

Attracting and retaining international talent

Priorities for immigration reform across different
career stages

Contents

Introduction	2
Why the UK is an attractive destination for researchers	5
How the government can help to ensure we can continue to attract international researchers	7

Introduction

Universities support the government's drive to secure the UK's position as a science and innovation superpower.

Universities welcome the government's recent drive to strengthen the UK's position as a global leader in science and innovation – it is an ambition shared by the whole higher education sector. Investment into the research system and its infrastructure will be key to achieving this aim, but to fully execute this vision requires the recruitment of the best research and innovation talent from across the globe.

The government has demonstrated its commitment to making the UK a science and innovation superpower by announcing its ambitious target to increase investment in research and development (R&D) to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. To achieve this target the government also announced it will be raising public investment in R&D to £22 billion per year by 2024/25 – a record increase in spending.

This bold strategy is clear from the government's announcement to invest £800 million towards the creation of a new research funding body – the Advanced Research and Innovation Agency (ARIA). Based on the principles of the US Advanced Research Projects Agency, the ARIA strategy is to sponsor high-risk projects in the understanding that many will fail, but the ones that do succeed will drive economic growth and have a profound and positive impact on society.

The UK will need an additional 150,000 researchers and technicians by 2030 if we are to meet the government's 2.4% R&D target

Universities are well placed to understand that people are at the core of research and development. Our position as a global leader in science and innovation has relied on an immigration system that facilitates and supports researchers and technicians coming to the UK.

In 2019/20, there were 92,440 international staff working at UK higher education institutions, representing over a fifth (20.9%) of the workforce. International staff make a significant contribution to key science and innovation disciplines, as seen in Figure 1. The highest proportion work in engineering and technology (39.5%), biological, mathematical and physical sciences (33.8%), and humanities, language-based studies and archaeology (33.1%).

