This briefing examines labour migration and work visas in the UK immigration system, before and after the implementation of the post-Brexit immigration system. It presents data on migrant workers, particularly people coming to the UK on work visas (sometimes known as work permits).

**Key Points**

For most of the last two decades, the EU was the major source of work-related migration to the UK, particularly in jobs classified as low-skilled.

Work related migration from EU countries declined after the 2016 referendum on EU membership, and appears to have collapsed since early 2020.

EU citizens’ demand for work visas under the post-Brexit immigration system in the first half of 2021 was low, making up only 7% of work visas (excluding frontier workers)—but it is still too early to draw conclusions about the impacts of post-Brexit policies.

Work visas issued to non-EU citizens fell by 40% from 2019 to 2020, after years of growth. Applications for most work visas remained lower than pre-pandemic levels in the first half of 2021—except Skilled Worker visas, which continued their upward trend.

The health and social work sector made up a growing share of skilled sponsored work visas from 2010 to 2020, making up 33% of these visas in the first half of 2021.

The Seasonal Agricultural Workers’ Pilot—the only work visa explicitly designed to bring workers for low-wage work—issued just over 7,200 visas in 2020.

Most non-EU citizens who receive work visas leave within 5 years and do not settle in the UK permanently.

Some international students stay on to work, but the majority do not.

Indian citizens were the largest recipients of work visas in 2020.

**Understanding the policy**

Until the end of the post-Brexit transition period in 2020, work-related migration to the UK was governed by two different policy regimes. People from EU countries (plus EEA and Switzerland) could come to the UK to work under free movement rules, without applying for permission, while citizens of non-EEA countries required a work visa.

From January 2021, the post-Brexit immigration system is in place. Under the new system, EU and non-EU citizens both need to get work visas in order to work in the UK (except Irish citizens, who can still live and work in the UK without a visa). This means that the post-Brexit immigration system became much more restrictive for EU citizens. For non-EU citizens, the new system is less restrictive than the one that preceded it. The post-Brexit work visa system and these changes over time are explained in more detail in the Migration Observatory policy primer, *The UK's 2021 points-based system*.

As of 2021, there are now three main categories of work visas in the UK: employer-sponsored, long-term work visas; unsponsored long-term work visas; and temporary work visas.
**Employer sponsored, long-term work visas**

Some work visas provide work authorization for several years, usually with the opportunity to apply for settlement after five years. Most people coming to the UK for work on a visa like this must be sponsored by an employer. The best known visa to do this is the Skilled Worker route (previously known as ‘Tier 2 general’), which is for employees in middle- or high-skilled jobs. Workers using this route must usually earn annual salaries of at least £25,600, but there are exceptions for some workers or jobs, including young people under the age of 26, people working in shortage occupations, and people in health and education jobs who are paid based on agreed pay scales. For example, nurses do not have to meet the £25,600 threshold. Workers in jobs on the shortage occupation list face a minimum salary of £20,480.

Some workers qualify for the ‘Health and Care’ visa. This visa is effectively part of the Skilled Worker route, except with lower fees. In this briefing, we include Health and Care within the Skilled Worker category unless otherwise specified.

The other main group of skilled, sponsored workers is intra-company transferees. These are for staff who already work for an overseas office of an international company and are coming to the UK office, often on temporary assignments. The vast majority of intra-company transferees can remain in the UK long term but cannot apply for settlement unless they switch into another visa category first (small numbers of intracompany graduate trainees can stay up to 12 months only).

In this briefing, we refer to these two groups together as ‘skilled sponsored workers’ (without capitalization, to distinguish it from the ‘Skilled Worker’ subcategory). For simplicity, we also use the term Skilled Worker route to refer both to the route in the post-Brexit system, and to its pre-2021 equivalent, Tier 2 (general).

