Written evidence submitted by the Advisory Council on Romanian Diaspora in the UK (ACORD UK), Edge Hill University and Bournemouth University (WOR0034)

Written evidence submitted *on behalf of* the Advisory Council on Romanian Diaspora in the UK (ACORD UK), Edge Hill University and Bournemouth University, to the *Home Affairs Committee's* call for evidence into *Work-based immigration*, by **Prof Ruxandra Trandafoiu**, Edge Hill University; **Dr Alina E. Dolea**, Bournemouth University; **Adina Maglan**, Bournemouth University; and **Marius Comper**, **Cristina Irimie, Dr Oana Burcu** and **Mihai Bica**, members of ACORD UK.

ACORD UK is an independent advisory council of UK-based Romanian experts. Its June 2026 report, *The Romanian Diaspora's Contributions to the British Economy and Society*, was launched at Parliament and is the main evidence base for this submission.

Our submission provides insights into migrant under-employment and skills under-utilisation in the UK, from the perspective of the Romanian community. It responds to five questions in the *Work-based immigration* call for evidence (Home Affairs Committee, 2026a). Each section below is headed by the question it answers.

The response is built on the premise that the UK already has a large pool of qualified workers with the right to work: (a) settled migrants who are already part of the UK labour supply today, yet they are employed below their skill level; and (b) sponsored workers. Recognising migrants' qualifications, offering clear progression routes and providing a clear transition when Skilled Worker visas expire would put existing skills to better use, reducing reliance on overseas recruitment while raising productivity and tax revenue.

What impact does immigration policy have on investment in domestic skills and training by employers?

Employers recruit overseas for skills already present, but unused, in the settled migrant workforce. This is a hidden domestic talent pool. As our research into the Romanian Diaspora's contribution to the British economy and society showed, people born in EU2 countries (Romania and Bulgaria) have the highest employment rate of any country-of-birth group in England and Wales, at 80.4% (employees and self-employed). One in three Romanian adults holds a degree (ACORD UK, 2026, p.10). Yet elementary occupations, such as cleaners, shelf fillers and bar staff, are the most common occupation group for employed EU2-born residents (28.3%); only 9.1% work in professional occupations, the lowest share of any group (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Overqualification is often assumed to be temporary. UK studies of Central and Eastern European migrants find it persists, with job concentration for this group in the secondary sector, which entails precarity, pay penalties and fewer routes to progression (Johnston, Khattab and Manley, 2015). Our own report shows how **occupational downgrading can trap skilled people below their training level, reducing UK productivity and tax revenue** (ACORD UK, 2026, p.24). Recent UK panel data also document occupational downgrading among workers who have arrived since the 2004 EU enlargement (Bell and Johnson, 2023).

We, the authors, have encountered in our direct interactions (through practice and research) with Romanian community members, cases of highly skilled professionals working in unskilled jobs. Examples include a highly trained biologist and former teacher in Romania who is a returnee agricultural worker, a biology researcher working as a delivery driver, a violin teacher working in construction or a radiologist working on the factory floor in automotive. The main reasons provided for this contrast were: insufficient professional level English language proficiency combined with low confidence to apply for roles in their fields, a lack of recognition of their qualifications and work experience from abroad, combined with a lack of understanding of how to match their foreign qualifications with the UK systems, and the cost of comparability statements, translations and fees for registering with relevant professional bodies.

Construction shows why employer-led training cannot reach much of this workforce. Of around 2.06 million UK construction workers in mid-2026, about 768,000 (37%) were self-employed (BCIS, 2026); earlier Office for National Statistics analysis found that 66% of Romanian and Bulgarian construction workers were self-employed in 2014–2016 (ONS, 2018). Romanian-origin workers made up about 19% of respondents to a 2022 CITB survey of London site workers (CITB, 2022). Where training decisions sit outside any employer's payroll, the cost of proving competence falls on the individual. In more than ten years of preparing and assessing construction operatives for NVQs, one of the

authors has met many settled EU workers who are skilled groundworkers, dryliners, carpenters, steel fixers or bricklayers but hold only a Labourer card, and who seek certification only when a contractor demands it for a new contract, by which time the workplace evidence needed for assessment may no longer be available. (Cristina Irimie runs a centre that delivers these assessments and declares an interest.)