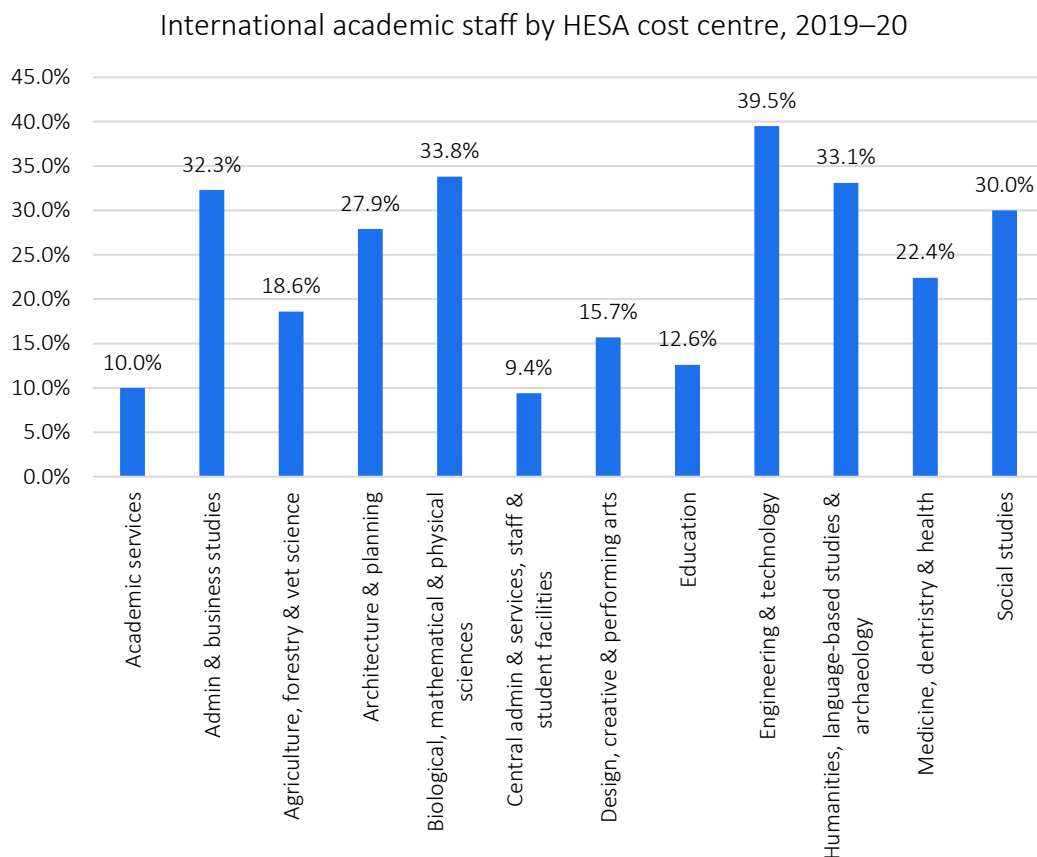


FIGURE 1

The skills and knowledge international researchers bring produces significant reputational, performance, and financial benefits for our institutions. Studies have shown that mobile researchers out-perform domestic researchers – those moving to or from the UK are found to have above average levels of citation impact. Not only this, but opportunities for international collaboration enhances productivity and increases R&D and economic activity. This circulation of knowledge (or ‘brain circulation’) as researchers move across countries is critical to the development of collaborative research links between the UK and research teams across the globe.

If the UK is to sustain its target of 2.4% research intensity, it is estimated that the R&D sector will need **at least an additional 150,000 researchers and technicians by 2030**. It will not be enough to rely on British nationals – we need a sector that can continue to attract and retain overseas talent from all backgrounds and at all stages of their careers.

This fact has been readily acknowledged in the government’s 2021 people and culture strategy. A range of interventions have been introduced to diversify and widen routes into the UK:

- the Global Talent visa, allowing fast and straightforward entry for high skilled international scientists and researchers
- changes to the Graduate Route, making it easier for promising young international graduates to secure skilled jobs in the UK
- continued development of the GREAT campaign website, designed to attract overseas talent to the UK

These recent immigration reforms recognise the importance of overseas talent contributing to our science and research ecosystem and have been warmly welcomed by the higher education sector. However, further changes to the immigration system will be needed if the UK is to reach the 2.4% target and continue attracting overseas researchers in the face of increasing international competition.

Why the UK is an attractive destination for researchers

It is important to recognise and build upon what has already established the UK's reputation as an attractive destination to do research. There is no doubting our international research performance – we have been ranked first for field-weighted citation impact in the G7 every year since 2007.

In 2018, the UK produced 14% of the world's most highly cited publications. Figure 2 shows that the UK, compared to other countries, has the largest proportion of its research among the world's most highly cited publications. In short, this is an area where we punch well above our weight.

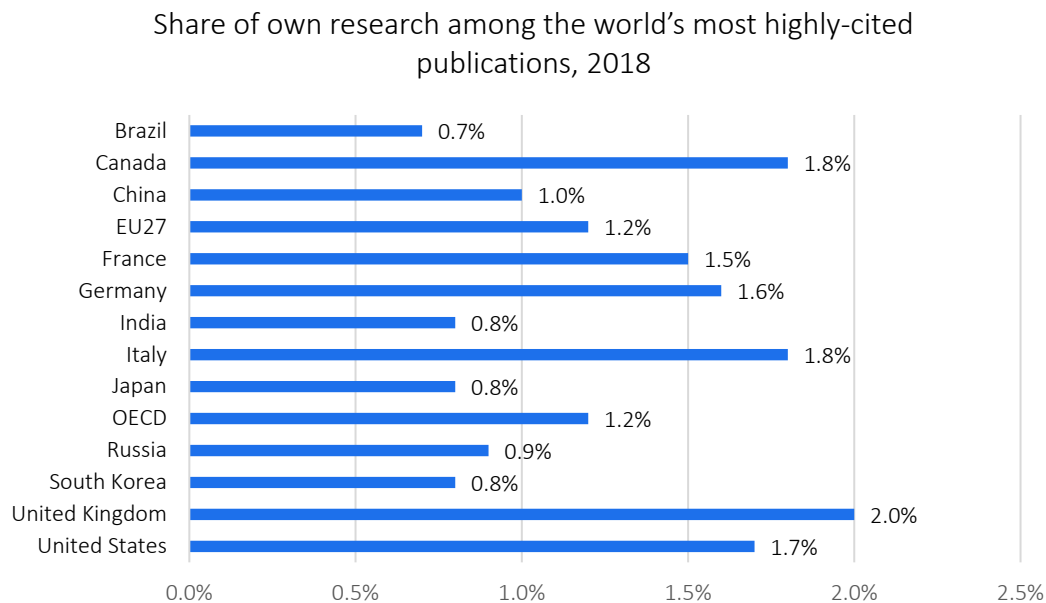


FIGURE 2

This consistently high performance has been achieved through our world-class research infrastructure which provides access to excellent facilities, services and personnel. An example of the fantastic support and provision provided to our researchers is demonstrated by the Researcher Career Development concordat, an agreement between universities, research institutes and funders to support the career development of researchers in the UK.

