![Campaign for Social Science logo]

Statement by the Campaign for Social Science on a future skills-based immigration system for UK HEIs

BACKGROUND

Public and policy discussion of the UK's immigration policy has increased dramatically since the referendum decision to leave the EU in June 2016. In part this has been a response to what is seen an underlying issue in the referendum, but it has also become urgent in the face of the end of freedom of movement between the EU and the UK once Brexit occurs. Indeed, the Academy of Social Science's own *Briefing Paper*, issued the day after the referendum, noted that the issue of international-origin staff and students would be essential in ensuring the long-term health of UK social science. We have followed this up with our *World of Talent* reports.

At the end of 2018, the then-government released a White Paper on immigration, backed up by a report from the Migration Advisory Committee.

The White Paper recognises the need for a flexible system that meets the UK's post-Brexit needs for workers of different skill levels; it makes some welcome moves, like lifting the cap on the number of skilled workers using the Tier 2 (skilled) visa route. But it recommended that only those with jobs paying £30k or more would be eligible for these visas. The Campaign for Social Science raised concerns about the implications of this salary threshold in our World of Talent reports. Since then, there have also been some positive policy announcements, such as the improved offer to international students seeking to work in the UK after their studies. The current government has asked the Migration Advisory Committee to look again at salary levels for Tier 2 visas; there is a consultation open about this now. However a recent announcement limiting increased availability of Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent) visas only to science, technology, maths and engineering (STEM) subjects seemed to show less flexibility in meeting the needs across all UK research, as the Campaign also pointed out.

While policy is being developed, the Campaign believes it would be helpful to set out some principles that we believe any immigration policy should follow to foster the UK's research strengths, and set out some modest proposals for how they might be made operable.

PRINCIPLES

Science, including social science, is a system. That system requires all of its components – not just eminent professors and the exceptionally talented, but also the skilled researchers, research assistants, technicians, teachers, and students that support and challenge them – to be healthy, vibrant, innovative and sustainable. Successful scientific systems must also be global, with the ability to recruit the best talent and skills no matter where they come from, by being able to offer a welcoming, attractive, and open environment that is accessible through a simple but robust process.

While the natural and physical sciences (covering the so-called STEM subjects of science, technology, engineering and maths) are necessary for innovation and economic growth, it is important to understand that these cannot occur without the contribution of the social sciences as well. The social sciences are needed to help address 'grand challenges' such as health and environment-related behaviour, educational outcomes, and the design and evaluation of social policy. They are also important across a wide range of private sector businesses, from manufacturing and retail, to finance, planning, and development – to name just a few. Indeed, they underpin much of the thinking behind the Industrial Strategy itself (see our case studies on this issue).

In addition, universities themselves are a major source of strength to UK society and the economy. According to a UUK report, our universities 'generate more than £73 billion a year in output for the British economy, contribute nearly 3% of UK GDP, and generate more than 750,000 jobs' – all of which help drive UK growth. UK universities are the backbone of the UK research community for all disciplines, developing the 'the evidence base on which policy areas like health, education and the environment rely' and furthering both 'debate and progress on social, cultural and political issues.'[1] Our universities are also where a new generation of students are given the skills to both 'transform' their own lives and to contribute to society through their future work, whether they go on to become doctors or social workers, physicists or psychologists.

All of this means that developing an immigration regime that helps the UK recruit the research, teaching and innovation workforce it needs is increasingly urgent, especially if the free movement allowed with EU countries comes to an end. This is needed to bring scarce research skills at all levels to the UK, to attract investment, and to play the ambassadorial role at which UK science and education have been so effective. UK universities contribute greatly to UK soft power, educating the second highest number of global leaders worldwide according to a recent HEPI survey – and it should be remembered that 60 percent of global leaders have undergraduate degrees in social science fields. **In order to make this a reality, the Campaign for Social Science believes we need a simpler, more comprehensive, and straightforward approach to immigration for the higher education and research sector** to ensure that the UK both is – and is seen to be – truly open for science and research skills after Brexit.