**Unsponsored, long-term work visas**

Some workers do not have to be sponsored by an employer but still have a route to long-term settlement in the UK. Most of these are categorized together in the UK’s immigration statistics as ‘High Value’ work visas, and were known as ‘Tier 1’ under the pre-2021 immigration system. They include:

- **Investors**: people who invest at least £2m in UK-based companies (e.g. shares in listed companies);
- **Global Talent**: various groups of people including those who have been endorsed by specified organisations, such as the British Academy or Tech Nation; who have secured a job as a researcher or technical specialist at a research organisation; or who have received ‘prestigious prizes’ such as Oscars;
- **Entrepreneurs** whose business ideas have been endorsed by one of a list of organisations including various accelerator programmes and early-stage investors.

Another unsponsored long-term work visa is the ‘ancestry visa’. Commonwealth citizens with at least one grandparent born in the UK can also get a long-term visa to work here without employer sponsorship. There are no skills-based selection criteria. Similarly, the British National (Overseas) route allows certain people from Hong Kong to live and work in the UK long term; the visa was introduced in response to national security legislation in Hong Kong and is not explicitly a work visa, but it can be used to work without employer sponsorship.

**Temporary visas**

Various temporary visas are available for other groups of workers. Most of these were previously known as ‘Tier 5’ of the pre-2021 immigration system. While there are many different categories, among the largest are the Youth Mobility Scheme and the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Pilot.

The Youth Mobility Scheme (YMS) gives 2-year non-renewable work visas to people aged 18 to 30 from certain countries with which the UK has signed an agreement (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Monaco).
At the time of writing in 2021, no EU countries were included on the list, although the government has said that it would like to negotiate deals with EU countries to include them. YMS visa holders do not need an employer to sponsor them and are not tied to specific jobs. There are caps on visa numbers for each nationality, although the overall number of visas granted is well below the total number that are in theory available. In 2021, the caps were 30,000 (Australia), 13,000 (New Zealand), 6,000 (Canada), 1,500 (Japan), 1,000 (Monaco), 1,000 (Taiwan), 1,000 (Hong Kong) and 1,000 (South Korea).

The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Pilot was introduced in 2019 in anticipation of the end of free movement (a similar scheme existed until 2013). In 2021, it had a cap of 30,000 places. This was up from 10,000 places in 2020 and 2,500 places in 2019.

Another substantial but little-discussed temporary visa is for domestic workers in private households. This visa allows people who live abroad to bring cleaners, chauffeurs, cooks or carers to the UK with them for temporary visits of up to six months.

**Settlement**

In some cases, temporary migration is part of the policy design, and workers must leave the country when their temporary visas expire, unless they are able to switch into another visa category. Most of the long-term visas described above, however, provide a route to settlement after five years. During the 2010–2015 Coalition Government, the Home Office had an explicit policy to break the link between temporary migration and permanent settlement (Home Office, 2011). This included a higher income requirement for Skilled Workers to access permanent settlement from April 2011 onwards. This policy was reversed in the post-Brexit immigration system, and most Skilled Workers now only need to maintain the original eligibility criteria for 5 years to become eligible for settlement.

**Low-wage work**

Except for seasonal agricultural workers, there are no employer-sponsored visas for workers taking up low-wage or low-skilled jobs. This means that unless the worker qualifies for one of the categories described above, such as the Youth Mobility Scheme, it is usually not possible for employers to sponsor workers to come to the UK in jobs that do not meet the skill and salary thresholds for skilled work visas. This includes jobs such as care workers, waiters and waitresses, and heavy goods vehicle drivers, which do not meet the minimum skill requirements.

**Understanding the evidence**

The Home Office provides information on visas issued to non-UK citizens to work in the UK. Unless otherwise specified, the visa data in this briefing only include people receiving their visas from outside the country. Visa data gives an indication of how many people are coming to the UK for work, although not everyone who is issued a visa will necessarily come to the UK – some change their plans after a visa is issued, and this was increasingly the case during the pandemic in 2020.

This briefing also uses Home Office data on ‘Certificates of Sponsorship’ (CoS) for skilled sponsored work visas. When employers sponsor a worker, they must assign them a CoS. The worker then uses the CoS to apply for their entry visa to the UK. Again, some people who receive a CoS may not actually come to the UK.