Furthermore, due to our highly mobile researcher population, our institutions provide significant opportunities for international collaboration, which as previously mentioned has been linked to increased individual publication performance and productivity. As shown in Figure 3, when compared to other countries, the UK has one of the highest proportions of publications that are the result of international collaboration.

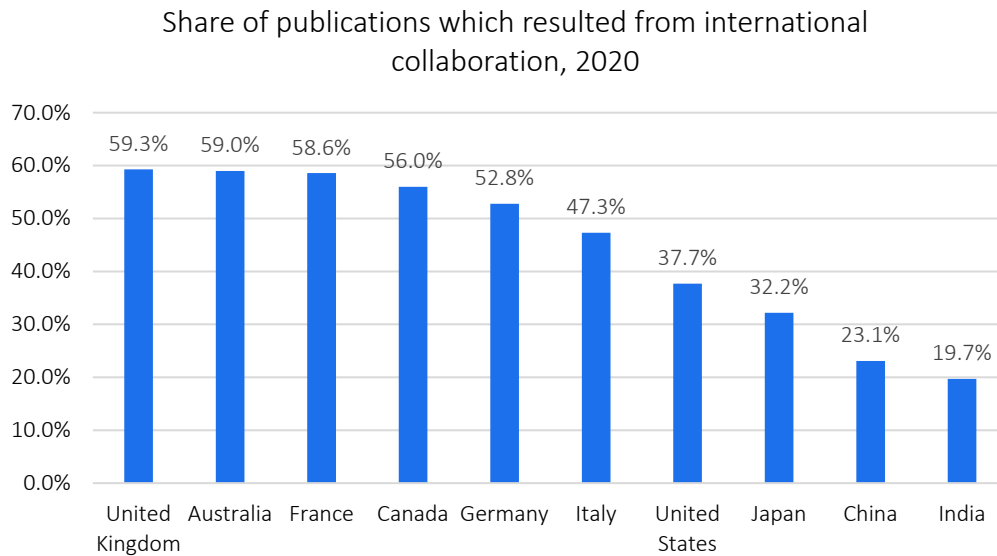


FIGURE 3

Similarly, the UK's culture and lifestyle provides an attractive pull factor for overseas talent. A [study](#) found that UK lifestyle is more attractive to researchers and scientists who have moved here than to those in other countries. These softer factors – which exist outside the research system – are nonetheless important to consider when promoting the UK to international researchers.

Despite our continuing global appeal, we cannot afford to be complacent in the face of increasing global competition if we are to reach an additional 150,000 researchers by 2030 to sustain the government's target of 2.4% R&D intensity.

How the government can help to ensure we can continue to attract international researchers

There are a wide range of factors a researcher will consider when choosing a destination country and institution. What an individual prioritises will depend on their circumstances which are likely to change as they progress throughout their career. If the UK is to achieve its ambition of becoming a science and innovation superpower, our offers need to be attractive at all stages of a researcher's career.

We've developed a framework that considers visa and immigration obstacles for international researchers at different stages of their careers to structure our suggestions on how the immigration system could be reformed. The framework addresses the following priorities:

1. attracting early career researchers (ECRs)
2. attracting mid career researchers (MCRs)
3. retaining international researchers

1. Attracting early career researchers

We define ECRs as including individuals who are either undertaking their PhD¹ or within six years of their PhD award. We also include those who are within five years of their first research appointment, understanding that particularly in some fields such as law and creative arts there are often alternative entry points to PhDs. These groups have been combined on the basis that they have overlapping priorities and experiences. They have not yet established a significant level of independence, and as

¹ Emerging UUKi research shows that, since peaking in 2016, the UK has started losing ground to Germany and Canada in attracting international doctoral students.

such, their needs most commonly relate to access to funding, development of research skills, and opportunities for career progression.

We know from member feedback that ECRs must navigate significant financial barriers for what is often low entry level pay, and often depend on competitive funding opportunities and sponsorships. These struggles are compounded by UK visa arrangements which are amongst the most expensive in the world.

