THE
ROYAL
SOCIETY

The borders of science

Making UK visas work for short-term
researcher mobility

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Contents

Foreword

If the UK wants to be a world leader in science and technology, it needs to be world-leading in its approach to researcher mobility. This is not the case currently and it comes at great cost.

In 2019, the Royal Society showed that the UK had the highest upfront immigration charges for international researchers of any leading science nation. The gap with other countries has since increased.

How the UK manages short-term scientific exchanges matters too. Researchers move frequently back and forth across borders to collaborate and share ideas. This dynamism drives innovation, keeps science at the cutting edge, and ensures that the benefits of research feed downstream into society.

This report looks at the UK's visitor visa arrangements for individuals who attend conferences and other short stay scientific engagements. It finds a system characterised by opaque processes, hidden costs, absent communication, and refusals that are skewed against applicants from emerging science nations.

Putting up barriers to researcher mobility harms the UK. In a competitive global environment, countries that engage international talent will advance more quickly on discoveries and innovations and win a disproportionate share of the economic and societal benefits than those which isolate their scientists.

The opportunity is there for the UK to get ahead on researcher mobility. We just need to take it.

Sir Adrian Smith,
President of the Royal Society

Executive summary

Short-term researcher mobility enables international collaboration and increases the impact and reach of scientific discoveries and innovations. Making the UK a top global hub for conferences and other research-related visits supports government policy on attracting science and technology talent to the UK. It also comes with economic and soft power advantages which extend beyond science.

This report analyses the UK's visitor visa arrangements for international researchers. Drawing on data from UK and international sources and a series of stakeholder interviews, it finds barriers and inefficiencies with the current system which cast doubt on its effectiveness. The recommendations – summarised below – are aimed at improving the experience for hosts and visitors while maintaining UK border security.

Findings

- The application process for UK visitor visas is bureaucratic and unwieldy. Official information on GOV.UK confuses applicants to the extent that host institutions routinely produce their own guidance and are required to provide dedicated assistance to those applying. Depending on individual circumstances, options to communicate with the Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) are either inadequate or non-existent.
- The UK's service standard for visitor visas (15 working days) is in line with other science nations. While the standard is mostly met, delays in securing biometric appointments and acquiring Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) certification means the end-to-end process is often much longer. Applicants regularly require several months' notice to ensure their visa is processed in time and this has led to missed opportunities to exchange knowledge with UK researchers through conferences and collaborations.
- The UK has one of the highest visa refusal rates of the countries analysed in this report, and refusals are skewed towards applicants from the Global South. UK hosts have such difficulty in inviting researchers from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in Africa that they ask individuals to submit additional non-mandatory documentation in the hope it will facilitate a positive verdict.
- There is a widely shared perception that visitor visa refusals are made for arbitrary or at least poorly justified reasons.
- Poor experiences with UKVI dampen demand to host collaborations in the UK, with some scientists reporting that they actively look to chair conferences abroad, resulting in a loss to the UK.
- Although the visitor visa application cost of £100 is consistent with other countries, it does not reflect the hidden costs of international travel for biometric appointments, cancelled flights following delayed or refused applications, or hiring designated administrative staff to facilitate applications.

Recommendations

1. **Greater transparency around processing times**
   The Home Office and UKVI should provide accurate and regularly updated information on the end-to-end processing time which will enable hosts and visitors to use their time more efficiently.

2. **Better, more open communication**
   The Home Office and UKVI should be better resourced to communicate effectively with applicants.

3. **Establish a short-term mobility equivalent of the UK Global Talent visa**
   A new visitor visa category or reform to existing provision for researchers and innovators should be considered which takes into account the unique nature of researcher mobility.

Introduction

Background

International collaboration forms the bedrock of science and is enabled by researchers moving between countries and establishing networks and contacts. The global diffusion of people and ideas is critical not just for knowledge exchange but for extending the impact and reach of scientific discoveries and innovations. That in turn translates into advances in economic performance, the health and security of people and the planet, and our resilience to national and global shocks.

In the UK, much of the policy debate around researcher mobility concerns international students and immigration for skilled work. In contrast, arrangements for short-term visits — encompassing conferences, brief research collaborations, guest speaker invitations, etc. — receive relatively little attention from policymakers, even though reports of visa delays and refusals in the media and elsewhere have long existed.[1] There are, however, significant benefits borne from researchers visiting the UK for short periods which go beyond science and are worthy of serious policy attention. Being the host nation has soft power advantages in terms of showcasing UK assets and demonstrating global leadership in support of environmental, security and foreign policy objectives. There are also economic benefits. Analysis of the UK's events industry shows that business events are worth over £31 billion, with conferences and meetings alone contributing over £18 billion and attracting over 95 million delegates.[2] Research-performing organisations (RPOs) are a popular venue for hosts.[3] In a separate analysis of supranational conferences in Glasgow in 2018, 41 out of 44 involved scientific, research or practitioner specialists. In total, these events made a contribution of £40 million to the local economy.[4]

Box: Researcher mobility and UK politics

The UK government has stated its ambition to increase public and private investment in research and development (R&D) and make the UK a "science and technology superpower". A core part of this will be establishing "competitive advantage in attracting international talent to the UK".[5] To facilitate longer-term immigration for skilled work, in 2020, the government introduced the Global Talent visa and an Office for Talent within Downing Street and the Cabinet Office to reduce mobility barriers for researchers and innovators.[6] It has also launched a science and technology-themed talent initiative as part of the GREAT campaign and continued to relax visa rules for high potential individuals and globally mobile businesses.

The importance of researcher mobility was acknowledged in the government's Innovation Strategy and R&D People and Culture Strategy published in 2021.[7] More recently, the Minister for Science, Innovation and Technology has written of the need to ensure that "our visa and mobility system enables talented individuals and teams to come to the UK... ease of international mobility is key".[8] The case for enabling researcher mobility is also recognised by opposition parties. In 2019, for instance, Labour's current shadow science spokesperson led an all-party parliamentary group investigation on visitor visa refusals among African academics.[9]

While shorter-term researcher mobility has attracted less policy attention, in the 2023 Spring Budget, the government committed to reviewing "existing rules for visitors to the UK with a view to ensuring that our system contributes to securing the UK border whilst at the same time supports and encourages economic growth".[10]

Beyond yielding economic benefits, conferences are a tried and tested means of addressing challenges at the cutting edge of science and technology. Several econometric assessments have shown that attending conferences increases research collaborations with other attendees, and that papers resulting from such collaborations achieve higher impact by attracting more citations.[11] One study concluded that conferences bring "collaborative and spillover benefits qualitatively similar to those generated by permanent colocation [i.e. being in the same city, department, laboratory]".[12] In-person events are also essential for networking and exchanging knowledge among research and innovation professionals, especially early career researchers (ECRs) who tend to be more globally mobile. In a survey of German ECRs who attended an international conference, 69.5% of doctoral students and 72.1% of postdoctoral researchers indicated that they had acquired new knowledge from scientific papers or unpublished manuscripts.[13] ECRs also benefit from job offers from interactions with visiting researchers. Although conferences are mostly hosted by RPOs, participation is much broader than this, spanning industry, government and civil society, all of which benefit in different ways. For the pharmaceutical industry and other research-intensive sectors, for example, conferences strengthen engagement at the interface with academia and provide a safe space for discussing early-stage innovations and pre-competitive partnerships.

