



Written Response to: Marriage Visas: Pre-Entry Requirement for Spouses by The Runnymede Trust, 27 February 2008

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We welcome the opportunity provided to respond to the consultation paper relating to the pre-entry English-language requirement for foreign spouses seeking to join a British national or person with indefinite leave to remain in the UK. We are in favour of providing migrants with the skills and knowledge for successful integration into British society, however are opposed to the proposed legislation as outlined in the consultation.

The Runnymede Trust is an independent policy research organisation focusing on equality and justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society. Our mandate is to promote a society where citizens and communities feel valued, enjoy equal opportunities to develop their talents, lead fulfilling lives and accept a collective responsibility all in the spirit of civic friendship, shared identity and a common sense of belonging. Immigration policy has thus been an area of concern to us, as it directly affects the members of our diverse communities.

Since we are opposed to the pre-entry requirement of English-language for spouses, we will only focus on the following questions outlined in Chapter One:

Do you think there should be a requirement for spouses to demonstrate knowledge of English before they enter the UK?

No. The proposals set forth in this consultation paper would place added disadvantage to non-EEA foreign spouses and those from non-English speaking countries in joining their spouse who is either a British national or settled person. Thus, this proposal is discriminatory to certain nationalities, races and genders. Additionally, the proposals would be counter to Article 8 (right to respect for private and family life) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and in certain circumstances Article 12 (right to marry and found a family) read with Article 14 (right of enjoyment of rights and freedom set forth in the ECHR).

Do you think the three objectives behind the introduction of a pre-entry English requirement are well founded?

- 1. To assist the spouse's integration into British society at an early stage.**
- 2. To improve employment chances for those who have access to the labour market.**
- 3. To raise awareness of the importance of language and to prepare the spouse for the tests they will need to pass for settlement.**

No. While knowledge of English is indeed useful and often vital to fully understand the complexities of rights and entitlements whilst living in the UK, the proposed pre-entry requirement would not necessarily lead to a better process of integration of foreign spouses into British society.



In a recent study we undertook researching into the Thai community¹, the majority of the women involved in research first arrived in the UK to join their British spouse, and had also taken English classes either in Thailand or the UK. Despite this attempt at improving their communication skills – as already required to provide competence of English for permanent settlement – they stated they still felt alienated from British society because of discrimination against foreigners and more specifically, non-native English speakers. In this study, women felt that English helped their employment opportunities, but those employed also felt that sexism and racism in the workplace inhibited their career progression. Also, they felt that the non-recognition of past work experience, and sometimes even past qualifications from their country of origin, were also constraining their career options. As nearly all the women who took part in the research were married to English men, they understood the importance of being fluent in English in both their private and public lives. However, even with the ability to communicate in English, they felt that discrimination was the main barrier to integration into British society.

We understand that EEA nationals would be exempt from the proposed pre-entry English requirement; however issues of integration into British society and knowledge of English are also important for their lives in the UK. Free and widely accessible English language classes in the UK would be the most effective method of language learning for migrants regardless of their country of origin. Learning English in an environment of native English speakers is more effective than learning in a non-English speaking country, or in isolation through self-study as proposed in the consultation paper. Subsidies for learning English – or at the very least the waiver of residency requirement for home student tuition – would better demonstrate the Government's commitment to equality, integration and the maintenance of cohesive communities.

Therefore we feel that there should not be a requirement for spouses to demonstrate knowledge of English before they enter the UK, and furthermore, that the objectives behind the introduction of a pre-entry English requirement are not well founded.

Thank you for considering our response and the concerns and issues we highlight. We look forward to learning the result of the consultation process and the intentions of government on any changes to pre-entry requirements for marriage migrants. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this response, please contact: Michelynn Laflèche (Director) or Jessica Mai Sims (Research and Policy Analyst) at the address or telephone number below.

The Runnymede Trust
27 February 2008

¹ Sims, J. (2008) *Empowering Individuals & Creating Community – Thai Perspectives on Life in Britain*. London: Runnymede Trust