This is in part due to the immigration health surcharge (IHS) which costs £624 per year (and per person if bringing over family dependents). Whilst our members have highlighted examples of good practice from universities supporting ECRs to pay through staff-loans and funding of post-doctoral health provision, not all universities can afford these schemes². We support the vital contribution to the NHS but see the requirement to pay the total cost of the IHS upfront as needlessly prohibitive. Feedback from our members has even highlighted cases of researchers requesting shorter contracts to reduce the up-front cost of coming to the UK.

Another barrier faced by ECRs moving to the UK is a lack of career security in a sector which is highly competitive. Based on member feedback, there is not always a clear pathway for ECRs to bridge gaps between posts or institutions which can result in anxiety over what happens once a fixed term post comes to an end. It is important that ECRs have access to information on the various opportunities and career pathways available to them in the UK, with the new GREAT talent campaign and website providing a good opportunity to address this issue.

We believe the Home Office should consider the following options in overcoming these obstacles:

- Undertake a benchmarking exercise to review visa application costs to ensure we are at least in line with our international competitors, if not more competitive on the grounds of cost.
- Enable applicants to pay the IHS over a series of staggered monthly payments over the lifetime of their visa, rather than requiring the total upfront.
- Continue to work with the sector in developing later stages of the GREAT campaign website, paying particular focus to support for ECRs on potential career pathways.

² OfS sector analysis shows that universities are unable to cover the full economic costs of their research, further reducing their ability to invest in financial support for international researchers.

Story 1: Expensive visa and IHS costs are impacting Early Career Researchers

Two researchers both had to take out loans to afford the upfront visa and IHS costs to renew their visas for a further two years. They have been in the UK for almost eight years, first as PhD students (so have a substantial amount of debt already from paying overseas student fees), and then as university employees. They are now struggling to afford to live after paying loan fees and rent, even though they have no dependants. Both are highly skilled, contributing to a prestigious researcher programme, and work in a shortage occupation.

Story 2: Applicants are coming to the UK for shorter periods to avoid paying additional visa and IHS costs

At one institution, several new starters have said that their visa costs, their family's visa costs and the IHS costs are a big outlay and have asked for support. Particularly for open-ended roles where a five-year Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) would be an option, there are instances of individuals being issued with a CoS for a shorter period so they can afford the visa costs to come to the UK. The institution has a visa reimbursement and interest free loan scheme, but new starters are only able to access this once their employment starts.

It is difficult for the university to help them in advance of starting employment because of complexities including HMRC rules. One researcher, despite being employed in an open-ended contract, could only be issued a CoS for one year due to high visa and IHS costs.

2. Attracting mid career researchers

We define MCRs as individuals who were either awarded their doctorate over six years previously – or over five years since their first research appointment – and have developed a significant level of research independence. They would also have begun establishing themselves in their field by publishing reputable works. MCRs are more likely to be supporting family members, in which case financial stability and wellbeing will be prioritised for this group.

Our immigration system can create financial barriers to entry that disproportionately affect researchers with family. The total cost for an individual applying for a five-year visa through the Skilled Worker Route, who is also bringing a partner and two children, as shown below.

Part of the visa process	Cost
Skilled Worker application fee	£1,235
Family member visa fee x 3	£3,705
Immigration Health Surcharge	£3,120
Immigration Health Surcharge (for 1 adult and 2 children)	£7,820
Total cost	£15,880

TOTAL VISA COST FOR A FAMILY OF FOUR

The UK's immigration rules are also not always accommodating of diverse families – for example the 'sole responsibility' requirement which only allows a dependent child to come to the UK with a single parent in very limited circumstances.

This requirement does not recognise families where the parents may have divorced or split up, but both still retain responsibility for childcare, nor families where both parents work or study, often in different countries, and only one parent is moving to the UK. This also has a disproportionate impact on women, who are often less likely or willing to be able to leave children with a partner or family member in another country.

When considering MCRs, we suggest the Home Office should consider:

- A review and reform of the 'sole responsibility' test to be more inclusive to diverse family structures.
- Reviewing dependency visa costs to reduce the upfront financial burden for researchers with large families.
- Working with the sector in developing later stages of the GREAT campaign website to include practical information on housing, schools, and support for childcare for families settling in the UK.