A current campaign from Centrala (Centrala, 2026a; 2026b) reports systemic barriers and a lack of support from Jobcentres or employers. One such example is that of a Ukrainian national fleeing war who has worked in finance for over 15 years. In the UK, they could not find anyone willing to employ them in a finance job and they stated that Jobcentre did not support them either. Centrala's campaign effectively sums up this case of economic injustice - "15 years of experience do not disappear at the border!".

Post-Brexit vulnerabilities of EU migrant populations demonstrate the impact of migration policy on this migrant labour force and that the gap between skills and employment is spare capacity the UK already has and can tap into straight away. Migrants holding a status under the EU Settlement Scheme do not require a visa application to work in the UK. Being trapped below one's training affects wellbeing, family stability and how migrants are perceived. It perpetuates stereotypes of Romanians and other migrants and affects social cohesion. Fair treatment of migrant workers is one of the principles agreed by members of the public in the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee's Your Voice on Immigration process, summarised by the Committee as 'Prioritise UK workers but give migrants a fair deal' (Demos, 2026; Home Affairs Committee, 2026b). We advance the case for ***migrants already in the UK being part of the UK workers priority group*** while also recognising their specific needs and the significant potential they hold.

To what extent, and over what time frames, can skills policy influence the scale of international recruitment?

Recognising and upgrading existing migrants' qualifications is faster and cheaper than training from scratch, which has been evidenced elsewhere. In Germany, after three years, the full recognition of immigrants' foreign qualifications increased their employment rates by 24.5 percentage points and raised their hourly wages by 19.8% relative to immigrants without recognition (Brücker et al., 2021). An NHS Employers briefing reported by The Conversation put the cost of retraining a refugee doctor at around £25,000, compared with £250,000 to train a new doctor (The Conversation, 2016). The government-funded STEP Ukraine programme, delivered by World Jewish Relief with the British Council, combined 12 weeks of tailored employment support with 10 weeks of intensive English tuition for Ukrainian refugees. An independent evaluation for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government found that participants were 6.6 percentage points more likely to be in work over the 20 months after joining. Those already in work before joining were earning around 10.7% more after 20 months. Every £1 invested returned £2.04 to the public finances, mainly through higher tax receipts and lower benefit payments (Alma Economics and RAND Europe, 2026). The earnings result is the most relevant one for Romanians, most of whom are already in work but below their qualification level. ***A similar programme, adapted for settled EU citizens with professional guidance, recognition support and occupational English where needed, could help them move into jobs that match their skills, while likely paying for itself through higher tax receipts***.

Construction also illustrates the time frames involved. Bricklayers were included on the Immigration Salary List in October 2026 (Home Office, 2026b). Sponsoring a bricklayer for three years costs an employer already licensed £1,965–£4,485 in mandatory charges (Certificate of Sponsorship and Immigration Skills Charge), or £5,698–£8,218 including the visa fee and Immigration Health Surcharge usually paid by the worker (UK Government, 2026a; 2026b; 2026c). The recruit then needs an Ecctis skills statement, which takes around eight weeks, before a skilled CSCS card is issued (Ecctis, 2026; CSCS, 2026). A settled bricklayer already on site can gain a Level 2 NVQ through on-site assessment for around £900, typically within 4 to 12 weeks (CST Training, 2025; Essential Site Skills, 2026). These figures exclude wages and other costs and are illustrative, but they suggest that ***recognising resident skills is cheaper and no slower than sponsorship, and this should be tested.***

Skills policy can also reach the next generation sooner. Only 42% of construction further-education learners in work a year after qualifying were in a related occupation, compared with 75% of construction apprentices (National Audit Office, 2026). In the authors' experience, young people from settled migrant families often find that a college diploma

does not get them onto a site: the trade card needs an NVQ, the NVQ needs an employer, and employers rarely take on someone without site experience. Their parents know the trade but not the UK system, and many of these young people leave construction for other low-skilled work.

