Commons Science and Technology Committee: An Immigration System that works for Science and Innovation

Introduction

1. This is the official response from the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) to the inquiry by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee for its proposed immigration system for science and innovation.

2. The RAS represents 4,000 astronomers and geophysicists, predominantly in the UK, in occupations in academia, industry, education and public engagement, and journalism, as well as others in the wider economy. Our members are described as 'Fellows'.

3. The short timescale for this inquiry necessarily restricts our ability to consult our full membership. Nonetheless our governing Council approved this submission, and we are of course pleased to assist the Committee with its work in this area.

4. From our most recent membership survey carried out in 2014[1], around 30% of our Fellows reside outside the UK, though many of those are British citizens who migrated to other countries. Within this group, 11% live in the United States and 9% elsewhere in the European Union. Immigration and migration is therefore a matter of *direct* importance to a significant proportion of our membership.

5. The data we have on the UK astronomy and geophysics research community provides more evidence for the international nature of this workforce. Our 2017 demographic survey[2] found that overseas nationals make up 27% of permanent staff, 50% of postdoctoral research associates, and 30% of postgraduate students in UK universities and research establishments.

If an early deal for science and innovation could be negotiated, what specifically should it to contain in relation to immigration rules and movement of people involved with science and innovation?

6. Astronomy and geophysics in every country benefits from the movement of scientists at all stages of their careers, from postgraduate students to senior academics, and leading specialists in industry. A post-Brexit immigration system needs to end the confusion and inefficiency that characterise the present approach to non-EU migrants. Uncertainty on future migration to and from the EU is also already damaging research collaboration (few academics wish to go on the record,

[1] "Who are we now?", Massey R., Astronomy and Geophysics, vol. 56, pp. 3.15-3.17, 2015. https://academic.oup.com/astrogeo/article/56/3/3.15/229974

[2] "The Demographics and Research Interests of the UK Astronomy and Geophysics Communities 2016", McWhinnie S., 2017. http://www.ras.org.uk/images/stories/DemographicSurvey/2017/demographic_survey_full.pdf

but already report significantly less interest in partnership from European colleagues).

7. The Society therefore calls for early clarity on future migration arrangements and supports the recommendations of the Campaign for Science and Engineering[3], to which we are affiliated.

8. For example, the future system should recognise the need for highly skilled people (currently covered by Tier 2 visas) and their families to be able to move with ease between different countries, including the UK. Like CaSE we also welcome the reports that the Home Secretary is to review the annual cap in the number of Tier 2 visas issued, and recommend too that PhD level roles are exempt from this in future, and that the arbitrary salary threshold level attached to visas should end (posts such as postdoctoral research associates and technicians often have salaries lower than is required).

9. This is not just an issue for academia. Some of our members, and scientists collaborating with our academic members, work in aspects of industry where international freedom of movement is vital. These include the space sector, and also the petroleum and extractive industries and aspects of civil engineering where geophysics is important, and include roles on the shortage occupation list of Migration Advisory Committee[4].

10. We also predict a growing role for internationalisation of renewable energy industrial activity involving geophysicists, particularly in geothermal energy and offshore wind. If the UK wishes to lead in these fields, it will need to be a welcoming place for international companies to set up or maintain headquarters or subsidiaries, and have an immigration system in place that enables them to recruit the staff they need from here and overseas, as well as growing domestic talent. This would be in line with the Industrial Strategy published last autumn.

11. Once a scientist is in employment here in academia or industry, and has indefinite leave to remain, it should be straightforward for them to leave for a period of time, whether in short term attendance at an international conference or for a longer period to support a research project, for example in a laboratory facility.

12. A new system should also enable quick decisions on granting employment visas. In UK academia, research grants are usually issued with the expectation that work starts promptly, at least within the first few months of the award. If the funded project uses a scientist from outside the UK (for example a postdoctoral research

[3] "CaSE policy review on Immigration 2018", http://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/resource/immigration2018.html

[4] "Full review of the recommended shortage occupation lists for the UK and Scotland, a sunset clause and the creative occupations" https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/257241/mac-report.pdf

associate), then it is imperative that they can take up employment with the host institution without serious impediment.

13. The Select Committee should also consider the messages from Government relating to immigration. Searching for employment in the UK quickly links to a page of visas and the restrictions associated with them. Ministers also regularly give speeches setting out their plans to curtail migration.

