Impact of UK immigration system changes on cancer research

Evidence and analysis from Cancer Research UK Institutes

July 2024

CANCER RESEARCH UK

Together we are beating cancer

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Overview

The UK has a history of spearheading research and attracting some of the world's best scientists, but barriers in the immigration system are putting this at risk. Through 2023 and early 2024, the previous UK Government brought in changes that increased costs, salary thresholds and restrictions. UK upfront immigration costs for researchers now vastly exceed other leading science nations.[1]

This has caused concern in the UK scientific community.[2] We have assessed how these changes are affecting the four Cancer Research UK Institutes – to show the direct consequences of UK Government immigration policy on cancer research.[3] We also include evidence from our wider research community, collected prior to these changes.

In our programme for the new UK Government, *Longer, better lives*, and our research workforce policy paper, we set out why international talent is so important to cancer research – to attract the greatest possible number of world-class researchers and help ensure UK research is connected to a worldwide effort to beat cancer sooner.[4,5]

Features of the system – like the Global Talent visa – do support science, but significant challenges remain. These changes are taking us in the wrong direction. This paper identifies the steps that are needed to ensure the UK remains a destination for global research talent.

Key concerns for CRUK Institutes

International talent is vital, particularly in early-career roles, but recruitment is increasingly challenging.

- 62% of the scientific staff at the Francis Crick Institute and 70% of postdoctoral researchers (postdocs) at the CRUK Scotland Institute are from outside the UK.
- All Institutes are struggling to attract talent. This is causing delays, leaving roles unfilled and increasing costs due to need for multiple rounds of recruitment.

Increasing immigration costs are taking money away from research and researchers can't afford them, which is limiting access to international talent.

- Our Institutes spent over £470,000 on visas in 2022/23, prior to increases, and to recruit the same number of international researchers now costs nearly £690,000, a 44% increase. Visas will now cost the Crick alone half a million pounds a year.
- A postdoc at the CRUK Manchester or Scotland Institutes would now spend 10% of their total income for a three-year position on immigration costs to bring 3 family members.

The Skilled Worker visa is the primary visa used by our Institutes, but is becoming more restrictive and there are challenges limiting use of the Global Talent visa. This is risking organisations being unable to access visas for the roles they need.

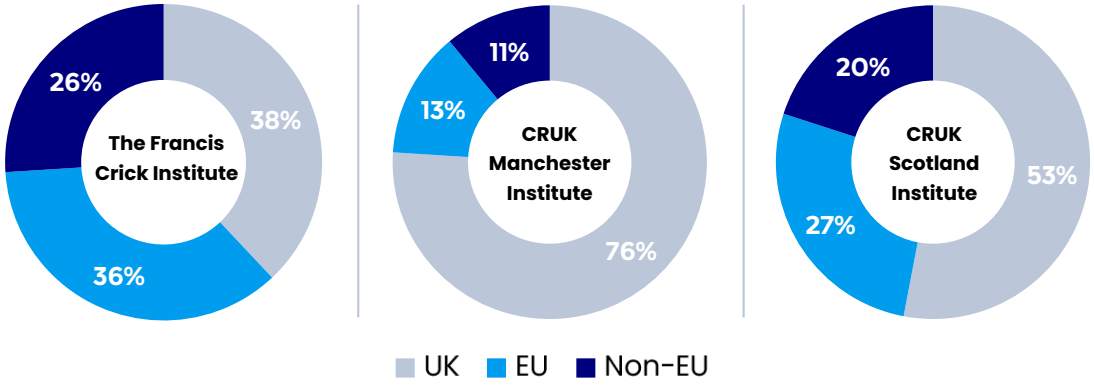
- There are 233 Skilled Worker visa holders at our Institutes, compared to 28 Global Talent visa holders.
- The increase to the Skilled Worker visa minimum salary threshold will make it no longer accessible to some vital technical roles that Institutes are using it for.
- There is a low awareness of the Global Talent visa and a lack of clarity over which roles in research are eligible, so it is perceived to be an exclusive route, limiting its use.