This will mean:

- *significantly streamlining the process and the reducing the costs of current visa proposals, for individuals, employers and the government alike;*

- *opening up visa routes to researchers from all disciplines, and at all levels;*

- *removing arbitrary salary thresholds that don't work for all research positions or geographic regions;*

- *and making it possible for HEIs, recognised independent research institutes, and recognised research funders to act as trusted employment sponsors for international staff, in the same way as now happens for international students.*

Doing all of these things will be necessary to create the type of welcoming environment that attracts and retains the best global talent – from students, to research and teaching staff, to eminent professors and innovators.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students play an integral role in the health and vitality of the UK higher education sector, while also contributing greatly to the UK economy during and after their studies. The 458,490 International students from the EU and beyond made up 20% of all UK higher education student enrolments in 2017/18. Of these, at least 216,935 were enrolled in the social sciences – meaning that nearly half (47%) of international students were enrolled in the social sciences, and that 25% of students enrolled in the social sciences were of international origin (see Figure 1). [2]

Figure 1. International Students at UK Universities in 2017/18[3]
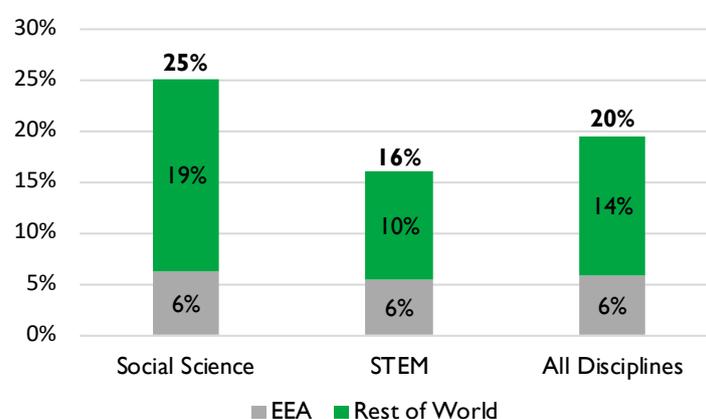
In a single year, international students added £13.8 billion to UK GDP through on and off-campus spending, generated £10.8 billion in export earnings, and created 206,600 jobs. Indeed, a recent HEPI report assessing the economic benefits of hosting these students versus the costs, found that 'the total net impact of international students on the UK economy was estimated to be £20.3bn' in 2015/16. More importantly, these students represent real global talent, bringing with them the global perspectives and skills (like number and data skills) the UK needs to create the type of vibrant science system that fosters learning and innovation.

We welcome the Prime Minister's 11 September 2019 announcement that the government will reintroduce the two-year post-study work visa for international students. This visa will be available to all undergraduate and post-graduate international students 'graduating in the summer of 2021 and after' from a reputable higher education institution. It will also allow international students to transfer to a 'skilled work visa if they find a job which meets the skill requirement of the route.' Such a move will undoubtedly help early career researchers who may require more time to find the right post.

This represents a significant improvement on the duration of post-study stay that was offered to international students in the government's Immigration White Paper. The government has specified that it will not cap the numbers of students allowed to apply for this visa, in line with the announcement earlier this summer that they would like 'to grow the numbers of international higher education students studying in the UK to 600,000 by 2030.'

