

# Position Statement: International Mobility

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## Executive summary

Physiology as a discipline is a highly international endeavour, and this situation is standard for all modern research areas. The trend is towards greater international collaboration in research, and increasing numbers of events and organisations with global reach. The science sector is strengthened by the mobility of its workforce and international sharing of skills and knowledge. This belief was confirmed by a survey of The Physiological Society members in the wake of the Brexit vote, which showed the principal concern was retaining ease of international mobility for researchers and students.

Problems currently exist for non-EU international scientists trying to come into the UK, and the likelihood is these will extend to EU nationals also after Brexit. The Tier 2 “skilled worker” visa route has a monthly cap on entries which is repeatedly being reached. There are also restrictions on who can apply for these visas which exclude some roles vital to research infrastructure. Salary requirements do not take into account the likely pay of academic roles and can cause problems. Similarly, salary requirements and costs are a huge issue when trying to bring foreign dependents into the UK.

International students are being put off by the anti-immigration rhetoric emerging from Britain, despite their being a crucial source of income for UK universities. They are counted in immigration figures that the government aims to reduce, even though most leave after completing their studies. Those who do wish to stay and use their skills for the benefit of the UK economy can find this very difficult as they do not have a grace period to find work after finishing their degree.

Mobility rules can be a problem even in the case of short-term visits. Visa applications can be a difficult and effortful process with no guarantee of approval, and no explanation of rejections.

All these migration issues will be complicated by the fallout of the Brexit process and the conflict between stated government intentions to reduce UK immigration but make this country the best place in the world to conduct research. There has been talk of sector-based exemptions and special rules, but a much more satisfactory outcome would be a flexible immigration system which works for all.

## 1. Recommendations

### A: Recommendations for The Society:

1. Collect detailed information on problems faced by Members and their university departments due to restrictions and complications around migration, to present an overview of the effects on the discipline to policymakers

2. Work with likeminded organisations to present the strongest possible united front on the importance of international mobility to science and exploiting all possible routes of access for workers e.g. Tier 1 Visas
3. Continue providing grants and advice to facilitate Members' international travel on scientific business, including supporting applications to visit UK conferences

**B: Recommendations for government:**

4. Keep the list of shortage occupations regularly updated, and use it to acknowledge both those professions strengthened by international workforce turnover, and necessary student numbers in areas which lack a supply of trained graduates
5. Exempt STEMM occupations from the cap on the number of Tier 2 visas allowed, and reduce their financial and bureaucratic burdens
6. Reduce the costs and restrictions associated with bringing spouses and dependants to the UK, allowing international workers to settle here and build a skilled career
7. Maintain exemptions from salary restrictions for PhD-level positions, and expand these to cover other highly-skilled roles without a PhD requirement such as technicians
8. Remove caps and restrictions on international students, remove students from immigration numbers, and expand post-study work visas for STEMM occupations
9. Ease the burden of short-term visa applications for academic conference attendance, and provide academic bodies a route to easily verify overseas visitors

## **2. Introduction**

While we are The Physiological Society of the United Kingdom and Ireland, our remit is more international than this suggests. The Society has members from over 60 countries and has close relationships with other nations' physiological societies and the International Union of Physiological Sciences (IUPS). Our discipline is highly international, collaborative and integrative. The Society has been keen to recognise this, and has organised a series of joint conferences with the German and Scandinavian Physiological Societies, known as Europhysiology, with the first to take place in London in 2018. Furthermore, recent Society awards have gone to scientists representing a wide variety of nations, working both in the UK and overseas. Our most prestigious award, the Annual Review Prize Lecture, was awarded in 2016 to John O'Keefe (American-born, working at University College London), in 2014 to Richard Tsien (Chinese-born American, working at the University of Oxford), and in 2013 to Eric Gouaux (American, working at the Vollum Institute in Oregon), to name only a few recent winners from overseas.

This represents only the smallest glimpse into the international nature of modern scientific research, which in its entirety comprises a vast web of people working around the world with all nationalities comprehensively mixed together. This trend towards multinational working is only strengthening. The new Francis Crick Institute in London, which includes a physiology research section, has staff members from over 70 countries. Multinational consortia are tackling many large problems in science, from emerging health risks such as Zika and Ebola, to nuclear fusion and particle physics.