International recruitment at CRUK Institutes

The benefits of international researchers are well documented, and this is reflected in the international makeup of the UK research workforce.[6,7] International researchers bring a diversity of skills, ideas and experience and connections which open opportunities for their labs in the UK to form international collaborations.[6] The new UK Government has recognised how central UK life science is to achieving the ambitions set out in their missions for health and growth. People are at the heart of research, so strengthening the UK research workforce is central to achieving this, which relies on both strengthening the domestic training pipeline, and benefitting from access to a global pool to boost talent at all career stages.[5]

Our Institutes value these benefits, which is seen in their efforts to attract talent from across the world (Figure 1). Cancer Research UK polling also shows public support, with 73% thinking the UK Government should make it easier for medical researchers and scientists to come to the UK.[8]

Figure 1
CRUK Institutes are made up of staff from across the world



Note: Latest available data. The Francis Crick Institute data covers their scientific staff. Unknowns removed from CRUK Scotland Institute data (10% of total staff and students). The CRUK Cambridge Institute do not collect nationality data.

Cancer Research UK Institutes are based in London (The Francis Crick Institute), Manchester, Cambridge and Glasgow (CRUK Scotland Institute), and are associated with leading UK universities. They are considered to be some of the best locations to conduct cancer research in the world. Despite this, **all our Institutes are facing challenges in attracting and recruiting international researchers.**

They are concerned that the recent immigration changes – including increased visa fees, Immigration Health Surcharge, and Skilled Worker visa minimum salary threshold - are making this even worse. Issues were compounded when the UK left the EU, which reduced the accessibility of the UK to EU researchers and increased costs, as EU researchers now pay for visas. Our survey in 2023 found that 76% of UK cancer researchers had faced difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff since the UK's exit.[4]

Our Institutes have seen a drop in high-quality applications from across the world, which they attribute to challenges of the immigration system contributing to the UK being unattractive to global talent. It is becoming more common to have to conduct multiple rounds of recruitment to fill roles, which increases costs and introduces delays to research projects. International recruitment is particularly key for roles like postdocs, who make critical contributions to research while developing their professional experience following their PhD. 70% of postdocs at the CRUK Scotland Institute are international, but Institutes are finding it harder to recruit them.

Impact of increased visa fees and Immigration Health Surcharge

In October 2023, the UK Government increased the fees for work and study visas by 15% and 20%, and the Immigration Health Surcharge increased by 66% in February 2024. [9,10]

UK immigration costs

The UK has substantially higher visa costs than other leading research nations, including the US, Germany and Japan, and the recent increases mean the gap is getting bigger.[1] The UK's prohibitively high costs are known to researchers around the world, and are putting off talent applying here. We're struggling to compete, particularly with the EU.

Immigration costs are made up of the visa fee and the Immigration Health Surcharge, shown in Table A for the main worker routes used by our Institutes. Costs are paid upfront, including the Immigration Health Surcharge for all years of the visa, so the substantial increase to this surcharge is the main driver of increases to upfront costs. There can be additional charges to the employer or applicant, such as the Immigration Skills Charge (£1,000 per year) paid by the employer for some technical roles. The total upfront cost of a 5-year Skilled Worker visa increased by 22% to £11,933, and for a Global Talent visa increased by 58% to £5,891.[1]

Table A
Current costs for common routes for researchers

£719 - £1,636	£716	£1,035 / year
Skilled Worker Visa fee[9]	**Global Talent Visa fee[9]**	**Immigration Health Surcharge[11]**

Assessment of increased costs at our Institutes

Our Institutes all contribute towards immigration costs and provide support with the application process, to limit impact on researchers. This is covered from Institute core funding, lab group grant awards or the host university. However, for most Institutes it is not possible to cover all costs, so researchers also pay, which reflects a similar picture within the wider UK research community. The costs were already a barrier, so now this is getting even worse.[5]

We have assessed the direct financial impact for our Institutes of the increases in immigration costs made by the UK Government. To do so, we compared the annual spends for the financial year prior to the increases (2022/23) and added the additional costs to estimate how much it would be to obtain the same number and types of visas now. This covers the total cost to the Institute, whether paid for from core Institute funding, lab groups, the university or researchers themselves.

Immigration spend across all four Institutes in 2022/23 totalled £477,244. To recruit the same number of researchers, this will now cost £687,674 a year, a 44% rise (Figure 2).

Table B shows the breakdown for each Institute. The Crick is a larger Institute and is an outlier among UK research organisations as it covers all costs for researchers and their dependents, For other Institutes, data on dependents of researchers is not recorded, so costs of any dependents are not included here.