Until early 2020, a major source of information on work migration was the International Passenger Survey (IPS). While full year figures are available for the year ending December 2019, face-to-face interviews were suspended due to Covid-19 in March 2020 and since then there have been no new migration statistics based on the IPS.
This briefing also uses data from the Annual Population Survey (APS). The APS is based on an ONS survey of households across the UK and provides detailed information on the characteristics of people living here—including whether their reason for coming to the UK was work. It has some important limitations, however. Some people are excluded, such as residents of communal establishments like hostels. Response rates for the survey have declined over time, and were particularly low during the pandemic; this means that there is added uncertainty about the reliability of the data for 2020.

Because the APS is a sample survey, the estimates come with margins of error. This means that small differences between numbers or percentages may not be statistically significant – that is, they may not reflect real differences in the population. This briefing rounds APS estimates to the nearest 1,000, although in practice the margins of error will be much larger than this.

Note that work visas are sometimes also referred to as 'work permits', although we use the term visa throughout this briefing. This briefing uses the term 'migrants' to refer to the foreign-born, and 'migrant workers' to refer to foreign-born people who are working; note that some will subsequently have acquired British citizenship.

A note on terminology: when discussing policy, this briefing uses the term 'EU' for ease of understanding, but readers should note that citizens of non-EU countries Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway also faced the same rules as EU citizens until the end of free movement. The official datasets used in this briefing do not include non-EU EEA or Swiss citizens in the 'EU' category; unless otherwise specified, these citizens are included in the 'non-EU' category, although in the case of visa data they will have received very few visas before 2021.

For most of last two decades, the EU was the major source of work-related migration to the UK

Work is an important driver of overall migration to the UK, alongside family and international study. On average from 2010 to 2019, 40% of migrants moving to the UK for at least a year said that their main reason for moving was work (ONS, 2020).

Before the EU referendum and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, free movement from the European Union was a major source of labour migration to the UK. By 2020, an estimated 55% of migrant workers who said that they had originally moved to the UK for work-related reasons were born in EU countries (Figure 1). This is largely the result of 15 years of migration from EU countries following EU enlargement in 2004.

A key feature of free movement rules that were in place until 2021 was that EU migrants could work in any job, whereas non-EU citizens on work visas would often have to meet skills-based selection criteria (see the Understanding the Policy section, above).

In part as a result, EU workers have been more likely to be working in low-wage jobs and less likely to be in high skilled jobs than non-EU workers. In 2020, an estimated 36% of non-EU born migrants were in jobs classified as highly skilled, for example, compared to 30% of the EU born (Figure 1). Among non-EU migrants, there are large differences depending on the reason for migration. Non-EU migrants who said that their main reason for coming to the UK was work were most likely to be in skilled jobs (45%), reflecting skill-based selection criteria for work visas. People who came to study—many of whom will subsequently have had to qualify for work visas in order to remain in the UK—also had high shares in skilled work. By contrast, EU-born workers who came for work were less likely to be in high-skilled jobs (27% in 2020).
Among workers who originally moved for work reasons, the EU born make up a lower share in London (46%) than the rest of the UK (60%). This reflects both London’s long-standing popularity with non-EU citizens, and the fact that EU workers after 2004 moved in large numbers to non-traditional destinations outside of London, including the East of England and East Midlands.

While the skill profile of non-EU born workers in London is broadly similar to the rest of the UK, EU-born workers were significantly more likely to be in high-skilled work if they lived in London (37%) compared to the rest of the UK (27%). This in part reflects the overall composition of London’s workforce, which has a higher share of high-skilled jobs—including among the UK born. Nonetheless, London still has a substantial low-wage EU migrant workforce. In 2020, the EU born made up an estimated 22% of workers in jobs classified as low-skilled in London, compared to just 10% in the rest of the UK (data from Figure 1). This means that while London is sometimes portrayed as being less affected by the end of free movement because of the higher salaries there, London employers have in fact relied more heavily on EU workers than other parts of the UK.