Story 3: Immigration rules around family dependents are needlessly stopping talented researchers from coming to the UK

A researcher is an Indian national who had been offered a job. They were a resident in India, married with two children, and required a Tier 2 (General) visa. Their spouse had spent time in the UK on a Tier 2 (Intra-Company Transfer) visa but had returned to India. They wanted to bring their children to the UK with them but, due to the ICT 'cooling off period' rules, and their job in India, the spouse wouldn't be able to accompany them. The rules around children dependents made it unlikely that these would be considered 'serious and compelling reasons' for bringing the children to the UK without one parent. Due to the difficulties involved, they decided to withdraw from the role.

Story 4: Expensive dependant visa and IHS costs are making it difficult for researchers to bring over family

A researcher was offered a role as a Research Associate on a grant for which the university's Deputy Vice-Chancellor was the Principal Investigator. He declined the offer as he could not afford the upfront cost of visa applications and IHS for himself, his wife and his two children. The cost worked out to ten times his current salary in Turkey. He was the only appointable candidate for the role and despite repeatedly readvertising, the university was not able to find any other suitable candidates.

3. Retaining international researchers

Attracting talented global researchers to the UK is essential, but equally important is the need to retain them once they have arrived. Applicants who have lived and worked in the UK for five years (or three years under the Global Talent visa) can apply for indefinite leave to remain (ILR), giving them the right to live, work and study in the UK for as long as they like³.

Yet feedback from our members has highlighted many difficulties for researchers applying for ILR – not least the significant upfront cost of £2,389, which can cost an additional £800 for super priority processing (24 hours) or £500 for priority processing (five days). ILR applicants are also required to meet a minimum income

³ [Indefinite leave to remain](#) – GOV

threshold, based on the annual going rate of their role. Researchers being paid an annual salary of less than £33,000 will be unable to apply for ILR.

There is also a mismatch in the minimum number of years requirement between the Global Talent visa and others, including dependent visas. This can leave some researchers in a situation where they can apply for ILR after three years, but their dependent family members will not be able to until after five years.

Researchers may also find it difficult transferring from one institution to another, particularly when visas are linked to sponsorship at a specific institution, such as those who are on a Skilled Worker visa. This means for an individual to update their visa, they must reapply and pay the same application fees once again, creating an additional financial and bureaucratic burden for applicants.

To support and encourage talented researchers to remain in the UK, we suggest the Home Office should consider:

- Enabling family members on dependent visas to apply for ILR after three years, in line with those on the Global Talent visa.
- Enabling visa application costs to be transferred across institutions when updating an applicant's visa.

Story 5: A researcher seeking to remain in the UK pays two endorsements for the same visa

A researcher was on a Tier 4 Doctorate Extension Scheme (DES) visa which was due to expire approximately four months before his fixed term contract end date. He believed he met the criteria for global talent route 1 (directing or leading an individual or team in a research or innovation project), and this was confirmed by his manager. Route 3 would have been preferable as he was an early career researcher and met all the criteria, apart from not having two years left on his contract at the point of applying. The employee wished to progress under route 1, so the university prepared a statement of guarantee letter to support his endorsement application.

The endorsement was refused. He requested a review, but there was no change to the decision. The university started to look at sponsorship under the Skilled Worker route, however there was a high cost and not much time left before his visa expiry and the contract end date. He decided to apply under global talent route 4 (peer review) and was successful. He therefore had to pay for two endorsements for the same visa, and had dependants, so the visa and IHS costs were significant.

Story 6: Mismatch between indefinite leave to remain and dependant visas

A researcher is Chinese national in the UK with indefinite leave to remain, and their Chinese partner is on a PBS dependant visa. They had a baby. The partner was to return to work, so the Chinese national's parent came to the UK on a two-year Visitor visa to look after the baby. However, this meant that the parent was only able to be in the UK for two six-month periods, being required to leave after each six-month stay and unable to afford to return to the UK for a period of time. In addition, multiple and successive visits were understood to be frowned upon by the Home Office and may have seen the parent refused entry at the UK border.

The researcher was advised by the university that the only other possible option would be via the 'adult dependant relative' route, but this would be problematic as the parent did not need long-term care which was not available and/or affordable in China. The university advised the researcher to seek independent legal advice.

Universities UK is the collective voice of 140 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world; maximising their positive impact locally, nationally and globally.

Universities UK acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution.



Woburn House
20 Tavistock Square
London, WC1H 9HQ

+44 (0)20 7419 4111
info@universitiesuk.ac.uk
universitiesuk.ac.uk
@UniversitiesUK



May 2022

ISBN: 978-1-84036-487-3