The UK benefits from short-term visits of scientists from both advanced economies and emerging science nations. As well as being important from an equity standpoint, facilitating collaboration and mobility for partners in the Global South is key to tackling international challenges. The Network for Genomic Surveillance in South Africa, for example, played an essential role in identifying novel COVID-19 variants and alerting other countries,[14] and the ability to learn from and collaborate with networks like this will be just as critical in addressing future disease threats. Furthermore, countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia, have increasingly important start-up hubs, artificial intelligence ecosystems, and robotics laboratories.[15] Promoting scientific mobility of researchers working in these emerging centres of excellence will advantage the UK and other advanced science nations.

Mobility restrictions associated with COVID-19 have brought into focus the environmental benefits of minimising in-person contact, and there is some evidence that online conferences also improve accessibility and equality and diversity.[16] While these are important considerations, video conferencing tools have not evolved to the extent that they directly replicate the advantages of physical attendance. Researchers interviewed as part of this project stated the necessity of in-person conferences, even if occurring less frequently.. Several reported difficulties in communicating their work via Zoom and other platforms and judged that they missed out on the essential networking and learning opportunities associated with attending an event in person. In situations where researchers require physical access to specific instruments or facilities outside their home country, there is no alternative to international travel.

Methodology

The Royal Society has previously shown that the UK is outperformed by comparator countries on the costs of work and study visas.[17] To understand the picture for short-term mobility arrangements, the Royal Society in collaboration with the international law firm, Fragomen LLP, conducted an analysis of short-term visa costs and processes in the UK and other leading science nations. The research used a mixed methods approach consisting of four overlapping strands:

1. International comparison of short-term visas

Through a combination of desk research and practical experience of visa applications in more than 170 countries, Fragomen LLP collated data around the process for visiting leading science nations for events, conferences, and other short-term business-related activities. The research covered the following 17 leading science nations, as defined by the Nature Index 2022: [18]

- Australia
- Canada
- China
- France
- Germany
- India
- Israel
- Italy
- Japan
- Netherlands
- Singapore
- South Korea
- Spain
- Sweden
- Switzerland
- UK
- USA

Information was gathered on the availability and operation of visitor routes, including those comparable to the UK's standard visitor visa, and on the cost and the time taken to complete an application. All data used in this analysis is accurate as of May 2023.

2. Analysis of Home Office data

The Home Office makes many immigration datasets available for public use, making it more transparent than many nations for immigration data.

To understand patterns in the volume of applications, refusal rates and time taken to process standard visitor visas in the UK, the Society analysed two of the publicly available Home Office datasets:

1. Entry clearance visas granted outside the UK. This dataset includes entry clearance visa applications by nationality and visa type and includes outcomes of visa applications. The analysis focused on the standard visitor visa applications for all visit purposes (not just for research) for the 10-year period from 2012 to 2022.
2. Visas and citizenship data. This includes the percentage of applications processed within the service standards from Q2 2019 to Q3 2021 (when the dataset was discontinued), and the analysis was focused on the standard visitor visa applications for all visit purposes.

Both datasets cover periods of time during the pandemic when travel restrictions were in place and there was a substantial drop in visitors to the UK. As such, the trends shown during this period may not represent the typical visitor visa experience outside the pandemic.

Additional detail on the data used is in Appendix 3. No further breakdowns or extensions of the datasets are available.[19]

3. Semi structured interviews

To understand qualitative perceptions of the UK visa system, the Society completed interviews with international scientists, conference organisers, and UK immigration experts. These stakeholders have extensive direct experience of navigating short-term visas, and the interviews were designed to capture their expertise and views on the strengths and weaknesses of UK arrangements. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, with questions covering visa processes, experiences of delays and refusals, and suggested recommendations for improvements. In addition, a small sample of Future Leaders – African Independent Research (FLAIR) fellows visiting the UK for a Royal Society event in February 2023 responded to a short survey around their visa experience.

4. Focused desk research

Finally, the Society conducted a non-structured review of literature to further understand the global visitor immigration system, and to gather information on the value of holding in-person events.

Structure of the report

This report briefly introduces visa options for short-term travel to the UK, before outlining some of the common issues encountered in applying for a visa. Section 2 analyses the timeliness of visa issuance in the UK, and how the UK compares internationally in this respect. Section 3 details the nature and impact of visa rejections, again providing international context. Section 4 then shows how the cost of UK visitor visas compares to other leading science nations.

Recommendations

Based on data compiled from official sources and feedback from stakeholder interviews, the report makes the following recommendations aimed at improving the experience of researchers visiting the UK and their hosts without compromising on border security.

1. Greater transparency around processing times

The Home Office and UKVI should provide accurate and regularly updated information on visa processing times which will enable hosts and visitors to better plan and avoid disappointment. The 15-day service standard is perceived to be misleading and offers little indication as to how long a decision will take in practice. Seasonal fluctuations and backlogs in biometric appointments can result in the process taking significantly longer from start to finish.

2. Better, more open communication

The Home Office and UKVI should be better resourced to communicate effectively with applicants. It should be possible to receive answers to queries and status updates regardless of the end decision. Hosts and applicants are often reliant on personal contacts in embassies or the Home Office to expedite applications, but this is not a service which is open to all.

3. Establish a short-term mobility equivalent of the UK Global Talent visa

The introduction of the Global Talent visa in 2020 has widened the pool of overseas researchers eligible for a flexible, fast-track work visa with fewer restrictions and costs than other immigration categories. The logic of attracting globally mobile talent to the UK should also apply to short-term mobility. As visa arrangements are almost always reciprocal,[20] improving the attractiveness of the UK visa offer will have the added benefit of facilitating the mobility of UK-based researchers. A new route for visiting researchers, or reform to existing provision, should consider the specific nature and purposes of researcher mobility and balance of risk when it comes to individuals overstaying. It should also resolve some of the geographical discrepancies in refusals outlined in this report. A visa route that encourages consideration of the scientific legitimacy and value of the proposed visits will realise the government's stated ambition of a "merit-based system rather than one based on country of origin". [21]

Background to short-term visas

To attend a conference, meeting or other short-term engagement in the UK, a standard visitor visa may be required. For some nationalities, such as the USA, European Union (EU) and several others (see Appendix 1 for full list of non-visa nationals), the UK offers a visa waiver, meaning they need not apply for unpaid, short-term visits. A reciprocal arrangement also exists with many countries, including the EU which allows visa-less entry for up to six months at a time. Figure 1 shows that India accounts for the most visitor visa applications to the UK, with other Commonwealth nations, Nigeria and Pakistan, in second and third place respectively.