These projects are significantly harmed by construction of artificial barriers that stop researchers from travelling to and working where they will be most effective.

A recent survey of The Physiological Society members concerning the consequences of Brexit showed that there is wide support for free movement of people; indeed, the combined scores for movement of researchers and students made this the top issue for respondents.<sup>1</sup> We believe that harsh restrictions on international movement will have a detrimental impact on the course of research, and will set back efforts to improve health, technology and society.

### 3. International mobility of researchers

The foot soldiers of scientific endeavour are the researchers who apply themselves to it. Researchers are not limited to the esteemed professors who win Nobel Prizes, but are a much wider group including junior academics, post-docs, research students and technical support staff. The “best and brightest” that successive Governments recognise, and want to recruit and retain as the core of excellent British science, are found throughout the career grades, and throughout the world.

Every country has home-grown talent, but research is a global undertaking, and scientists may want to move for a number of reasons. These include going to work with a specialist in their field or at a specialist facility, accessing new sources of funding, working under different regulatory regimes, or more personal reasons such as wanting to experience a new country or move with family. Whatever the reason for moving, it has been shown that internationally-mobile researchers have a higher research performance than sedentary researchers.<sup>2</sup> The UK should be seeking to encourage this international movement of researchers, both in and out of the country, in order to attract the best talent pool to the country and expand the diaspora of British scientists working around the globe.

Currently, there are significant difficulties experienced in facilitating this international movement. Most non-EU researchers come into the UK under a Tier 2 visa for skilled workers, which has stringent requirements and heavy cost implications for both the individual and the sponsoring organisation (despite the exemption from the Immigration Skills Charge (ISC) for PhD-level positions).<sup>3,4</sup> There are also salary requirements related to admission under Tier 2, with a minimum to be eligible depending on the position offered. However, academic salaries are acknowledged to be low for the skill level required, and some academics may fail to meet the requirement. This is of particularly great relevance to physiologists, as most work in academia rather than industry, and are therefore even more likely to be in a lower salary bracket than their contemporaries. Perhaps most problematically, there is a monthly cap for the number of people who can be admitted into the UK under Tier 2. Recently, this cap has been reached repeatedly, resulting in delays and problems for those with job offers. Once Britain has left the EU, if all foreign citizens come under these regulations, it will be imperative the cap is raised accordingly. This system also fails to recognise that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.physoc.org/sites/default/files/PhySocBrexitInfographicFinal.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Elsevier (2013) International comparative performance of the UK research base - 2013

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.freemovement.org.uk/interregnum-11-years-without-free-movement-1962-1973/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/governments-new-immigration-skills-charge-to-incentivise-training-of-british-workers>

highly skilled technical staff who underpin British science are not eligible for Tier 2 visas, despite their experience and skill level, as they do not meet the ISC exemption criterion of holding a PhD.

Another route for scientists to enter this country is the Tier 1 “Exceptional Talent” visa system. There are 1000 slots reserved annually for those of “exceptional talent”, as deemed by an approved sponsoring body, to be allowed into the UK. The national academies are “competent bodies”, recognising that scientists can be outstanding and that they are wanted in Britain. However, in practice, Tier 1 is hugely undersubscribed, with a minority of the 1000 places actually used.<sup>5</sup> This is likely due to a lack of knowledge about the route and a reluctance to deal with the administrative burden. With a case having to be made for each entrant by this route, it is only deemed suitable for established professors or industrial researchers and is not currently a means to recruit more junior researchers, their talent notwithstanding. However, even if the system were used well, 1000 entries per year across all competent bodies are insufficient to address migration capacity problems.

There is a general acceptance of the need for movement of international scientists into the UK among the public. A survey after the referendum showed that an overwhelming majority of the public (88%) supported maintained (42%) or increased (46%) migration of highly skilled workers to the UK, whereas only 12% wanted a reduction.<sup>6</sup>

There are significant soft power benefits to having an open immigration situation for scientists. Foreigners who have studied or worked here are likely to go home with positive views of the UK which would benefit future relationships. As well as the specifics of immigration policies, political rhetoric is also important as it often sets the perception among scientists and students about the reception they will receive in the UK. We have already seen a decline in applications from foreign students to study in the UK (both EU and non-EU), as well as from workers coming in for skilled position such as nurses. Though there are not yet full figures for academic positions, it seems highly likely that this decline is also affecting them.

