

£30,000 salary threshold would be detrimental for research and innovation

We need an immigration system that welcomes skilled people from overseas

The government has committed to meeting an ambitious target of 2.4% of GDP invested in UK R&D by 2027, and a longer-term goal of 3%. UK research and innovation must flourish to achieve this.

The UK's research and innovation workforce comprises people with a wide range of skills. This includes established researchers with considerable experience and those at earlier stages of their career, entrepreneurs and innovators, project managers and technicians. The workforce is also supported by specialists who teach future researchers and innovators the skills that they need to succeed. All of these people are important for a successful research and innovation system and many of them are overseas nationals.

The UK will need a larger research and innovation workforce to deliver its ambitions over the coming years. It is important that the future immigration system supports the necessary efforts to expand this workforce, including the recruitment and retention of talented people from overseas for study and work.

This explainer shows how the proposed £30,000 salary threshold for a skilled worker visa might impact on UK research and innovation by limiting the recruitment of certain key staff members.

Some of these roles are found outside academia in industry and charities. However, this explainer focuses on staff at UK universities for whom there are clear data to demonstrate the scale of the issue.

£30,000

the salary threshold for skilled workers as proposed by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC)¹

£26,280

median salary of science, engineering and production technicians at UK universities in 2017²

42%

of technicians in UK universities were earning less than £30,000 a year in 2017³

75%

of language specialists in universities earned at £31,000 or less in 2017⁴

1,430

non-UK EU nationals were working in university technician roles in 2016 out of a total of 21,860⁵

Why does UK research and innovation need more people?

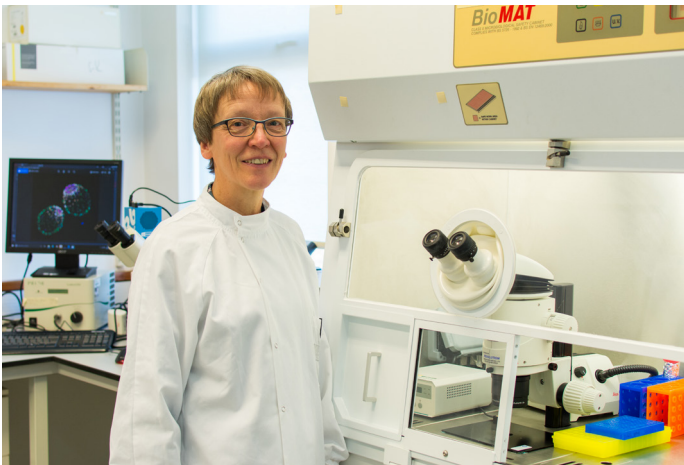
Sir John Kingman, Chair of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), estimates that an increase of up to 50% in researchers is required to meet the government's target of investing 2.4% of GDP in R&D⁶. This calls for a proportional increase in technical staff to build and operate equipment and maintain oversight of evaluation, management and safety, and specialists to help teach valuable skills.

Home grown talent takes time to develop. If the UK is to meet the 2.4% target, we must invest both in developing UK citizens to fill these new roles and in attracting skilled staff from other countries.

Why is the proposed £30,000 salary threshold a problem?

Many important roles within the research and innovation workforce come with salaries below £30,000. Examples include research technicians who have specialist skills to operate equipment and maintain ongoing experiments, language specialists who provide expert teaching, researchers at the start of their careers who are contributing to research projects as they learn and develop their skills, and part-time staff whose take-home salary is lower than a full-time equivalent.

CASE STUDIES – WHO WILL BE AFFECTED?



Doris Kilsch

Specialist Research Technician, School of Biosciences, University of Nottingham.

Doris works on stem cells from livestock animals, as well as gene editing of cells and embryos. This research aims to improve livestock production and develop better models of human disease to the benefit of people in the UK and overseas. Doris' role involves carrying out experiments, supporting postdoctoral researchers, supervising students and general lab management.



Claire van Wengen

Lead Tutor in Dutch at the College of Open Learning, University of Edinburgh.

As the UK shapes its new role in the world, key skills for the UK workforce will be an understanding of different cultures and an ability to communicate fluently with people around the world, whatever language they speak. The presence of native language speakers in universities and other UK institutions is vital for diversity of thought and experience. The focus of Claire's teaching at Edinburgh University is to enthuse and encourage verbal communication in Dutch and convey to students the ways in which society in the Netherlands differs from the UK. She is currently the only teacher of Dutch in the city.

The Immigration White Paper published by the UK government in December 2018 proposes to restrict the movement of all overseas nationals coming to the UK after Brexit.

Under proposals for a skilled migrant worker route, those applying to take up roles at RQF Level 3 and above in the immigration rules would be eligible for a visa on the minimum skill requirement (see Box 1) but only if they met the minimum salary threshold.

The government will consult on the appropriate level for the salary threshold. However, the starting position recommended by the MAC is to retain the current requirement of £30,000 a year.

While the majority of roles in the research and innovation workforce meet the proposed skill threshold of RQF Level 3, not all of them attract salaries of £30,000, meaning that skilled people from overseas would be ineligible for a visa.