Figure 1 – UK Standard Visitor visa applications – top 20 nationalities by volume, 2022.
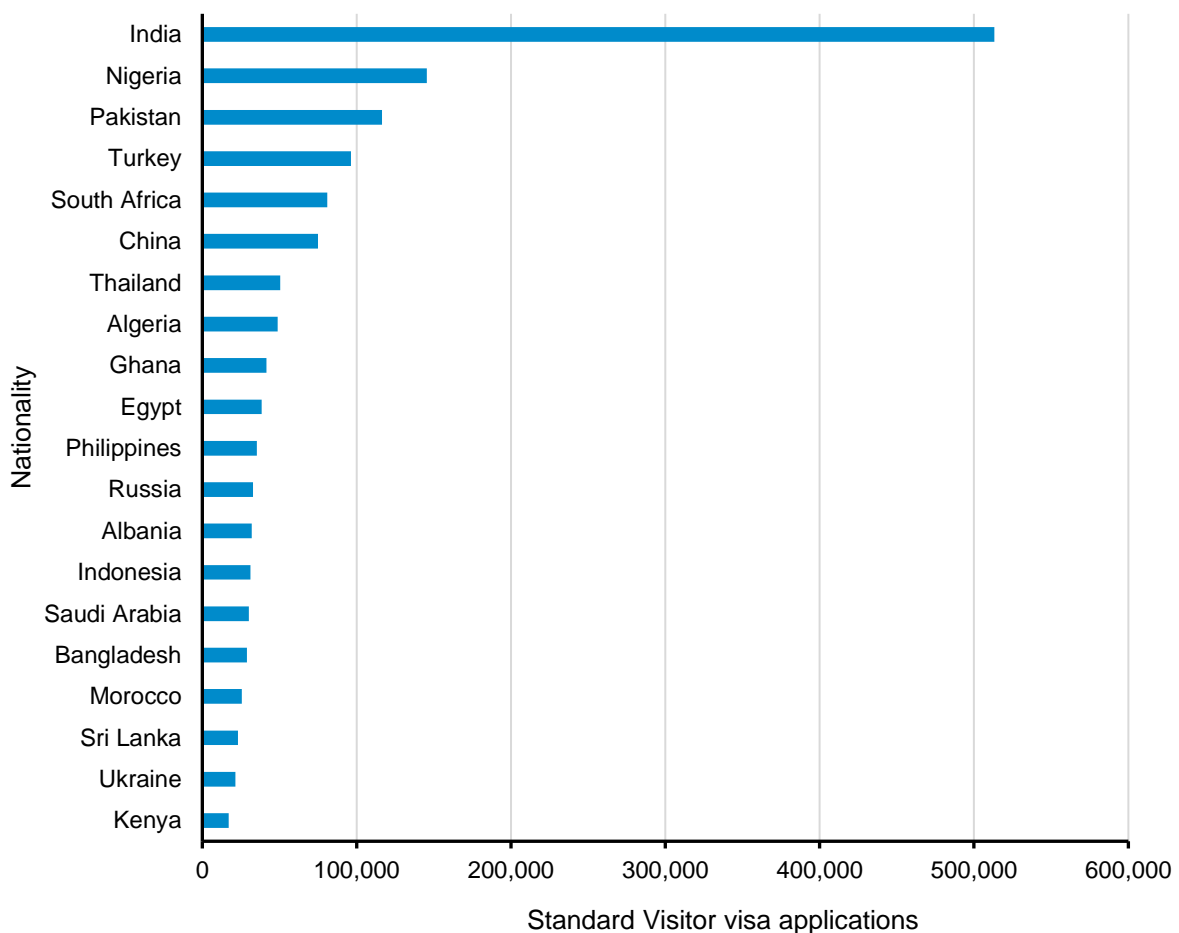
A standard visitor visa in the UK costs £100 and has a six-month validity,[a] with the option to extend for a further six-months for £1,000 under certain circumstances, including for eligible academics.[22] As it is the most popular route for short-term scientific engagements, the processes and costs surrounding the standard visitor visa are the main focus of this report. There are however several other short-term visa options:

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[a] N.B. all costs are correct as of May 2023.

- The Academic Visitor visa, which is a sub-category of the Standard Visitor visa. This enables academics to apply for a 12-month visit, and costs £200.
- Permitted Paid Engagement Visitor visa.[23] This route enables individuals to visit the UK for a paid engagement as an expert if invited by a UK-based organisation or client for up to one month, and costs £100. This is often used by RPOs to pay for a guest speaker or external examiner.
- Temporary Work – Government Authorised Exchange.[24] This enables RPOs to invite international scientists to complete a longer, formal research project or collaboration. The application costs £259 to complete and some nationalities are also required to pay the UK immigration health surcharge.

While these are separate visa categories, much of the discussion and policy issues surrounding the visitor visa are generally cross-applicable. There are, however, some important exceptions. For example, the Standard Visitor visa unlike other routes does not require a formal Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) certificate. This is required for researchers of certain nationalities coming to the UK to work in areas deemed sensitive.

The application process

1. Check eligibility requirements
2. Check if visa needed
3. Start online application
- Provide required documentation
- Arrange an appointment at local visa office for biometrics.

Submit online application and pay fee.

After the applicant has attended the biometric appointment and compiled the documentation, the online application can be submitted. The fee for a standard 6-month visitor visa of £100 must be paid. The priority and super priority routes cost £250 and £956 respectively.

The earliest an application is permitted is 3 months prior to the planned visit.

Wait for visa application to be processed.

The waiting time service standard depends on the priority of the application, which can be upgraded at a cost. The current service standards are:
- Standard – 15 working days
- Priority – 5 working days
- Super priority – next working day

The visa is either granted or refused.

The standard visitor visa has validity of 6 months, provided the visa holder only partakes in permitted activities whilst in the UK, otherwise the visa is invalid.

Among those interviewed for this report, there was concern that the application process for a visitor visa described above was neither clear nor user-friendly. Several interviewees said that the website was inaccessible, and one complained that the UKVI website was confusing, circular, and had out of date

documentation. [a] One university Immigration Compliance Officer commented that "if we can help it, we would never direct people to the website" and said they produced bespoke advice and guidance for applicants as standard.[b] This was also the case with other interviewees. One Indian scientist applying for a visitor visa without host support described the experience as "harrowing" and said they "dreaded" applying again.[c] Experiences are not universally negative, however. From the small sample of FLAIR fellows invited to a Royal Society event in February 2023, most were satisfied with the process.[d]

A lack of opportunities to communicate with UKVI increases negative experiences of the application process. Applicants and hosts said they have been unable to find a webchat or phone number to speak to a visa official to clarify issues, resulting in confusion and a more time-consuming process overall.[e] This experience compares unfavourably with the visa application process in France, which allows applicants to phone an official and ask questions. The opportunity afforded by UKVI to raise a query online for £2.74 is perceived to be unsatisfactory, as it offers automated replies and no guarantee that concerns will be resolved.

