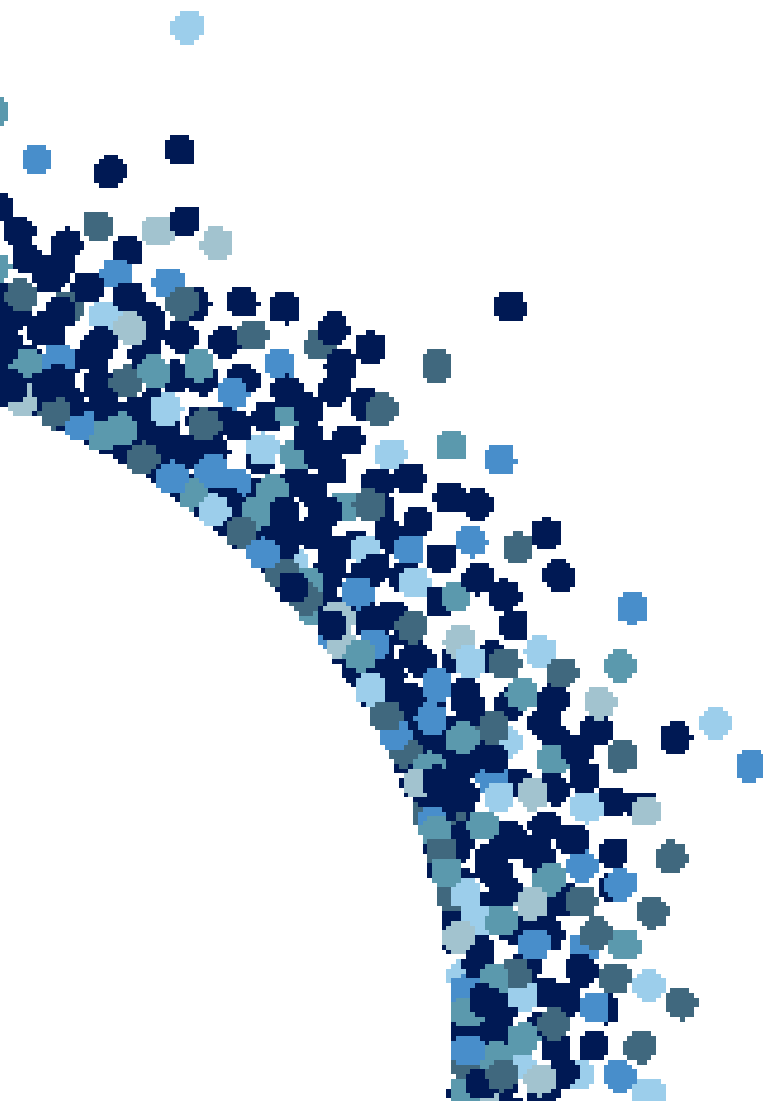




BRIEFING

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. After the Brexit referendum in 2016 visa grants to EU citizens dropped sharply, before any new migration policies came into force.

Non-EU work visa grants grew strongly between 2021 and 2023, with the sharpest growth in the Skilled Worker visa category. Visa grants to some groups of Skilled Workers fell sharply in early 2024 following a series of policy changes.

The health and social care sector accounted for over 60% of Skilled Worker visa grants in the year ending March 2024, and was largely shielded from 2024 increases in salary thresholds.

There is widespread qualitative evidence of exploitation of migrant workers. The risks are higher when migrants' visas are tied to their employers or where their work is low-paid or isolated.

By the end of 2023, students had started to stay in the UK longer after their studies, compared to pre-Brexit trends. This was in part due to the 'Graduate Route' for international students who want to work after their studies, and in part 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 7% of work visa grants in 2023.

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 2023, followed by citizens of Nigeria.

Understanding the evidence

The post-Brexit immigration system came into force in January 2021. Under this 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). 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.

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 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](#).

Employer sponsored, long-term work visas

Some work visas provide work authorisation 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 be paid a minimum annual salary, which depends on the occupation the person is working in.

In April 2024, the general salary threshold increased from £26,200 to £38,700, while the 'going rate' – an additional, occupation-specific threshold – was increased to the median earnings in the occupation. However, there are exceptions for some workers or jobs, including young people under the age of 26, people working in occupations on the 'Immigration Salary List' (ISL), and people in health and education jobs who are paid based on agreed pay scales. Workers in jobs on the ISL face a minimum salary of £30,960.

Some workers qualify for the 'Health and Care' visa. This visa is effectively part of the Skilled Worker route, except with lower fees and a lower salary threshold. 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.

The other main group of skilled, sponsored workers is intra-company transferees, also known as 'senior or specialist workers' under the post-Brexit immigration system. These visas 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. Most 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 capitalisation, 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).

Un-sponsored, 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 immigration statistics as 'High Value' work visas, and were known as 'Tier 1' under the pre-2021 immigration system. 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 un-sponsored 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 had a cap of 45,000 places in 2023 and 2024 (plus another 2,000 for poultry workers), which could be increased by 10,000 a year "if necessary" to meet demand. This was up from 40,000 places in 2022, 30,000 in 2021, 10,000 in 2020, and 2,500 in 2019. Generally Seasonal Workers must be working in horticulture, but poultry workers became eligible in 2022, having been temporarily added to the scheme in 2021. A similar scheme, known as the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS), existed until 2013, when it was suspended on the basis that there would be a sufficient number of workers coming from EU countries, including from Romania and Bulgaria.

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 11 countries with which the UK has signed an agreement, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand, among others. 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 2024, no EU countries were included on the list. 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.

Low-wage work

Except for Seasonal Workers and care 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 waiters and waitresses, cleaners and heavy goods vehicle drivers. Note, however, that the dependants of migrants with work visas can work in any job, regardless of the skill and salary level.

Understanding the policy

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 include 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.

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.

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 moving to the UK for at least a year said that their main reason for moving was work (ONS, 2020).

