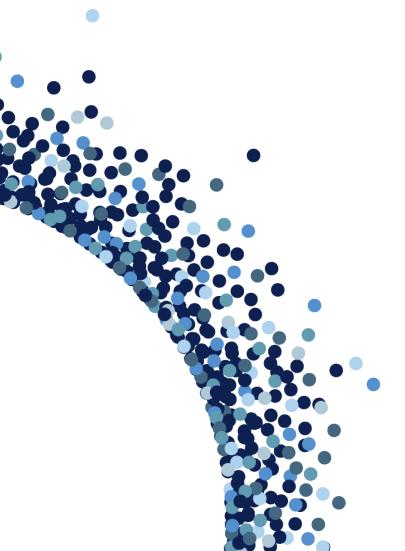


BRIEFING

Work visas and migrant workers in the UK



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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. Since the post-Brexit immigration system came into force, non-EU citizens have been the main driver of work migration.

After a sharp rise between 2021 and 2023, the number of work visa grants to non-EU citizens declined in 2024. This fall followed policy changes affecting Skilled Worker visas.

The health and social care sector accounted for around a third of Skilled Worker visa grants between October 2024 and March 2025, with care workers the most common occupation.

There has been widespread qualitative evidence of exploitation of migrant workers under the post-Brexit immigration system, particularly for care workers. The risks are higher when migrants' visas are tied to their employers or where their work is low-paid or isolated.

Since Brexit, students have started to stay in the UK longer after their studies. This was in part due to the 'Graduate Route' for international students who want to work after their studies, but also due to students switching directly to long-term work visas.

Since free movement ended, take-up of the post-Brexit immigration system was low among EU citizens, who made up only 11% of work visa grants in the year ending March 2025.

In the past, most non-EU citizens who received work visas left the UK within 5 years and did not settle in the UK permanently. The proportion remaining long-term has increased over time, but varies by the specific visa type.

Indian citizens were the largest recipients of work visas in the year ending March 2025.

Understanding the policy

The post-Brexit immigration system came into force in January 2021. Under this system, both EU and non-EU citizens need to get work visas to work in the UK (except Irish citizens, who can still live and work in the UK without a visa). There are now three main categories of work visas in the UK: employer-sponsored work visas; unsponsored long-term work visas; and temporary work visas.

Until the end of the post-Brexit transition period in December 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. This means that the post-Brexit immigration system became much more restrictive for EU citizens. For non-EU citizens, the new system was initially less restrictive, but some of these liberalisations were subsequently rolled back.

Employer-sponsored work visas

The Skilled Worker route (previously 'Tier 2 general') is the largest visa route for people coming to work in the UK. Workers must be sponsored by an employer to work in a graduate-level or middle-skilled job, and must be paid a minimum annual salary, which is the higher of the general salary threshold and the 'going rate' – an additional occupation-specific threshold, equal to the median earnings in the occupation. The general salary threshold has risen several times, increasing from around £26,000 to £38,700 in April 2024, and to £41,700 in July 2025. However, there are exceptions, including for people under the age of 26, people working in occupations on the 'Immigration Salary List' (ISL), and those in health and education jobs whose salaries are based on agreed pay scales.

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. In February 2022, care workers were added to the Skilled Worker route despite not meeting the skills threshold for the route. From July 2025, care workers cannot be recruited from outside the UK, although care providers can recruit in-country (i.e., migrants in the UK on a different type of visa).

Since July 2025, only people hired to work in graduate-level roles have the opportunity to apply for settlement after five years. Workers can only join middle-skill jobs that are included on the 'Temporary Shortage List' (TSL), which are deemed important to the UK's industrial strategy. Visas for TSL jobs are temporary, meaning the holder cannot apply for settlement.

The other main group of skilled, sponsored workers is intra-company transferees (also known as 'senior or specialist workers'), for staff who already work for an overseas office of an international company and are coming to the UK office, often on temporary assignments. In this briefing, we refer to these two groups together as 'skilled sponsored workers' (without capitalisation, to distinguish it from the 'Skilled Worker' subcategory).

