for staff applications more than doubled compared to 2021

Universities have made clear that these delays have led to highly qualified candidates abandoning applications because of increased costs and the impact on their wellbeing, undermining efforts to secure the best and brightest talent from overseas.

We understand that overseas recruitment is not without risk and due diligence must be undertaken, which is why universities work with CPACC on this scheme and others. Nevertheless, delays are now causing significant problems for research projects, individual students, and universities.

Delays have already blocked the recruitment of a specialist PhD candidate to support industry-sponsored research into the safety of titanium alloys; forced the abandonment of one planned programme of aerospace research and led to the suspension of a computing PhD programme. Without urgent action, further delays are likely to lead to the cancellation of this work, return of private research investment and significant disruption to UK R&D as ATAS applications increase ahead of the 2023 academic year. This would be the third year in a row the scheme has been hit by delays.

Issues flagged to us as contributing to processing delays included inconsistent communications with applicants leading to a high volume of duplicate submissions, a lack of clarity in guidance, and confusing application questions, leading to errors. We believe addressing these issues can be done at a low-cost to Government and lead to performance improvements against processing targets.

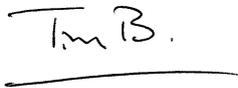
Moreover, we believe that given the consistent level of ATAS delays, it is imperative to review the level of resource provided to CPACC and officials in the FCDO administering the scheme to ensure they are able to meet processing targets without compromising necessary scrutiny of individual applications.

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 and avoid significant disruption to UK R&D. We are eager to work with you to discuss how light-touch and low-cost changes can be made to the application process and would be delighted to meet with you to discuss these issues – and our survey data – in more detail.

We would be happy to speak with your officials to arrange a time at your convenience and look forward to your reply.

This letter has been copied to Michelle Donelan MP, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology; George Freeman MP, Minister of State in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology; and, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Minister of State in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Yours sincerely,



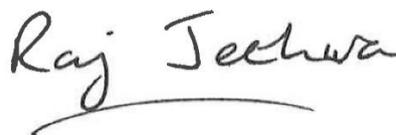
Dr Tim Bradshaw  
**Chief Executive, Russell Group**



Jamie Arrowsmith  
**Director, Universities UK International**



Anne Marie Graham  
**Chief Executive, UKCISA**



Raj Jethwa  
**Chief Executive, UCEA**