Beyond paying for the 'premium service', an optional product which costs universities £8,000 a year, and large to medium-sized organisations £25,000,[25] there is thought to be no effective means of contacting UKVI regarding an application. A HR manager at a UK university with expertise in immigration, said "applicants are unlikely to receive a prompt reply to their enquires" from the standard helpdesk,[f] while two other university Immigration Compliance Officers commented "really it should just be called customer service, because if we don't have the premium service, there's nothing you can do".[g] Commenting on the effectiveness of the premium service, another compliance officer said that while it used to enable them to speak to an official and expedite applications that were held up, this was no longer the case due to a lack of capacity.[h]

Confusion around the use of ePassport gates (e-gates), particularly for the paid permitted engagement (PPE) route, can act as a barrier in the visa application process. The PPE route, primarily used by universities for external reviewers and paid guest lectures, requires a stamp from a UK border official, and the more rapid e-gates cannot be used, which creates difficulties for non-visa nationals (e.g., US citizens), who normally are able to access them. Interviewees noted border officials will often insist on the use of the e-gate wherever the passport allows (presumably to reduce queues). This occurs even when they present specific information from the university as well as printed advice from the Home Office.[i] Under UK law, without the PPE stamp, the visiting scientist must not attempt to undertake paid work.

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[a] INT02

[b] INT10

[c] INT05

[d] 2020 FLAIR Fellows

[e] INT02, INT05 and INT08

[f] INT10

[g] INT11

[h] INT07

[i] INT10, INT09, INT07

Timeliness

Among those countries with set government standards for visa processing times, the UK's service standard of 15 days is in line with other nations. In Schengen Zone countries for example, the government standard is also 15 working days. Moreover, the UK visitor visa service standard is almost always met. As shown in Figure 2, in the third quarter of 2021 (Q3 2021), the last quarter for which data is available, the proportion of standard applications processed within the service standard had fallen to 65%. However, as the graph below highlights, this can be considered an anomaly and partially explained by pandemic-related backlogs.

Figure 2: Proportion of visitor visas processed within the 15-day standard service, 2019-2021.
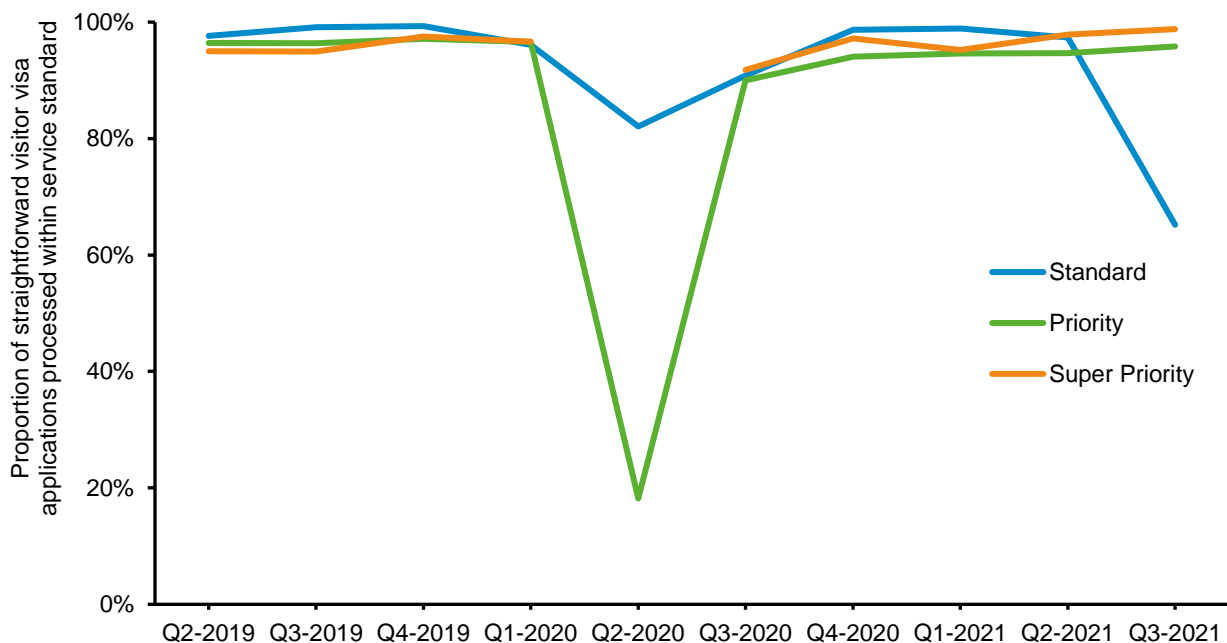
Importantly, the UK's service standard of 15 working days does not represent the total application time required to obtain a visitor visa, but rather the time spent processing visas post-biometric appointment, which is typically the last step in the application. This is regarded as misleading in that applicants interpret service standard to mean "how long will it take to get a visa",[a] and yet delays elsewhere in the process, such as in obtaining a biometric appointment, can be on the scale of months.[b] One commonly cited reason for these delays is the lack of biometric centres in host countries. This is a particular problem for African applicants, as visa approval centres (VACs) are not present in every nation.[26]

As a result, conference organisers are compelled to create their own lead times to account for delays over and above the 15-day service standard. There have been instances of hosts initiating the application process three to four months ahead of the conference they were organising for fear of not

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[a] INT06

[b] INT07

knowing how long the application would take.[a] Even with such a generous lead time, delays were still experienced, resulting in conference attendees and speakers being withdrawn. Several interviewees reported missing a conference because of lengthy processing times.[b]

Delays in the ATAS, required for researchers of certain nationalities coming to the UK to work in areas deemed sensitive, is another issue of visa timeliness. One interviewee remarked that, for them, the service standard was almost always met, but that ATAS was the single biggest cause of delays.[c] Unlike the visa application itself, ATAS has no service standard, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) only advises that it will take at least 20 working days.[27] Some interviewees reported delays of months,[d] which is also reflected in recent media reports concerning ATAS.[28]

Refusals

In 2022, 22% of UK visitor visa applications were refused. This represents a sustained increase compared to pre-pandemic, when in 2019 only 12% of visas were refused.

