An immigration system that works for science and innovation

CaSE submission to Science & Technology Committee inquiry | 6 June 2018

About CaSE

The Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) is the UK's leading independent advocate for science and engineering. Our mission is to ensure that the UK has the skills, funding and policies to enable science and engineering thrive. We represent over 110 scientific organisations including businesses, universities, professional bodies, and research charities as well as individual scientists and engineers. Collectively our members employ 380,000 people in the UK, and our industry and charity members invest around £43bn a year globally in R&D[1].

Recommendations

Our two headline recommendations for Government on immigration are:

1. Rebuild confidence in the short term

2. Create a streamlined system in the long term

Further evidence to support these recommendations are contained in previous submissions to the committee and our immigration policy review[2].

1. Rebuild confidence in the short term

The Government should unilaterally and urgently amend visa rules and improve immigration messaging. This is an essential first step if Government is to demonstrate it is serious about ambitions for Global Britain and being one of the best places in the world for science and innovation. Current policy is a bellwether for future action during the Brexit transition, and the science community at home and abroad are watching carefully.

Amend current visa rules

Abolish the Tier 2 (General) cap

Businesses and employers across the public and private sectors need a predictable immigration system. The Tier 2 cap increases uncertainty. In 2017-18 due to the cap being reached, thousands of critical roles are going unfilled, damaging productivity. These rejections send a damaging message that the UK is not open to the 'brightest and best' across the world. All the while, the UK public support immigration of skilled workers, and scientists and engineers in particular. In the short term, roles on the Shortage Occupation List and PhD level roles should be exempt from the Tier 2 cap and no such arbitrary cap on skilled workers should be implemented in any new system.

[1] Figure calculated in March 2018 from latest available data

[2] http://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/resource/immigration2018.html

Permit research activity overseas in Indefinite Leave to Remain rules
Some UK-based research projects require long periods overseas. Further, the Government is promoting international research collaboration and international development through science, for instance through the Newton fund. Rules preventing researchers wishing to obtain Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) in the UK from spending more than 180 days overseas in any 12-month period in the course of their work could undermine the success of these initiatives and fails to take into account the nature of our sector.

One researcher refused ILR on this basis said, as tropical ecologists "our research is strongly field data-driven, this job required me to spend >50% of my first two years leading field work and building research collaborations in SE Asia… I have the expertise to contribute to UK science and see a good academic career future here…yet have been denied the right to settle". This could be easily resolved by amending ILR rules to permit research activity overseas.

Improve immigration messaging

Promote the UK as a place to learn, earn and contribute, working to combat the unwelcoming environment towards migrants
Government net migration targets, migration caps and extensive costs associated with migration serve to tarnish the attractiveness of the UK as a go-to nation. A family of four moving to the UK from outside the EU face paying over £10,000 in fees, while risking rejection from the UK because of indiscriminate numerical caps. Government must work across departments to promote the UK as a global research and innovation hub through trade missions, international strategy, Brexit negotiating positions and ministerial speeches. A positive, pragmatic statement in a science and innovation pact on frictionless research workforce mobility to support the continuation of mutually beneficial collaboration could be a good start.

2. Create a streamlined system in the long term

Thinking specifically about any future immigration system, to support research and innovation it must facilitate frictionless movement, have proportionate system rules, be founded on robust evidence and fit for the future.

An immigration system that supports research and innovation

If the immigration system is to work for science and innovation it must encompass the types of people and types of movement these sectors require.

Operating and navigating two migration systems would likely increase cost and complexity for government, employers and individuals. However, there is strong agreement that a single system with the level of burden and bureaucracy of the current non-EEA system would pose significant problems to research and innovation organisations and should not be expanded to cover all migration. A future streamlined system should retain the ease of movement currently afforded to scientists and engineers from the EEA, while there would also be benefits reducing barriers to movement for scientists and engineers from outside the EEA.

A future immigration system must support the retention, access and movement of those who lead, undertake and support research and innovation including:

- Highly skilled people – e.g. researchers, engineers, academics, business founders (characteristics include PhD level roles, Chartered Engineer status)
- Specialist technicians – e.g. data analysts, cell culture specialists, AI experts
- Students – including undergraduate, postgraduate taught and PhD students
- Dependants of these individuals

Research and innovation requires mobility for excellence, skills, education and collaboration. To support science and innovation in all its settings, an immigration system should support the following types of movement:

Long-term migration

- Recruitment to advertised posts - initiated by the employer – The strongest candidate is selected, irrespective of nationality
- Relocation of research and innovation talent to the UK - initiated by the individual e.g. named holders of research grants or recognised fellowships, investors, business founders, those with skills in short supply

Temporary migration

- Short visits (up to 6 months) e.g. visit a collaborator, give a lecture, sit on an interview panel
- Temporary work (up to 2 years) e.g. secondments, placements, training, co-location for collaboration, use of a UK-based facility, staff exchange, addressing an urgent research issue (e.g. disease outbreak)
- Intracompany transfers
- Formal study in approved education establishments with options for remaining in the UK

Outward mobility

Th above types of movement are also required for outward mobility by UK residents.

A streamlined immigration that works for science and engineering should also:

Support frictionless movement of science and engineering professionals

- Design visa-less options for visits, training and work, which could also form part of trade deals and research agreements
- Introduce a light-touch registration-based approach for low-risk migrants
- Allow trusted employers to certify visits for low-risk researchers

Ensure system rules are proportionate to risk, benefit and labour market demands

- Ensure the system is flexible to meet the UK's skills needs and research priorities, avoiding arbitrary numerical caps on skilled migrants
- Provide reasonable opportunity to switch between migration categories in-country

Be founded on robust evidence

- Report annually on migration flows and the economic contribution of migration to inform policy and public debate

- Maintain the employer skills survey and use findings to inform immigration policy

Be fit for the future

- Create a user-friendly online interface for the migration system drawing on UK design and technological expertise
- Improve processes and increase policy options by developing world-leading passport, visa and security technologies.

Ideas to explore for a science and innovation pact with the EU

There is an EU directive that enables researchers or students from third countries who have moved to an EU country for work or study to carry out part of their studies or research in another EU country on a temporary basis[3]. The legislation aims to stream-line visa applications for international researchers and their families, and make it easier for researchers to travel between member states for their research. The UK could seek to harmonise with this legislation or propose a similar researcher mobility model with the EU. This would not only support continued collaboration with the EU but work to increase the attractiveness and connectivity of the UK for global researchers.

CaSE also contributed to the submission to the Committee from UK Research and Innovation detailing the research reasons for different types of mobility to give a picture of research and innovation careers.

[3] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOL_2016_132_R_0002