House of Commons Science & Technology Committee: An immigration system that works for science & innovation

Response by the Wellcome Trust - June 2018

Summary

1. In February 2018, Wellcome published a report *Building a strong future for European science: Brexit and Beyond*[1,2] which was informed by wide consultation in the UK and Europe[3]. We said that the key issues for science and innovation should be addressed in the October 2018 framework for future relations or in a stand-alone science pact, including provisions to support full researcher mobility across Europe after Brexit. In the absence of free movement, this response explores how this could be delivered in practice and recommends:

    - **Securing a reciprocal arrangement between the UK and EU on continued mobility for the science and innovation workforce after Brexit**. This could be negotiated as part of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).
    - Implementing such an arrangement in the UK through a **quick and easy system for EEA nationals working in science and innovation, as well as a fit-for-purpose visitor route**. Expanding the UK visa system for non-EEA nationals is not good enough.
    - In the longer-term, **continuing to improve the current system for non-EEA workers**.

Introduction

2. Collaboration and international partnership are the basis of great science. 72% of UK researchers have trained or worked abroad[4]. 38% of UK doctoral students take up a position in another country after completing their training[5]. Mobile researchers have around 40% higher citation rates in scientific journals[6] and collaborative publications generally have more impact[7].

3. As researchers work together to tackle the complex problems of our time – from climate change and epidemics to the growing burden of dementia – it is hard to see how any one individual, team or country could take on these challenges alone. The new International Brain Laboratory is an excellent example of what could be achieved through collaboration. It unites 21 neuroscience groups from the UK, Europe and America to test how the brain controls learning and decision making – a problem with a scale and complexity that far exceeds what can be tackled by any single laboratory.

4. Against a backdrop of increasing international collaboration in research, UK-EU partnerships are critical: over half of the UK's collaborative papers are with EU partners[8], and countries that are geographically close are more likely to collaborate[9]. Britain is also a popular location for world-leading EU scientists – from 2007 to 2016, more than one in five (22%) European Research Council grant-holders chose to work in the UK, followed by Germany (15%) and France (13%)[10]. Around 17% of academic staff in UK universities are non-UK EU nationals[11] and 9% of the technical workforce at Russell Group universities are EU nationals[12]. In 2016, 28% of Wellcome's personal award holders were non-UK EEA nationals, compared to 12% from outside of the EEA.

5. It is therefore vital that the UK and EU ensure continued mobility for the science and innovation workforce after Brexit. This should remain as close as possible to current arrangements to maintain the benefits that free movement has delivered. Critically from a UK perspective, we do not think that this can be delivered by an expansion of the current visa system for non-EEA nationals. This system isn't quick or agile, and it relies too heavily on salary and qualifications as a proxy for skill.

6. Arrangements must be agreed quickly to give much-needed certainty to researchers and businesses throughout Europe. Wellcome has already started to see signs of a decline in the flow of talent from the EU to the UK. In the last year, the proportion of EEA researchers applying for our early career schemes fell by 14% and the Wellcome Sanger Institute saw a near 50% drop in postgraduate applications from non-British EU nationals. The CBI also reports that numerous collaborative projects involving British researchers and companies have been thrown into doubt since the referendum[13]. This is damaging for UK as well as EU science and innovation.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The UK and EU should secure a reciprocal arrangement on continued mobility for the science and innovation workforce after Brexit.

7. Europe is a world-leading location for science – with only 7% of the global population, the region produces a third of the world's scientific publications[14,15]. UK and EU ambitions for science post-Brexit are also closely aligned. The European Commission's LAB – FAB – APP report called UK participation in research a 'win-win'[16] and the British Government has signalled its intent to forge a more ambitious and close science partnership with the EU than any yet agreed[17].

8. This close future partnership should be underpinned by a reciprocal arrangement on continued mobility for the EEA science and innovation workforce. This would also be in line with several initiatives aiming to enhance European science. The European Research Area suggests a series of actions that Member States and other organisations can take to remove obstacles that stand in the way of a European research labour market[18]. The EURAXESS website is backed by the EU and Member States and supports researcher mobility and career development[19]. Science Europe's Money Follows Researcher Initiative enables portability of research funding across Europe and is supported by the UK Research Councils[20]. A new EU Directive is expected soon in most European countries to improve residence rules for non-EU students and researchers[21].

How could this be delivered in practice?

FTAs often include provisions on mobility: these include independent professionals, intra-company transfers and business visitors. While there is no precedent, new provisions to support the science and innovation workforce could be negotiated as part of a future FTA between the UK and EU. This high-level agreement would need to be implemented nationally, but could include a duty on Member States to permit entry for the science and innovation workforce without the need for Resident Labour Market Tests or quotas. It could include service level agreements to ensure speedy provision of visas (for example, processing visas in three weeks). As part of the FTA, the UK and EU could also ensure that any provisions for intra-company transfers are fit-for-purpose and sufficient for science.

