

Cheaper and safer than using lorries

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Applying for a place at an expensive boarding school and obtaining a Home Office study visa do not seem like the natural choices for a trafficking gang trying to get cheap nail bar workers into the UK.

The well-worn route of illegal migrants from Vietnam to Europe involves flying to Russia and then travelling in cars and lorries to France, often via Latvia and Belarus, and it comes with many risks.

Traffickers using the boarding school route simply approach an education agent working for one of the many schools who recruit in Vietnam. Guided by an agent, the child applies to one of the private schools or colleges that offer courses to help international students qualify for British universities.

Estimates for the cost of travelling to Europe via Russia and overland through Europe in lorries range from just under £10,000 up to more than £35,000. That makes the costs of the boarding school scheme seem reasonable — paying for a flight to the UK and one term's school fees, before disappearing into thin air.

Vietnam is considered a “scholarship market” for British private schools and many applicants will be offered discounted fees of up to 50 per cent. So in some cases, the scheme costs as little as £5,000.

In the past decade many private schools have ramped up their recruitment in Southeast Asia. They use local education agents, and generally pay them on commission.

Tier 4 child visas are available only to students with offers from British private schools. Unlike the much more common “general” study visas used by university students, they do not require applicants to take an English test.

There are 666 independent schools approved by the Home Office to sponsor overseas students for child visas. They include Eton, Harrow and Stowe.

An agent in Vietnam who recruits heavily to UK private schools told *The Times* that in the past few years about 30 per cent of applicants were interviewed by UK Visas and Immigration agents during their visa application. “This year,” he said, “nobody has had to do an interview.”