

STEM community responds to new immigration proposals

Senior figures from the world of science and engineering last week called for further consultation on the Government's immigration proposals to limit the number of skilled immigrants entering the country, warning that such changes could damage the UK's science and engineering base.

CaSE has written to the Immigration Minister Mark Harper raising concerns over the proposed 'sunset clause' - the automatic removal of any occupation from the Shortage Occupation List (SOL).

The occupations currently listed on the SOL include a large number of scientific and engineering positions which have been deemed strategically vital to the UK, and we are worried that two years will not allow enough time to develop the skilled UK workforce needed to fill these positions.

The letter is supported by a further twenty-two senior individuals and institutions from across the science and engineering community and CaSE's membership, and has been forwarded to the Science Minister and the Home Secretary.

You can read the letter below or view a pdf version [here](#).

Full Text

Mr Mark Harper MP
Immigration Minister
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

14th January 2013

Dear Minister,

The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) recently consulted over whether to introduce an automatic removal of any occupation from the Shortage Occupations List (SOL) after a period of two years on the list. We would like your assurance that the Government will not bring in such a measure without further consultation with our sector.

We await the result of the MAC's deliberations. However, the change could have such a damaging effect on UK science, engineering, and wider academia that we want to raise our concerns with you directly.

Skilled immigrants are crucial for the UK's economy, society, and healthcare

The occupations currently listed on the SOL include cardiac physiologists, engineering geophysicists, diagnostic radiologists, petroleum engineers, radioactive waste managers, paediatricians, science and maths teachers, and dozens of others. Such positions appear on the SOL because the MAC has

recognised that not only are they of strategic importance for the UK, but that we are not training enough of them.

The skilled immigrants in these occupations help drive economic growth in sectors such as aerospace, pharmaceuticals, process industries, and others. They keep Britain's lights on by working in our nuclear industry. They save lives in our hospitals, and they educate our children.

We appreciate that the Government wishes to accelerate progress towards self-sufficiency towards the UK for such skills. However, two years is simply far too short a timescale for even beginning to address structural problems with the UK's workforce.

Long-term action is required

For instance, in the case of specialist scientists, Research Councils UK estimates that it takes 7-8 years to progress from gaining a PhD to the first steps in an independent career. It takes a further 3-4 years to achieve the PhD in the first place, and a further 3-4 years in undergraduate and postgraduate study to gain entry to PhD programmes. If we add in the time it takes to encourage more young people to take the appropriate A-levels (or equivalent) to be able to take the right undergraduate degrees, that gives a total of 14-17 years.

Similarly, for specialist engineering professions, even a newly Chartered Engineer will have taken 12 years to get from taking the right A-levels to attaining Chartered Engineer status.

Moreover, these processes rely on the UK having enough senior people in such professions, and in academia, to help train the next generation of British-born scientists, engineers, doctors, and other professionals. Often such people will have to be skilled immigrants.

Even if the resources were suddenly made available to achieve the required improvements in the UK workforce, such that there were no more skills shortages, realistically it would take an additional few years for the relevant schemes to be adopted. For instance, the coalition Government took office in 2010, but it is only now – at the start of 2013 – that we are beginning to see the success of the Department for Education's excellent new schemes to attract drastically more science teachers into the nation's schools in order to help fill our chronic shortage of such professionals.

The question that the MAC have invited responses on is therefore a world away from the kind of policy responses required to address chronic shortfalls in the UK skills market. Indeed, they could actively hamper efforts to promote self-sufficiency.

We would be pleased to discuss potential solutions to the wider workforce problem with you, but in the meantime we ask if you can give assurances that an automatic 'sunset' clause is something that the Government will not bring in without further consultation with our sector?

Yours faithfully,

Imran Khan
Director, Campaign for Science and Engineering

This letter is supported by the following individuals and institutions:

Kate Baillie
Chief Executive of the Biochemical Society

Prof Martin Barstow
Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Leicester

Jonathan Bruun
Chief Executive of the British Pharmacological Society

Dr Simon Campbell
Former President of the Royal Society of Chemistry

Prof Roger Cashmore
Chair of the UK Atomic Energy Agency

The UK Deans of Science

Prof Dame Athene Donald
University of Cambridge

Prof Pete Downes
Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of Dundee

Dr Mark Downs
Chief Executive of the Society of Biology

Sue Ferns
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The Society for General Microbiology

Prof Sir Colin Humphreys
University of Cambridge

Prof Peter Jarritt
President of the Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine

Prof Sir Peter Knight
President of the Institute of Physics

Lord Robert May
Former Government Chief Scientist

Edmund Nickless
Executive Secretary of the Geological Society

Dr Robert Parker
Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Chemistry

John Pullinger
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Lord Martin Rees
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