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 categorised together in the UK's post-Brexit immigration statistics as 'High Value' work visas (previously 'Tier 1'). They include:

- 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 (or 'Innovator Founders' in the immigration rules terminology) 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', which allows Commonwealth citizens with at least one grandparent born in the UK to get a long-term visa to work here without employer sponsorship. There are no skills-based selection criteria.

Temporary visas

Various temporary visas are available for other groups of workers. These visas do not provide a path to settlement in the UK – people must leave the country when their visas expire, unless they are able to switch into another visa category. Most temporary visa categories were known as 'Tier 5' under the pre-2021 immigration system.

Since the 2020/21 academic year, international students graduating from UK higher education have been able to apply to stay on in the UK for up to two years (or three years for PhD graduates) before requiring another visa. Graduate visa holders can take on work at any skill and salary level. The route is similar to the previous post-study work visa category, which was in place between 2008 and 2012.

The Seasonal Workers visa admits workers for up to 6 months, and has a cap of 45,000 places in 2025 (of which 2,000 are for poultry workers). This is lower than the total cap in place in 2023 and 2024 (57,000).

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.

Finally, the Youth Mobility Scheme (YMS) gives 2-year non-renewable work visas to people aged 18 to 30 from 13 countries with which the UK has signed an agreement, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand. YMS agreements with some countries are more liberal (e.g., with a 3-year duration and 35-year maximum age), while policies for India are more restrictive. At the time of writing in 2025, no EU countries were included on the list, but the UK and EU had agreed in principle to develop a 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, with a ballot held if demand exceeds the cap in place.

Except for these temporary visa categories, there are no employer-sponsored visas for workers taking up low-wage or low-skilled jobs. Note, however, that the dependants of migrants with work visas can work in any job, regardless of the skill and salary level.

Understanding the Evidence

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. Unless otherwise specified, the visa data in this briefing only includes people receiving their visas from outside the country and not those who extend their visas in-country.

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. The CoS data are used to establish the worker's industry and occupation in Home Office visa data.

A note on terminology: 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.

In addition, 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.

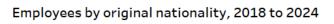
The source of work-related migration has changed since the Brexit referendum

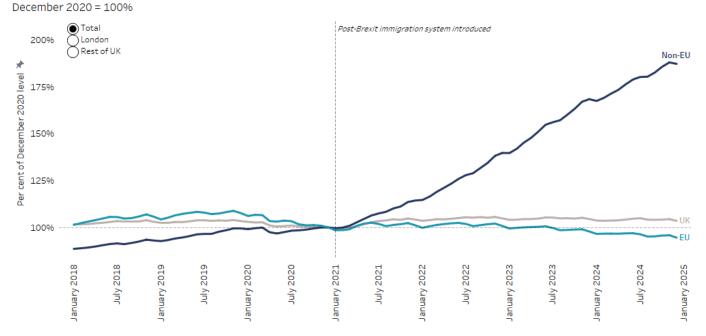
Work is an important driver of overall migration to the UK, alongside family and international study. On average from 2010 to 2019, 40% of migrants who came to the UK for at least a year said their <u>main reason</u> for moving was work. By 2020, an estimated 55% of foreign-born workers who said they originally moved to the UK for work-related reasons were born in EU countries, largely the result of 15 years of migration from EU countries following EU enlargement in 2004. A key feature of free movement rules in place until the end of 2020 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.

The end of free movement thus led to a major shift in UK immigration policy. Several occupations where employers relied heavily on EU workers were ineligible for work visas under the post-Brexit system, including bar staff, cleaners, and food processing workers. At the same time, non-EU citizens faced less restrictive rules than before Brexit (see the Understanding the Policy section, above).

In December 2024, there were 134,000 fewer EU workers in employment than in December 2020 (-5%) (Figure 1). By contrast, the number of non-EU workers increased sharply over the same period, rising by 1.85 million (87%). Note that these figures include migrant employees who came to the UK on other types of visa (e.g., family visas): the majority will not be main applicants on work visas. See the Migration Observatory briefing, Migrants in the UK labour market, for a further discussion.

