



The Rt Hon Suella Braverman KC MP
Secretary of State for the Home Office
Home Office
(By e-mail)

13 June 2023

Dear Suella Braverman,

Science and Technology Committee – visa policy for STEM talent

I am writing to you as Chair of the Lords Science and Technology Committee, in reply to the Government's response to our letter of 15 December 2022 which concluded our inquiry on people and skills in UK STEM.¹ The response, which has been published online, was authored primarily by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, although our recommendations cut across a number of departments.²

Our inquiry covered four areas: immigration policy for STEM talent, the domestic skills gap, the recruitment and retention of STEM teachers and educators, and the precariousness of academic careers. We were pleased to see the Government's acknowledgement that it "recognises the challenges the Committee has identified" and the necessity to "inspire, attract, develop and retain" outstanding research and STEM talent both in the UK and from abroad. We were heartened by the creation of the new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Government's renewed push towards defining and delivering on the ambition to become a "science and technology superpower." The Committee shares this ambition for the UK: the economic, social and policy benefits are clear.

It is therefore disappointing to reflect on the response to the conclusions and recommendations that concerned the Home Office and its immigration policy, which seem to stand at odds with and undermine these goals. The response states that the immigration system should be funded "as much as possible by the user, and not the British taxpayer." We feel that it is short-sighted to adopt this approach when considering the high-skilled, high-talent individuals the Government is attempting to attract to the UK with these specific policies, who will make a significant positive contribution to the British economy and to public life. Private companies understand the necessity of competing for top talent and nation states are no different. If the principle of a "self-financing Migration and Borders system" leads the Government to sacrifice attracting top global talent and inward investment into the UK, we will fail in our ambition to become a science superpower.

In our recent Committee debate on the Science Superpower report, Baroness Walmsley asked the Minister whether the principle of a self-financing migration system meant that

¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/33254/documents/179987/default/>

² <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/34237/documents/188474/default/>

“scientific visa applicants are subsidising other functions of the Home Office?”³ but the minister did not directly respond to this question. Can you confirm whether this is the case?

The response to our report says that “UK fee levels are broadly competitive”. This is evidenced by a Fees Table in the response. This table excludes the Immigration Health Surcharge, which many of our witnesses cited as the most daunting up-front barrier. Research from the Royal Society notes that this imposes an up-front cost of £3,120 for a five-year Skilled Worker visa and a total upfront cost of £21,790 for a family of four, which will exclude all but the wealthiest.⁴

Nevertheless, even excluding the IHS, the table shows that the Global Talent visa is the second most expensive out of eight countries listed. At £623, it is far in excess of the US at £377 and many times more expensive than Germany at £65. This table does not show that visa fees are broadly competitive and we regret that the Home Office did not choose to produce a breakdown of visa costs to explain why these visas are comparatively more expensive. We also regret that the suggestion that the Immigration Health Surcharge could be paid over time was seen as “overly complex” when the alternative means many applicants faced with a bill for five years in advance. We note that this approach was favoured by the Home Office’s own exit survey of successful Global Talent Visa applicants.⁵

We note with interest that – within the same response – the Department for Education describes its efforts to improve teacher training in subjects like physics, which have critical teacher shortages that cannot be addressed through domestic training alone:

“We have also extended bursary and scholarship eligibility to all non-UK national trainees in physics. This is part of a wider package of new measures to make teaching in England even more attractive to the best teachers and trainee teachers from around the world, which also includes:

- A new international relocation payment to help those moving to England to teach or train to teach languages and physics with the costs of visas and other expenses.”

This suggests that there is in fact some flexibility with respect to the principle that the migration and borders system should be self-financing. We see no reason why this flexibility should not be extended to other workers whose skills are in high demand, such as the Global Talent visa recipients. Global Talent Visas are awarded to winners of prestigious prizes, or require an endorsement from an organisation such as the British Academy, the Royal Society, UKRI, or Tech Nation. In many cases these individuals have already succeeded in securing prestigious positions or funding in competitive applications, demonstrating their excellence. This visa route accounted for 2,560 individuals in the year to September 2022 – a small fraction of the overall numbers.⁶

³ HL Deb, 7 June 2023, [col 293GC-294GC](#) [Lords Grand Committee]

⁴ <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/Publications/2022/visa-costs-comparison-update.pdf?la=en-GB&hash=ED8B6947CD6803D819D6DE7498EE8538>

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1072031/Final_Global_Talent_evaluation_wave_1_report_-_for_publication.pdf

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-september-2022/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-to-work>

We urge the Home Office to reconsider its response to our letter, and more broadly to recalibrate its approach to the highly skilled workers the UK should be competing with other nations to attract to settle here and make an invaluable and necessary contribution to our nation.

We have copied this letter to the Acting Secretary of State for the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Brown of Cambridge", followed by a horizontal line.

Baroness Brown of Cambridge
Chair, House of Lords Science and Technology Committee