

Visa laws crippling language schools

SOUTH African language school owners say their businesses are being "crippled" by the country's immigration laws and have already suffered millions of rand in losses, which they fear could lead to closures.

Owners who spoke to the Cape Argus said there had been a huge increase in the number of study visa applications turned down by South African embassies and consulates over the world since the new immigration laws were implemented last year, and they feared the drop in student numbers would result in job losses.

Stevin Smith, co-founder of the South African College of Education and Languages in the city centre, said his and other schools went through an accreditation process with the Services Sector Education and Training Authority and could previously take in foreign students based on this accreditation.

"But our potential students' visas are being denied because the immigration laws state that institutions have to be registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training."

Smith said his school contacted the Department of Higher Education and Training last year and showed the Cape Argus an e-mail from the department stating that: "The college accredited by a recognised Seta is not required to register with the Department of Higher Education and Training."

He said his school, which opened in 2004 and has since been providing language lessons to students, pilots, engineers and other professionals from around the world, was now facing closure.

"It is clear that the language school industry was not considered when the new laws were drawn up. I understand the need to look after the integrity of our borders and we want to be regulated.

"All we are asking government is to help us to find a way to look after our livelihoods and to help us prevent job losses."

He said the school and others were now trying to register as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges with the Department of Higher Education and Training, but this was a lengthy process.

Johannes Kraus, chairman of Education South Africa, a national association of English language centres, said a grace period, during which the centres could complete their accreditation as TVET colleges, and visas were issued, would make a big difference.

He said that based on a calculation of the number of weeks potential students would have spent at the language schools, more than R34 million had been lost in the first three months of this year in course expenditures alone.

"If we include accommodation we are talking about a loss of R42 495 750 in the first three months of 2015 alone."

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training, it provides letters to the schools, which the schools could then provide to the Department of Home Affairs. It was not aware of any schools indicating that these letters had not been recognised by Home Affairs.

But owners said some schools had not received such letters while, in other cases, consulates didn't recognise them.

Home Affairs deputy director general for immigration services Jackie McKay said all education facilities had to be accredited with the Department of Higher Education.

"They (the language schools) have to sort this out with the Department of Higher Education."

Alan Winde, the MEC for Economic Opportunities, said the Western Cape government's Red Tape Reduction Unit had engaged Home Affairs on the matter.

"One of the recommendations included that letters of registration/acceptance/enrolment issued by the relevant, accredited institutions should be accepted as valid for the purposes of a study visa.

"The previous engagement had not had the desired outcome and the Red Tape Reduction Unit is preparing for a new round of talks with Home Affairs to unblock the issue."