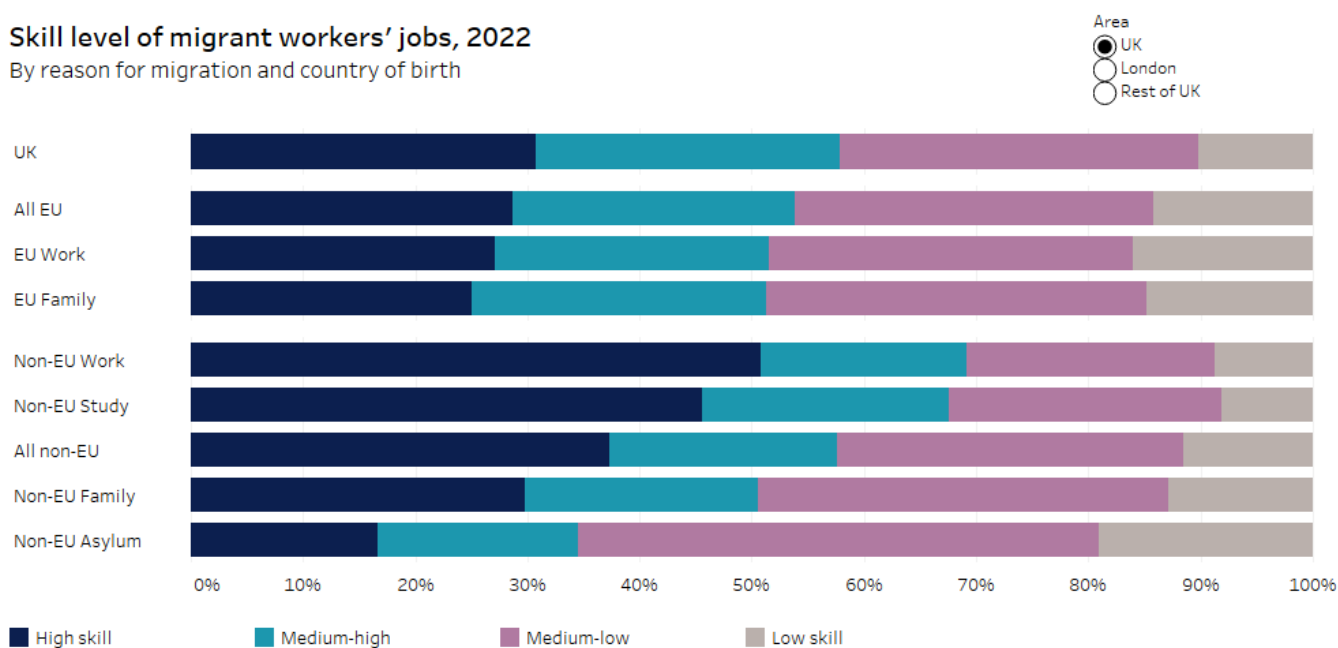
By 2020, an estimated 55% of foreign-born workers who said that they had originally moved to the UK for work-related reasons were born in EU countries, which was largely the result of 15 years of migration from EU countries following EU enlargement in 2004. A key feature of free movement rules that were 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 2022, an estimated 37% of non-EU born migrants were in jobs classified as highly skilled, for example, compared to 29% of the EU born (Figure 1). For more information about the type of jobs that EU and non-EU migrants do in the UK, see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview](#).

Figure 1

Skill level of migrant workers' jobs, 2022

By reason for migration and country of birth



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Annual Population Survey [Secure Access], 2022.

Note: Figures include both employees and self-employed.



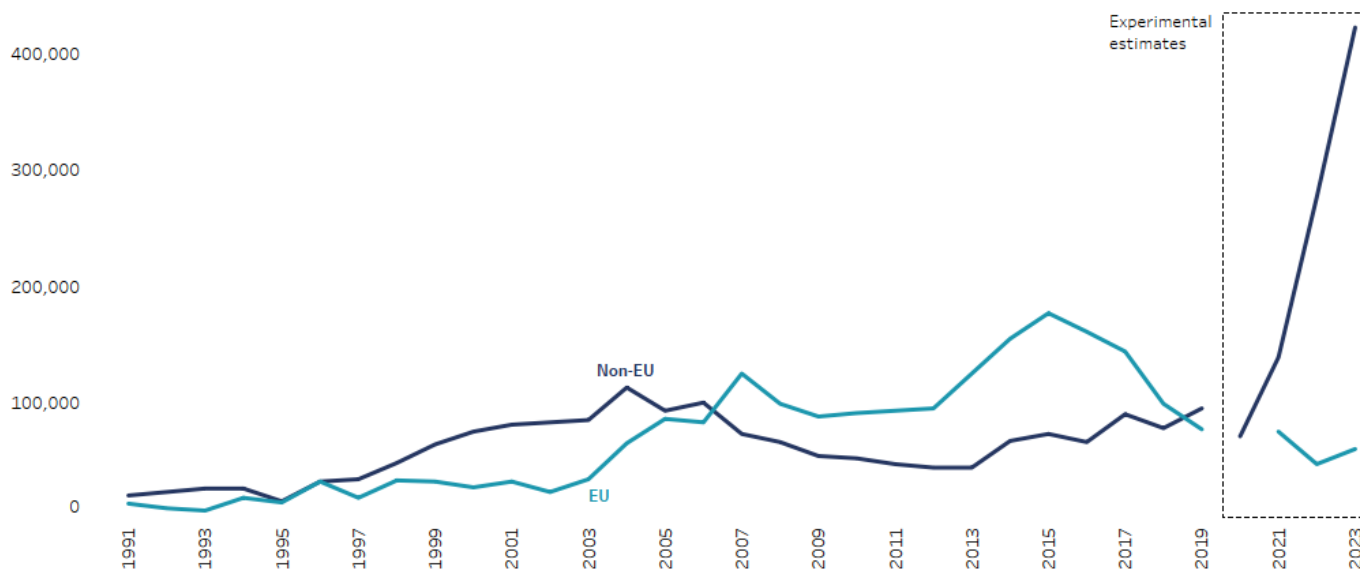
The end of free movement thus represents a major shift in UK immigration policy. Several occupations where employers have relied heavily on EU workers are no longer eligible for work visas under the new system, such as bar staff, cleaners and food processing workers. (For more discussion of eligible and ineligible jobs, see the Migration Observatory's policy primer on the [UK's 2021 Points-based System](#)). Take-up of the new immigration system is discussed further below.