This will impact overseas candidates for research and innovation roles with salaries below £30,000, including some research technicians and language assistants. However early career researchers switching from study to work should be able to access visas on a lower starting salary. The White Paper states that “graduate entrant jobs are already subject to a lower salary threshold and we intend to continue with that approach to ensure that those at the start of their careers are able to access the job market”.

100%

of RQF Level 3-5 technical specialists at the Wellcome Sanger Institute earn £30,000 or less⁷

BOX 1

The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) is used to determine the skill level of different occupations in the context of immigration policy. The proposed minimum skills requirement for the skilled migrant worker route is Level 3.

Level	Example qualification
Entry	Pre-GCSE entry level certificate
1	GCSE grades D-G
2	GCSE grades A*-C
3	A-level or equivalent
4	Certificate of higher education
5	Foundation degree or diploma
6	Undergraduate degree
7	Master's degree
8	PhD

As the UK shapes its new role in the world, understanding different cultures and being able to communicate fluently with people around the world, whatever language they speak, will be key skills for the UK workforce.

2%

of undergraduates are studying a modern language⁸.

35%

of higher education staff in modern languages in 2015/16 were non-UK EU nationals, the second highest proportion after economics and econometrics⁹.

Can home grown talent take these jobs instead?

The UK's R&D workforce will need to expand rapidly to meet the UK government's 2.4% target by 2027. While action is needed now to encourage more people to consider research and innovation careers, in the short-term domestic training will not produce enough people with expert skills in the timeframe that the UK needs. In the case of technicians, the existing workforce is ageing, with a high proportion of senior professionals due to retire in the next decade¹⁰.

In the longer-term, a great deal of existing good practice can be learnt from and scaled-up to provide new career pathways for skills specialists in the UK¹¹. If the UK is to remain globally competitive, these individuals must have the opportunity to travel and work abroad in the course of their career – thereby gaining knowledge and experience and building new global networks from which the UK can benefit. At the same time, we must ensure that the UK remains open to skilled people from overseas.

In areas such as modern language teaching, where native or highly accomplished non-native speakers are essential, the UK education system is simply not equipped to provide the people with specialist skills for the future.

Can salaries simply be increased?

The MAC assumes that a £30,000 salary threshold “would require employers to pay salaries that place greater upward pressure on earnings in the sector”.¹² However, if employers do not respond in this way, there is a risk that a restrictive threshold would mean jobs going unfilled. Particularly for RQF Level 3 roles, which come with salaries often some way below £30,000, the increase in pay required to meet the threshold would be significant.

For UK research and innovation, as in any other sector, skills shortages would have a damaging impact on working practices and productivity.

Will EU nationals still want to work in specialist support roles in the UK?

Perceptions matter. Choosing where to live and work is a personal decision as well as a professional choice. Important factors in people's decisions will be the cost of moving and the opportunities that are on offer, not least the quality of life. It is vital that the UK sends a message that it remains open to talent from around the world.

13%

is the proportion of gross annual salary needed to cover visa costs, if an EU citizen with three family members required a permit to work in the UK on £30,000 a year¹³.

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1. Migration Advisory Committee (2018), 'EEA migration in the UK: final report – September 2018'
 2. Universities and Colleges Employers Association (2018), 'UCEA response to MAC report: Responding to recommendations of most concern to the higher education sector – November 2018'.
 3. Universities and Colleges Employers Association (2018), 'UCEA response to MAC report: Responding to recommendations of most concern to the higher education sector – November 2018'.
 4. The median basic pay of higher education language assistants in 2016/17 was £26,000 and £31,000 at the upper quartile. See Universities and Colleges Employers Association (2018), 'UCEA response to MAC report: Responding to recommendations of most concern to the higher education sector – November 2018'.
 5. Universities UK (2017), 'Response to Migration Advisory Committee call for evidence on EEA workers and the UK labour market – October 2017'.
 6. Sir John Kingman (2018), 'Speech at the Royal Society 'Research culture: changing expectations' conference – 30 October 2018'.
 7. Wellcome Trust (2018), 'Analysis of the technical workforce at the Wellcome Sanger Institute'.
 8. HESA Student Record 2016/17, accessed under license via HeidiPlus.
 9. The British Academy (2017), 'International Staff and Students in UK Higher Education'.
 10. P Lewis and H Gospel (2013), 'Technicians under the microscope: a study of the skills and training of university laboratory and engineering workshop technicians', Gatsby Foundation.
 11. Academy of Medical Sciences (2019), 'From innovation to implementation: team science two years on – February 2019'.
 12. Migration Advisory Committee (2018), 'EEA migration in the UK: Final report', p 5.
 13. Based on current terms applicable to rest of world migrants. Calculated on the basis of an individual applying for a three-year Tier 2 (General) visa including application costs (£610) and NHS surcharge (£400). A scenario in which the main visa applicant brought three dependants would increase costs by a factor of four, totalling £4,040.