UK employers have relied particularly heavily on EU workers in some occupations in logistics, food manufacturing, and hospitality, as detailed in the Migration Observatory briefing Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview and our report on Low Skilled Work Migration After Brexit.

The end of free movement thus represents a major shift in UK immigration policy. Several occupations where employers have relied heavily on EU workers are no longer eligible for work visas under the new system, including in hospitality and food manufacturing. (For more discussion of eligible and ineligible jobs, see the Migration Observatory’s policy primer on the UK’s 2021 Points-based System.)

Research conducted before the post-Brexit immigration system was introduced suggested that the more restrictive work visa system for EU citizens would have significant impacts on the employers the relied most heavily on EU
workers, but that the overall impacts on the UK economy were likely to be relatively small (MAC, 2018, 2020). At present, it is still too early to assess the impacts what the impacts of the new immigration system have been, not least because it was introduced during a time of economic disruption due to Covid-19.

**Work related migration from EU countries declined after the referendum and appears to have collapsed during the Covid-19 pandemic**

In recent years, EU migrants’ role in work-related migration has declined. After the June 2016 referendum, long-term EU migration dropped even before any new policies restricting EU migration came into force (Figure 1). Possible explanations for this decline include the fall in the value of the pound, reducing the value of money earned in the UK compared to other EU countries; political uncertainty due to Brexit; and the fact that EU migration had been unusually high in the pre-referendum period and thus might be expected to have fallen anyway. For more information on EU migration, see the Migration Observatory briefing, [EU migration to and from the UK](#).

**Figure 2**

Second, Covid-19 had a big impact on the EU workforce in the UK. EU employees suffered large job losses in 2020, particularly in London. By December 2020, the number of EU migrants in employee jobs in the UK had fallen by 8%, much higher than the 3% seen among their UK counterparts (Figure 3). While job losses among UK employees took place mostly at the beginning of the pandemic (from March to May 2020), net job losses among EU citizens continued throughout the year.
Not all EU migrants who lost their jobs will have left the country. Because the pandemic also disrupted data collection, its impact on EU migration and the EU migrant workforce is uncertain. However, exploratory analysis from ONS suggested that there may have been a net out-migration of approximately 50,000 EU citizens from March to June 2020, i.e. the period covering the first Covid-19 lockdown. A separate ONS analysis estimated that the EU-born population (age 16 and above) fell by 107,000 in the year ending Q4 2020. While this would represent a small share of the total EU migrant population, it is a sharp reversal of years of steady net growth in the EU migrant population.

EU citizens’ demand for work visas during the first few months of the post-Brexit immigration system was low

After free movement ended in January 2021, newly arriving EU citizens faced a more restrictive immigration system with higher costs and administrative obstacles. Many EU citizens currently working in the UK are in jobs that do not qualify for long-term work visas. Before the system was implemented, the Home Office estimated that it might thus reduce long-term EU work migration by around 70%, by reducing the number of jobs that are eligible for visas (see the Migration Observatory’s commentary, Calculating the Bill, for more details). There is also some evidence that employer sponsorship requirements reduce migration among people who are in principle eligible, for example due to costs and administrative barriers (Sumption, 2019).

In the first six months after free movement ended—January to June 2021—just over 15,000 EU citizens made work visa applications, making up only 14% of work visa applicants (including dependents) (Figure 4). This includes people coming for short work-related trips and not necessarily relocating to the UK. Indeed, more than half of all work visa
applications from EU citizens in the first half of 2021 were for Frontier Worker permits—a specific category designed for people who do not actually live in the UK but used to come to the UK for work before the end of free movement (see Hunt, 2021 for an explanation of how these permits work). If frontier workers are excluded, just over 7,000 EU citizens made up only 7% of work visa applications.

These are low numbers when considering that in 2019, even after EU work migration had already fallen substantially post-referendum, an estimated 79,000 EU citizens made up 45% of non-UK citizens immigrating for at least a year for work (see Figure 2, above). These figures exclude short-term movers who are included in the visa figures for 2021.