Figure 3: UK annual refusal rate of Standard Visitor visas, 2012-2022.
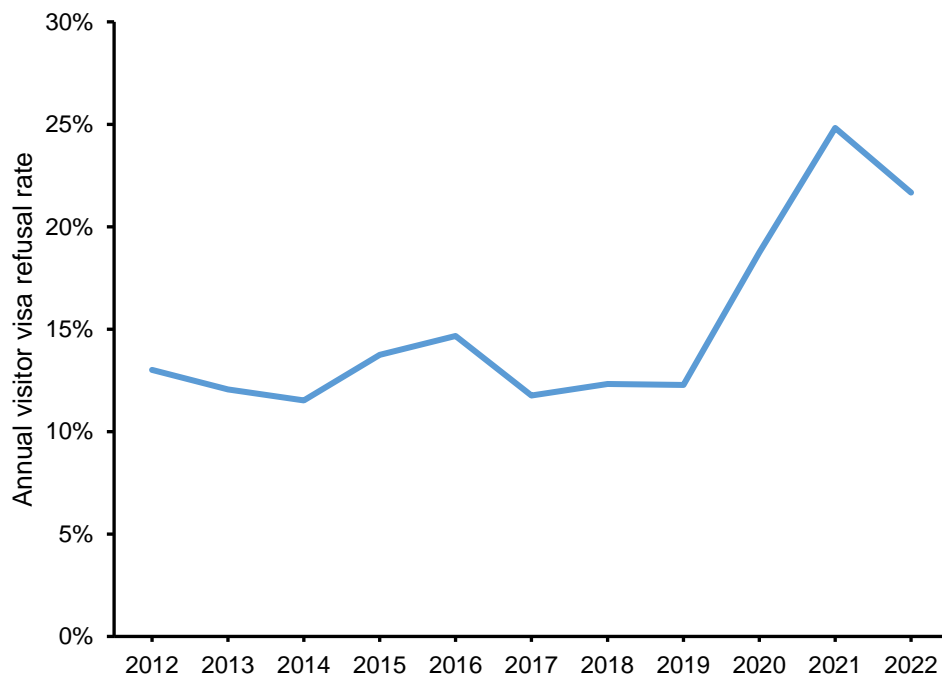
The UK has one of the highest visa rejection rates among comparator science nations, as highlighted in Figure 4. Only France and Sweden had higher refusal rates in 2022.
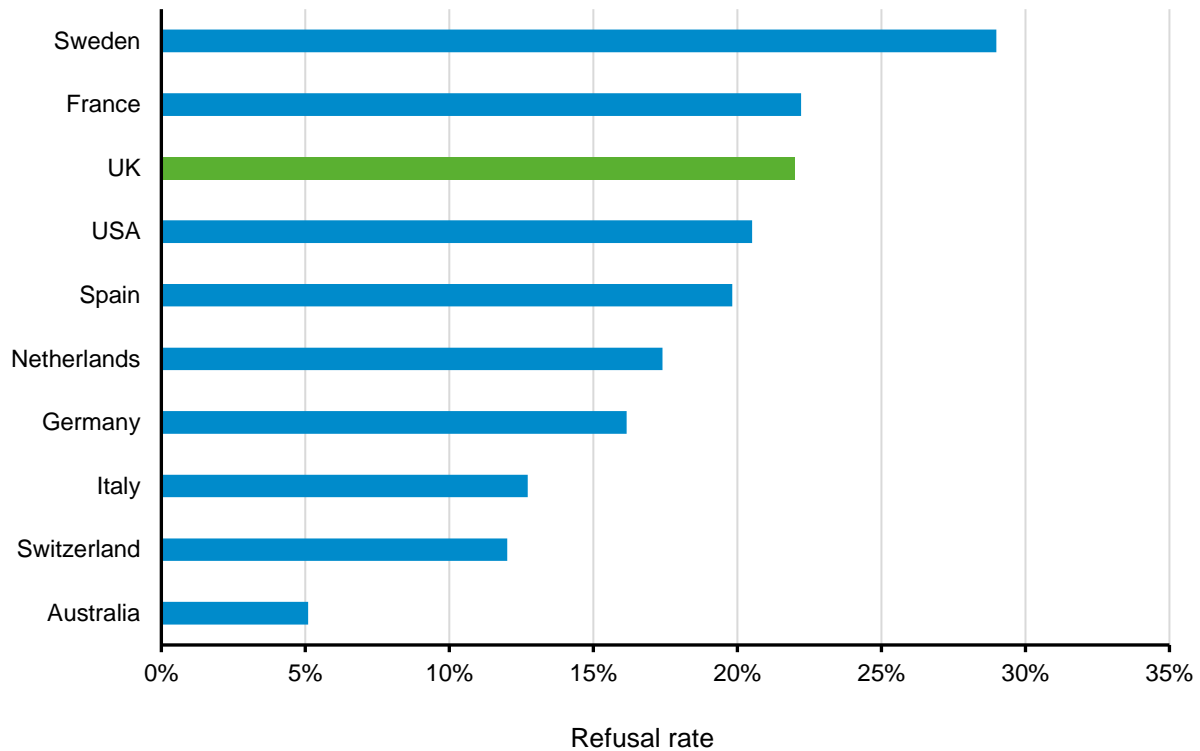
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[a] INT06

[b] INT04, INT02, INT03.

[c] INT12

[d] INT09

Figure 4 – Business visitor visa refusal rates in leading science nations, 2022 [a,29,30,31]

Refusal rate

Refusals occur when an entry clearance officer (ECO) is not convinced that an applicant is a genuine visitor and believes they will likely overstay the visit or break the accepted terms. While some visa applicants may not be genuine, RPOs and conference organisers must vouch for the scientific attributes of individuals and, in many cases, pay significant financial sums to facilitate their visit to the UK. Furthermore, conferences are often highly selective and involve a competitive application to present papers prior to invitation. In these cases, there is a low risk of non-genuine applicants being able to take advantage of the system.

There is concern that refusals are often made for arbitrary and subjective reasons. A common explanation for a refusal, listed in the visa caseworker guidance, is insufficient funds, which is used even when a UK sponsor is covering the full costs of the trip. In one example, an Iranian scientist had sought to come to the UK for three days and was rejected for financial reasons, as UKVI had reportedly mistaken their salary by a factor of 10.[b]

While the exact drivers behind such decision making are not clear, it is possible that cultural issues play a significant part. Immigration Compliance Officers, in their experience of visa refusals on other routes and direct interaction with the Home Office and UKVI, said that ECO concerns around overstaying

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[a] Canada, China, India, Israel, Japan, South Korea and Singapore do not have up-to-date refusal data available. Data for the USA (B-1 Business Visa) is for the 2022 financial year, and Australia (all short-term business visas) is for Q4 2022 only. Method of measuring refusal rate may vary.
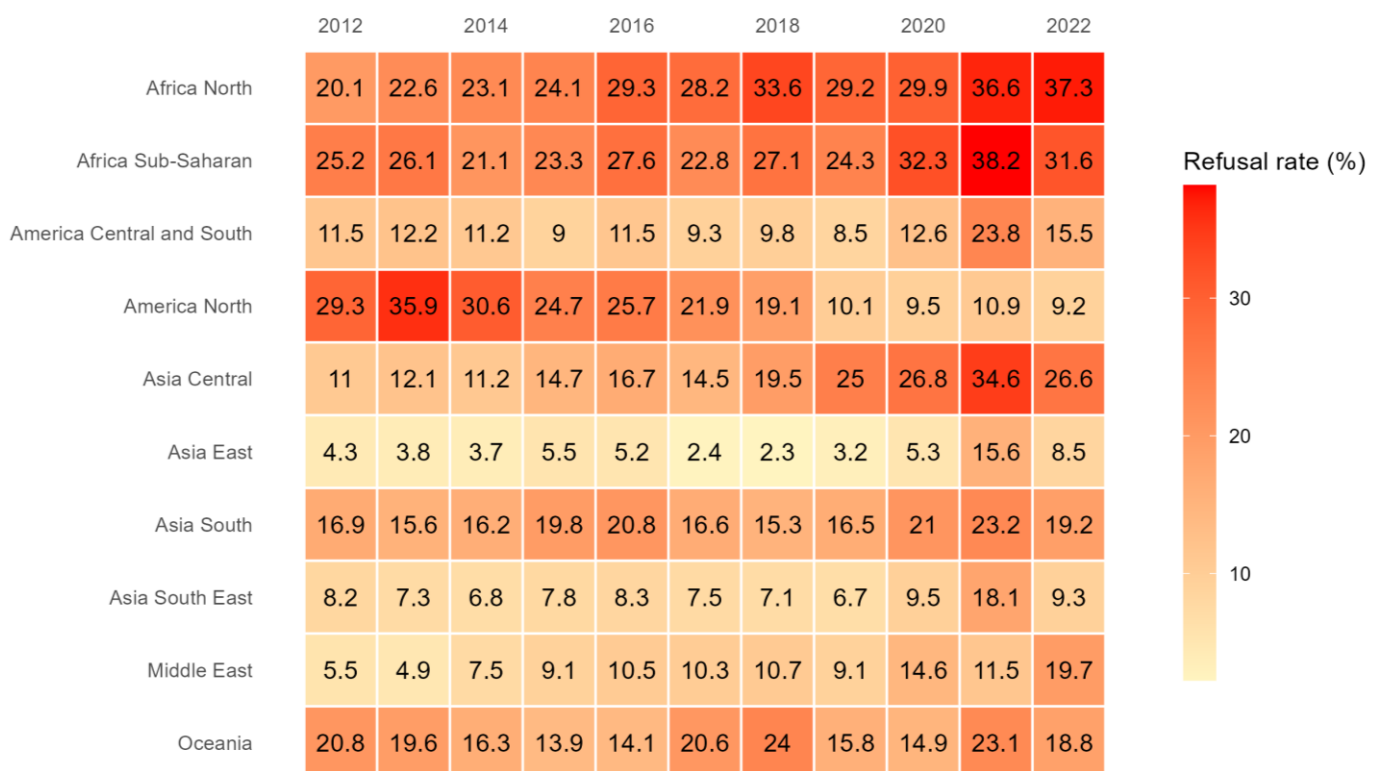
[b] INT08

