HOUSE OF LORDS
Science and Technology Committee

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Rt Hon Sir Keir Starmer MP, Prime Minister
Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, Home Secretary
Rt Hon Rachel Reeves MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer
Lord Vallance of Balham, Minister for Science
(By e-mail)

6 May 2025

Dear Prime Minister, Chancellor, Home Secretary and Minister,

Science and Technology Committee—concern about visas for STEM talent

I am writing to you as Chair of the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, concerning the UK's immigration and visa policy for STEM talent, following our earlier letter dated 30 January 2025.[1] We write again because the situation has become more urgent. There is now increasing global competition for STEM talent due to the science funding policies of the US administration. Without changes to immigration policy for STEM talent, we will miss a real opportunity to drive economic growth in the UK and to build up our research base in science and technology.

Our letter of 30 January described the UK's current immigration system, and its approach to STEM talent for academia and industry, as "an act of national self-harm". This is still the case. Our headline message was that **the UK's visa and immigration policy needs to adapt to recognise that we are in a global competition for talented individuals in science and technology.** We cannot afford to put up unnecessary barriers to highly skilled and talented individuals who want to live, work, and contribute to the UK; yet the UK's upfront immigration costs now substantially exceed other leading research nations.[2]

We are aware that the Government's Immigration White Paper is due to be published imminently. The Government must seize this rare opportunity to

[1] Letter from House of Lords Science and Technology Committee to Rt Yvette Cooper MP, Home Secretary, Rt Hon Rachel Reeves MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Lord Vallance of Balham, Minister for Science (30 January 2025): committees.parliament.uk/publications/46483/documents/236519/default/; this also follows evidence sessions we held in public with witnesses on 7 January 2025 and 22 April 2025, as well as evidence received as part of our other inquiries. QQ 1-32 (Professor Dame Karen Holford, Shuyeb Muquit, Harry Anderson, Professor Alison Noble); QQ 29-40 (Sir Paul Nurse); Q41-50 (Sir John Bell). Letter from Rt Hon Suella Braverman KC MP, then Home Secretary, to Baroness Brown of Cambridge, then Chair of the Science and Technology Committee (3 August 2023): committees.parliament.uk/publications/41353/documents/203230/default/
Letter from Baroness Brown of Cambridge, then Chair of the Science and Technology Committee to Rt Hon Suella Braverman KC MP, then Home Secretary (13 June 2023): committees.parliament.uk/publications/40341/documents/196983/default/

[2] The Royal Society, 'Summary of visa costs analysis (2024)': https://royalsociety.org/news-resources/publications/2024/summary-visa-costs-analysis-2024/ [accessed 6 May 2025]

rectify the situation where it is putting up unnecessarily high barriers to the global talent that want to live and work here, harming the national interest and in stark contrast to the actions of other nations. At a time of dramatic geopolitical and technological change, our action—or inaction—right now will have a huge impact on our future. We cannot afford business as usual.

We are also aware of very recent reporting that the Government will launch a scheme to recruit global research talent.[3] We welcome this initiative and look forward to seeing the details. We strongly recommend that it extends to a wide pool of individual researchers, rather than being restricted to a small number of research teams. It should be accompanied with funding commensurate to the scale of the opportunity. The issues around high upfront visa costs and the immigration system's impact on the fiscal sustainability of universities raised in our letter of 30 January must be addressed by the forthcoming Immigration White Paper, or this scheme risks being ineffective.

In the months since we last wrote, the situation for global science and technology has become much more urgent. The current US administration's restrictive immigration policy and substantial cuts to science funding—a proposed 40% cut to the $47.4bn budget of the National Institutes of Health, and substantial terminations of NSF grants on political grounds[4]—have left many scientists and researchers who are currently based in the US wishing to leave.[5] Many more who might have studied or worked in the US will now be looking elsewhere, and other countries have responded to this shifting landscape.

Sir John Bell described this in evidence to us as a "massive opportunity" for the UK to attract scientists, especially as the most severe cuts fall precisely in the areas of health and life sciences where the UK has historic strengths:

> *"Almost everyone I know who are leaders in the biomedical research space—in fact, I am talking a lot to MIT from the point of view of recruiting people from MIT to the Ellison Institute—are the best people in the best universities in America and they are all saying, 'When can we move?'"*[6]

Similarly, Nobel Laureate Sir Paul Nurse told us that now is the time to "put science at the centre of [the] agenda and shout about it from the rooftops … We will be enormously attractive."[7]

This policy would clearly support the aims of the Industrial Strategy: the AI Opportunities Action Plan, authored by Matt Clifford, also noted that "the cost and complexity of visas … create obstacles for startups and deter overseas talent from re-locating to the UK" in the AI

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[3] Financial Times, 'UK to launch scheme to recruit global research talent after Trump crackdown': https://www.ft.com/content/d1ce6077-fabc-4fc0-b6a4-53bd9fbccbaa [accessed 6 May 2025]

[4] Science, 'Wednesday Trump Tracker: NIH budget proposal, DOE cost cap blocked, educators sue and Seth Rogen defends science': https://www.science.org/content/article/nih-budget-proposal-doe-cost-cap-blocked-educators-sue-and-seth-rogen-defends-science [accessed 6 May 2025]; Nature, 'Exclusive: NSF stops awarding new grants and funding existing ones': https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-01396-2 [accessed 6 May 2025]