Figure 4

EU citizens made just under 2,900 applications for long-term Skilled Worker visas in the first half of 2021, which represented only 12% of the total.

Low demand in the first few months of the new system’s operation does not necessarily tell us what will happen to EU migration in the future. The UK entered lockdown a few days after free movement ended. Economic turmoil and travel
restrictions meant that one would expect many fewer people to use the system in the first quarter of 2021 than would otherwise have been the case. It is also possible that some EU citizens who already knew that they were going to move to the UK would have done so before free movement ended, in order to avoid the cost and restrictions that come with work visas. It will thus take some time before the impacts of the new immigration system on EU migration become clearer.

**Non-EU work-related migration fell in 2020, after years of growth**

Covid-19 had a significant impact on non-EU labour migration. Total work visa grants fell by 40% for main applicants in 2020 (Home Office, 2021), and ONS analysis suggests that many people who received work visas did not take them up or left the UK early (ONS, 2021b).

The impact of the pandemic varied depending on the type of work visa (Figure 4). Intra-company transfers fell most sharply, declining by 68% or over 18,000 visa grants from 2019 to 2020. Most people on intracompany transfer visas are in the IT sector (MAC, 2015, Table 6.3). Skilled Workers fell by 22% or just over 8,000 visa grants.

“High value” visa grants, e.g. to investors and ‘innovators’ fell by 41%, although they make up a small part of the work visa system. This group received only around or 2% of the 107,000 work visas issued in 2020.

There was also a large decline in young people moving to the UK under the Youth Mobility Scheme, whose numbers are driven by citizens of Australia and New Zealand (both countries with very low rates of Covid-19 infection in 2020). YMS workers can work in any occupation so will include people in a range of skilled and less-skilled positions. The government has said that it would like to negotiate with EU countries to add more of them to the list of nationals eligible for YMS—a move that would create work additional work visas that have no requirement to be in high-skilled work.

By contrast, the number of seasonal agricultural workers grew to around 7,300, following an increase in the cap from 2,500 in 2019 to 10,000 in 2020.

In most cases, the declines in work visas issued in 2020 were driven primarily by very low levels in the second quarter of the year, during the period of the first lockdown.
By the second quarter of 2021, non-EU citizens’ applications for work visas had returned to numbers relatively close to pre-pandemic levels, however. Total work visa applications from this group in the first half of 2021 were around 8,100 lower (8%) than in the first half of 2019, including dependents. While some work visa categories remained low, the number of Skilled Worker route main applicants in the first half of 2021 was 37% higher than in the same period of 2019. This could result in part from the liberalization of policy towards non-EU citizens in the post-Brexit immigration system, though it could also simply reflect the continuation of the long-term trend of rising demand for non-EU workers. Data for the first half of 2021 suggest that the health sector was primarily responsible for the increase (Home Office table CoS_D01), continuing the pattern of growth seen in previous years.

The health sector accounted for a growing share of skilled sponsored work visas from 2011 to 2020

After the financial crisis depressed demand for work visas in 2009, the number of non-EU skilled employees receiving employer-sponsored work visas had risen steadily from 2012 onwards (Figure 6). This coincided with falling unemployment as the UK economy recovered from the late 2000s financial crisis. Increases in 2018 and 2019 were facilitated by the government’s decision to exempt doctors and nurses from the 20,700 cap on these visas that had been introduced in 2011. As noted earlier, visa grants dropped sharply during the pandemic in 2020.

The two largest industries using skilled sponsored work visas are health and IT. The increase in the number of work visas for non-EU citizens from 2011 to 2020 was driven most strongly by one sector, though: health. The health sector accounted for 30% of visa applications in 2020, up from 8% in 2011. This share continued to grow in the first half of 2021, when it reached 33% (data not shown).

