



People and Skills

Barriers in the visa system for UK R&D organisations

September 2025

Introduction

Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) has consistently highlighted that international research talent alongside our skilled domestic workforce is crucial for the UK to maintain a world-leading R&D sector. However, it is widely recognised across the sector that visa policy poses barriers to attracting international talent to work in the UK.

Recent UK Government policy announcements in the Immigration White Paper and Industrial Strategy signal aims to impose tighter immigration controls and boost the UK's R&D sector, which at first glance appear to be contradictory. There has been promising recognition of the value of international research talent in the commitment to make the UK's Global Talent visa easier to use and the announcement of the Global Talent Taskforce and Global Talent Fund. However, some barriers have been left unaddressed and others, such as changes to the Skilled Worker visa, have also been raised.

CaSE has spoken to organisations across the R&D sector about the barriers immigration policy poses to them. We have gathered a catalogue of evidence covering visa costs, the user experience and government communications. We heard from 15 organisations from CaSE's membership and the wider sector through written case studies and interviews. Responders included those who work directly on visa applications and immigration compliance for their organisations. A list of organisations who have consented to be named is given at the end of the briefing.

One of the most common messages we heard was how important it is for UK institutions to attract the highest possible level of talent to maintain their positions as world leaders. International researchers are essential to stay on the cutting edge and some specialist organisations said that there is a challenge to recruit enough top-quality staff from the UK to maintain this position. One organisation said that for most research roles it is not uncommon to have only 10-15% of applications from UK nationals.

Summary of barriers R&D organisations face

- **The Global Talent visa is ambiguous and confusing to navigate.** It is often ambiguous to applicants and immigration compliance professionals who is eligible, and the visa route itself is hard to navigate.
- **Complex visa policy can put significant strain on organisations.** Visa policy is increasingly complicated and puts significant strain and costs on organisations to ensure compliance. This can lead to paying for legal advice, requiring additional staff, or even outsourcing immigration administration for fear of not being compliant.
- **High visa costs can be a decisive barrier and can be unsustainable for organisations.** High visa costs are a significant disincentive and financial support from can make or break leading researchers' decisions to come to the UK. This support comes at an increasingly significant cost for organisations and can be unsustainable.

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"For the UK to be seen as a good choice of place to work, and to remain internationally competitive, we must not erect unnecessary barriers to the flow of researchers from around the world."

John Innes Centre

The Global Talent visa and the Skilled Worker visa

Two of the most commonly used visa routes for international researchers are the Global Talent visa (GTV) and the Skilled Worker visa (SWV).

Our respondents consistently said the Skilled Worker visa was one of their main routes for international researchers. In contrast, there was wide variation in the use of the Global Talent visa across institutions, reflecting variations in awareness. This ranged from organisations who used it as one of their main routes for international researchers, alongside the SWV, to organisations who rarely or never used the GTV. One leading specialist research organisation said they did not use the GTV at all as they had the impression it was “only applicable for senior leadership roles”. Several organisations indicated that they are trying to increase their use of the GTV as policy changes make it harder to fill vacancies with the SWV.

The Global Talent visa

The **Global Talent visa (GTV)** is a specialist visa for talented and promising individuals seeking to work in the UK in academia or research, arts and culture, or digital technology.

Applicants normally must seek endorsement from one of six bodies. There are four different routes to achieve this – more detailed information is available [here](#).

1. Academic and Research Appointments (fast-track endorsement)
2. Individual Fellowships (fast-track endorsement)
3. Endorsed Funders (fast-track endorsement)
4. Peer Review

Applicants who have been awarded one of a [list of ‘Prestigious Prizes’](#), such as a Nobel Prize or Fields Medal, can get a GTV without seeking endorsement.

Organisations who regularly used the GTV generally preferred it to the SWV, citing benefits for the organisation and applicants themselves, including: a faster, more flexible process; reduced administrative burden; autonomy for applicants to move jobs, aiding research mobility; being more cost-effective; a faster route to indefinite leave to remain; and an easier way for international researchers to take on additional roles, e.g. in spinout companies. They also highlighted good administrative support throughout the application process from UKRI and the Royal Society.

Despite these benefits, our respondents highlighted a variety of barriers the GTV poses for employers and candidates.

