

24.16

S. R. M. P. 30 July 1978

Big drop in UK student visa bids

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The number of students seeking further education in Britain has plummeted apparently in response to London's plan to double tuition fees for overseas students.

Figures from the Education Department's Overseas Students and Scholarships Section (OSSS) show that the number of student visas issued by the Immigration Department in the first six months of the year dropped 47 per cent compared with the same period last year.

Last year a total of 2,729 visas were issued by the immigration authorities to students going to all types of British educational institutions of which 1,919 were issued between January and last month.

In the first half of this year only 1,006 visas have been issued.

This only involves students who intend to go.

It does not take into account students who get offers from institutions in other countries and decide to take

them up instead, a spokesman for the Education Department said yesterday.

So the actual numbers who do go to British institutions when the academic year starts in September could be even smaller.

The drop in numbers affects all types of institutions according to the OSSS, a body which acts as a middleman for students by channelling applications and providing information on British education institutions.

The number of visas granted by the Immigration Department for the first six months of last year and the numbers issued in the same period this year give some idea of the situation:

● 756 were granted for students going to British secondary schools last year compared with 378 this year.

● 569 were granted for students accepted for GCE courses last year compared with 286 this year.

● 135 were granted for those going for their first degrees last year. The figure this year is only 58.

● 77 were granted for post-graduate students last year compared with 32.

● 302 were granted to those pursuing other educational courses last year compared with 200.

● 47 were granted for nursing students last year compared with 34.

● 33 were granted to students pursuing an ordinary or higher national diploma last year compared with 15 this year.

An Education Department spokesman said yesterday that the sudden plunge, after years of steady increase, has probably resulted from the British Government's announced fee rise.

The new fees to be introduced for overseas students will range from £2,000 (about HK\$22,000) to £5,000 (about HK\$55,000) a year.

The rates compare with the current average figure of £940 (about HK\$10,340) for overseas students, and £740 (about HK\$8,140) for home students.

Education sources say that even the British Government's promise to review its

policy of charging full fees to students from its colonies has not dampened the apprehension of local students.

"The general feeling seems to be that even if Britain agrees to some minor concessions now as a result of pressure from the Hongkong Government there is no guarantee that this will not be withdrawn next year," one source said.

Students discouraged by the gloomy prospects in Britain are increasingly viewing the United States and Canada as educational havens it seems.

A spokesman for the Canadian Commission, Mr J. MacLachlan, said that the current rate of applications for student visas had shot up by 30 per cent compared with the same time last year.

As of yesterday, 3,417 applications had been received.

About 80 per cent were from students wishing to go to Canadian high schools and the rest were mainly from those heading for universities.

Based on past experience at least another 1,000 applications are expected to be received before the end of the year.

Commission officials put the number of Hongkong students already in Canadian schools and universities at about 16,000.

This year it is likely the figure will be boosted by another 4,000 to 4,500 from Hongkong, according to the officer in charge of the commission's student programme, Mr Peter Lancefield.

University fees in Canada for foreign students range from about C\$1,500 (about HK\$7,500) to C\$1,800 (about HK\$9,000) a year — a fraction of what the British universities are intending to charge in September.

Mr Lancefield said he believed the giant fee rises in Britain is one of the reasons why more local students are going to Canadian schools and universities but quite apart from that numbers have been rising steadily over recent years.



Mr Nider

The American Consulate is also expecting a flood of applications for visas from local students.

"We would be very surprised indeed if the rate of applications does not rise sharply," said US Consul, Ralph Nider.

But the deadline for applications is open until August 18, he said, so it is still too early to draw any firm conclusions.

"The Education Department has been telling us to expect more applications and based on that and the inquiries we were getting we do expect a great increase," he said.

More students were expected to pick the US not only as a result of the higher fees demanded by British educational institutions but also because various countries are restricting the number of overseas students.

America does not impose any limitations nor are there any plans for major increases in fees apart from an annual rise of about six to 10 per cent to account for inflation.

Mr Nider said it is difficult to give any accurate figures of the fees at America's 7,000 tertiary institutions but as a rough guide universities generally charge between US\$2,000 (about HK\$10,000) to US\$3,000 (about HK\$15,000) a year for residents with overseas students paying an additional 50 to 100 per cent.

Prestigious universities, however, often charge far more, he said.