14. In contrast (for example) the New Zealand government website promotes the advantages of working in that country[5], and describes the kind of people companies and organisations need to recruit. It would be helpful if the UK Government could send out similarly positive messages to scientists considering work here, and understand that even rhetoric about 'the brightest and best' may deter promising early career scientists who do not (yet) see themselves in those terms.

<u>What are the specific career needs of scientists in relation to movement of people, both in terms of attracting and retaining the people the UK needs and supporting the research that they do?</u>

15. Scientists in academia in particular follow career paths that take them from one institution to another. This mobility enables a scientist to build up her / his networks or peers, to collaborate effectively, and to benefit from resources in different institutions and facilities. Typically most academic scientists will spend a period away from their home country at some point, often as a PhD student or postdoctoral research associate, but frequently in more senior positions too. Their host countries benefit from importing their expertise for the duration of their stay.

16. Careers in science therefore need a flexible and efficient immigration system. The partners and families of scientists must be accommodated too. Impeding the movement of families is likely to disproportionately affect women of childbearing age, and further deter them from pursuing careers in science.

17. Transfer of pensions between countries (for example the proposed 'EU pension') is also a consideration, particularly for researchers who move frequently as is commonly the case early in scientific careers.

18. The Committee should note too that some senior scientists may come to the UK, or move to other countries, with PhD students or early career researchers. A future immigration system should acknowledge that movement of people is not always about single individuals, but sometimes groups of researchers.

19. One matter not strictly connected with immigration is the continued access of UK institutions to international funding schemes such as Horizon Europe, to take effect from 2020. This access is likely to be a major factor for EU27 researchers in future

[5] https://www.newzealandnow.govt.nz/work-in-nz

considering whether to apply for posts in the UK. (European Research Council grants represent around 30% of funding for UK astronomy and space science.[6])

What aspects of the 'people' element need to be negotiated with the EU-27, as opposed to being simply decided on by the Government?

20. Astronomers and geophysicists, like their peers elsewhere in science and industry, need assurances on their status after 2019, both on their right to remain and on the details of the immigration system. This applies as much to UK nationals resident elsewhere in the EU as it does to EU nationals living and working here. The reciprocal nature of these arrangements is clearly not simply a matter for the UK government, but a requirement of a new UK-EU agreement covering science and innovation. It includes, but is not limited to, access to employment, healthcare, long term residence rights, rights for families, the right to vote in elections, and the ability to move between and work in different nations with ease.

21. We would also wish to see such an agreement include protections for specific rights for UK-based workers from the EU-27 / EEA, and for UK nationals resident in Europe, to take part in industrial action without penalty. At present migrants on Tier 2 visas are subject to a 20-day annual limit on unpaid leave from work. Where this is exceeded, employers are expected to withdraw their sponsorship and a migrant's leave to remain may be curtailed with decisions leading to deportation left to the discretion of the Home Office. Non-EEA staff in universities were affected by this rule during the recent university strikes.

22. It is of course welcome that the UK is set to remain a member of international scientific organisations like the European Space Agency (ESA) and European Southern Observatory (ESO) after leaving the EU. When UK nationals are offered posts with these organisations, they are likely to need to move to countries such as the Netherlands or Germany, and applicants from member states will in some cases move here (for example to take up roles at the European Centre for Space Applications and Telecommunications at the Harwell Campus). For the UK to continue to reap the full benefit of ESA and ESO membership, the agreement with the EU needs to ensure that successful applicants can continue to take up employment in these organisations without restriction.

On what timescale is clarity needed in relation to future immigration rules in order to support science and innovation in the UK?

23. The referendum on EU membership took place two years ago, Article 50 was enacted in March 2017, and withdrawal from the EU is set to take place in March 2019. Despite more than a year of negotiations, the scientific community, including astronomers and geophysicists, has yet to see any detailed information on how future arrangements on immigration will work in ten months' time.

[6] See e.g. our earlier evidence for the Science and Technology Committee's Brexit summit http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/science-and-technology-committee/brexit-science-and-innovation/written/77898.pdf

24. We therefore see clarification on this as an urgent priority and one that needs resolution as soon as possible. An early commitment by Government to a flexible and open immigration system that allows scientists and their families to move straightforwardly between countries, and thus allows science to thrive, would help to rebuild the confidence of the UK astronomers and geophysicists we represent and that of the scientific community as a whole.