The same gap affects young people born or raised in the UK in Romanian and other migrant families more widely. A significant second generation of British Romanians is now coming of age (ACORD UK, 2026, p.16), and a provisional estimate suggests around 60,000 pupils may speak Romanian at home (ACORD UK, 2026, p.46). Most are fluent in English, and many are bilingual, but their parents are often unfamiliar with UK qualifications, apprenticeships and career routes, and young people frequently act as interpreters for their own families (ACORD UK, 2026, p.46). Closer links between migrant parents, schools, colleges and employers, including careers information aimed at parents, would help this home-grown talent move into skilled work.

Migrant workers also bring additional skills: the ability to navigate different cultures, multilingualism, and a strong understanding of the foreign qualifications and work experience of their peers. Migrant entrepreneurs often employ people from their own community and embed migrant workers into their work structures. For example, many Romanian construction entrepreneurs have set up flourishing businesses, some of which now employ staff at scale (ACORD UK, 2026, pp.32–34).

Are there mechanisms the Home Office could use to incentivise domestic recruitment?

Until 2021, EU rules gave EU-trained doctors, nurses and certain other professionals largely automatic recognition in the UK. That ended with Brexit. **Settled EU citizens** who had not yet sought recognition, often because they took lower-skilled work on arrival, **now face each regulator's own tests, fees and supervised practice** (Department for Business and Trade, 2025). Many remain below their qualification level, yet shortage planning overlooks them: they are employed, so are not targeted as available labour, and hold no visas, so do not appear in immigration data (Strain-Fajth and Sumption, 2025). A Romanian civil engineer with settled status working in a warehouse is a potential domestic recruit for an engineering shortage, but the system does not see him that way.

The 2025 Immigration White Paper (Home Office, 2025) proposed sector workforce plans setting out how employers will train and recruit locally before relying on visas. The Labour Market Evidence Group and the Migration Advisory Committee should ***measure how many people already hold relevant qualifications but work below them, by occupation, and count them as part of the available domestic workforce when deciding whether a shortage is real,*** for example in reviews of the Temporary Shortage List (Migration Advisory Committee, 2026). Workforce plans should then ***set out routes to recruit or upskill this group before turning to overseas recruitment***. These could include recognition of qualifications, guidance on how UK professional requirements differ from those in their home country, support to close any gaps so they can practise fully, conversion courses and supervised practice. Employers who recruit or upskill these workers should be rewarded.

The Committee's own public deliberation points the same way: the principle participants ranked above all others was to train, upskill and employ the people already here before relying on migrant labour (Demos, 2026). Settled EU workers and their UK-educated children are among those people. One checkable mechanism would be to require employers in shortage trades to ***record an assessment offer to settled workers before a Certificate of Sponsorship is issued***, with Immigration Skills Charge revenue funding the assessment and card progression.

A second migrant group that can benefit from tailored support towards retention, progression and skills-coverage are sponsored visa workers. ***Support for transitioning into UK roles before their visas expire, within the rules on changing employer*** and taking on additional work (Home Office, no date a; no date b; 2026a), can provide continuity and reduce pressures on workers and their employers.

How important is immigration to responding to shortages in the public sector, and what role does immigration have in workforce planning in sectors such as health, education and justice?

According to our ACORD UK report, Romanian-nationality staff in NHS England more than doubled, from 3,098 in June 2016 to 6,575 in June 2025, an increase of 112% (ACORD UK, 2026, p.40). By 2025 Romania was the fifth-largest EU

nationality in NHS England and ninth among all non-British nationalities (ACORD UK, 2026, pp.10, 40). Growth continued after the 2016 referendum and after the end of free movement, which suggests long-term commitment rather than short-term labour mobility (ACORD UK, 2026, p.42). **The contribution is concentrated in roles where the NHS is under most pressure**: in April 2025 the largest groups were clinical support staff (2,365) and nurses and health visitors (1,909), while registered nursing vacancies in England stood at 22,559 in December 2025 (ACORD UK, 2026, p.41). 7,226 nurses, midwives and nursing associates trained in Romania were on the Nursing and Midwifery Council register on 31 March 2026, the largest EU/EEA group (28%) (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2026). Around 3,460 doctors with a Romanian primary medical qualification were on the GMC register in 2025, up from about 400 in 2006 (General Medical Council, 2026).