During the 2020 pandemic year, applications for skilled sponsored work visas in the health sector fell by only 13%, compared to 38% in the IT sector and 33% in other industries (Figure 7). Health professions in the UK have relied heavily on migrant workers over the past decades, including both people on work visa and those on other immigration routes such as family visas. In March 2019, 29% of doctors and 18% of nurses working in NHS hospitals were non-UK nationals (ONS, 2019).
Over the past decade, EU workers coming to the UK under free movement rules have played a substantial role in the health workforce. In March 2019, EU citizens made up 10% of hospital doctors and 7% of hospital nurses (ONS, 2019, Figure 5). The NHS has been a major recruiter of non-EU migrant workers on work visas, but data are not yet available on whether substantial numbers of EU health workers will be sponsored in the post-Brexit system.

An estimated 81% of workers in the health sector would have met the criteria to be considered ‘key’ or ‘essential’ workers during the 2020 Covid-19 crisis. Although non-EU born workers represent about 10% of the labour force in the UK, they are over-represented among key workers in occupations such as health professionals (23%), nurses and midwives (19%) and care jobs (16%), as detailed in the Migration Observatory commentary, Locking out the keys? Migrant key workers and post-Brexit immigration policies.

The Seasonal Agricultural Workers’ Pilot—the only work visa explicitly designed to bring workers for low-wage work—issued just over 7,200 visas in 2020

The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Pilot is the only work visa designed to allow employers to sponsor migrant workers in low-wage work. Usually, employer-sponsored workers must be in skilled jobs earning at least £25,600 (see the Understanding the Policy section above). This scheme was introduced in 2019 in anticipation of the end of free movement. A similar scheme existed until 2013, when it was suspended on the basis that there would be a sufficient number of workers coming under free movement rules, including from Romania and Bulgaria.

In 2021, the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Pilot had a cap of 30,000 places—up from 10,000 places in 2020, and 2,500 places in 2019. In 2020, 7,236 visas were issued to seasonal workers. The majority (87%) were to Ukrainian nationals.

Research on seasonal agricultural workers in the UK has found that they can be vulnerable to exploitative practices, such as being given misleading information about the job, not receiving the minimum wage, or paying fees to be recruited (e.g. FLEX, 2021; Burcu et al, 2021)). Evidence of exploitation exists among both migrants with free movement rights and those on visas, although the risks may be exacerbated in the case of seasonal work-visa holders because they have fewer rights and usually cannot change jobs. In the first quarter of 2021, around 1% of seasonal worker visa holders were EU citizens (Immigration Statistics table Vis_D02), although this share may grow over time if the number of EU workers who are already in the UK (i.e. with status under the EU Settlement Scheme), and who conduct seasonal work, falls.
Work-related migration is often temporary; most non-EU citizens receiving work visas leave the UK within 5 years

Some migrants who come to the UK for work stay for short periods, while others stay permanently and receive permanent status (settlement) or UK citizenship. Temporary migration can have economic benefits, for example because recently arrived migrants tend to have more positive impacts on public finances (see the Migration Observatory briefing on the Fiscal Impacts of Migration). However, it can also have negative impacts in communities by increasing population churn (Poppleton et al, 2013).

Most non-EU work migrants do not settle permanently in the UK and there is evidence that non-EU work-related migration has become more temporary since the mid-2000s. By the end of 2020, 25% of non-EU citizens who received work visas in 2015 still had permission to be in the UK (this includes both main applicants and dependents). This is down from 34% of those receiving work visas in 2004, by the end of 2009 (Figure 8). A majority of people with visas in the small, ‘high value’, category still to have permission to remain in the UK after five years, however. Women entering on skilled sponsored work visas (including dependents) in 2015 were also more likely than men still to have permission to be in the UK five years later, at the end of 2020: 34% vs. 26% (Home Office migrant journey data, age and sex summary table MJ_04).

Figure 8

How many work-visa holders still have permission to be in the UK after 5 years?

A key change for EU citizens coming to work in the UK long-term under the post-Brexit immigration system from 2021 onwards is that their immigration status depends on remaining employed—at least until they accrue five years
of continuous residence and successfully apply for permanent settlement. By contrast, free movement provided more flexibility to spend periods out of the country or out of work without losing the right to live and work in the UK.

