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# Student Vetting: The UK's Academic Technology Approval Scheme

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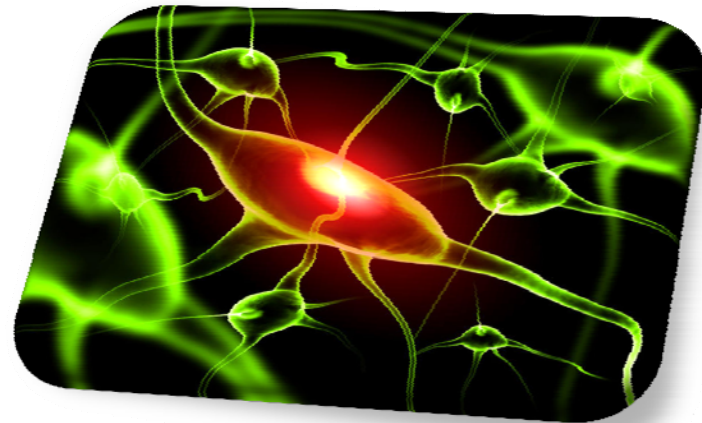
Directorate for Defence and International Security

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# Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS)





## About ATAS – what is it?

- Government-run student vetting scheme set up in 2007 to address transfers of sensitive knowledge through postgraduate study
- Requires students offered a place on certain sensitive taught or research courses to obtain UK government clearance
- ATAS targets knowledge that may help develop or use WMD and their means of delivery: **nuclear, chemical, biological, radiological, toxin** programmes, also **ballistic missile**.





## Why do we have it?

- Meets UK objectives to deny states WMD capabilities and means of delivery, reducing risks of associated instability
- Delivers international commitments, e.g. Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), relevant UNSCRs, commitments under Export Control Regimes
- Cases in past of postgraduate foreign students becoming weapons proliferators





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## How does it work?

- Students present evidence of ATAS clearance to UK Visas & Immigration when applying for a visa
- Required by UK immigration legislation, where sensitive courses are listed
- Applies to postgraduate students from most countries (not European Economic Area /Switzerland)





## How does it work contd...?

Student submits electronic application to UK government



Application vetted



Decision made to approve/deny ATAS Clearance



Decision emailed as certificate to student / academic institution



Student applies for visa or makes new/amended application



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# Outreach

- Scheme is heavily subscribed: over 20,000 applications in 2014
- Importance of foreign students to UK universities: effective outreach needed
- Outreach is dual purpose:
  - improves **compliance** with ATAS requirements
  - improves **service** levels and expectations





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# Compliance

## Clarity of requirements:

- Universities told which courses of interest and which levels via ATAS website and immigration rules

## Enforcement angle:

- Universities that fail to comply put at risk prized immigration sponsor status
- Students warned on certificate that fraud punishable by criminal penalties







## Compliance contd...

### Other key elements:

- Unique number generated for document security (recent student fraud uncovered this way)
- Universities required to request ATAS clearance when course is changed, extended or relocated
- Institutions advised to inform UK government when offering courses overseas (export licensing)





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# Service



## Reputational angle:

- Must be light touch and not undue barrier to academic exchange
- International relations: important to ensure timely decisions and be clear on rationale for denials

## Economic angle:

- Importance of international students to universities and UK economy



## Service contd....

### Elements to efficiency of scheme:

- Need credible timeframe for vetting (20 working days)
- Over 85% of applications successfully processed within this timeframe
- Managing expectations through regular contact with universities, including hotline, mailbox, visits

### Review option:

- Students can appeal; involves actors not party to original decision





# Conclusion

Key factors for running an effective scheme that balances security and economic considerations:

- Clear criteria for submitting and completing applications
- Keep to service targets that are clearly communicated
- Fully utilise communication channels to meet and manage expectations



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## Contacts

ATAS Website:

<https://www.gov.uk/academic-technology-approval-scheme>

ATAS Online Service:

<https://www.atas.fco.gov.uk/public/welcome.aspx>

ATAS Unit, Counter Proliferation Department, FCO:



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