Figure 2
Impact of immigration cost increases for CRUK Institutes

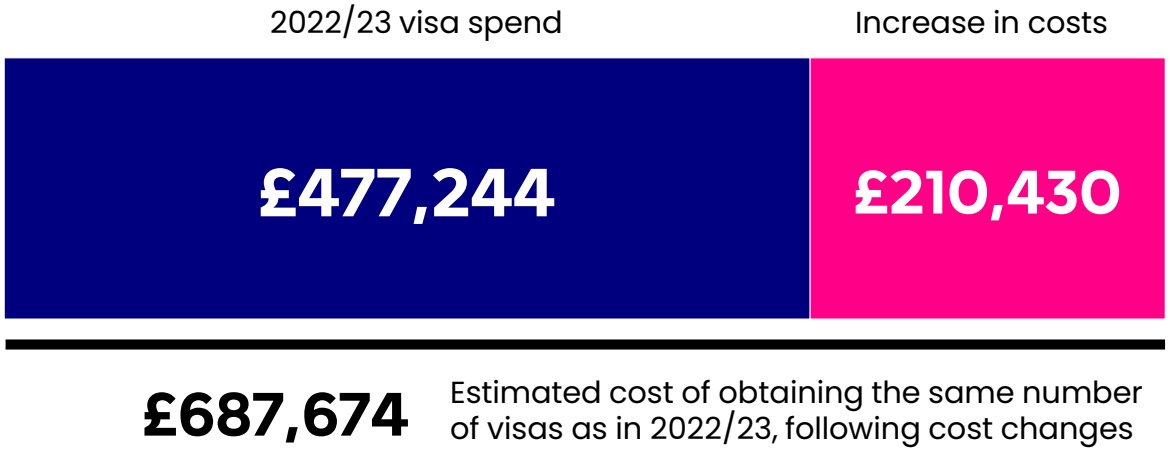


Table B
Immigration costs for CRUK Institutes, before and after increases to visa fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge

Institute	2022/23 spend	Estimated new spend	Increase
The Francis Crick Institute	£350,000	£501,000	£151,000 (+43%)
CRUK Cambridge Institute	£43,687	£65,793	£22,106 (+51%)
CRUK Manchester Institute	£27,150	£39,675	£12,525 (+46%)
CRUK Scotland Institute	£56,407	£81,206	£24,799 (+44%)
Total	**£477,244**	**£687,674**	**£210,430 (+44%)**

Increasing costs impact Institutes, lab groups and researchers

As this analysis shows, the increases are significant. For the costs that Institutes cover from their core funding, increases draw money from functions that support research – like specialist facilities and staff training. To manage increases, the Crick considered reducing international recruitment or requiring researchers to pay their Immigration Health Surcharge and for their dependents. This would mean they would lose out on international talent, so they instead intend to increase the budget from their core funding for the estimated £501,000 annual cost.

When costs are covered by a lab group that is recruiting a researcher, the increase in fees directly takes grant funding away from research. Lab research is energy-intensive, so inflation has had a significant impact on the cost of research, meaning lab groups are already having to stretch grant funding awards further, limiting the research that can be undertaken.[12] Having to use this funding on visa costs instead of research projects makes this even worse.

The direct impact on researchers is significant. Researchers at the CRUK Cambridge Institute cover their own Immigration Health Surcharge, which is now £5175 upfront for a 5-year visa.[9] Most of our Institutes cannot cover dependents, so researchers coming with families face high personal costs. A postdoc at the CRUK Scotland and CRUK Manchester Institutes would need to spend roughly 10% of their total income across a three-year role to pay for three family members. There is concern this makes coming to the UK unfeasible with a family.

Even when costs are covered, most Institutes have policies that researchers pay upfront and get reimbursed once they begin their role, which is similar to the approach taken in other research organisations. The rise in costs, and the fact all years of the Immigration Health Surcharge must be paid upfront, means that researchers need to have access to multiple thousands of pounds, which is particularly challenging for early-career researchers. Some are having to take out loans privately or through affiliated universities, or borrow from family.

There is a risk that researchers who cannot afford this will not be able to come, or will choose to go to research countries with lower costs. It is therefore particularly challenging to compete for EU researchers with EU countries.

The impact of costs on researchers – a case study

A researcher at the CRUK Manchester Institute, who has come to the UK to conduct prostate cancer research, struggled to meet costs after their application was subject to the increase to the Immigration Health Surcharge in February.