However, long-term EU migration dropped after the June 2016 referendum before any new policies restricting EU migration came into force (Figure 2). 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; uncertainty about the UK’s political or social environment for EU citizens after Brexit; and the fact 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

Long-term work immigration by citizenship, 1991 to 2023

Experimental estimates are calculated using a different methodology for EU and non-EU citizens



Source: LTIM: for 1991 to 2019: ONS, International Passenger Survey table 3.08; for 2020 to 2022: Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2023.

Note: Figures only include people who say that they intend to move to the UK for at least 12 months; they do not include ONS adjustments for migration between the UK and Ireland, people who change their intended duration of stay, and asylum seekers. Data come from a sample survey with large confidence intervals, so small differences may not be statistically significant. Data have not been revised to account for IPS underestimates of EU labour migration during the 2000s and 2010s. Long-term work migration figures are not available for EU citizens in 2020.

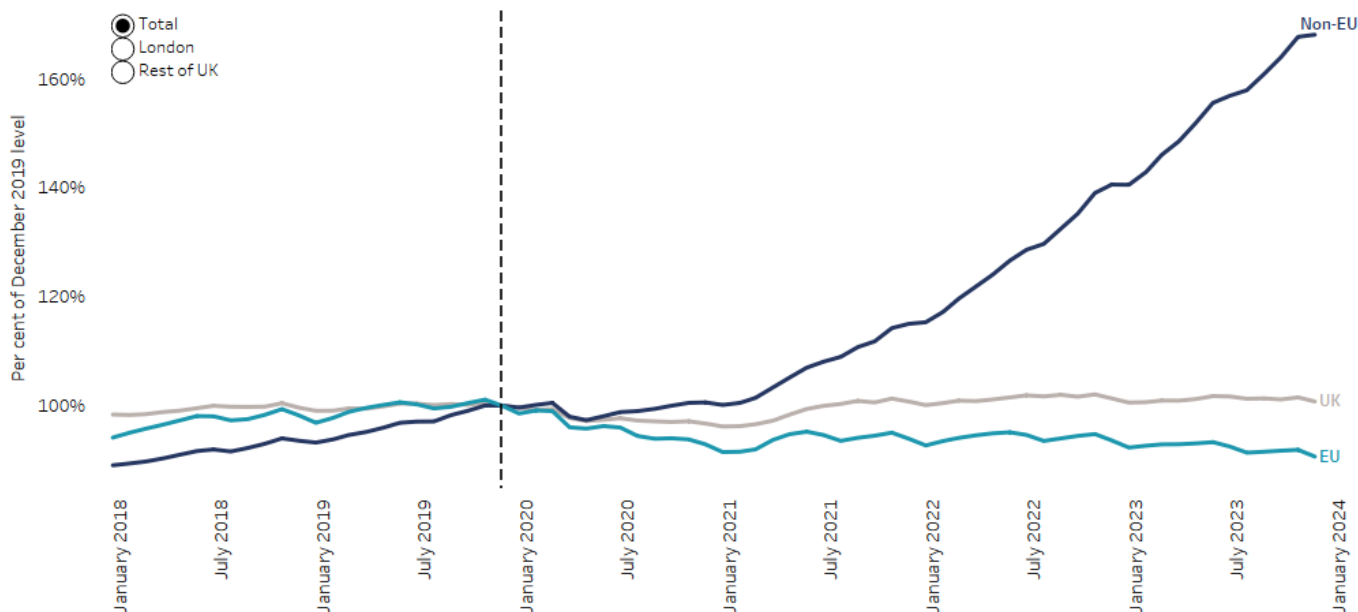


In 2020, EU workers suffered large job losses due to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in London. This led to a fall in the size of the EU workforce in the UK of 7% (Figure 3). It remained below its pre-pandemic (i.e., December 2019) level from 2021 to 2023, a period when there was [net emigration](#) of EU citizens. In December 2023, there were 250,000 fewer EU workers in employment than before the pandemic (-9%). By contrast, the number of non-EU workers increased sharply over the same period, rising by 1.43 million (68%).

Figure 3

Employees by original nationality, 2018 to 2023

December 2019 = 100%



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HMRC “UK payrolled employments by nationality, region, industry, age and sex, from July 2014 to December 2023”.

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.



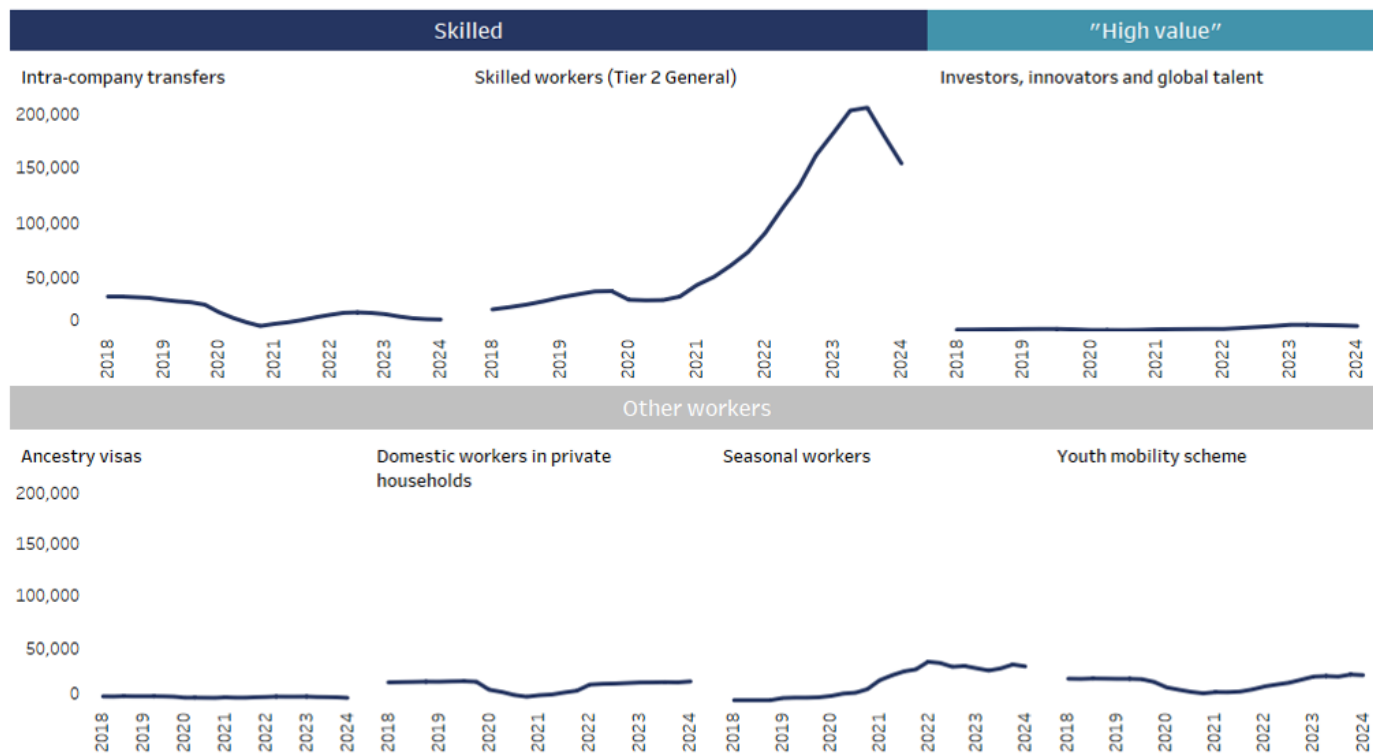
Non-EU work-related migration grew strongly between 2021 and 2023, but fell sharply in the first half of 2024