The eligibility requirements for the GTV are ambiguously worded and restrictive – one organisation said clearer criteria would be the biggest improvement to the route.

- The requirement for applicants to be “directing or leading” work for the *Academic and Research Appointments* route is poorly defined and excludes early career postdoctoral researchers who have a significant impact but may not lead research.

- Within the *Peer Review* route ambiguous language such as “exceptional” and “significant contribution” puts many applicants off applying.
- Within the *Endorsed Funder* route the requirement for “fair recruitment” is vague and no definition is provided, making it hard to assess eligibility.
- The requirement for “a PhD or equivalent research experience” in the *Peer Review* route can lead PhD students to mistakenly believe they are eligible.

The GTV is confusing for candidates and immigration compliance professionals alike. This is due to its multiple endorsement routes, each with two stages, and a lack of transparency about success rates. This creates a perception among candidates that it is difficult and makes it hard for immigration compliance experts to advise applicants.

There is not enough guidance for the GTV and existing guidance is confusing. Official government rules and guidance are confusing and hard to navigate, even for immigration compliance professionals. Compared to the SWV there is less external guidance available – one university noted that their outsourced immigration administration function could not provide guidance to applicants applying for the GTV.

The list of eligible funders for the *Endorsed Funder* route is too narrow with no clear mechanism for adding new ones. This can lead to equivalent researchers working on the same project being on different, unequal visa routes purely because they have different funders. Open Targets and Chan Zuckerberg Initiative were noted as omitted funders.

The *Peer Review* route is slow and off-putting. This route is typically used when no other route is applicable for a candidate. Candidates are often reluctant to pursue it due to the large administrative burden and a perception that success is harder. Long response times for this route can deter organisations from using the GTV. One respondent said they have had many cases where they have opted to bring someone in on an SWV as this route could not get a researcher in fast enough.

The Skilled Worker visa

The **Skilled Worker visa (SWV)** is a visa for individuals taking on a skilled job in the UK from a Home Office-approved employer. To be eligible, the individual must have a Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS), and their job must be on [a list of eligible occupations](#) and have a salary above a minimum threshold for their type of work.

There are a number of exceptions and case-specific rules for this visa route, including: an Immigration Salary List of jobs with a lower salary threshold; a Temporary Shortage List of medium skilled jobs that are eligible for the visa in certain circumstances; higher thresholds for jobs with a high ‘going rate’ salary; different salary rules for some healthcare and education jobs; lower salary thresholds for young people, recent graduates, individuals with a relevant STEM PhD-level qualification, and postdoctoral positions in science or higher education; amongst others.

The SWV is used extensively by many organisations for positions at all levels of seniority – it was used for the overall head of one large UK university interviewed. While it benefits from being a more familiar route, some route-specific barriers were raised.

The increased salary threshold makes it harder to attract key roles. Newly increased salary thresholds align more closely with experienced researchers, limiting opportunities to employ early career researchers and research assistants. One organisation also said that it made it difficult to recruit into emerging skill areas. This policy could pressure employers to raise salaries to meet the visa criteria or to pay overseas workers higher salaries, raising equity issues.

Complex policy is difficult to navigate without official tools. Exceptions and reductions to the salary threshold are confusing, even for immigration compliance professionals, and there is no easy way to determine which apply to a role. The Immigration Salary list is also difficult to interpret and not well integrated with 'going rate' salary tables.

General barriers

Our respondents also highlighted a range of barriers that are not specific to any route.

Frequent changes to immigration policy put a substantial burden on organisations. Navigating changes to the immigration system (such as the [July 2025 changes to the SWV](#)) is daunting and time-consuming for immigration compliance leads. Changes also impose legal costs on organisations who may need to seek formal advice to ensure compliance. Rapid policy shifts also cause significant panic among current visa holders, especially when changes affect settlement and long-term rights or are introduced without appropriately long transition periods. Anxiety from government announcements compounds the administrative burden for organisations as they can face more requests to switch to the GTV, limiting capacity to support new hires.

Immigration policy changes are unclear and lack accompanying guidance. It is often unclear to existing staff who is affected by announcements. Immigration compliance officials then face an additional workload providing support to existing staff members, diverting their capacity from incoming talent.

