What does immigration have to do with cancer research?

The staff who carry out our research are a mix of people from the UK and from abroad. For example, half of our PhD students are international and 76% of the postdoctoral researchers we fund at our Institutes are not from the UK.

Why? Because the Institutes we fund want to recruit the most qualified scientists to our research projects – regardless of their nationality – which means being open to the best scientists from around the world.

It's also important that UK researchers can easily travel abroad for short visits— to attend conferences or meetings with scientists based in other countries. These trips help staff make connections and share expertise, improving the research they do on behalf of patients.

An immigration system which doesn't facilitate international travel for research staff risks cutting the UK off from the global scientific community.

How does immigration work for science now?

Within the EU, free movement means scientists can move easily between all the member countries. Our own immigration system only applies to non-EU nationals. When we leave the EU, that immigration system will apply to everyone.

The problem is, it's currently bureaucratic and expensive compared to other countries who are good at research. If a researcher wants to come and work in the UK their visa will cost over £8,000, compared to an average £1,500 for other leading scientific nations.

Because EU nationals currently don't have to go through this system, they have been more likely than other international researchers to choose the UK as a research destination. CRUK funds four times as many Fellows from the EU as compared with the rest of the world – which goes to show how impactful it is for research when scientists are able to move easily.

What could change with Brexit?

After Brexit our immigration system will apply to everyone. Because it's currently a lot less easy to navigate than free movement, it needs updating so we don't put off scientists from choosing to come to the UK.

That's why, as the Government redesigns the UK's immigration system, it's important this system allows us to **attract**, **recruit** and **retain** scientific talent from around the world – as well as allowing the easy short-term travel to and from the UK mentioned above.

Brexit could also affect the ability of UK researchers to collaborate easily with EU scientists, or to access EU research funding, and in that situation our research may miss out. It's important the UK and EU can keep working closely together in science after Brexit and that the UK makes it a priority for our future relationship with the EU that we can take part in research programmes.

What are Government doing?

Government are currently redesigning the immigration system. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has pledged that the new system will help the recruitment of skilled scientists to the UK. For example, he has announced plans for a 'Global Talent Visa' which will aim to attract scientists who are 'integral to research projects'.

He has also said he'd like to explore a 'points-based' system like in Australia – though details of this are still to be made clear.

What do CRUK want to happen?

We want Government to design a new system that helps cancer research continue at the highest level.

That means keeping the costs and bureaucracy low for scientists who apply to work here (and for the research teams that employ them); helping scientists bring their families to the UK to live with them as they work; and allowing scientists to travel easily for short trips to and from the UK.

A good example is that cancer research projects rely on a range of staff – from Institute Directors and Group Leaders, to skilled technicians and PhD students. We'll be working hard to make sure reforms like the 'Global Talent Visa' help the recruitment of all these groups.

Why can't you just employ British research staff?

British research staff make up a core part of the research workforce we fund – we won't beat cancer without them. Still, lots of the questions we're trying to answer about cancer need niche skills and expertise which don't always exist in the UK. Answering these questions means helping research teams employ skilled scientists from around the world who have these specific skillsets.

Our main goal is to beat cancer as soon as possible. Designing an immigration system which helps research staff move easily for work will mean patients benefit from the best science in the world, faster.

Can't we wait until Brexit is over before we worry about this?

Unfortunately, uncertainty around Brexit is already affecting the number of skilled scientists applying to our research projects. For example, in 2016, 28% of post-doctoral applicants at the CRUK Beatson Institute were from the EU, but this fell to 13% in 2018.

Government is consulting on their proposals for a new immigration system, so we are already working hard to inform the Home Office and MPs from across the parties, to make sure it works for cancer patients and research.

If you have any more questions, check out the other materials on our webpage 'Exiting the European Union'. You can also email publicaffairs@cancer.org.uk.