### **Recommendations:**

Policymakers:

- Keep the list of shortage occupations regularly updated, and use it to acknowledge both those professions strengthened by international workforce turnover, and necessary student numbers in areas which lack a supply of trained graduates
- Exempt STEMM occupations from the cap on the number of Tier 2 visas allowed, and reduce their financial and bureaucratic burdens

The Society:

- Collect detailed information on problems faced by Members and their university departments due to restrictions and complications around migration, to present an overview of the effects on the discipline to policymakers

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<sup>5</sup> Immigration: Keeping the UK at the heart of global science and engineering, Campaign for Science and Engineering (2016)

<sup>6</sup> British Future, What next after Brexit? (2016)

- Work with likeminded organisations to present the strongest possible united front on the importance of international mobility to science and exploiting all possible routes of access for workers e.g. Tier 1 Visas

#### 4. Spouse and family visas

Obtaining spousal and family visas is an acknowledged problem for attracting people to the UK.<sup>7</sup> This can especially often be the case in scientific sectors as the international nature of research means that there is greater than usual mixing of nationalities, and international couples are common.

Firstly, there is a minimum salary threshold the UK partner must earn in order to be allowed to bring a non-EU spouse into the UK. This is currently £18,600 per annum (pre-tax). The threshold is raised by £3800 to also bring a first child and by £2400 for each subsequent child. As mentioned above, pay for academics is not high, or equivalent to what their skill level would command in industry.

Therefore reaching this salary threshold could be difficult for early career researchers or others in the lower paid jobs in science such as technical roles. Recent government proposals to raise the threshold as an immigration control measure would be disproportionately disruptive for scientists as a greater proportion of them would fall outside of the salary requirement. There are also significant numbers of international postgraduate and mature students who are likely not being paid at all, or are receiving a small stipend. There is every chance these students will be old enough to have a family affected by these regulations.

Even if earning enough to meet the threshold to bring in a family, the costs of the process can still be prohibitive. Government charges for bringing in a non-EU spouse amount to nearly £7000, with the prospect of this cost rising in coming years.<sup>8</sup> Many families simply cannot afford this, especially if one partner is prohibited from working due to visa requirements. This is a massive barrier to talented international researchers settling in the UK and adding their skills to our research base for the long term. These costs are disproportionate to the reality of the sector, and give no consideration to the likely viability of meeting the requirements they set. Far from increasing the burden visa applicants must meet, the government should be encouraging skilled workers and their families to settle here rather than be transient inhabitants of the UK.

#### **Recommendation:**

Policymakers:

- Reduce the costs and restrictions associated with bringing spouses and dependants to the UK, allowing international workers to settle here and build a skilled career

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<sup>7</sup> Immigration: Keeping the UK at the heart of global science and engineering, Campaign for Science and Engineering (2016)

<sup>8</sup> <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/05/25/the-interregnum-11-years-without-free-movement-from-1962-to-1973/>

## 5. Technicians and other research support workers

The business of science requires a smoothly-functioning infrastructure around it in order for progress not to grind to a halt. There are many more crucial personnel in science and research than researchers educated to PhD-level. Industry supplies reagents and feedstocks, and builds equipment. Technicians are required to maintain labs and work on specialist equipment providing specialist services for researchers. Animals used for research require highly trained and expert dedicated workers to care for them. Research departments have complex administration requirements. Many of these positions in the infrastructure around research require very highly-skilled workers and long periods of training. However, these positions often lack recognition from outside of the research sector and do not meet PhD skill-level exemptions, but require similarly high levels of expertise to fill. They are often not well-paid, therefore are also likely to suffer with regard to salary thresholds. Despite being hard to fill, these roles are not recognised on the shortage occupations list.

### **Recommendation:**

Policymakers:

- Maintain exemptions from salary restrictions for PhD-level positions, and expand these to cover other highly-skilled roles without a PhD requirement such as technicians

## 6. International students

One of the UK's best exports is higher education. We have a proud track record of educating international students, a small proportion of whom stay in this country and enrich our workforce, while others return home with positive impressions of their time in Britain. While here studying, overseas students make a large economic contribution, which is distributed across the country in many university towns and cities. This has been calculated as £25 billion in 2014/15.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the most prestigious scholarships and placements which can be achieved bring international students to this country. These include the famous Rhodes Scholarships at the University of Oxford, established in 1902, and the Erasmus+ programme, which is coordinated by the EU and facilitates placements across Europe. Brexit has placed British participation in Erasmus+ at risk, despite universal appeals from the sector to maintain our involvement.

