

Royal Society submission to the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into the Tier 2 Skilled Workers system

Summary

- The UK has a proud track record of research excellence that attracts some of the world's best minds and highly skilled workers to its internationally renowned institutions and vibrant industries. The ability to access and attract the top talent supports the UK's capability to carry out cutting edge research and keep pace with competitors and collaborators. International scientists make a valuable contribution to the UK research base and the flow of highly skilled workers is vital for the health of the science and innovation system.
- A system that restricts the UK's ability to access talent from abroad is also likely to restrict the growth and productivity of the economy. Research creates new knowledge and technological innovations, which can improve productivity by supporting the development of new processes and approaches. The UK needs to have the right policies in place to encourage valuable immigration, and minimise barriers to the flow of talented people.
- The Tier 2 (General) visa route is the main route for foreign scientists to enter academia, public service and industry in the UK. The current points-based system of the Tier 2 visa route prioritises PhD-level positions, and therefore recognises that salary is not an appropriate proxy for their value to the UK. The Society recommends that the provision for PhD-level positions is maintained.
- The recent breach of the Tier 2 cap has, broadly speaking, not prevented UK institutions from accessing the scientists they need through provisions for PhD-level positions, as discussed above. Despite this provision, a cap on the number of skilled workers entering the UK has the potential to cause problems for scientists entering the UK in the future.
- The Tier 2 (General) visa route is also used by international students switching from a Tier 4 (General) visa, providing they find employment within four months of graduating. This option attracts international students to come to study in the UK, and allows existing highly-skilled graduates to enter the work force. The Society recommends that the option of switching from a Tier 4 visa to a Tier 2 visa should remain in place for students.
- Setting restrictions on the UK's access to the global pool of talent, runs the risk of creating negative perceptions of the UK as a place for skilled workers to come and work. Although there are provisions for PhD-level positions, restrictions to the flow of skilled workers to the UK have the potential to send the signal that the UK is not an accommodating nation for scientists and skilled workers from abroad.

Introduction

1. The Royal Society welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Home Affairs Select Committee's inquiry into the Tier 2 Skilled Workers system. The Royal Society is the national academy of science in the UK. It is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world's most distinguished scientists working across a broad range of disciplines in academia, industry, charities and the public sector. The Society draws on the expertise of the Fellowship to provide independent and authoritative scientific advice to the UK, European and international decision-makers.

2. This submission sets out the Society's position on the Tier 2 Skilled Workers system, including how scientists use Tier 2 and the effect of the annual Tier 2 (General) visa cap, in light of the recent breach in the number of applicants. This response builds on the Society's previous positions and contributions about this topic, including the response to the Migration Advisory Committee's (MAC) review of Minimum Salary Thresholds for Tier 2.
3. Broadly reflecting the scope of the inquiry, the Society's response is divided into the following sections:
 - Skilled workers in UK science
 - Tier 2 and scientists
 - The cap on Tier 2
 - Controlling skilled migration
 - Switching from Tier 4 to Tier 2 visa routes
 - Perceptions
 - Conclusion

Skilled workers in UK science

4. The UK's excellence in science attracts some of the best minds to work in its world-leading institutions and the UK is a major hub for international research and collaboration. With relatively little investment the UK punches well above its weight as a research nation, which helps it to access the best talent from around the world and maintain the ability to carry out cutting edge research.^{1,2} For instance, in the UK, over one third of all academic papers are now written by multinational teams of authors, and the leading business investors in R&D in the UK are global firms with offices around the world.³
5. Science is a global enterprise and the world's scientific workforce is highly skilled and internationally mobile. Mobile scientific talent can contribute to the creation and diffusion of knowledge, as well as expanding networks of collaboration and creating lasting connections between research institutions around the world. A mobile scientific workforce can facilitate international collaborations, which in turn can bring benefits to the UK science base including increased citation impact, access to markets, and broadening research horizons.⁴
6. The UK needs to have the right policies in place to encourage valuable immigration, and minimise barriers to the flow of talented people. The UK must ensure that migration and visa regulations are not too bureaucratic and impede access for researchers to the best science and research across the world. A rigid and bureaucratic visa system can discourage researchers from migrating to the UK.
7. The UK is experiencing a skills shortage that has the potential to damage the health of its economy, limiting its ability to compete in a global marketplace.⁵ Not enough top quality UK-based students are currently coming through the education system to take up these roles in science,

¹ OECD (2014) Main Science and Technology indicators. <http://stats.oecd.org/>

² International Comparative Performance of the UK Research Base (2013) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/263729/bis-13-1297-international-comparative-performance-of-the-UK-research-base-2013.pdf

³ The Royal Society (2013) Fuelling prosperity: Research and innovation as drivers of UK growth and competitiveness <https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/Publications/2013/fuelling-prosperity/2013-04-22-fuelling-prosperity.pdf>

⁴ The Royal Society (2011) Knowledge, networks and nations: Global scientific collaboration in the 21st century <https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/Publications/2013/fuelling-prosperity/2013-04-22-fuelling-prosperity.pdf>

⁵ UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2013: UK Results. UK Commission for Employment and Skills. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/327492/evidence-report-81-ukces-employer-skills-survey-13-full-report-final.pdf

engineering and technology.⁶ The UK's ability to attract skilled workers will be a key solution to this shortfall in industry. With the UK approaching full employment and systematic skills shortages in some sectors, such as engineering, skilled workers from abroad are important to support growth.⁷ Industries that recruit from abroad will suffer if they are unable to tap into the global pool of skilled workers. The ability to employ global talent is a key factor in determining where industries locate themselves.⁸ Many other sectors, particularly the health and care sectors, also depend on being able to access skilled workers from abroad to meet demands.⁹ Restricting the number of skilled workers entering the UK's science and innovation system can have a detrimental impact on our economic growth in the long-term.