Non-EU citizens’ demand for work visas far surpassed its pre-pandemic level following the introduction of the post-Brexit immigration system. For example, in 2023, 312,600 work visas were granted to non-EU citizen main applicants (excluding frontier workers), compared to 137,000 in 2019 (Figure 4). 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. The Skilled Worker route, the largest single work visa category, saw the sharpest growth—almost 200,000 visas were granted (to main applicants) in 2023, more than three times the number granted in 2021. In the first half of 2024 these figures fell sharply, driven by a reduction in health and care visa grants. Between January and June 2024, 15,200 Skilled Worker visas were granted to healthcare workers, compared to 72,000 over the same period in 2023. However, visa sponsorship in the health sector still remained well above pre-Brexit and pre-pandemic levels in the first six months of 2024, compared to the same period in 2019.

Figure 4

Work visa grants to non-EU citizens, by type

2018 to 2023, main applicants only



Source: Home Office Immigration System Statistics, year ending March 2024, Vis_D02

Note: Visa routes for intra-company transfers are called "Global Business Mobility" under the post-Brexit immigration system.



The number of non-EU citizens receiving visas under the Seasonal Worker scheme – the only route designed to allow employers to sponsor migrant workers in low-wage work – rose markedly between 2019 and 2021, after which point visa grant numbers settled. A little over 30,000 visas were granted to non-EU migrants in 2023, far below the total annual cap in place for that year (57,000 places). In May 2024, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) [extended](#) the scheme until 2029, but said it expected the horticulture and poultry sectors to reduce its demand for migrant workers over this period. At the same time, it announced that the total cap for 2025 would be set at 45,000 places.

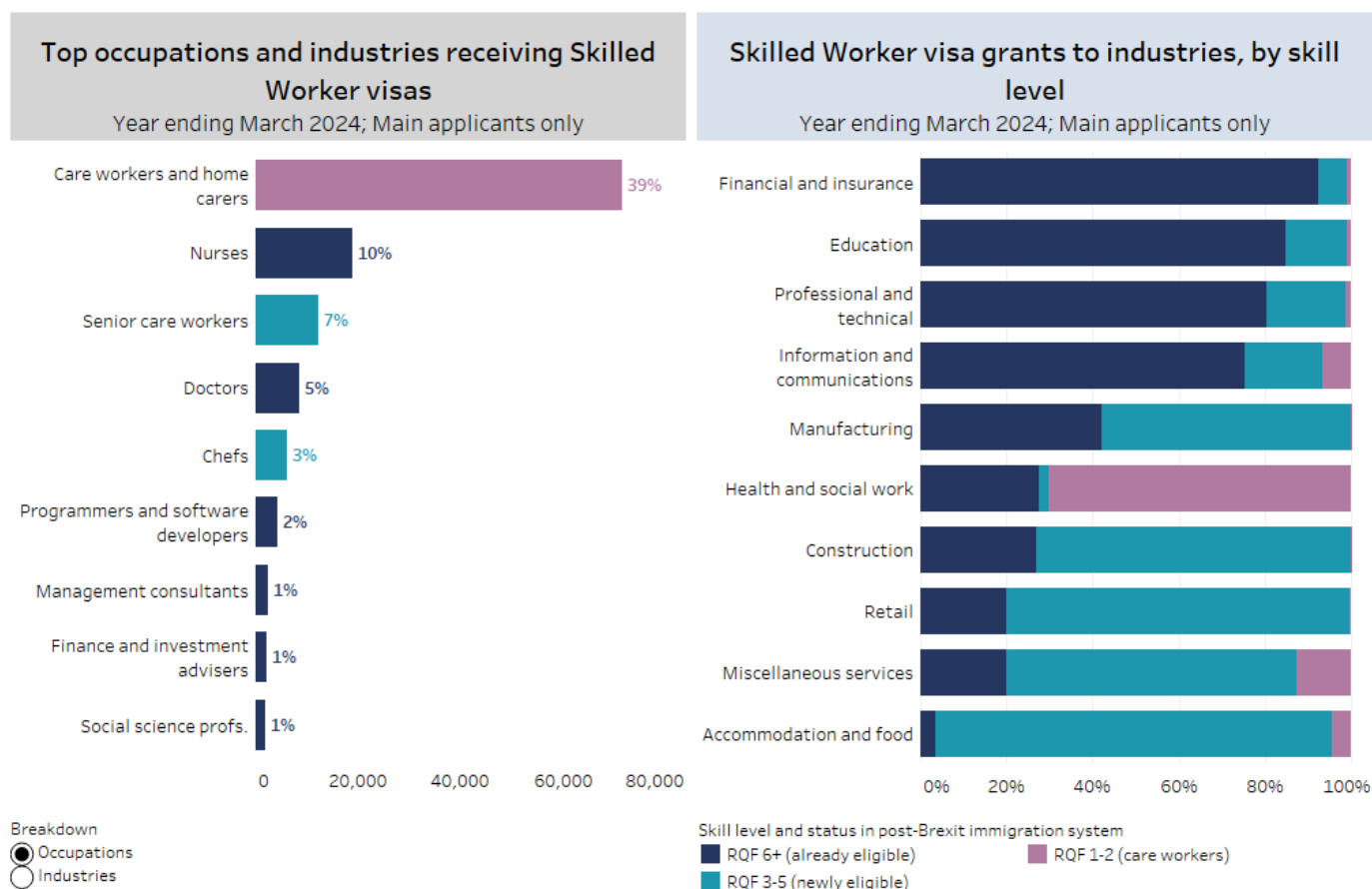
The number of young people moving to the UK under the Youth Mobility Scheme returned to roughly pre-pandemic levels in 2023—around 22,700 visas were granted, primarily to citizens of Australia (44%), New Zealand (24%) and Canada (12%). People arriving via this route can work in any occupation so will include people in a range of skilled and less-skilled positions. The European Union [published](#) a proposal to negotiate a YMS with the UK in early 2024, which was rejected by the both the Conservative government at the time and the Labour opposition.