(echoed in wider media reporting around overstaying) [32, 33] were particularly acute for the visitor visa route.[a] Resource constraints and management practices may also play a role in refusals. A 2017 inspection by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) found tight productivity targets in all visa decision making centres. In Istanbul, for example, the average time taken to review an application was just three minutes.[34]

Inequities of refusals

Although official policy states that "all applications are considered on their individual merits", visa refusals disproportionately affect individuals from low to middle income countries (LMICs), and particularly those in Africa. The figure below shows that African nationals are twice as likely to have their visa rejected than any region, bar Oceania. They are also three to four times more likely to be rejected than East Asian nations, a trend which has held for at least the last 10 years.

Figure 5 – Heatmap of visitor visa refusal rates by regions, 2012-2022.

	2012		2014		2016		2018		2020		2022
Africa North	20.1	22.6	23.1	24.1	29.3	28.2	33.6	29.2	29.9	36.6	37.3
Africa Sub-Saharan	25.2	26.1	21.1	23.3	27.6	22.8	27.1	24.3	32.3	38.2	31.6
America Central and South	11.5	12.2	11.2	9	11.5	9.3	9.8	8.5	12.6	23.8	15.5
America North	29.3	35.9	30.6	24.7	25.7	21.9	19.1	10.1	9.5	10.9	9.2
Asia Central	11	12.1	11.2	14.7	16.7	14.5	19.5	25	26.8	34.6	26.6
Asia East	4.3	3.8	3.7	5.5	5.2	2.4	2.3	3.2	5.3	15.6	8.5
Asia South	16.9	15.6	16.2	19.8	20.8	16.6	15.3	16.5	21	23.2	19.2
Asia South East	8.2	7.3	6.8	7.8	8.3	7.5	7.1	6.7	9.5	18.1	9.3
Middle East	5.5	4.9	7.5	9.1	10.5	10.3	10.7	9.1	14.6	11.5	19.7
Oceania	20.8	19.6	16.3	13.9	14.1	20.6	24	15.8	14.9	23.1	18.8

Refusal rate (%)

Breaking down refusal rates by country, the skewed nature of refusals towards African applicants is even clearer. Figure 6 shows that the top 10 most highly refused visa nations were in Africa. This issue is not unique to the UK as LMIC attendees are underrepresented at conferences worldwide, at least in part because of visa issues and refusals.[35]

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[a] INT01; INT06.

Figure 6 – Top 30 nations by Standard Visitor visa refusal rate, 2022 [a]
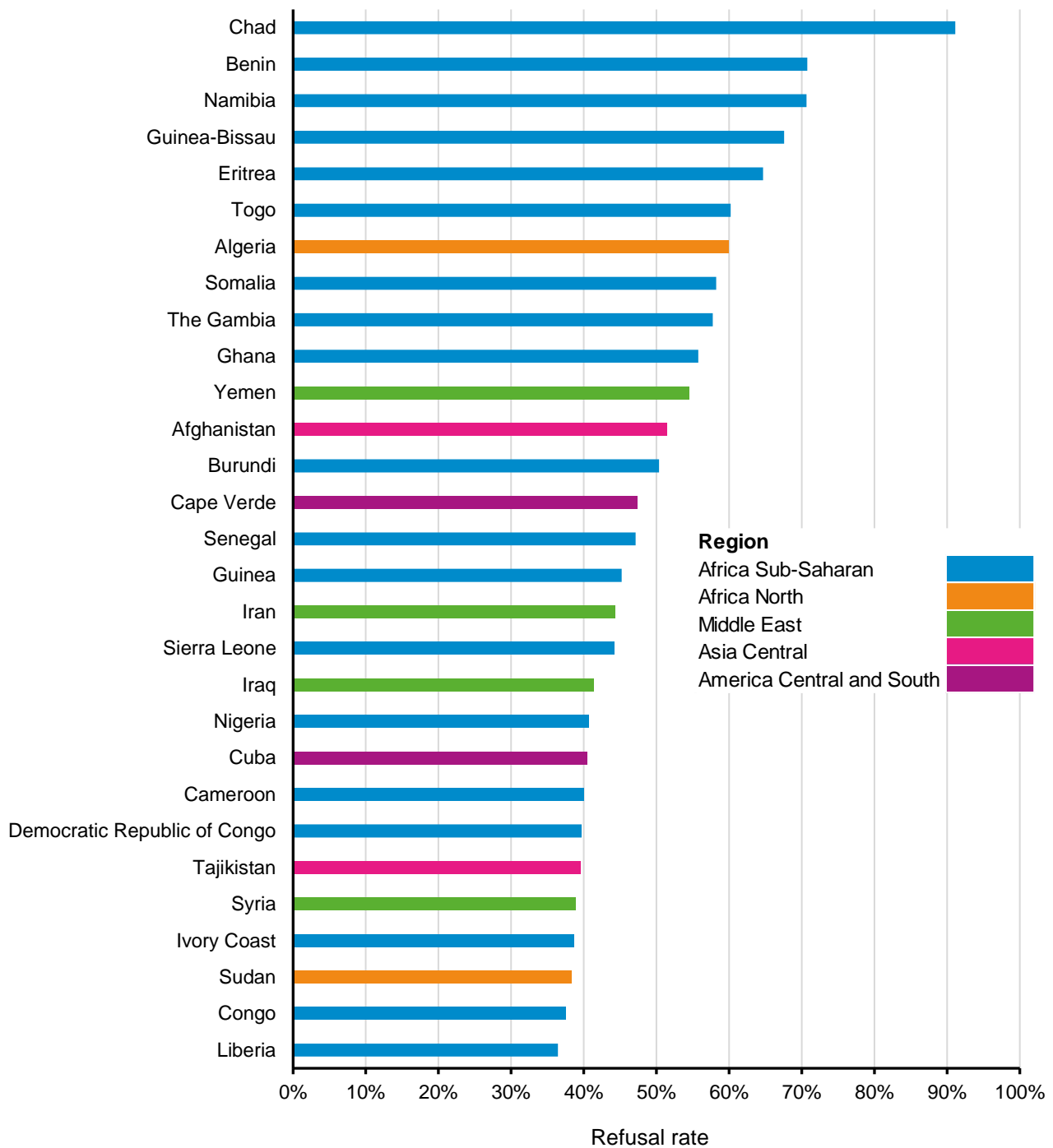
Geographical discrepancies in visa refusals were also identified in interviews with many highlighting difficulties in inviting scientific visitors from LMICs to UK conferences. One Immigration Compliance Officer remarked that "when we hear we have someone coming from Africa, we sigh as we know it's going to be much, much harder [for them to be accepted]".[b] Conversely, a conference organiser