If a reciprocal arrangement cannot be agreed, researcher mobility between the UK and EU countries may be subject to the **different systems in place across the region**. This would not be as effective as a mutual agreement because provisions vary, but a number of EEA countries offer special categories or programmes for international researchers. Some examples are provided below and will be covered in more detail in an upcoming report by the Wellcome-supported Together Science Can campaign with data compiled by Fragomen LLP:

- Estonia has a Residence Permit for Employment for the purpose of scientific research.
- France's Talent Passport Scientist/Researcher was designed for highly skilled researchers.
- Poland's work permit exemption may apply to foreign nationals working in research.
- Spain has a Residence Permit for Researchers.
- Sweden has a Residence Permit for Visiting Researchers.

Recommendation 2: This reciprocal arrangement should be implemented in the UK through a quick and easy system for EEA nationals working in science and innovation.

9. Any country that wishes to be a world-leader in science must have a world-leading travel and migration system. This must be quick, simple and transparent. It should not just apply to the brightest and the best as outlined in Prime Minister Theresa May's recent speech at Jodrell Bank[22], but must consider the research workforce at all levels and career stages, from technician to PhD student to eminent professor. Support should also extend to families and research teams because without this, people will not consider moving to the UK.

10. The travel and migration system must be responsive to advancements in science, as well as to skills shortages. It must also support the range of mobility that is essential for science – this includes short-term visits to attend a conference or give a lecture (see recommendation 3), temporary trips to work with a collaborator or use a research facility, and long-term migration with routes to residency. More information on researcher mobility is included in UK Research and Innovation's submission to the committee.

How could this be delivered in practice?

A quick and easy system for EEA nationals could be delivered through a dedicated **Science Visa**. This could include appropriate Home Office requirements, alongside a fast, cheap and streamlined process to support the science workforce over the medium- to long-term. It could do this by utilising a trusted organisation, such as UK Research and Innovation, to endorse migrants from the EEA in receipt of a genuine job offer, placement or training opportunity in a university or research institute. It could also build in penalties for employers that abuse the system. There is precedent for a fast-tracked process for scientists – the Tier 1 Research and Innovation Talent Visa uses endorsing bodies including the Royal Society, and certain Research Council and charity Fellowships are accelerated because of the strict peer review processes used by these organisations.

This system could be supplemented by taking a similar approach to the **German Academic Exchange Service** – the world's largest funding organisation for the international exchange of students and researchers[23]. Founded in 1925, they provide funds for non-German nationals to research in Germany, and grants to German students and scholars to work abroad. Their €400 million budget is jointly funded by the German Foreign Office, and the Education and Economic Ministries, and supports over 125,000 grantees. They also provide extensive advice on visas, health insurance, housing and local cultures, amongst other things. In a similar set up to the British Council, they have 15 regional offices and 57 information centres around the world, in both developed and developing countries.

Recommendation 3: Post-Brexit, there should be a fit-for-purpose route for EEA visitors to the UK.

11. Short-term visits are critical to science. Whether it's attending a conference or meeting, taking part in the peer review process, or giving a talk or lecture – these encounters are often the first step in exchanging ideas, forging connections and sparking curiosity. Freedom of movement has facilitated this extremely effectively, and post-Brexit there must be simple and swift visa-free travel for EEA nationals for up to 6 months, in a similar approach to that taken for Canadian and American visitors to the UK. The Government could also consider models such as Switzerland's '8-day rule' which allows foreign nationals to work in the country without a permit if the period does not exceed 8 days in a calendar year, subject to certain restrictions[24].

Recommendation 4: In the longer-term, the Government should continue to improve the current migration system for non-EEA workers.

12. In the future, we urge the Government to consider how the UK might better compete with other countries in the speedy provision of visas for research staff from beyond the EEA. One way to do this

is to bring the non-EEA system closer to our recommended arrangements for EEA nationals and to reduce bureaucracy wherever possible.

13. While we welcome recent announcements to streamline visas for international scientists in the 2017 Autumn Budget[25], the non-EEA system is not quick or agile enough, and relies too heavily on salary and qualifications as a proxy for skill. It is costly, and new research by TheCityUK and EY estimates that costs for firms bringing skilled EU workers into the UK after Brexit could increase by up to 300 percent if current immigration rules are applied unchanged to European citizens, and planned visa fee increases come into effect[26].

14. It is also deeply concerning that skilled workers in health, engineering and science have recently been denied visas. This has already delayed important research at the Wellcome Sanger Institute, and we welcome the Home Secretary Sajid Javid's recent commitment to take a 'fresh look' at the Tier 2 visa cap[27].

Louise Wren, Policy Manager
020 7611 7282
europe@wellcome.ac.uk

Wellcome is the UK's largest charitable foundation. Over the next five years, we plan to invest up to £5 billion in biomedical research and the medical humanities in the UK and internationally. We also support the development of new commercial innovations to improve health.

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1 https://wellcome.ac.uk/sites/default/files/building-strong-future-european-science-brexit-beyond.pdf
2 https://wellcome.ac.uk/sites/default/files/wellcome-brexit-briefing-for-policymakers.pdf
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