The health sector accounted for over 60% of Skilled Worker visas in the year ending March 2024

The number of non-EU skilled employees receiving employer-sponsored work visas rose steadily from 2012 onwards. 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. Visa grants dropped sharply during the pandemic in 2020, but rebounded in 2021 and rose strongly in 2022 and 2023.

By the year ending March 2024, 64% of Skilled Worker visas went to occupations that were newly eligible for visas under the post-Brexit immigration system. In particular, 39% of visa grants were for care workers, following their addition to the Skilled Worker route in February 2022 (Figure 5). Alongside care workers, nurses, senior care workers and doctors were the occupations receiving the most Skilled Worker visas in the year ending March 2024. In turn, the health and care industry was the largest recipient over this period, accounting for over 60% of grants. 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](#).

Figure 5



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 includes repair of household goods and activities of membership organisations.



In early 2024, the government introduced various measures to restrict migration under the Skilled Worker route. However, health and care roles were largely shielded from these changes. For example, they were exempted from the increase in the minimum salary threshold – from £26,200 to £38,700 – because their salaries are set according to nationally agreed pay scales. Instead, most health and care jobs are subject to a minimum salary of £29,000 (or £23,200 for care workers). As a result, the salary threshold increase will primarily affect jobs in the private sector. For a more detailed discussion, see the Migration Observatory commentary, [How will new salary thresholds affect UK migration?](#)

One policy change which could impact Skilled Worker visa grants to the public sector is the ban on visas for care workers' partners and children. Data from early 2024 indicated that visa grants to health and care workers had fallen sharply, although at the time of writing it remained uncertain whether this trend would continue. The decline coincided with a Home Office move to scrutinise applications, in light of widespread reports of exploitation in the care sector. For more information, see the Migration Observatory commentary, [The ban on care workers' family members: what will be the impact?](#)

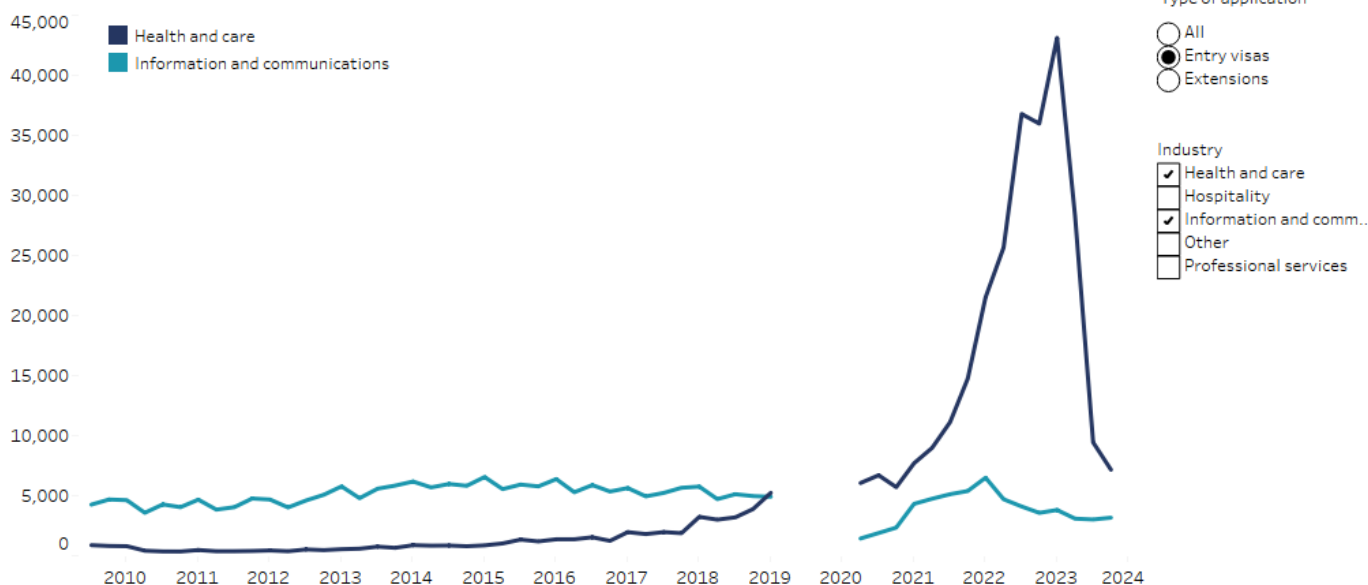
After the health sector, the industries granted the highest number of Skilled Worker visas in the year ending March 2024 were professional services (6%), hospitality (5%) and IT (5%) (Figure 5). However, the share of visas going to different industries is likely to change during 2024 due to higher salary thresholds, which are expected to affect lower-paying industries such as hospitality most.

While there are no published data on the number of Skilled Worker visas granted in each occupation before the introduction of the post-Brexit immigration system, it is possible to compare the number of skilled sponsored work visas—that is, both Skilled Worker and intra-company transfer visas—by industry. The number of skilled sponsored visa grants to the IT sector was relatively similar pre- and post-pandemic (Figure 6). By contrast, the hospitality industry received over 16 times more entry visas in 2023 than it did on average between 2010 to 2019 (9,300 compared to 575), driven primarily by visa grants to chefs (an occupation newly eligible under the post-Brexit immigration system).