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[a] This analysis excludes nations with fewer than 100 applicants in 2022.

[b] INT01

commented that "if someone is coming from India or the USA, we're highly confident they'll get accepted".[a]

Several interviewees said that UKVI seemed to operate on the assumption that anyone, regardless of their background or position, coming from an LMIC is more likely to be an economic migrant. In their experience of visa refusals, they said a "blunt" approach was applied, so that an individual's nationality took precedence over their personal circumstances or rationale for their visit. For similar reasoning, one Immigration Compliance Officer interviewed said that they took special measures for their African visitors, deliberately covering the costs of their trip to avoid financial refusals and asking them to provide more documentation than was normally required to prove they were a genuine visitor.[b]

Impacts of visa refusals on science

As well as frustrating hosts and scientists, visa refusals can act as a barrier to current and future collaboration. Interviewees spoke of academic partnerships that had fallen through due to visa rejections,[c] and conferences that had been cancelled or rearranged due to visa related absences of keynote speakers.[d] Interviewees agreed that an inability of international researchers, due to visa refusals, to attend conferences in person undermines their quality and the convening power of UK science. In the case of one conference focused on gathering insights from the Global South, visa issues meant that representation was limited to attendees based at institutions in the Global North. The conference organiser said that this "defeat[ed] the purpose of the event" and that the "academic quality of the workshop was compromised, no question". Such incidences are not uncommon, as scientists from LMICs have been refused from several high-profile conferences in recent years.[36] Such was the concern that in 2019 more than 70 academics wrote that African visa rejections were "undermining 'global Britain's' reputation and efforts to tackle challenges including climate breakdown, poverty, disease outbreaks and conflict".[37]

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[a] Many interviewees noted that not all LMICs were treated equivalently and some LMICs, such as India and Brazil, seemed to have minimal issues.

[b] INT07

[c] INT12; INT05

[d] INT01

International comparison of visitor visa costs

Compared to other leading science nations, the UK's Standard Visitor visa is average on price. At a cost of £100, it is broadly similar to C Visas for the Schengen Zone, which vary between £85-103 depending on the service provider used. Of comparator science nations, Australia had the lowest visa cost for visa nationals at £11, while South Korea was the most expensive at around £160.

Figure 7 – Estimated government filing fees of comparator visas to UK Standard Visitor visa[38]
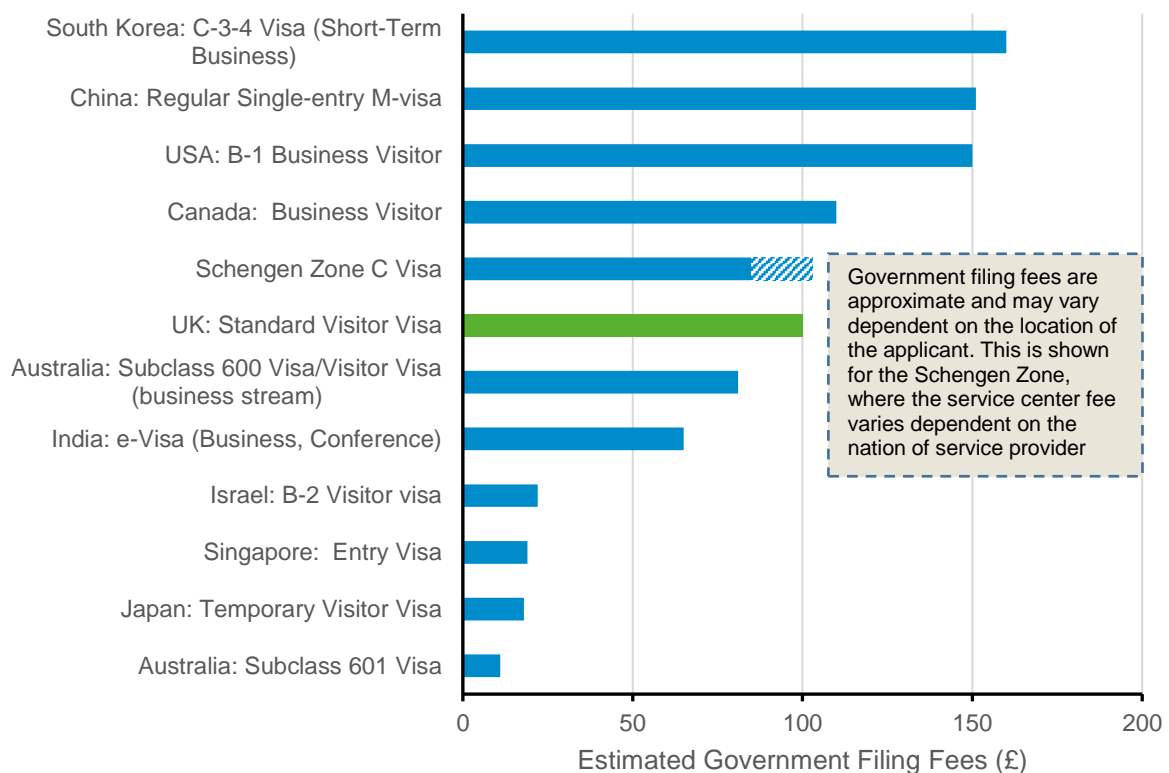
In addition to headline visa costs, there are significant hidden costs associated with the application process. Obtaining a biometric appointment, for example, where fingerprints and digital photograph are required, can be highly expensive if a visa application centre is not present in visitors' home countries. For African nationals in particular, accessing a biometric appointment for the UK visitor visa often requires flying to a third country and occasionally paying additional visa costs as a result.[a]

Another significant cost comes from cancelled flights due to refused or delayed visas. Applicants have spent hundreds and, in some instances, thousands of pounds on flights that were cancelled or unused because of refusals.[b] While UKVI might advise applicants to wait to book flights only after the visa had been processed, booking a long-haul flight at short notice can be prohibitively expensive.[c]

[a] For example, Mauritanians applying for a UK visa are required to first travel 2,000km to Rabat in Morocco and pay for a Moroccan visa.