The UK's visa policy is confusing for applicants and immigration professionals alike. Applicants can hesitate from applying and often require step-by-step guidance from organisations. However, it is becoming harder for professionals to navigate the system. In the past 18 months, a large UK university outsourced their immigration administration function at an annual cost of £1 million out of concerns that they could not remain compliant internally under the UK's increasingly complex visa policy.

The UK is losing its reputation as a welcoming country for researchers. Political rhetoric and changing visa policy harm the UK's international reputation and cause worry among existing international researchers in the UK who don't see the UK as a welcoming country. Applicants and existing staff can interpret immigration-adverse government announcements as being directed at them. This can lead to researchers considering moving to Europe which is seen as "more accessible and cheaper".

Restrictions on bringing families are a significant disincentive for leading researchers. High costs for bringing families to the UK put a significant strain on researchers and can be so high that researchers get separated from their families. The proposed changes to the salary threshold for dependents will make relocating with a family even less attractive. One leading organisation has seen cases of these restrictions separating researchers from their families and leading to top researchers leaving the UK or not choosing not to come in the first place.

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“We have several [researchers] who have not seen their families for more than 6 months because the previous costs were too high”

James Hutton Institute

Changes to the settled status threshold are likely to have negative impacts partly due to social benefits like healthcare and childcare only applying after reaching settled status. The prospect of changes causes anxiety and uncertainty in international researchers. Extending the settled status threshold would add £6,300 in Immigration Health Surcharge costs which will be shouldered by UK organisations or by researchers themselves.

Visa costs and the Immigration Health Surcharge

Visa costs can make or break a candidate's decision. Visa costs, including the Immigration Health Surcharge, are a significant barrier. One organisation said that nearly 40% of international researchers offered employment in a recent year noted difficulty accepting due to high costs. This is especially true for researchers who are, early career, from low-income countries, and those with dependents. Costs for a three year SWV can be up to 20% of an early career researcher's income in some countries. For those with families, upfront visa costs can be over £10k, not counting relocation expenses.

Institutional support on visa fees varies widely, often at a significant cost. Some organisations have the financial resources to reimburse visa costs for employees, however this poses administrative burdens and an increasingly high financial burden. One organisation whose immigration related spending increased from approximately £15,000 in 2020 to £120,000 in 2024/25 said this support is “becoming unsustainable”. Other institutes are not in a position to support visa costs, putting them at a comparative disadvantage. One organisation said in many cases visa support is a deciding factor for an applicant, especially those with dependents.

One organisation provided an interest-free loan scheme to support visa costs. Home Office rules meant that this counted against salary thresholds for the Skilled Worker visa, adding to compliance duties and admin burden. They have since suspended the scheme pending a full legal review.

Impacts on the organisation and trends

Several respondents noted rising visa costs having a negative impact on applications. One research institution noted their applicant pool decreased following visa cost increases in April 2024. Several organisations stated that without international researchers they cannot fill the roles they need to remain internationally competitive. The issues can be particularly acute for postdoctoral researchers and technical roles. More senior group leaders can also be deterred by costs for dependents and for fear that they will struggle to recruit their teams. One organisation said, “We don't just lose out on individuals, but entire groups of researchers”.

Retaining talent is an issue in addition to attracting it. Rising costs and fluctuating policy increasingly makes the UK a less attractive place for international researchers already working here. One research institution said that internal analysis showed that rising visa costs are disincentivising current staff from remaining in the UK

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“Without a fair and functional visa system, we risk reaching a breaking point in our ability to attract global talent and sustain world-leading research”

The Sainsbury Laboratory

Partial list of contributors

CaSE reached out to 15 organisations who contributed to this project through a combination of written case studies and interviews. Several organisations who participated asked not to be named. The following contributors have consented to being named:

- The Francis Crick Institute
- The James Hutton Institute
- John Innes Centre
- The Sainsbury Laboratory
- Wellcome Sanger Institute
- University of Exeter



Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) is a non-partisan charity with a membership that cuts across R&D sectors. It takes a high-level, cross-sector view of the research and innovation environment, and gives impartial expert insight on the whole R&D system to decision-makers.

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