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## Leading Article: Swift action needed on Iraqi scholars

Thursday, 2 July 2009

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The report last week from the UK Higher Education International Unit on how Britain can do its bit to help Iraqi universities back onto their feet is welcome if only because it shows how far we have to go. Government ministers are putting the best possible gloss on things, but the fact is that it is well-nigh impossible for Iraqis to secure visas to Britain at the moment because they have to travel abroad to do so. That means Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's initiative to have 10,000 Iraqis on scholarships abroad – divided between the UK and the USA – may be difficult to get off the ground. It will certainly take a lot longer to achieve because of the obstacles that exist in the immigration arrangements for this country. The British Council believes that Iraqi students need more help in preparing for English language testing in advance of applying for a visa, and better advice on what to expect when they get here. So, the Government has a lot on its plate.

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When al-Maliki visited London in April, it was agreed that 250 Iraqis would come to Britain on his scholarship scheme this autumn. That number is beginning to look extremely optimistic. But it is certainly in Britain's interests to do as much as it can to ease travel arrangements for Iraqis coming to the UK to study. We owe it to a country that, with other Western allies, we invaded in 2003, and that has suffered immense unrest since. As Professor Rick Trainor, president of Universities UK, says, education has a key role to play in the development of civil society in Iraq.

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