

# Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill

## Impact on the chemical sciences

June 2020

1. Science is a global endeavour. Collaboration between scientists, no matter where in the world, delivers the best answers to global challenges and the most creative innovation, and this can only be achieved by smooth and easy mobility. The past few decades has seen the UK establish itself as a global leader in science and a central node in international collaboration, meaning it has been able to attract the best scientists from around the world to work. This status has helped the UK attract additional inward investment and funding, providing resources for further collaboration and innovation.
2. The Government has said that highly skilled scientists, researchers and entrepreneurs should be encouraged to come to the UK. It is positive that the plans for the new points-based immigration system includes specific provisions to make it easier for skilled scientists to work in the UK. However, we have two key concerns about how the Bill as currently drafted may impact on chemical sciences in the UK:
  - a. High visa costs risk undermining the UK's ambitions to attract the best scientific talent, and in particular the ability of SMEs to access the skills they need. Fees and charges should be tied to independent recommendations rather than political influences. Their aim should be to keep the UK an attractive location for science talent, benchmarking against other leading science nations' visa fees.
  - b. Both the Bill, and the plans for our future immigration system for which the Bill lays the foundations, were developed before the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on movement of researchers and students was a consideration, and should be reassessed in this context.

### High visa costs risk undermining the UK's ambitions to attract the best scientific talent

3. Clause 4(5) in the Bill creates provisions for modification to visa fees or charges via regulation. These costs are already highly burdensome for SMEs in the chemicals sciences. 96% of UK companies in chemical sciences are SMEs, however SMEs often do not have, or struggle to afford, the funds needed to be a visa sponsor. The UK's total visa costs for a skilled scientist are 540% higher than the average of visas costs across other leading science nations. For a student visa, the UK's typical costs are 405% higher than the average costs of other leading science nations<sup>1</sup>. As such, researchers and SMEs would benefit from reassurance that an already burdensome fees structure will not be subject to unexpected increases as a result of political factors.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

**Any decisions about future modifications to fees should be benchmarked against other leading science nations' visa fees.**

## **The planned immigration system does not account for the impact of Covid-19**

4. The government's plans for a points-based system were drawn up before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and as such may not fully account for the new immigration environment – particularly within the context of international students coming to study the sciences at British universities.
5. The UK Higher Education sector is a vital and growing export for the UK. In recent years international students have constituted an ever-higher proportion of their student body. A report by the Higher Education Policy Institute found that, between 2008/09 and 2017/18, UK-domiciled postgraduate entrants increased by 10% but students from overseas grew faster: EU-domiciled student numbers increased by 11% and non-EU international students grew by 33%. Furthermore, the majority (53%) of Master's students are from outside the UK<sup>2</sup>.
6. There is already a risk that numbers of those travelling for study will decrease due to the pandemic, and the government must be cautious that an immigration policy perceived as unwelcoming doesn't exacerbate this. Loss of income caused by lower numbers could make it particularly challenging for universities to fund expensive science courses, which by their nature are more costly to run due to the requirement to maintain laboratories.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

**To counter the potential loss of vital income, the content of the Bill and the future immigration system must be reviewed to factor in the impact of Covid-19 on the higher education sector, whilst also seeking to attract global talent to the UK for work and study.**

## **Contact**

The Royal Society of Chemistry would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this briefing in more detail. Please direct questions to Tanya Sheridan or Matt Davies at [policy@rsc.org](mailto:policy@rsc.org).

## **About the Royal Society of Chemistry**

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<sup>1</sup>. The Royal Society, 'UK science and immigration: why the UK needs an internationally competitive visa offer' <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/Publications/2019/international-visa-systems-explainer-july-2019.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute, 'Postgraduate Education in the UK' <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/05/14/postgraduate-education-in-the-uk-2/>