They needed to access over £2100, which their savings couldn't cover, so had to borrow from their family to meet costs. They told us:

> "By presenting such financial hurdles, the UK risks losing global talent to other countries with more accommodating immigration policies."

There were two-month delays to their visa application, delaying the start date for their research. They described the process as extensive and complex.

> "[The Home Office] don't provide transparent information for anything."

They did, however, see the Global Talent visa as a positive for scientists, as the route has fewer administrative requirements for the applicant and host institution. They called for wider access to this route to make the UK a more attractive destination for researchers.

> "[The Global Talent visa] could lead to an influx of innovative thinkers and researchers, thereby enhancing the country's standing as a leading hub for scientific research and development."

UK costs are higher than all other leading science nations, so we risk losing out

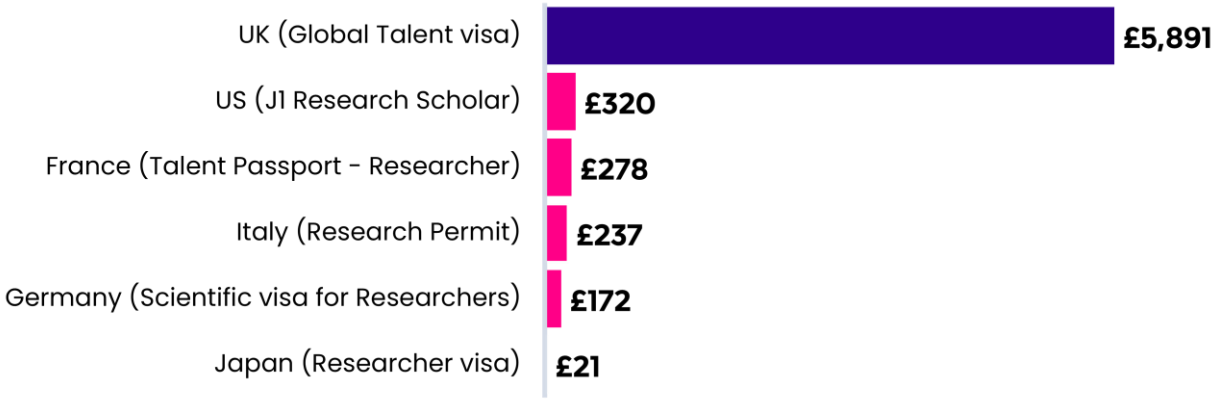
Since the cost increases, the Royal Society conducted an update of their analysis of UK upfront costs for common routes for research, comparing with other leading science nations[i].[1]

The total upfront cost of a 5-year Skilled Worker visa (£11,933) is now 970% higher than the average for equivalent routes across all other leading science nations in the study.

While the fee for a Global Talent visa is lower than for a Skilled Worker visa, upfront costs are still the highest at £5,891. This is 1583%, or 17 times, higher than the average cost for dedicated routes for researchers. Figure 3 compares the UK upfront cost with those of countries in the G7. Even without the Immigration Health Surcharge, the UK is more expensive than the international average of £350.

[i] 'Leading science nations' were defined by selecting the top 17 countries in the Nature Index rankings: United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United States of America.

Figure 3
Upfront costs comparison for research visa routes



Source: The Royal Society. Summary of visa costs analysis 2024. Comparison of upfront costs for dedicated researcher visa routes across G7 countries included in the study (for a 5-year visa).

It now costs £20,980 for a researcher to come on a 5-year Global Talent visa with 3 family members, which has risen by 57% since the cost increases.[1,13]

Previous iterations of this analysis showed that UK visa costs were already higher than other leading science nations.[14] While some countries have increased their visa costs since the last analysis in 2021, the gap with the UK is still widening. Some countries are reducing costs, including France, who reduced equivalent skilled worker and dedicated researcher visa routes by 92% to £278. While the US raised costs for their dedicated researcher visa by 29% between 2021 and 2024, this was only by £72, compared to the UK upfront cost increase for a Global Talent visa of £2163, making the UK visa now 18.5 times more expensive.