How could the Home Office work more effectively with other government departments to develop a work migration system that achieves its aims – such as growing the economy and delivering essential services – while reducing net migration?

Responsibility for helping migrants use their qualifications is split across several bodies: professional regulators (GMC, NMC, HCPC, Engineering Council, etc.) and the Department for Business and Trade for professional qualifications; the Department for Education, through UK ENIC, for academic comparability; Skills England for skills planning (Department for Work and Pensions and Skills England, 2026); the Department for Work and Pensions for employment support; and the Home Office for immigration. None of them is responsible for the overall outcome. **No one owns 'brain waste'**. Labour market planning focuses mainly on visa routes and on people who are unemployed or economically inactive. Under-employed settled migrants fall through the gap: employed, so not targeted; not on visas, so not counted. A recent briefing by the Migration Observatory makes the same broader point: the UK does not have an overarching policy on migrants' labour market integration (Brindle and Fernández-Reino, 2026).

Joined-up working must also reach people outside formal employment channels. CITB estimates that London alone needs around 26,500 additional construction workers over 2024–2028 (London Assembly, 2025), and in July 2026 the Mayor announced an £88.6 million construction skills package (Mayor of London, 2026). Yet awareness of such initiatives is very low among the settled operatives one of the authors works with, many of whom find work only through community networks and report daily journeys of around four hours. Government departments, CITB and local and combined authorities should measure whether programmes such as the October 2026 Construction Jobs Plan reach self-employed and subcontracted workers (UK Government, 2026d).

Recommendations:

1. **Treat under-used migrant skills as part of the domestic workforce.** Ask the Labour Market Evidence Group and the Migration Advisory Committee to publish overqualification rates by country of birth and to factor them into shortage-occupation and workforce-plan decisions.
2. **Before approving overseas recruitment in a shortage occupation, engage the settled pool and sponsored visa holders already in the UK.** Where many settled migrants hold relevant qualifications but work below them, require workforce plans to include a recruitment or bridging route for them, and support sponsored visa holders already in the UK to progress or move into shortage roles.
3. **Use Immigration Skills Charge revenue for bridging programmes.** Fund conversion courses, supervised practice and English for professional purposes for settled migrants in shortage fields (engineering, health, digital, teaching). Develop tailored guidance for migrant workers in the UK to help fill gaps in documentation and accreditations. Fund recruitment campaigns that represent the entire UK workforce, including migrants, and that include testimonials, case studies and success stories to mentor and build confidence of migrant workers to seek jobs at their actual level of qualification and experience.
4. **Make qualification recognition fast, cheap and joined up.** Create one cross-government owner for recognition. Fund UK ENIC statements of comparability for low-paid workers (UK ENIC, no date).
5. **Reward employers who upskill and promote settled workers.** Give credit to employers who move overqualified staff into skilled roles.

6. **Fix the data.** Publish APS/Census analyses of overqualification by nationality and region; ACORD UK's report shows how thin current nationality-level data are. Measure whether skills programmes such as the Construction Jobs Plan reach self-employed and migrant workers.
7. **Recognise construction competence earlier.** Fund on-site NVQ assessment and CSCS card progression for settled workers in shortage trades, including self-employed subcontractors, and pilot a recorded assessment offer to settled workers as evidence of domestic recruitment before sponsorship.
8. **Build routes from education into skilled work.** Connect schools, colleges, apprenticeships, supervised placements and employers, with outreach to young people from settled migrant families and their parents, and report sustained employment rather than course completion.
9. **Work with diaspora organisations.** Bodies like ACORD UK can reach qualified workers and test bridging pilots, in line with our report's call for a UK–Romania governmental working group.

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We remain available to provide further detail and give oral evidence as needed.

Sincerely,

Oct 2026