Figure 1





 $Source: Migration Observatory\ analysis\ of\ HMRC\ "UK\ payrolled\ employments\ by\ nationality,\ region,\ and\ industrial\ sector,\ from\ July\ 2014\ to\ December\ 2024".$

Note: Includes both employees and self-employed. 'Original nationality' refers to the nationality when the person registered for a national insurance number (NINo). The figures therefore include people who subsequently became UK citizens; however, they would not include migrants who moved to the UK and became a UK citizen before applying for a NINo.



Non-EU work visa grants grew strongly between 2021 and 2023, but fell in 2024

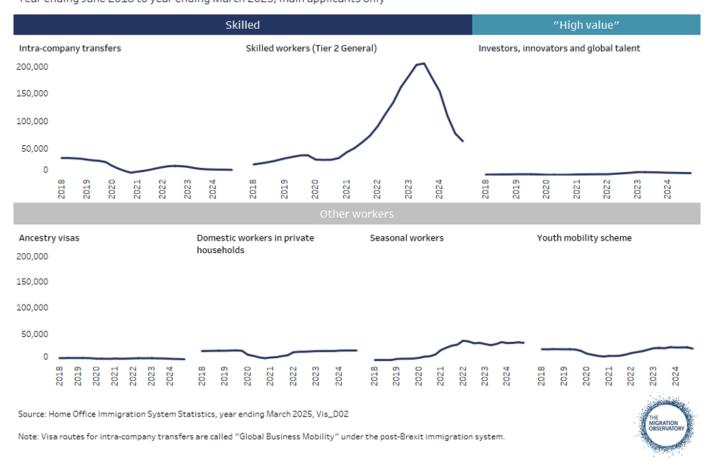
Non-EU citizens' demand for work visas under first few years of the pre-Brexit immigration system far surpassed previous levels. Total work-visa grants to non-EU citizen main applicants rose from 137,000 in 2019 to 312,600 in 2023 (excluding frontier workers). Almost all of the growth in overall work visa grants took place between 2022 and 2023, although different visa routes have seen different trends in recent years (Figure 2). Total grants had decreased to 171,000 by the year ending March 2025 but remained above pre-Brexit levels.

The Skilled Worker route, the largest single work visa category, saw the sharpest growth. Visa grants (to main applicants) peaked at 200,000 in 2023, of which 72% were for health and care workers. Visa issuances then fell sharply in 2024 following changes made by the Conservative government, including a crackdown on sponsorship in the care sector in late 2023, and higher salary thresholds from the spring of 2024. However, visa sponsorship in the health sector still remained well above pre-Brexit and pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 2

Work visa grants to non-EU citizens, by type

Year ending June 2018 to year ending March 2025, main applicants only



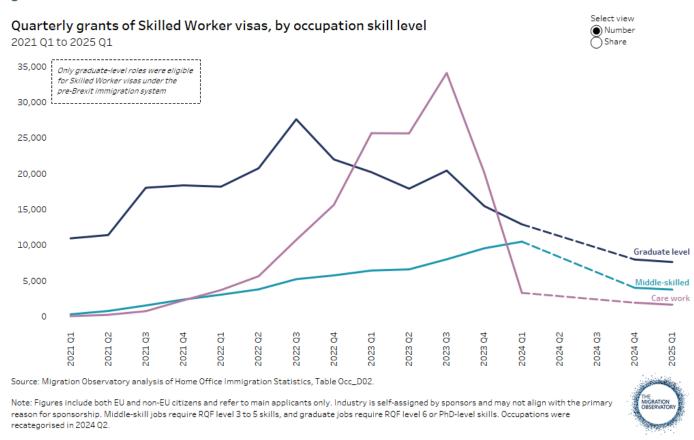
The number of non-EU citizens receiving visas under the Seasonal Worker scheme – the only route designed explicitly to allow employers to sponsor migrant workers in low-wage work – rose markedly between 2019 and 2021, after which point visa grant numbers settled. Around 34,000 visas were granted to non-EU migrants in 2024, well below the total annual cap in place for that year (57,000 places). In 2024, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) <u>extended</u> the scheme until 2029, but slightly reduced the cap (to 45,000) and said it expected the horticulture and poultry sectors to reduce their demand for migrant workers over the medium term.