It is inherently challenging to gather evidence on researchers who might have considered coming to the UK but were put off. But our Institutes are seeing the impact of this. The CRUK Cambridge Institute gave the example of struggling to compete for specialists with large computational cancer centres in Germany, such as the Institute for Computational Cancer Biology. EU citizens can move to Germany under free movement, and Germany's researcher visa is £172, a fraction of the cost of UK routes.[1] UK immigration costs are placing UK research institutes at a competitive disadvantage for global talent.

Policy recommendation

Increasing immigration costs are directly taking money away from cancer research and limiting access to talented researchers from across the world to help beat cancer sooner.

- **Recommendation:** By the end of this parliament, the Home Office should reduce overall and upfront immigration costs for researchers, so they are competitive with comparable leading research nations.

Impact of increased Skilled Worker visa minimum salary threshold

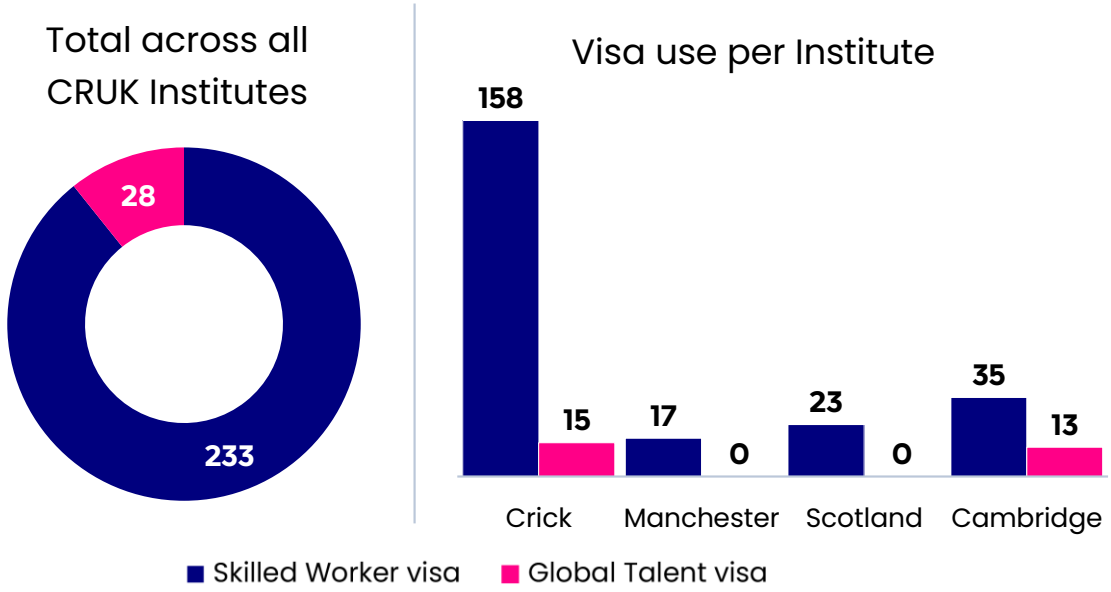
The UK Government implemented a 48% increase to the minimum salary threshold for Skilled Worker Visas, from £26,200 to £38,700, from 4th April 2024.[15] In March 2024, the Home Office announced a 20% discount to the threshold for STEM PhD holders (£30,960).[16]

Visa use by CRUK Institutes

The Skilled Worker Visa is the primary route used by our Institutes, with 233 Skilled Worker visa holders compared to 28 Global Talent visa holders (Figure 4). CRUK Manchester and Scotland Institutes have not yet used the Global Talent visa route.

Different visa types are used for different roles. For example, at the Crick, 76 of the current Skilled Worker visa holders are postdocs. The Global Talent visa is used primarily for group leaders, with some for roles like postdocs and senior lab research scientists. The CRUK Manchester Institute use the Skilled Worker visa for a wide range of roles including postdocs, clinical fellows, scientific officers, informaticians and IT technicians.

Figure 4
Current number of Skilled Worker Visa and Global Talent Visa holders at CRUK Institutes



CRUK Institutes use the Skilled Worker visa for roles below the new salary thresholds

Vital roles in research, like technicians and research assistants, often have salaries below this new threshold, so this is likely to impact recruitment. The discount for STEM PhD holders alleviated some serious concerns that the increased minimum salary threshold would make postdoc roles no longer eligible for the Skilled Worker visa. However, many vital research roles do not require a PhD, so will still face the higher threshold.