[b] INT04, INT05, INT02, INT06

[c] INT01

Finally, the administrative burden involved in the application can also be considered as a hidden cost, as RPOs often use research funds to hire dedicated administrative staff to facilitate visa applications.[a]

Conclusion

The UK's visa arrangements for visiting researchers are bureaucratic and difficult to navigate, which acts to discourage visitors and hosts. Confidence in the legitimacy of the visa application process is undermined by perceptions of arbitrary decision-making around genuine scientific visitors, and refusals that are skewed towards LMICs.

Short-term researcher mobility has important scientific, economic and societal benefits. It is facilitated by efficient and effective visa policy.

[a] INT01

Appendices

Appendix 1: UK non-visa nationals

Citizens of the following countries do not need a visitor visa to visit the UK:[39]

- European Union (EU) / European Free Trade Association (EFTA) nations
- Andorra
- Antigua and Barbuda
- Argentina
- Australia
- Bahamas
- Barbados
- Belize
- Botswana
- Brazil
- Brunei
- Canada
- Chile
- Costa Rica
- Dominica
- Timor-Leste
- El Salvador
- Grenada
- Guatemala
- Honduras
- Hong Kong
- Israel
- Japan
- Kiribati
- Macau
- Malaysia
- Maldives
- Marshall Islands

- Mauritius
- Mexico
- Micronesia
- Monaco
- Namibia
- Nauru
- New Zealand
- Nicaragua
- Palau
- Panama
- Papua New Guinea
- Paraguay
- Saint Kitts and Nevis
- Saint Lucia
- Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
- Samoa
- San Marino
- Seychelles
- Singapore
- Solomon Islands
- South Korea
- Taiwan
- Tonga
- Trinidad and Tobago
- Tuvalu
- United States
- Uruguay
- Vanuatu
- Vatican City

Appendix 2: International comparable visas reference table[40]

Nation	Visa	Permitted duration of stay for business visitor	Allowed to speak at a conference	Allowed to receive payment for conference activities	Cost (approximate)	Explanation of cost
Australia	Subclass 601 Visa / Electronic Travel Authority (eligible countries only)	Three months	Yes	No	£11	Standard visa is free, but there may be an £11 service charge
Australia	Subclass 600 Visa (if ineligible for Subclass 601)	Three months	Yes	No	£81	Standard visa fee of £81 for all applicants outside Australia
Canada	Business Visitor / Temporary Resident Visa	180 consecutive days	Yes - for up to five consecutive days	Yes - for up to five consecutive days, requires work authorisation or exemption if hired by a Canadian entity to provide training services or weekend seminars	£110	Standard visa fee of £60 for all applicants, and a one-off biometrics charge of £50. The biometric test is required once every ten years
China	Single-entry M-Visa	90 consecutive days. Business visitors are limited to 90 days cumulatively per calendar year	Yes	No	£151	Standard visa fee of £85 when filed in the UK, with a further £66 for the service fee
France Germany Italy Netherlands Spain Sweden Switzerland	Schengen Zone C Visa	90 days in any 180-day period, counted cumulatively across the Schengen Area. If attending conferences or receiving training in activities limited to 90 days per year	Yes (except for Netherlands)	No	£80-£103	Standard fee of £71 for all applicants, plus a service charge dependent on the provider used which typically vary from £9-£32

Nation	Visa	Permitted duration of stay for business visitor	Allowed to speak at a conference	Allowed to receive payment for conference activities	Cost (approximate)	Explanation of cost
India	e-Visa (Business or Conference)	180 consecutive days	Yes	No	£65	Standard visa fee when filed in the UK of £65
Israel	B-2 Visitor Visa	90 consecutive days	Yes	No	£22	Standard visa fee of £22 for all applicants
Japan	Temporary Visitor Visa (Single Entry)	15 to 90 days	Yes	No	£18	Standard visa fee of £18 for all nationals (except for Indian nationals)
Singapore	Entry Visa	90 consecutive days	Yes - if an internal meeting, otherwise a Work Pass Exception (WPE) will be required	Yes - requires a WPE	£19	Standard application fee of £19 when filed in the UK
South Korea	C-3-4 Visa (Short-Term Business)	90 consecutive days (except for Canadian nationals at 180 days)	Yes	No	£160	Standard application fee of £108 when filed in the UK, with a further £52 service charge
UK	Standard Visitor Visa	Six cumulative months	Yes - provided not organised as commercial events and will not make a profit for the organiser	No	£100	Standard visa fee of £100 for all applicants
USA	B-1 Business Visitor	One year, but rarely more than 180 days are granted for business visits	Yes	No	£150	Standard visa fee of £150. Additional fees may apply for non-UK applicants

Appendix 3: Home Office Data Analysis

The Home Office makes many immigration datasets available for public use, making it more transparent than many other nations for immigration data. To understand the patterns in the volume of applications, refusal rates and time taken to process the UK Standard Visitor visa application, the Society analysed two publicly available Home Office datasets.

Entry clearance visas granted outside the UK, Vis_D02.[41]
This dataset includes entry clearance visa applications by nationality and visa type and includes outcomes of visa applications. The analysis focused on the Standard Visitor visa applications for all visit purposes (not just for research) for the 10-year period from 2012 to 2022.

The refusal rate was calculated as the number of applications divided buy the total resolved cases. Withdrawn and lapsed cases were excluded from the analysis, consistent with Home Office methodology.

Nations within the dataset were grouped into regions. The nationalities included within the EU, European and Other regions were excluded from the international comparison. The table below outlines the nations included within each region in the analysis:

Region	Nationalities
Asia Central	Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan
Africa North	Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia
Africa Sub-Saharan	Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Seychelles
America Central and South	Argentina, Barbados, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela, Grenada, Panama, Uruguay, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, The Bahamas, Belize
Oceania	Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Micronesia, Niue, Nauru
Middle East	Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Yemen
Asia South	Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives
Asia South East	Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam
America North	Canada, United States
Asia East	China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Macau, Mongolia, Taiwan, North Korea

Visas and citizenship data, VSI_02.[42]
This dataset includes percentage of applications processed within the service standards, and covers only Q2 2019 to Q3 2021, when the dataset was discontinued. The analysis was focused on the Standard Visitor visa applications for all visit purposes.

The UK standard visitor visa applications were broken down by three customer service standards:
1. Standard – 15 working days
2. Priority – 5 working days
3. Super Priority – next working day

Both datasets cover periods of time during the COVID-19 pandemic when travel restrictions were in place and there was a drop in visitors to the UK, thus the trends during this period may not represent the typical visitor visa experience outside of the pandemic.

Appendix 4: Interviewee Reference Table
See below for a list of interviewees and how they correspond to the codes used in the report.

Interviewee code	Interviewee Role
INT01	Immigration Compliance Officer at UK university
INT02	Kenyan Scientist
INT03	UK Academic
INT04	UK Academic
INT05	Indian scientist
INT06	Conservation Science Conference Organiser
INT07	Immigration Compliance Officer at UK university
INT08	Iranian Scientist
INT09	Immigration Compliance Officer at UK university
INT10	Immigration Compliance Officer at UK university
INT11	Immigration Compliance Officer at UK university
INT12	Immigration Compliance Officer at UK university

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