The number of young people moving to the UK under the Youth Mobility Scheme in 2024 was similar to pre-pandemic levels, with visas going primarily to citizens of Australia, New Zealand and Canada. People arriving via this route can work in any occupation, so it will include people in a range of skilled and less-skilled positions. In May 2025, the UK and EU agreed in principle to develop a Youth Mobility Scheme.

The health sector accounted for a third of Skilled Worker visa grants in the year ending March 2025

Between October 2024 and March 2025, 42% of Skilled Worker entry visas (including Health and Care) went to occupations that became eligible for visas under the post-Brexit immigration system (Figure 3). In particular, 12% of visa grants were for care workers, after they were added to the Skilled Worker route in February 2022. The number of people who came from outside the UK to work in care fell sharply in 2024, coinciding with a Home Office move to scrutinise applications, in light of widespread reports of exploitation in the care sector. In July 2025, overseas recruitment into the sector ended, although care providers can still sponsor migrants in the UK on other types of visas until 2028 (including international students). For more information, see the Migration Observatory commentary, International students entering the UK labour market.

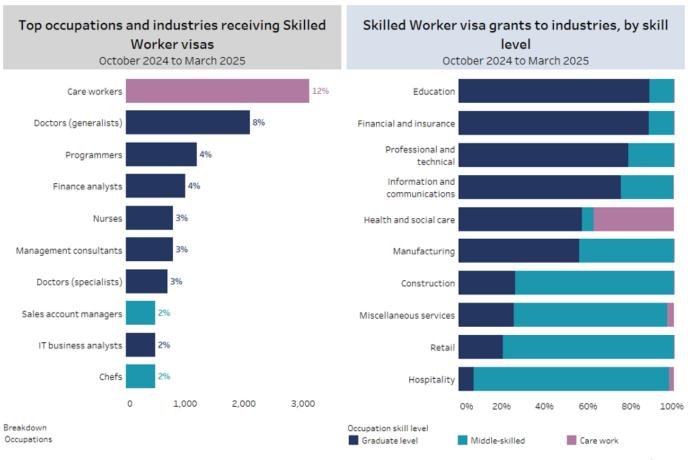
Figure 3



More broadly, the health and care sector was the largest recipient of Skilled Worker visas between October 2024 and March 2025, accounting for just over a third of grants (Figure 4). Health professions in the UK have relied heavily on migrant workers over the past decades, including both people on work visas and those on other immigration routes, although the overall reliance increased after the pandemic. For more information on the role of migration in the UK's health and care sector, see the Migration Observatory briefing Migration and the health and care workforce.

In April 2024, the government increased the minimum salary threshold to sponsor Skilled Workers from £26,200 to £38,700. However, health and care roles were largely shielded from these changes because their salaries are set according to nationally agreed pay scales. Instead, most health and care jobs faced a minimum salary of £29,000 (or £23,200 for care workers) in the year ending March 2025. As a result, higher salary thresholds primarily affected jobs in the private sector. For a more detailed discussion, see the Migration Observatory commentary, How will new salary thresholds affect UK migration?

Figure 4



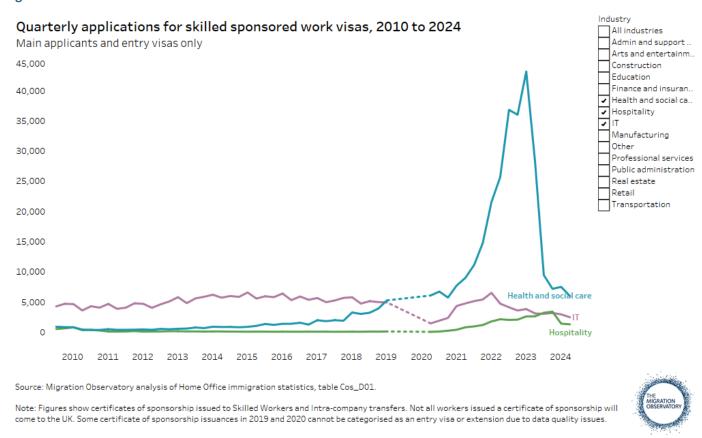
 $Source: Migration\ Observatory\ analysis\ of\ Home\ Office\ Immigration\ Statistics,\ Table\ Occ_D02.$