We identified roles at our Institutes which were being covered by the Skilled Worker visa that will no longer be able to use this route. This includes roles that provide essential technical or assistant support for research, but don't require PhDs. This includes scientific officer and some senior scientific officer roles at the CRUK Manchester Institute, who provide direct support to research, including specialist technical support in core facilities, lab technician services and

contributions to research projects. The CRUK Cambridge Institute have 26 staff on Skilled Worker visas on salaries below the new threshold, including 15 research assistants.

While the Crick only covers immigration costs for roles at postdoc level and above, which all have salaries above the new threshold, some labs choose to use their own funding for visas for roles that are not covered by the Institute, such as technicians. There are 9 individuals currently at the Crick in these roles, who would not meet the new thresholds.

To access the STEM PhD salary discount for the Skilled Worker visa requires ECCTIS certification of non-UK PhDs, which adds further cost and the CRUK Scotland Institute reported that this is introducing delays of around a month to the process for roles like scientific officers and bioinformaticians, delaying start dates.

It is unclear whether all of these research roles will be able to access the Global Talent visa, and so they may be left without access any UK visas.

Policy recommendation

- **Recommendation:** The Home Office and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should assess access to visa routes for all roles in research and take policy action to ensure coverage, either by reducing Skilled Worker visa minimum salary thresholds or broadening eligibility of the Global Talent visa.

Challenges to accessing the Global Talent visa

Although still costly, the Global Talent visa does offer benefits for researchers and employers, including no minimum salary threshold, more straightforward application requirements, a marginally lower fee than the Skilled Worker visa, shorter route to Indefinite Leave to Remain and freedom to change roles. The recent Home Office evaluation of the Global Talent visa has shown that this route is a real asset for attracting talent to the UK.[17]

The lack of minimum salary, in theory, would mean that roles that no longer meet the Skilled Worker visa threshold could use this route. The previous Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Michelle Donelan MP and Minister of State for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology Andrew Griffith MP both cited the Global Talent visa as being sufficient for the immigration changes to not impact research.[18,19]

However, the Global Talent visa does not cover all roles in research. For example, project management and technical support roles, which provide vital support to research, may not meet the criteria for fast-track or peer review routes of holding a PhD, or contributing sufficient proportions of their time to funded research.[20] This opens a gap where roles that used to be covered by the Skilled Worker visa are not captured by the Global Talent visa.

There is also a significant perception issue over role eligibility for this route. This means that, although roles that are no longer eligible for the Skilled Worker visa may in reality be eligible for the Global Talent visa, research institutions won't know they can use it. This could open gaps in visa coverage, limiting recruitment into roles where there are already shortages, like postdocs.

This issue was recognised in the Home Office Global Talent visa evaluation, which found that most holders learned about the route through their employer, but there was high variability in use and awareness among UK universities.[17]

Barriers to using the Global Talent visa for our Institutes

There has been limited use of the Global Talent visa by our Institutes (see Figure 4), with a slight gradual increase since its introduction in 2020.

Our Institutes are keen to make better use of this route due to restrictions on the Skilled Worker visa, and its wider benefits. But we identified that low use resulted from low awareness of the route; uncertainty and misconceptions around eligibility; and operational barriers.

A primary issue is the lack of clarity over eligibility for early-career and technical roles. We heard that this is due to insufficiently clear guidance and misconceptions that result from the terminology used by the UK Government, such as 'global talent' and 'exceptional promise'. These terms have resulted in perceptions that the Global Talent visa is exclusively for top-tier researchers. For example, we heard from one Institute "it's hard to say whether someone straight from a PhD is a 'future leader'" and from another that it was seen as a visa for the "Stephen Hawkings" of research. As a result of this, several of our Institutes were not aware that postdocs could access the Global Talent visa, contributing to the higher use of the Skilled Worker visa.

We saw in our evidence gathering that this lack of clarity contributes to a hesitancy for research organisations to change how they are using the UK immigration system. This is due to their responsibility to use it correctly, so they do not risk losing their licence to sponsor visas or

risk current staff having their visas withdrawn. These concerns are valid and demonstrate the need for increased support from the UK Government.

We therefore support the suggestions in the Home Office Global Talent visa evaluation to develop further understanding of experiences of applicants who are not successful or drop out of the process, and to improve employer understanding of the visa.[17]

Through this process, we also identified operational barriers and found some solutions (see page 13, *'How we are supporting our research community'*), that should enable our Institutes to access the Global Talent visa for more roles.