8. Universities, particularly those that are research-intensive, build on their research excellence through the recruitment of scientists from abroad. At the last count, 26% of the academic workforce in UK universities were non-UK nationals, with 11% from outside the EU.¹⁰ The proportion of international academics also tends to be higher in the UK's top universities, for example, in 2014, 32% of academic staff at the University of Cambridge and 31% at the University of Oxford were non-UK nationals.^{11,12} It is vital that the UK retains its ability to choose the best and brightest researchers from abroad. International academic staff make a valuable contribution to university research and boost the level of skills within the system. The ability to recruit excellent researchers from abroad keeps the UK at the forefront of international science.

Tier 2 and scientists

9. Freedom of movement is crucial at all career stages for scientists and the UK's attractive power depends on maintaining a visa system that is open to excellence at all levels. The Tier 2 (General) visa route is the main route for foreign scientists to enter academia, the charity sector, public services and industry in the UK. Unless a position is on the Shortage Occupation List or is a PhD-level position, then points are awarded on salary level. Those with a higher salary level are awarded a greater number of points, and therefore those in high earning roles are more likely to get their application granted.
10. PhD-level positions are awarded additional points. The system recognises that salaries paid to scientists are a poor proxy for their value to the UK, as academics are not particularly well paid. This mechanism helps to protect the research base, and the Society recommends that this provision is maintained.

The cap on Tier 2

11. The annual cap on the number of Tier 2 (General) visas that can be approved is currently set at 20,700. This cap was breached for the first time in June 2015, restricting the number of skilled workers that could enter the UK. As a greater number of points are awarded to PhD-level occupations, these roles are unlikely to have been significantly affected by the cap on Tier 2 visas. As far as we are aware, the breach of the Tier 2 cap has not prevented scientists from

⁶ The Royal Society (2014) Vision for science and mathematics education

<https://royalsociety.org/~media/education/policy/vision/reports/vision-full-report-20140625.pdf>

⁷ http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education_and_skills_survey_2013.pdf

⁸ Towards a Global Lab our Market? Globalization and the Knowledge Economy, The Work Foundation, June 2008

http://www.theworkfoundation.com/assets/docs/publications/30_globalisation.pdf

⁹ http://www.ippr.org/files/publications/pdf/winning-global-race_June2014.pdf?noredirect=1

¹⁰ Higher Education Statistics Agency (2015) Staff in Higher Education 2013/14

¹¹ http://www.equality.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/information_report_2013-14_draft_final.docx

¹² http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/media/global/wwwadminoxacuk/localsites/personnel/documents/factsandfigures/staffingfigures2014/Chart_7.pdf

entering the UK. Despite this provision, a cap on the number of skilled workers entering the UK has the potential to cause problems for scientists entering the UK in the future.

Controlling skilled migration

12. The Government has proposed several mechanisms for controlling skilled migration to the UK, such as a skills levy.¹³ The proposed skills levy for employers recruiting non-EU workers would be a method of funding apprenticeships in the UK. This would be a mechanism through which to train home grown workers in the long-term, to eventually fill the roles being recruited through the Tier 2 visa route. However, this proposal would not be a suitable mechanism to fill the roles of scientists recruited through Tier 2. Apprenticeships are not an appropriate form of training for many scientists, and therefore a skill levy to fund apprenticeships may not be suitable to train home workers for these roles.

Switching from Tier 4 to Tier 2 visa routes

13. The UK has traditionally attracted many international students, and has been particularly competitive in attracting post-graduate level students. However, non-EU students using the Tier 4 visa route are currently unable to stay and work in the UK if they do not find employment within four months of finishing their course, which could enable them to switch to a Tier 2 (General) visa. The possibility of working in the UK after graduation is part of what attracts international students to study in the UK, and the current provision for switching allows highly-skilled graduates to enter the workforce. The Society recommends that this option remains for students and that government ensure that pressure on the Tier 2 route as a whole does not jeopardise post-study work opportunities.

Perceptions

14. Setting restrictions on the UK's access to the global pool of talent, runs the risk of creating negative perceptions of the UK as a place for skilled workers to come and work. Although there are provisions for PhD-level positions, restrictions to the flow of skilled workers to the UK have the potential to send the signal that the UK is not an accommodating nation for scientists and skilled workers from abroad. There is global competition for the top talent, and career researchers are likely to follow the best work and resources on offer. For the UK to maintain its ability to keep pace with other nations, we must ensure that it is an attractive place to work for scientists and highly-skilled workers.

Conclusion

15. The UK must retain the ability to access and attract the top talent from across the world, if we are to continue to carry out cutting edge research and keep pace with our competitors and collaborators. International researchers help to build the research excellence of the UK's universities and research institutions. The system must maintain a flow of highly-skilled workers into the UK, for the health of the system and to support economic growth. It is vital that we have the appropriate provisions in place to allow researchers and skilled workers to come and work in the UK.

For all enquiries please contact Becky Purvis, Head of Public Affairs becky.purvis@royalsociety.org

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-announces-migration-advisory-committee>