

British security scheme to vet Indian, non-EU students

Britain has introduced a new security vetting scheme for all non-European Union students, including from India, who want to study in universities here in specialised areas such as mathematics, biochemistry, aeronautical engineering and nuclear physics.

The scheme, introduced from Nov 1, is called the Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS), and is part of Britain's wider security efforts to ensure that knowledge in universities here is not misused amid concerns over nuclear proliferation and terrorism.

The 'proliferation-risk' subject areas that will be closely monitored for foreign PhD students include Mathematics, Biochemistry, Electrical Engineering, Nuclear Physics, Microbiology, Chemical Engineering, Aeronautical Engineering and Material Sciences. Several Indian students come to Britain every year to study in such specialised subjects.

Neil Kernohan of the Foreign Office told IANS that the scheme would essentially target a small number of PhD students who pursue research in selected subject areas. Before applying for a student visa, they would first need to obtain a 'certificate of approval' after going through the new, IT-based security system.

'Discussions on the new scheme have been going for nearly two years, when it was realised that the existing academic system was not rigid enough. It is not linked to the recent acts of terrorism in Britain,' Kernohan said, when asked if the scheme was a fallout of Indian PhD student Kafeel Ahmed being arrested for an attempted car bombing at Glasgow Airport in July.

Bangalore-origin Ahmed had initially enrolled as a student at the Queen's University, Belfast, in 2001 and remained in Northern Ireland until 2004. He later studied for a PhD in computational fluid dynamics at the Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge.

Official sources said there was a vetting system in place earlier, but it was voluntary and relied on academic institutions providing information about postgraduate students from a list of '10 countries of concern'. The new system, however, makes it mandatory for all non-EU PhD students to be vetted.

Kernohan added: 'It's not my impression that this is a particularly large-scale problem here but there was an argument for putting it on a mandatory footing. It would not be in anybody's interest to penalise bona fide students interested in coming to study here.'

'The new system will be open... and thus less discriminatory. Our objective is to ensure that students coming into the UK to study do not take back information that helps the spread of weapons of mass destruction at home.'

ATAS is managed by the Foreign Office and involves an online application form that potential students in the select subject areas will need to complete. They are checked on the basis of their country of origin, the university at which they studied in their home countries and whether they had a history of proliferation.

If there are any concerns or doubts about the potential students, they will be refused the 'certificate

of approval', which will lead to refusal of a visa. Kernohan stressed that the new system will affect a small fraction of students coming to Britain.

The registrar of the Royal Society of Chemists, Tony Ashmore, told his organisation's publication, Chemistry World, that there was a security issue that needed to be addressed.

But, he said, Britain must remain 'open to students and academics from around the world. It really depends on how the Foreign Office implements the new system. If the vetting is restricted to a small number of countries that attract relatively few students, then the impact might be quite small.

'But if the scheme catches large numbers of students indiscriminately it could put people off coming to this country.'

A spokesperson for the Royal Society said it was clearly 'a priority to prevent the proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons'. But she added that it was important that any successor to the earlier system did not dissuade potential postgraduates from applying to study in Britain by creating unnecessary hurdles in the application process.

The full list of subjects for which applications for admission will be subject to security vetting are: Anatomy, Physiology and Pathology; Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmacy; Biology; Botany; Genetics; Microbiology; Molecular Biology, Biophysics and Biochemistry; Others in Biological Sciences; Animal Science; Others in Veterinary Sciences, Agriculture and related subjects; Chemistry; Materials Science; Physics; Astronomy; Physical and Terrestrial Geographical and Environmental Sciences; Others in Physical Sciences; Mathematical and Computer Sciences; Mathematics; Operational Research; Computer Science; Artificial Intelligence; Others in Mathematical and Computing Sciences; General Engineering; Civil Engineering; Mechanical Engineering; Aerospace Engineering; Naval Architecture; Electronic and Electrical Engineering; Production and Manufacturing Engineering; Chemical, Process and Energy Engineering; Others in Engineering; Metallurgy; Polymers and Textiles; Materials Technology not otherwise specified; Industrial Biotechnology; Others in Technology

Subjects included for Taught Masters as well as Doctorate and Masters degrees by research (but not MEng, MPharm, Msci): Materials Science; Physics (including Nuclear Physics); Mechanical Engineering; Aerospace Engineering; Materials Technology not otherwise specified

Prasun Sonwalkar (© IANS / India eNews)