It is also a significant improvement in tenor and tack that, unlike the new fast-track Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent) visa, this post-study work visa will apply to all disciplines of study – whether STEM, the social sciences, or the arts and humanities. As mentioned above, we know that many international students bring with them important quantitative skills for which there is a significant skills-gap in the UK science system. Our recent [Positive Prospects](#) report shows that this is important for all disciplines – including the social sciences — to have access to a steady pipeline of such talented individuals if the UK is to maintain its world-class research base after Brexit. Opening this post-study work visa to all disciplines will, for example, enable UK companies and universities to recruit and retain a whole new generation of post-graduate students with the unique combination of quantitative skills and social science knowledge needed by the science system to address big social issues, like the Grand Challenges. It will also help attract the best and brightest international talent to our shores at all levels of excellence, while ensuring the UK economy and society benefit from what they have learned while they study here.
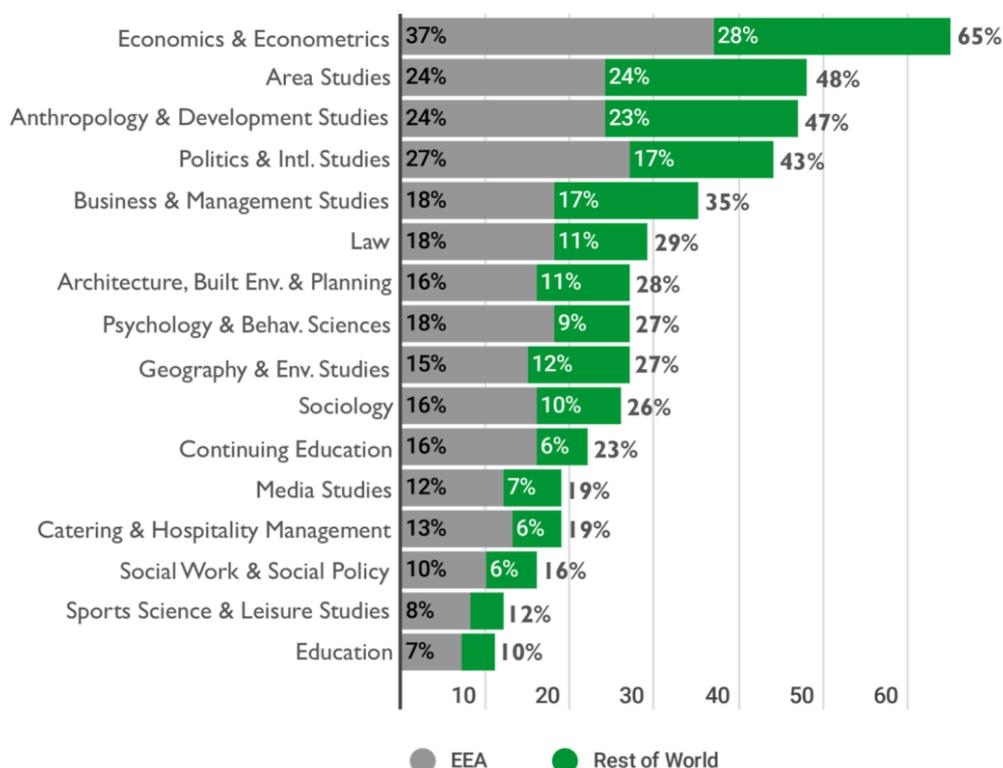
INTERNATIONAL STAFF

The positive developments made in regard to international students must now be matched with equally positive policy changes to the proposed visa and immigration system in respect of international staff. In order to ensure that the higher education and research community can continue to retain and recruit the brightest global talent for everything from basic research to the most complex interdisciplinary innovation, any post-Brexit migration system must be welcoming, predictable, and simple to use through the deployment of trusted sponsor employers, and must also be open to all research disciplines without subjection to arbitrary caps or thresholds. This is particularly important if higher education, research institutes and the innovation sector are to take their own decisions, rather than being all too often subject to central state or bureaucratically arbitrary decisions. **In Australia, for example, points-based skilled visas are only one part of an overall system that also allows employers to sponsor international staff through a separate visa scheme (the Employer Nomination Visa), which enables employers to determine and attract the talent they need to hire from abroad to make their businesses successful.**

Mobility Matters

At our UK universities, [30% of academic staff](#) are of international origin overall. These international-origin staff bring with them crucial skills and knowledge vital to the continued quality of the UK's universities system that contributes [£73 billion a year](#) to the UK economy and drives productivity, innovation, and growth across the country.

No broad subject area is immune to the risk of losing high-quality global talent after Brexit if we fail to get our new immigration system right for this sector. Our [*World of Talent*](#) Reports and [technical annexes](#) provide detailed evidence showing that in many disciplines and regions of the UK, the proportions of international-origin staff are much higher than average (see Figure 2) – and that this is an issue that affects the STEM sciences, the social sciences, and the arts and humanities alike (see Figure 3). Economics, for instance, has a particularly high proportion of international-origin staff in UK universities.

Figure 2. Total Proportion of International Academic Staff at All UK Universities on Regular Contracts in 2016/17, by Social Science Cost Centre

Cost Centre	EEA	Rest of World	Total
Economics & Econometrics	37%	28%	65%
Area Studies	24%	24%	48%
Anthropology & Development Studies	24%	23%	47%
Politics & Intl. Studies	27%	17%	43%
Business & Management Studies	18%	17%	35%
Law	18%	11%	29%
Architecture, Built Env. & Planning	16%	11%	28%
Psychology & Behav. Sciences	18%	9%	27%
Geography & Env. Studies	15%	12%	27%
Sociology	16%	10%	26%
Continuing Education	16%	6%	23%
Media Studies	12%	7%	19%
Catering & Hospitality Management	13%	6%	19%
Social Work & Social Policy	10%	6%	16%
Sports Science & Leisure Studies	8%		12%
Education	7%		10%

● EEA   ● Rest of World

Note: This graph is reproduced from A. Lenihan & S. Witherspoon (2019). A World of Talent II: International Social Science Staff across the Higher Education Workforce, p. 9.

