

BSI response to the House of Commons Science and
Technology Committee's call for evidence
June 2018

Written evidence submitted by the British Society for Immunology

Summary

- Major scientific breakthroughs often rely on international collaboration and international talent. For continued success in immunology and other scientific disciplines, the UK must have an immigration system that supports freedom of movement for highly skilled workers and does not impede the ability to recruit and retain researchers from within the EU and internationally.
- The UK must guarantee the rights of EU researchers currently working in the UK and UK researchers currently working in the EU-27.
- The UK and the EU must make science and innovation a priority at the negotiating table and reach an early deal in relation to immigration and funding.
- The Government must continue to reiterate that the UK is open to new talent and is committed to retaining researchers who are already here.

Introduction

- The British Society for Immunology (BSI) is the largest immunology society in Europe. We represent the interests of approximately 3,500 immunologists working in academia, clinical medicine and industry. Our main objective is to promote and support excellence in research, scholarship and clinical practice in immunology for the benefit of human and animal health.
- As a nation, the UK is a world-leader in immunological research and ranks first for research in infection and immunology amongst our G7 partners.¹ Immunology is an international science and UK immunological research benefits greatly from being able to attract the best and brightest from across the world. Indeed, analysis of the 2014 Research Excellence Framework established a link between high scoring institutions and the number of staff there with international experience.²
- As highlighted in our report, 'Immunology: An international, life-saving science',³ membership of the EU has greatly facilitated international links and we must ensure that, as the UK's new relationship with the EU begins, fostering collaborations and partnerships is kept at the forefront of discussions.
- Like other scientific disciplines, the immunology community has made the case for a Brexit agreement that would not increase divisions or borders to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of international collaboration and research excellence.

- The BSI welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry in order to assist the development of the Committee's proposals for immigration and visa rules for scientists.

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

1.1 Continuity for current international collaborations must be maintained. The immigration rights of EU nationals currently working at UK institutions (and their families) should be assured. Likewise, assurances on the immigration status of UK nationals working in EU-27 countries should be ascertained.

1.2 Immigration facilitates not only the easy flow of students, researchers and highly skilled workers across borders (some of whom can plug key skills gaps in the UK), but also the fluid transmission of ideas, innovations and knowledge that drives modern-day research. This demands an immigration system that supports the UK in maintaining its status as a global hub for the highest quality of science. We urge policymakers to explore options for streamlined entry systems for scientists and other high value workers, for example through a bespoke visa framework that preserves access to the skills and expertise that sectors such as science and academia so desperately need and that cannot be addressed within the domestic workforce.

1.3 Attracting world-class scientific talent to work in the UK is critical to boosting the UK's productivity and retaining our status as the G7 leader in infection and immunity research. The ability to do so is currently hampered by the cap on Tier 2 (General) visas, which are the main route for international skilled workers to enter the UK workforce. This cap is damaging the UK's ability to employ experts to key skills gaps and is damaging the appeal of the UK as a place to work. The Government should take positive action to relieve pressure on the system and exempt roles on the Shortage Occupation List and PhD level roles from the Tier 2 cap. This move would be widely welcomed by the scientific community.

1.4 Currently, international students are included in the Government's net migration target. This is under debate as research suggests that the UK public does not think of students as migrants; furthermore, if students leave the UK after completion of their degree, their net migration amounts to zero.⁴ The BSI recommends that students should be exempt from these targets to ensure that the UK remains welcoming and open to fostering international talent.

1.5 The BSI encourages a specialised visa category (e.g. Tier 1) to be extended to more scientists to ensure that the very best and brightest international researchers are able to collaborate easily with UK-based researchers.

2. 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?

2.1 The UK has a proud history of welcoming and benefitting from the contribution of foreign scientists; in immunology, 42% of the academic workforce are from abroad, with 26% from an EU country.⁵ The current ability for UK scientists to work in the EU, and vice versa, with little restriction has contributed to an internationally fluid workforce. The UK needs to protect the ability of UK scientists to collaborate with and recruit the very best researchers and high value workers from both within the EU and internationally in order to maintain our world-leading status on a global stage.

2.2 Scientists need reassurance that funding will still be available through the UK's continued access to Horizon 2020, and the Government need to make securing future access to future EU funding via

Horizon Europe a priority of ongoing negotiations. Access to this funding comes associated with opportunities for international collaboration which are essential for career development and international success.

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

3.1 The UK Government should negotiate with the EU-27 to provide clarity on the status of UK bioscientists, and their families, who are currently living and working in the EU.

3.2 The UK currently benefits from the ability for British students, scientists and clinicians to work abroad to receive short and long-term training and gain specialist knowledge in the leading institutions in the world. From our own immunology community, we know that 52% of researchers have worked abroad at some point in their career. Of these, 58% have worked at EU institutions.⁵ Immunologists are particularly likely to have worked abroad during the early stages of their career, especially at PhD (36%) and postdoctoral (48%) levels - career stages that often coincide with a time when researchers are likely to take short-term contracts and have reduced job stability. Therefore, it is crucial we have agile and effective immigration agreements in place with EU-27 countries that facilitate the bidirectional movements of researchers. This provides invaluable benefit to the UK research base as skills and expertise gained overseas can then be brought back to the UK to conduct state-of-the-art research, apply knowledge for commercial exploitation, and improve clinical practice.

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

4.1 Due to the lengthy nature of applying for and securing research grants, scientists need immediate reassurances on the future of a fruitful, collaborative career in the UK. The Government should provide clarity on the situation going forwards, and lead with the message that the UK is committed to remaining a world leader in science and innovation.

4.2 We welcome the report published by the Department for Exiting the EU in May 2018 on the UK-EU partnership framework for science and innovation. It was clear from this report that an early deal is a priority and considered a win-win for both sides. There is no reason to delay bringing these points to the negotiation table.

4.3 Early clarification on the future immigration rules that will apply both to EU researchers in the UK and to UK researchers working in EU-27 countries is of high importance to the science community. Scientific collaborations take time to build up and an early agreement with the EU-27 would act as a global signal that the UK is open to new talent. This will ensure that we don't discourage scientists from choosing to come here and instead drive them into the open arms of our international competitors. We urge the Government to take every opportunity to finalise an early immigration agreement with the EU-27 and thus reinforce the UK's status as a world-class destination for researchers.

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1. All Party Parliamentary Group on Global Health. 2015. The UK's contribution to health globally: benefitting the country
 2. Manvill, C et al. 2015 Characteristics of high-performing research units. Prepared for the Higher Education Funding Council for England.
 3. British Society for Immunology. 2016. Immunology: An international, life-saving science.
 4. The Migration Observatory, University of Oxford. 2011. Thinking Behind the Numbers: Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain
 5. British Society for Immunology. 2017. Careers in immunology.