A majority of British adults would like to maintain (44%) or increase (18%) the number of international students in the UK, and only a minority consider international students (24%) or EU students (23%) coming to study at a UK university as immigrants.<sup>10</sup> This agrees with the widely-held view that students should be removed from the official figures given on the number of immigrants to the UK, and therefore not count against Home Office targets to limit immigration.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/International-students-now-worth-25-billion-to-UK-economy---new-research.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> Universities UK poll, conducted by ComRes, October 2016

As described above, having a significant number of UK-educated researchers and workers distributed around the world brings significant soft power benefits, especially if they feel they have been treated well by the UK. The recent discontinuation of Post-Study Work Visas means that students have to immediately leave the country after finishing their studies. This is short-sighted as the UK is sending away qualified young workers rather than encouraging the employment of their talent for the good of the UK skills base and economy.

Leaving the EU will likely mean that all international students are forced to pay significantly higher overseas tuition rates, whereas currently EU students pay fees equivalent to home students. This greater price barrier will likely further reduce the number of international students coming to the UK. However, the loss of fee income could be offset to an extent by the higher fees each student would be paying. In order for this to be effective in helping universities' budgets, there should not be a cap on the number of international students allowed entry to the UK for study. If such a cap were imposed, universities would have no way to ameliorate the damage to their incomes.

### **Recommendation:**

Policymakers:

- Remove caps and restrictions on international students, remove students from immigration numbers, and expand post-study work visas for STEMM occupations

## **7. Short-term academic visits**

Academic conferences are central to the collaborative, information-exchange nature of modern science. Competition to host conferences is high, but Britain, with a large number of world-leading universities, is a popular destination. Despite this, history has provided a litany of difficulties for non-EU conference visitors. Examples of problems faced in bringing in conference attendees or short-term placements are widespread, and have affected all from junior researchers to professors. 13% of academic visitor visa applications were refused in 2013, with no grounds for rejection published, and often not in time to make alternative arrangements or recoup costs already expended.<sup>11</sup> This rejection rate has remained relatively constant over recent years. Rules were changed to be incorporated into the Standard Visitor Visa in April 2015, but this distrust of scientists coming to Britain for genuine academic purposes shows an attitude which can only undermine science and research in this country, despite the rhetoric that we will become the scientific world-leader.

One particularly disruptive experience is requiring some applicants to attend an interview with UK officials in the applicant's home country. Due to the worldwide nature of research, this is often not the country the applicant is living or working in. Therefore a long and expensive trip is necessitated to attempt to gain permission for another long and expensive trip, with uncertain chances of success. The UK visa system needs to be much more accommodating of travel for scientific purposes, and increase its flexibility and transparency for those trying to come to the UK, especially as more people will be affected by restrictions on motility after Brexit.

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<sup>11</sup> D Cressey, *Nature* **506** (2014), 14–15

## Recommendations:

### Policymakers:

- Ease the burden of short-term visa applications for academic conference attendance, and provide academic bodies a route to easily verify overseas visitors

### The Society:

- Continue providing grants and advice to facilitate Members' international travel on scientific business, including supporting applications to visit UK conferences

## 8. Conclusion

We see reasons to be worried but also to be optimistic. It is clear that the current systems for international migration are creaking under the pressures imposed both by political atmospheres and the increasingly international nature of science. However, the scientific community definitely stands behind the goal of increasing international cooperation.

The issue of Brexit is bringing the existing problems to the fore, with the risk of them being compounded by political changes. The prospect of passporting deals or some other special arrangement for researchers has been mooted, but we recognise we are not the only sector asking for special treatment. It would be far better to have a general system which works for all, rather than piecemeal exemptions which function tolerably well but cause resentment and uncertainty. Many organisations from many sectors have been calling for a rationalisation and redesign of immigration regulations, and Brexit presents the opportunity for the government to do this to the satisfaction of their petitioners and the public.

Though many different arguments have been made about migration, the foremost requirement when designing and implementing regulation changes is a reliance on evidence. Detailed examples show the need for reform, and careful analysis must be employed to bring it about.