Note: Figures include both EU and non-EU citizens and refer to main applicants only. Industry is self-assigned by sponsors and may not align with the primary reason for sponsorship. Miscellaneous services include the repair of household goods and activities of membership organisations. Middle-skill jobs require RQF level 3 to 5 skills, and graduate jobs require RQF level 6 or PhD-level skills.



There are no published data on the number of Skilled Worker visas granted to each industry before the introduction of the post-Brexit immigration system, but it is possible to compare the number of skilled sponsored work visas—that is, both Skilled Worker and intra-company transfer visas. The number of skilled sponsored visa grants to the IT sector was 40% lower in 2024 than the 2010-2019 average (Figure 5). By contrast, the hospitality industry received over 16 times more entry visas in 2024 than before Brexit (9,300 compared to 580), although numbers fell in the second half of 2024. The increase was driven primarily by visa grants to chefs (an occupation newly eligible under the post-Brexit immigration system).

Figure 5



There is widespread qualitative evidence of migrant exploitation

Qualitative research has found that migrants in the UK can be vulnerable to <u>exploitative practices</u>, such as being given misleading information about the job, not receiving the minimum wage, or paying high recruitment fees (which can lead to debt bondage). Although evidence of exploitation exists among both migrants with free movement rights and those on visas, the risks are exacerbated for work migrants who require sponsorship for the duration of their visa—sponsorship creates a <u>power imbalance</u> between a migrant and their employer because they are tied into their role unless they can find another sponsor. Risks are also more pronounced in jobs where pay is relatively low or workers are often isolated, which can make it <u>more difficult</u> to leave exploitative situations. As a result, visa holders such as migrant care workers, Seasonal Workers, and Overseas Domestic Workers are at <u>particular risk</u> of exploitation.

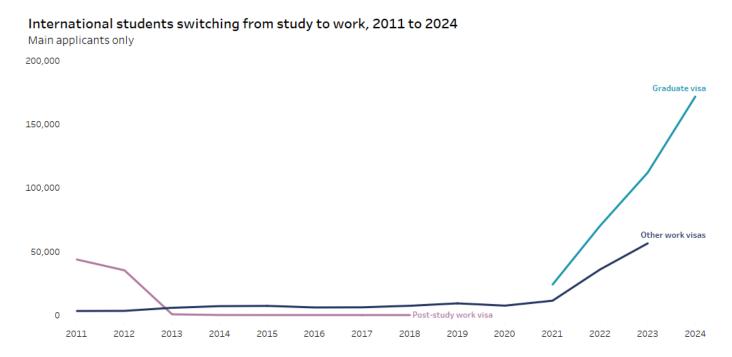
It is difficult to quantify the scale of exploitation of migrant workers in the UK, although the government has said 39,000 care workers were associated with sponsors who had their licenses <u>revoked</u> between July 2022 and December 2024. A 2023 <u>inspection</u> of the social care sector found evidence that migrant care workers had been housed in inadequate accommodation and coerced by their employers into paying 'large and unexpected costs' related to their employment. A 2024 Home Office and DEFRA <u>survey</u> identified concerns among some seasonal workers, including complaints of poor-quality accommodation and working conditions, as well as mistreatment by managers.

The share of non-EU international students staying on to work after their studies increased after Brexit

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.

A rebranded post-study work visa known as the Graduate visa was introduced in 2021 and has proved more popular than its predecessor—172,000 former students were granted one of these visas in 2024 (main applicants only) (Figure 6). Another 75,000 Graduate visas were granted in the first three months of 2025 alone.

Figure 6



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office immigration statistics: extensions for work obtained from tables Exe_02 and Exe_D02; post-study work grants obtained from Exe_D01; and graduate visa grants obtained from table Exe_D02.