Figure 6

Quarterly applications from non-EU citizens for skilled sponsored work visas, 2010 Q1 to 2024 Q2

Main applicants only; includes both entry visas and extensions



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office immigration statistics, table Cos_D01.

Note: Figures show certificates of sponsorship; not all workers issued a certificate of sponsorship will come to the UK. Some certificate of sponsorship issuances in 2019 and 2020 cannot be categorised as an entry visa or extension due to data quality issues.



There is widespread qualitative evidence of migrant exploitation

Qualitative research has found that migrants in the UK can be vulnerable to [exploitative practices](#), 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 [power imbalance](#) 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 [more difficult](#) to leave exploitative situations. As a result, visa holders such as migrant care workers, Seasonal Workers, and Overseas Domestic Workers are at [particular risk](#) of exploitation.

While it is not possible to quantify the scale of exploitation of migrant workers in the UK, qualitative evidence suggests it was a widespread issue in 2023. An ICIBI [inspection](#) of the social care sector, for example, 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 2022 Home Office and DEFRA [survey](#) identified concerns among some seasonal workers, including complaints of poor-quality accommodation and mistreatment by managers.

Some non-EU international students stay on to work after their studies

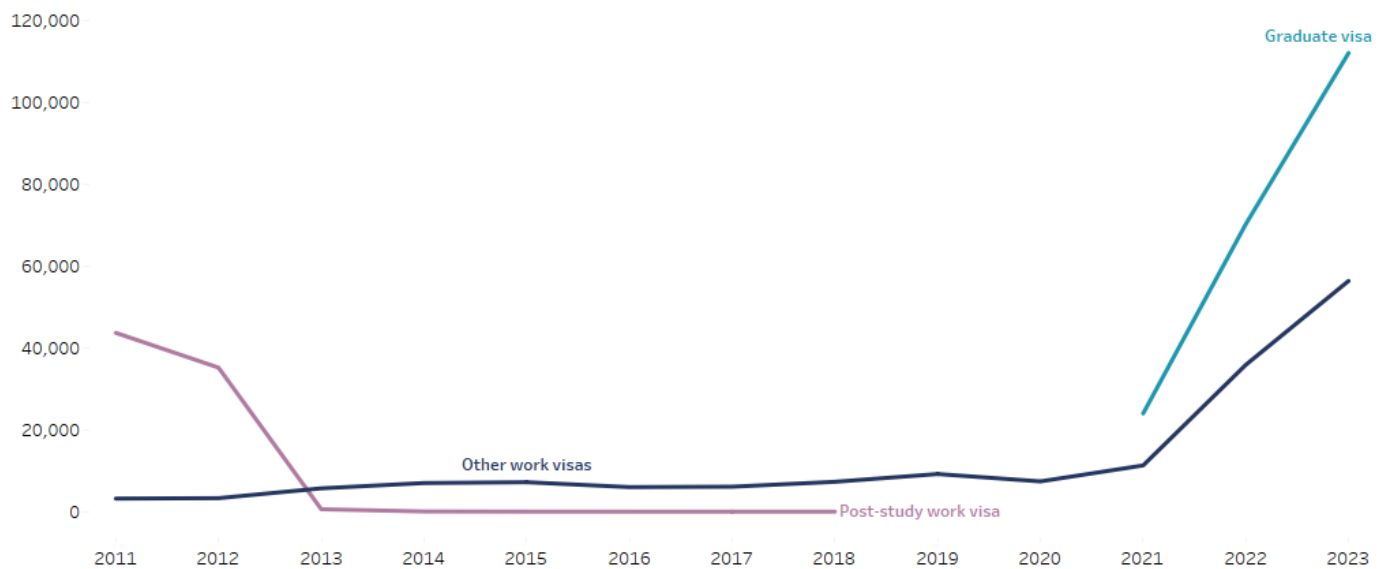
The number of international students receiving work visas to stay on in the UK after their studies fell sharply after 2012, when the ‘post-study work’ route was closed. After 2012, students who wanted to remain in the UK to work either needed to find an employer willing to sponsor them for a skilled 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 scheme was introduced in 2021 and has proved more popular than its predecessor—112,000 former students were granted one of these visas in 2023 (main applicants only) (Figure 7). Another 89,000 Graduate visas were granted in the first six months of 2024.

Figure 7

International students switching from study to work, 2011 to 2023

Main applicants only



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: Data do not include EEA or Swiss citizens before 2021.



In previous years, the majority of international students have 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, [Student Migration to the UK](#).

There is some evidence, however, that 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 more than half of all people who switched directly from study visas to Skilled Worker visas in the year ending June 2023 went into care work. See the Migration Observatory commentary, [International students entering the UK labour market](#), for a further discussion of these trends.