The end of free movement also brings various new costs for EU workers who are eligible for work visas. This includes the Immigration Health Surcharge (a total of £3,120 for a single person over five years, and more if they are bringing family members). It also includes the cost of a settlement application, which almost tripled from 2010 to 2020 and stood at £2,389 in 2021—as detailed in the Migration Observatory briefing, *Settlement in the UK*. Some employers pay these fees on migrants’ behalf, however.

Available data suggest that under free movement rules, there was significant short-term migration for work among EU citizens. In the year ending June 2019, EU citizens made an estimated 93,000 short-term trips of 1-12 months for employment, for example (ONS Table STIM.01a). There was also substantial long-term and permanent movement. By 2019, an estimated 48% of all EU-born people living in the UK—including those with many years of residence here—said they had originally come for work.

For more information on temporary migration, see the Migration Observatory briefing, *Permanent or Temporary: How long do migrants stay in the UK?*

### Some international students stay on to work, but the large majority do not

The number of international students receiving work visas to stay on in the UK after their studies fell sharply after 2012, when the ‘post-study work route’ was closed. After 2012, students who wanted to remain in the UK to work either needed to find an employer willing to sponsor them for a skilled work visa, or needed to qualify for another type of work visa, for example as an entrepreneur. In practice, the large majority of students switching to work visas took the first of these two routes. About 6,400 non-EU citizens switched from a student visa to a Skilled Worker visa in 2020 (Figure 9). They made up 15% of people receiving these visas (including both those coming from abroad and switching within the UK) (tables Vis_D02 and Exe_D02).
Work rights for graduating students have become more liberal again in the post-Brexit immigration system. International students graduating from UK higher education starting in the academic year 2020/21 can apply to stay on in the UK to look for and take on work at any skill and salary level, for up to two years (or three years for PhD graduates) before requiring another visa. This effectively reverses the 2012 rule change that eliminated the post-study work visa.

Most international students from non-EU countries do not currently remain in the UK to work after their studies, as described in the Migration Observatory briefing, [International Student Migration to the UK](https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk). Indian citizens were the largest recipients of work visas in 2020.

Among non-EU citizens on work visas, the top countries of origin vary depending on the visa type (Figure 11). Indian nationals are the largest nationality for skilled sponsored work visas. US, Indian and Chinese nationals received the largest numbers of 'High Value' visas, while Australian citizens received the largest share of Youth Mobility visas in the same year. Overall, Indian citizens received 23% of all main applicant work visas in 2020.
This picture remained broadly similar in the first half of 2021, with the introduction of the post-Brexit immigration system.

**Evidence gaps and limitations**

Despite significant improvements in data on work-related migration over the past decade, there is still relatively little data on the economic outcomes and trajectories of work visa holders after they arrive. Published statistics provide data on the nationalities and, in some cases, proposed occupation and industry of work visa recipients when they apply for a visa or an extension. But little is known about how work visa holders fare in the long term, particularly after they have received settlement or citizenship (for those who remain in the UK). It is possible that in future such data could become available from administrative data sources (i.e. HMRC and DWP records).

There is also no data on the occupations or earnings of short-term migrants, particularly those from EU countries during the period when free movement was still in place. Short-term workers from either EU or non-EU countries are not expected to be captured well by the Labour Force Survey, which is currently the main source of information about migrant workers’ economic activity in the UK. This will make it difficult to analyze the impact of changes to the immigration system, which is likely to reduce the feasibility of many types of short-term work migration (due to the cost and restrictions associated with work visas).

Another area of limited evidence is emigration. While there were overall statistics on the numbers of people leaving the UK for at least 12 months (at least until 2019), it is currently not possible to provide a clear picture of the skills and activities of people who leave vs. remain in the UK long term.
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References

BRIEFING: Work visas and migrant workers in the UK

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Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory’s analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.

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