Note: "Other work visas" figures refer to grants of leave to people who previously held sponsored study visas, excluding issuances of post-study work and graduate visas. The 2024 Graduate visa figure includes a (likely small) number of people who switched from visas other than study.



In previous years, most international students only stayed in the UK for a few years, before emigrating again. Among non-EU migrants issued an initial study visa in 2008, when the previous post-study work regime was in place, for example, only 17% still held a valid visa seven years later, with around half of these former students granted a graduate visa. For more information, see the Migration Observatory briefing, <u>Student Migration to the UK</u>.

However, international students became more likely to remain in the UK after their studies in the first years of the post-Brexit immigration system. This is not just because of the Graduate visa, but because more students were switching onto long-term work visa routes, including the Skilled Worker route, which provide a path to permanent residence in the UK (Figure 7, Other work visas). Data provided to the Migration Observatory through freedom of information requests show that around 40% of people who switched directly from study

visas to Skilled Worker visas in 2024 went into care work. See the Migration Observatory commentary, <u>International students entering the UK labour market</u>, for a further discussion of these trends.

EU citizens' demand for work visas has been low since the post-Brexit immigration system came into force

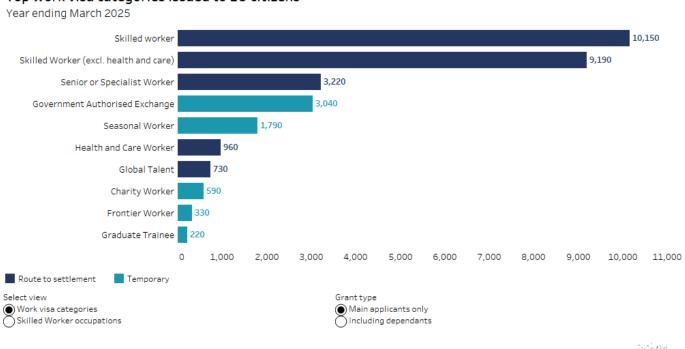
EU citizens made up the majority of those moving to the UK for work in the 2010s. After free movement ended in January 2021, however, newly arriving EU citizens faced a more restrictive immigration system with higher costs and administrative obstacles. In the year ending March 2025, 21,000 EU citizens received work visas (excluding dependants), making up only 11% of work visa grants.

Almost half of work visa grants to EU nationals in the year ending March 2025 were for the Skilled Worker route (Figure 7, Work visa categories), with only a small proportion for health and care jobs. Among those issued a Skilled Worker visa between October 2024 and March 2025, EU citizens were more likely than non-EU citizens to join graduate jobs (75% compared to 54%), while only 0.4% entered the care sector (compared 16% of non-EU Skilled Workers). Finance analyst was the most common job for EU citizens over this period (12%) (Figure 7, Skilled Worker occupations).

In 2024, 29% of work visas granted to EU citizens were for temporary work categories. The most common temporary category was Government Authorised Exchange (GAE) visas, which are for people coming to the UK for a short time for work experience, training or research.

Top work visa categories issued to EU citizens

Figure 7



 $Source: Migration \ Observatory \ analysis \ of \ Home \ Office \ Immigration \ Statistics, Table \ Vis_D02 \ and \ Table \ Occ_D02 \ and \ Occ_D02$

Note: Middle-skill jobs require RQF level 3 to 5 skills, and graduate jobs require RQF level 6 or PhD-level skills. Skilled Worker occupation data is not available for March to September 2024.



The end of free movement brought various new costs for EU workers who are eligible for work visas. These costs include visa application fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS). In April 2025, a Skilled Worker coming to the UK with their partner could expect to incur fees of around £20,000 from entry to permanent settlement. See the Migration Observatory Q&A Immigration fees in the UK for more information.

In the past, most non-EU citizens on work visas left the UK within 5 years, but this varies by specific visa type

Some migrants who come to the UK for work stay for short periods, while others stay long-term 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 <u>Fiscal Impacts of Migration</u>). On the other hand, it can also have negative impacts in communities by increasing <u>population churn</u>.