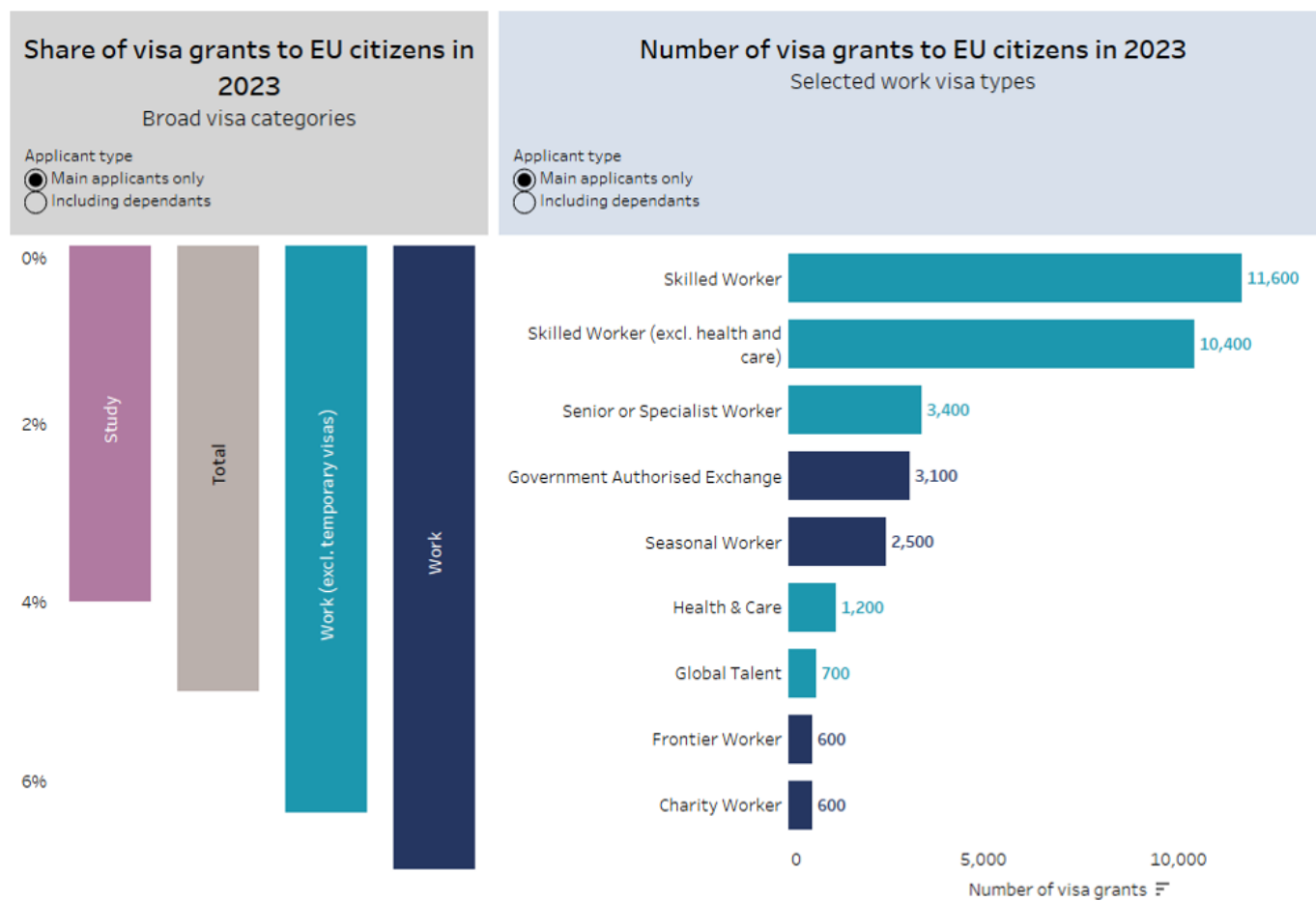
EU citizens' demand for work visas has been low since the post-Brexit immigration system came into force

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 the new rules might thus reduce long-term EU work migration by around 70%, by restricting the number of jobs that are eligible for visas (see the Migration Observatory's commentary, [Calculating the Bill](#), for more details). There was also [some evidence](#) that employer sponsorship requirements would reduce migration among people who are in principle eligible, for example due to costs and administrative barriers.

In 2023, the third year after free movement ended, 23,400 EU citizens received work visas (excluding dependants), making up only 7% of work visa grants (Figure 8). 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.

Almost half of work visa grants to EU nationals in 2023 were for the Skilled Worker route. In contrast to non-EU migration over the same period, only a small proportion of work visas granted to EU citizens were for health and care jobs (5%). The total work visa figure also includes grants to people coming for short work-related trips and not necessarily relocating to the UK: 29% of work visas granted to EU citizens in 2023 were for temporary work categories, with Government Authorised Exchange (GAE) visas the most common temporary visa route (13%). GAE visas are for people coming to the UK for a short time for work experience, training or research.

Figure 8



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Vis_D02.

Note: Left pane: 'Family' comprises family unification visas, EEA family permits, and EU Settlement Scheme family permits. Work comprises all work visas, including various categories of temporary work visas. 'Total' excludes visitor and transit visas. Right pane: Dark blue bars refer to temporary work visas.



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 July 2024, a skilled work visa holder coming to the UK with their partner could expect to incur fees of over £19,000 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 [Fiscal Impacts of Migration](#)). On the other hand, it can also have negative impacts in communities by increasing [population churn](#).

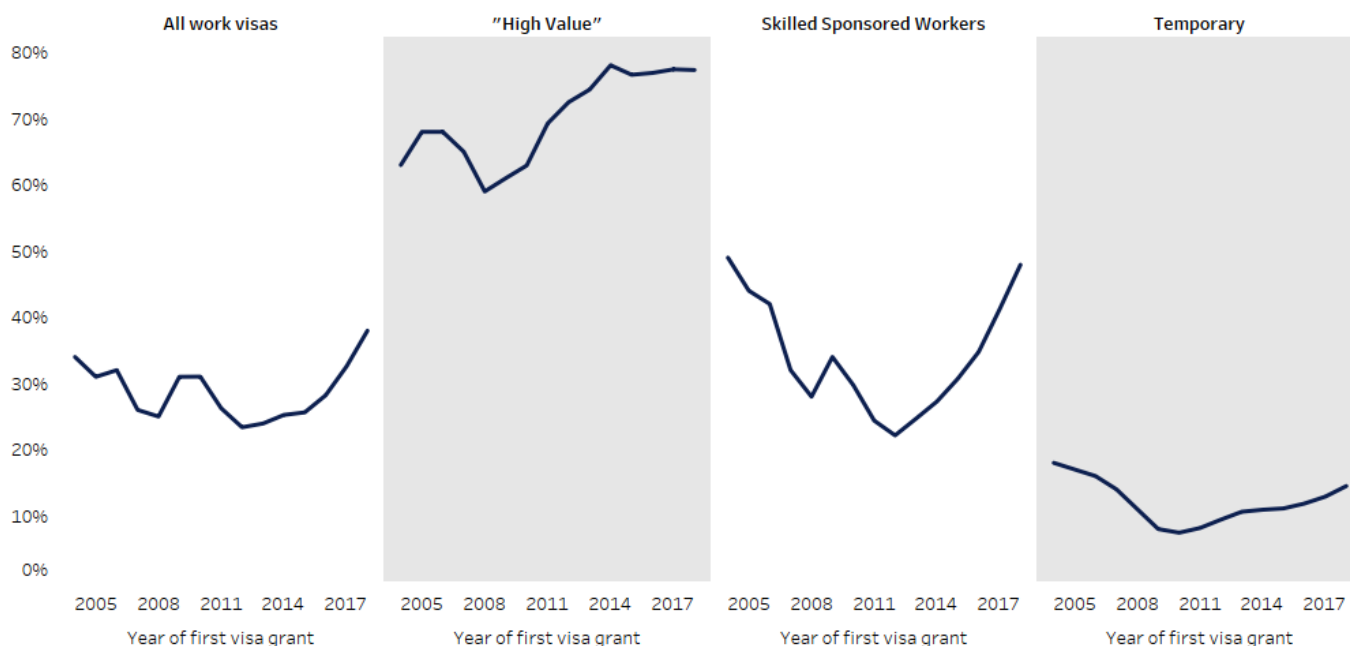
In the past, most non-EU work migrants have not settled permanently in the UK. By the end of 2023, for example, 38% of non-EU citizens who received work visas in 2018 still had permission to be in the UK (this includes both main applicants and dependants). However, this was a higher stay rate (after five years) than for any cohort arriving between 2004 and 2017 (Figure 9).