[5] Nature 'Exclusive: a *Nature* analysis signals the beginnings of a US science brain drain': https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-01216-7 [accessed 6 May 2025]

[6] Q 49 (Sir John Bell)

[7] Q 38 (Sir Paul Nurse)

sector.[8] There are also likely to be specific opportunities in the life sciences space, particularly on vaccines, where the UK has historically excelled and where this Committee has previously urged the Government to act.[9] Sir John Bell told us that "the vaccine issue in America is going to get incredibly tough" and said that "there seems to be a real obligation" to support vaccine research in the UK, "given that this should, historically, have been one of our strengths."[10] There will also be opportunities across economics and social sciences.

Other countries have already acted. The EU, France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada and Australia[11] have developed schemes designed to attract global talent, particularly from the US. Canada has fast-tracked 3,000 visas for displaced US researchers in its "Tech Talent Strategy".[12] Ursula von der Leyen and Emmanuel Macron launched a 500m EUR scheme on 5 May, signalling commitment to attracting global talent from the very top; we have not yet seen similar high-level statements from UK ministers.[13] In light of these actions and the changing global circumstances, the UK's apparent flat-footedness puts us at risk of falling behind.

Opinion polls show that a majority of the public consistently support an immigration system that allows scientists and researchers to come to the UK.[14] Yet visas granted for science, research and engineering roles fell by a third in the second half of 2024 from the same period a year earlier.[15] We understand that the Government was elected on a pledge to reduce overall immigration numbers—but the Global Talent visa accounts for only around

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[8] Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 'Independent report: AI opportunities Action Plan': https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ai-opportunities-action-plan/ai-opportunities-action-plan [accessed 6 May 2025]

[9] Letter from the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee to Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (4 December 2024): committees.parliament.uk/publications/45865/documents/227678/default/

[10] Q 47 (Sir John Bell)

[11] Science, 'Overseas universities see opportunity in U.S. 'brain drain'': https://www.science.org/content/article/overseas-universities-see-opportunity-u-s-brain-drain [accessed 6 May 2025]; CBC, 'Top American scientists just lost their jobs. Canada is rolling out the welcome mat': https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/us-scientists-canada-1.7502527 [accessed 6 May 2025]; Information Age, ''Urgent' chance to attract US researchers': https://ia.acs.org.au/article/2025/-urgent--chance-to-attract-us-researchers.html [accessed 6 May 2025]; Politico, 'Europe to burned American scientists: We'll take you in': https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-exploit-dunald-trump-brain-drain-academic-research-progressive-institutions/ [accessed 6 May 2025]; The Times, 'Trump brain drain starts global tug of war for American scientists': https://www.thetimes.com/us/news-today/article/trump-brain-drain-starts-global-tug-of-war-for-american-scientists-tn52fcbr6 [accessed 6 May 2025]

[12] Wonkhe, 'The UK can seize the opportunity from US academia's brain drain': https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-uk-can-seize-the-opportunity-from-us-academias-brain-drain/ [accessed 6 May 2025]

[13] Politico, 'Von der Leyen, Macron knock Trump's war on universities as 'gigantic miscalculation'': https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-ursula-von-der-leyen-emmanuel-macron-choose-europe-against-us-donald-trump-war-university-gigantic-miscalculation/ [accessed 6 May 2025]

[14] CaSE, 'The public prioritises giving universities access to the best talent over reducing immigration, new polling shows': https://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/press/detail/the-public-prioritises-giving-universities-access-to-the-best-talent-over-reducing-immigration-new-polling-shows/ [accessed 6 May 2025]; The Pie, 'Give scientists fair immigration system – UUK poll': https://thepienews.com/give-scientists-fair-immigration-system-says-poll/ [accessed 6 May 2025]

[15] Reuters, 'High UK visa costs deter international scientists engineers': https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/high-uk-visa-costs-deter-international-scientists-engineers-2025-04-15/#:~:text=Visas%20granted%20for%20science%2C%20research,drop%20in%20overall%20work%20visas. [accessed 6 May 2025]

4,000 people a year, less than 1% of the overall figures in 2024.[16] Reducing overall net migration is therefore not incompatible with increasing the proportion of science and technology experts who receive visas.

The letter of 30 January 2025 is enclosed alongside this letter. We urge the Government to act on its recommendations with a sensible visa policy and flexible funding for universities and research institutions to support critical research programmes. The opportunity to strengthen the UK's scientific and technological capacity needs to be taken urgently.

I am copying this letter to the Clerk and Chair of the House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Department for Business and Trade, and HM Treasury.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Mair

Lord Mair CBE
Chair, House of Lords Science and Technology Committee

[16] 12,243 visas granted between April 2020 and April 2023. The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, Rt Hon Peter Kyle MP, told us that there were 8,000 in the year to June 2024, but this included other types of visas as the Home Office statistics aggregate them together. Estimate of ~800,000 taken from ONS data for year ending November 2024. Q 17 (Rt Hon Peter Kyle MP); ONS, 'Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2024'.