These reports also crucially show the high proportions of fixed-term and casual staff (many of them research staff) in the higher education sector that come from abroad, in addition to those professors of exceptional global talent, in the STEM sciences, social sciences, and arts and humanities (see Figure 3). These staff are crucial to the success of the wider science and research system in the UK – and it is clear that any unexpected difficulties in being able to recruit and retain this talent will cause great disruption to the science (including social science) system as a whole. This is an important consideration, when more than half of international-origin staff in many disciplines and on many contract types in the sciences and social sciences come from the EEA and will now need to be part of the UK's visa and immigration for the first time, normally through the Tier 2 visa route.

Figure 3. Origin of STEM and Social Science Academic Staff at UK Universities in 2016/17, by Contract and University type
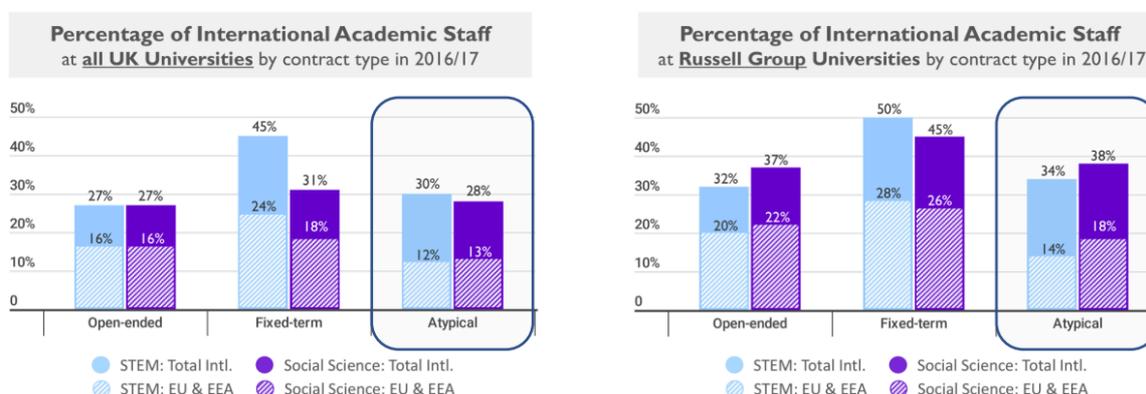
Note: This graph is reproduced from A. Lenihan & S. Witherspoon (2019). A World of Talent II: International Social Science Staff across the Higher Education Workforce, p. 7.

To put things in perspective, the industrial strategy for instance will require input from a wide variety of social science expertise, all of which have significant representations in their academic fields from international staff. Insights will be needed, for example, from planners (28% international-origin) and geographers (27% international-origin) about how to achieve more even economic growth and development; from psychologists (27% international-origin) and sociologists (26% international-origin) on the behaviour and social attitudes underpinning issues like health, social care and ageing; as well as from business and management studies (35% international-origin) and economics (65% international-origin) academics on other big issues, like how to improve productivity and our working lives.

We reiterate that science, including social science, is a system. The social sciences are a major contributor of talent and expertise to the service sector that makes up over 80% of the UK economy, and one that accounts for a significant portion of our national research and teaching output. Not only can it help us tackle issues like the grand challenges, but its interdisciplinary use with STEM can also help ensure that new technology and innovations are brought to market and public life in ways that are sustainable, ethical, and successful. But if we are to retain our place as a first-class research nation that punches above our wait, we need an immigration system that allows for recruitment to this higher education and research system across all disciplines, and at all levels, in the future.

AN IMMIGRATION SYSTEM FIT FOR THE SCIENCE SYSTEM

Towards this end, we propose a simple and straightforward approach to immigration for the higher education and research sector – in effect, **a sectoral deal**. We believe this entails *significantly streamlining the process and the related costs of current proposals, opening up visa routes to researchers from all disciplines, removing arbitrary salary thresholds that don't work for all research positions or geographic regions, and making it possible for HEIs, independent research institutes, and recognised research funders to act as trusted employment sponsors for international staff.* This would provide greater predictability, reduce costs for employers and indeed for government itself. It would

rest on allowing international origin staff at these trusted employer institutions to offer jobs to the best suited candidates, as long as there was an open competition; employers could be subject to audit to ensure the robustness of the system. It would promote excellence, which is essential at all levels for research to flourish.

