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# Visa changes could cost UK dear, says UUK head

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By [John Morgan](#)

**The government's proposed changes to the student visa system could cause economic damage to the UK by destroying jobs in higher education and beyond, the head of Universities UK has warned.**

Steve Smith, who is also vice-chancellor of the University of Exeter, spoke of his fears in an interview last week at the British Council's Going Global conference in Hong Kong, where he was keen to tell the international audience that the UK was still "open for business" despite impending visa restrictions.

The coalition government is expected to announce its visa changes for students this week, implementing the Conservative Party's manifesto commitment to cut immigration to the UK.

Professor Smith said UUK has had an official "embedded" in the UK Border Agency in a bid to ensure that the sector's key points are not overlooked.

UUK believes it is vital to preserve the progression route for overseas students who enter the UK to study A levels or language courses at colleges and then stay on for university.

"I don't think for a second that the government wants to damage UK higher education," Professor Smith said. "But they do seem to think that higher education starts at university and [seem] not [to] understand the pathway point."

On the potential impact of a sharp drop in student numbers caused by severe immigration restrictions, he added: "We think the impact could be really damaging to the UK economy. It is about jobs...Where else are growth and jobs coming from? They are not just academic and professional services jobs, but also jobs in the cities where the students are."

Professor Smith's message for delegates in his conference speech was more positive.

He said that "despite the headlines, the UK continues to welcome international students, and will do in increasing numbers".

Joanna Newman, the new director of UUK's International and Europe Unit, said the potential economic impact of the changes and the low rate of visa abuse by higher education students had not been communicated effectively.

The International and Europe Unit could be a channel for these messages, she said, adding that there should also be an emphasis on helping more UK students to study abroad.