Much of the increase in stay rates over time for skilled sponsored workers can be explained by the relative number of visas granted to the specific routes which make up the category. People who arrive as Intra-company transfers, for example, are less likely to stay in the UK, partly because this visa does not provide a route to settlement. People who arrive on the Skilled Worker route, which does provide a route to settlement, by contrast, are more likely to stay—indeed, 75% of people who received a Skilled Worker visa in 2018 [still had permission](#) to be in the UK in 2023. 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 valid leave after five years. Note, however, that this visa category is small (see Figure 4).

Figure 9

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



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

Note: includes dependants; permission to be in the UK includes a valid temporary visa, ILR, or citizenship; people with 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 2023, followed by Nigerian citizens

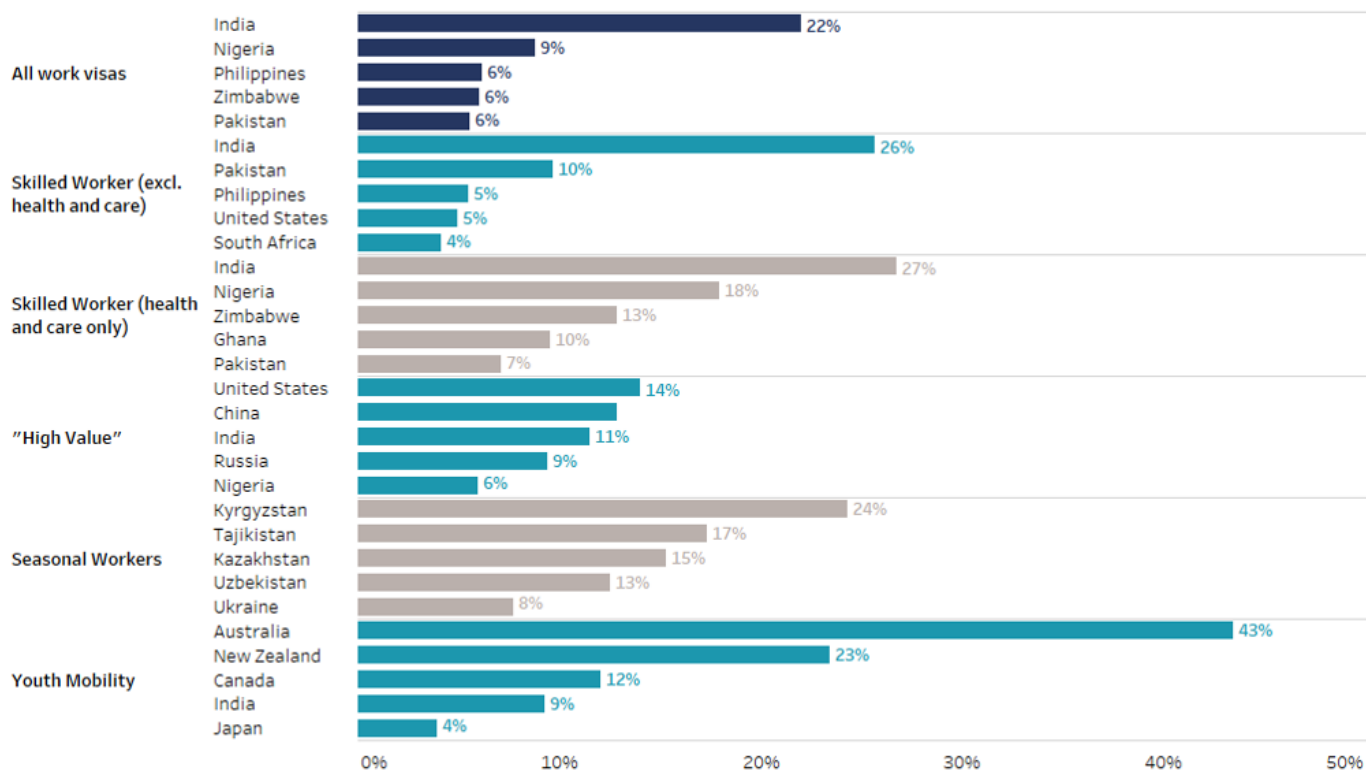
The top countries of origin receiving work visas in 2023 varied widely by visa type (Figure 10). Overall, Indian citizens received more main applicant work visas than any other nationality (22%), primarily because of their high take-up of Skilled Worker visas—indeed, over a quarter of Skilled Worker visa grants were to Indians, both in the health sector and in all other industries.

Citizens of Central Asian countries were more likely to participate in the Seasonal Workers scheme, while two-thirds of Youth Mobility visa grants were to citizens of Australia and New Zealand. People with US nationality received the largest numbers of ‘High Value’ visas in 2023; they predominantly arrived through the ‘High Potential Individual’ route, an unsponsored work visa for recent graduates of globally leading universities.

Figure 10

Top 5 nationalities by work visa type

Main applicants, 2023



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.



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. It is possible that in future such data could become available from administrative data sources (i.e. HMRC and DWP records).

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 numbers 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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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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