In order to do this, government must first recognise that a system that focuses only on 'exceptional talent' in particular disciplines is not sufficient. The availability of a Tier 1 route, whether through sponsorship of the national academies or through a fast-track system designed only for the highest-ranking STEM scientists, is not sufficient to fulfil the needs of the UK research community. As discussed above, it must be understood that almost one-third of the UK science (including social science) system is currently made up of international-origin staff that come in through Tier 2 visas or the current EEA freedom of movement rules, and would not qualify for the Tier 1 route. These individuals are part of almost every discipline and career level in the system, and their numbers cannot be replaced domestically.

The government's white paper does make an important move by proposing a removal of the current cap on Tier 2 visas, but the current proposed salary threshold requirement of £30,000 would limit the ability of many in the system to use that route. As we have argued elsewhere, such a threshold may prove an issue for early-career researchers that, while not 'new entrants' to the workforce, are nonetheless on atypical contracts or the lower bands of pay in fixed-term contracts. Our analysis shows that there are large numbers of international staff on fixed-term contracts (many of them research contracts) across the UK, and across disciplines. In social sciences like economics and econometrics, for example, 71% of fixed-term academic staff by cost centre are of international origin – in anthropology and development studies it is 55%, and in politics and international studies 51%. The government's White Paper is also very unclear how salary thresholds will affect those working part-time on or pro-rata fixed-term contracts, which is a common arrangement for many early career researchers.

To create a system that is fit for purpose would mean:

a. Recognising that the availability of a Tier 1 route is not sufficient to fulfil the needs of the UK research community alone, while at the same time opening all Tier 1 visas to individuals from all disciplines (not just STEM)

b. Removing the salary threshold requirements for Tier 2 skilled visa applicants in the higher education and research sector.

c. Stream-lining the visa application process for international staff in the higher education and research sector, by offering **trusted sponsorship status** to universities and recognised research institutes to reduce bureaucracy and cost and ensure greater predictability in the search for global talent;

d. Allowing HEIs and recognised research institutes to recruit internationally for research posts on a full and part-time basis, without the inclusion of a PhD requirement (since in many cases research assistants and their equivalents do not require a PhD);

e. For teaching only posts, PhD level qualifications could be a requirement for inclusion in any such 'trusted sponsor' scheme applying to higher education.

Such a **sectoral deal** would ensure the continued vigour of UK science, universities and research, across all disciplines, and allow for bottom-up and diversified decision making, essential to a vibrant research and innovation strategy.

We fully recognise that this would not address most private sector needs (except in the case of recognised private sector research institutes). This holds for STEM science and social science alike. The Campaign for Social Science will next year launch a report on the roles played by social science knowledge and skills in the private sector, which will also highlight the roles played by social science practitioners in the UK economy. But at least a sectoral deal for the higher education and recognised research institute sector, with a focus on skills and streamlining visa requirements for those skills, would be a step forward from the current system.

We believe that this approach would protect a core part of the research base for science as a whole, including the social sciences, allowing the UK to protect the vitality of the research sector and of UK higher education by welcoming the global talent which enriches science and research in *all* **disciplines at all levels of the system –to the benefit of the United Kingdom as a whole.**

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[1] https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/facts-and-stats/impact-higher-education/Pages/university-research-changes-the-world.aspx

[2] Data sourced from https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-22. The Campaign for Social Science considers the social sciences under HESA classifications to include the following broad subject areas from the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) 3.0 classification system, in line with those included in Main Panel C covering social science for the Research Excellence Framework: Architecture, building & planning (JACS subject area code A, which includes principal subject codes K0, K1, K2, K3, K4, and K9); Social studies (JACS subject area code B, which includes principal subject codes L0, L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, and L9); Law (JACS subject area code C, which includes principal subject codes M0, M1, M2, and M9); Business & administrative studies (JACS subject area code D, which includes principal subject codes N0, N1, N2, N3, N4, N5, N6, N7, N8, and N9); and Education (JACS subject area code I, which includes principal subject codes X0, X1, X2, X3, and X9). Please note that for these calculations we did not have access to the more detailed 'principal subject' level data, so we have not been able to include data on psychology graduates (JACS code principal subject code C8) within the total for social science – meaning that the figure is likely *higher* than 47%.

[3] Data sourced from https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-22.