In the past, most non-EU work migrants have not settled permanently in the UK. By the end of 2024, for example, 45% of non-EU citizens who received work visas in 2019 still had permission to be in the UK (both main applicants and dependants). However, this was a higher stay rate (after five years) than for any cohort arriving between 2004 and 2018 (Figure 8).

Much of the increase in stay rates over time for skilled sponsored workers can be explained by smaller number of intracompany transfer worker visas, which are for people moving to the UK to continue working for their overseas employer. People who arrive as Intra-company transfers are less likely to stay in the UK, and the visa does not provide a route to settlement. People who arrive on the Skilled Worker route are more likely to stay: 75% of people who received a Skilled Worker visa in 2018 still had permission to be in the UK in 2023, for example. For more information on settlement, see the Migration Observatory briefing, Migrant settlement in the UK.

A majority of people with visas who received 'high value' work visas still had a valid visa after five years. Note, however, that this visa category is small (see Figure 2).

Figure 8

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

Main applicants and dependants



 $Source: Migration \ Observatory \ analysis \ of \ Home \ Office \ Migrant \ Journey \ data \ (MJ_D01).$

Note: Permission to be in the UK includes a valid temporary visa, ILR, or citizenship. People with valid leave to remain are not necessarily physically present in the UK – some will leave before visa expiry.

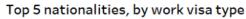


Indian citizens were the largest recipients of work visas in the year ending March 2025

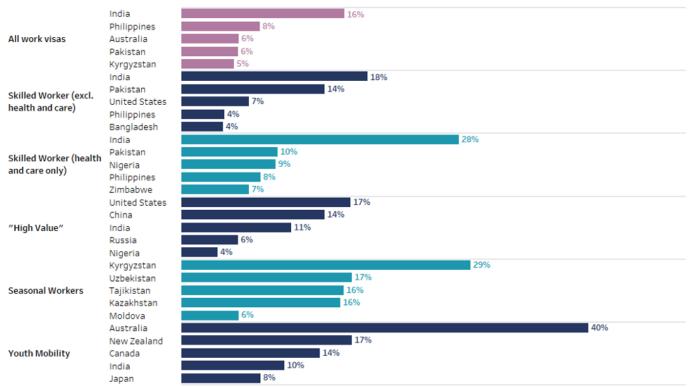
The top countries of origin receiving work-related entry visas in the year ending March 2025 varied widely by visa type (Figure 9). Overall, Indian citizens received more main applicant work visas than any other nationality (16%), primarily because of their high take-up of Skilled Worker visas, both in the health sector and in all other industries. Note that these figures exclude the Graduate route, which is not an entry visa.

Citizens of Central Asian countries were more likely to participate in the Seasonal Workers scheme—indeed, Kyrgyzstanis were the fifth-largest recipients of all work visas, due almost entirely to their demand for Seasonal Worker visas. People with US nationality received the largest numbers of 'High Value' visas; they predominantly arrived through the 'High Potential Individual' route, an unsponsored work visa for recent graduates of globally leading universities.

Figure 9



Year ending March 2025; Main applicants only



 $Source: Migration\ Observatory\ analysis\ of\ Home\ Office\ immigration\ statistics, table\ Vis_D02.$

Note: Shows information for entry clearance visas only (i.e., excludes extensions granted in-country). "All work visas" excludes frontier workers and transit.



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 those who remain in the UK have received settlement or citizenship. Data on earnings has recently started to become available from administrative data sources (i.e., HMRC records) but is not systematically published.

There is also limited data on the occupations or earnings of short-term migrants, including 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, for example.

Another area of limited evidence is emigration. While there are statistics on the number of people leaving the UK for at least 12 months by their reason for coming to the UK (including work), 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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This work was produced using statistical data from ONS. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates.

Further reading

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- Home Office (2025). Migrant journey: 2024 report. <u>Available online</u>.
- Home Office (2025). Sponsored Work and Family visa earnings, employment and Income Tax. <u>Available</u> online.
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The Migration Observatory

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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