Policy recommendation

The UK Government must improve perception and awareness of the Global Talent visa for it to ensure UK life sciences research can recruit international talent into all vital roles and career stages.

- **Recommendation:** The Home Office and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should take a comprehensive UK-wide approach, supporting the efforts of endorsing bodies, to improve awareness and uptake of the Global Talent visa among research organisations, including issuing clearer guidance about research roles that are eligible.

Evidence gathering

Data was collected between January and May 2024 from our four core-funded Institutes: The Francis Crick Institute (co-funded with the Wellcome Trust and Medical Research Council), CRUK Manchester Institute, CRUK Scotland Institute, CRUK Cambridge Institute. Qualitative evidence was collected through interviews with HR teams responsible for international recruitment and visa processing. Data and immigration rules are accurate as of July 2024.

Cancer Research UK Institutes are core-funded discovery research locations, which make up more than a third of our research spend. They host over 120 research groups across the breadth of cancer science, supported by state-of-the-art facilities. Find out more about our Institutes.

The Cancer Research UK research community is broader, with research funded in our Centres and host institutions across the UK through grant award funding and fellowships. We have focussed on our Institutes as in other settings visas are primarily managed by host institutions, of which there are too many to survey in the timeframe of this analysis. For more information on our research, visit our website.

How we are supporting our research community

We have been supporting our Institutes to make the best use of the immigration system as it currently is. We have been raising awareness of the Global Talent visa within our wider research community to increase uptake, including through a blog explaining the benefits and eligibility, and through promoting and attending workshops hosted by UKRI.

Through this work, it was identified that there were operational barriers for our Institutes to access the Global Talent visa endorsed funder route, due to roles being funded by the Institute using core funding from CRUK. This meant that despite CRUK being an endorsed funder for this route, the Institutes did not meet the criteria of having named staff roles on a successful grant award letters from an endorsed funder. We have therefore named staff roles in our Grant Award Letters. This should enable the Institutes to access the Global Talent visa for those roles, but it will remain to be seen if this resolves all issues in practice.

International recruitment in our wider research community

Data collected from a survey of the Cancer Research UK research community in 2023, *prior to the announcement of the changes discussed here*, gives an indication of the wider state of international recruitment for cancer research in the UK. This survey focussed on the impact of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on cancer research and collaboration.

76% of respondents said that the recruitment and retention of talent was one of the three factors most important to successful research. However, the same proportion had faced difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff, or had considered leaving the UK themselves, since the UK's exit.

Summary of policy recommendations

Increasing immigration costs are directly taking money away from cancer research and limiting access to talented researchers from across the world to help beat cancer sooner.

- **Recommendation:** By the end of this parliament, the Home Office should reduce overall and upfront immigration costs for researchers, so they are competitive with comparable leading research nations.

The UK Government must improve perception and awareness of the Global Talent visa for it to ensure UK life sciences research can recruit international talent into all vital roles and career stages.

- **Recommendation:** The Home Office and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should assess access to visa routes for all roles in research and take policy action to ensure coverage, either by reducing Skilled Worker visa minimum salary thresholds or broadening eligibility of the Global Talent visa.
- **Recommendation:** The Home Office and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should take a comprehensive UK-wide approach, supporting the efforts of endorsing bodies, to improve awareness and uptake of the Global Talent visa among research organisations, including issuing clearer guidance about research roles that are eligible.

This work has built on our existing recommendations for the new UK Government in Longer, better lives: our programme for UK Government and policy paper. Strengthening the UK research workforce to beat cancer.

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About Cancer Research UK

We're the world's leading cancer charity dedicated to saving and improving lives through research. We fund research into the prevention, detection and treatment of more than 200 types of cancer through the work of over 4,000 scientists, doctors and nurses. In the last 50 years, we've helped double cancer survival in the UK and our research has played a role in around half of the world's essential cancer drugs. Our vision is a world where everybody lives longer, better lives, free from the fear of cancer.

Our values

Our values help guide our behaviour and culture in an ever-changing world, building on the best of what we do today and what we aspire to be in the future. They unite and inspire us to achieve our ambitious plans and our mission of beating cancer, together.

Our values are:

Bold
Act with ambition, courage and determination

Credible
Act with rigour and professionalism

Human
Act to have a positive impact on people

Together
Act inclusively and collaboratively

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