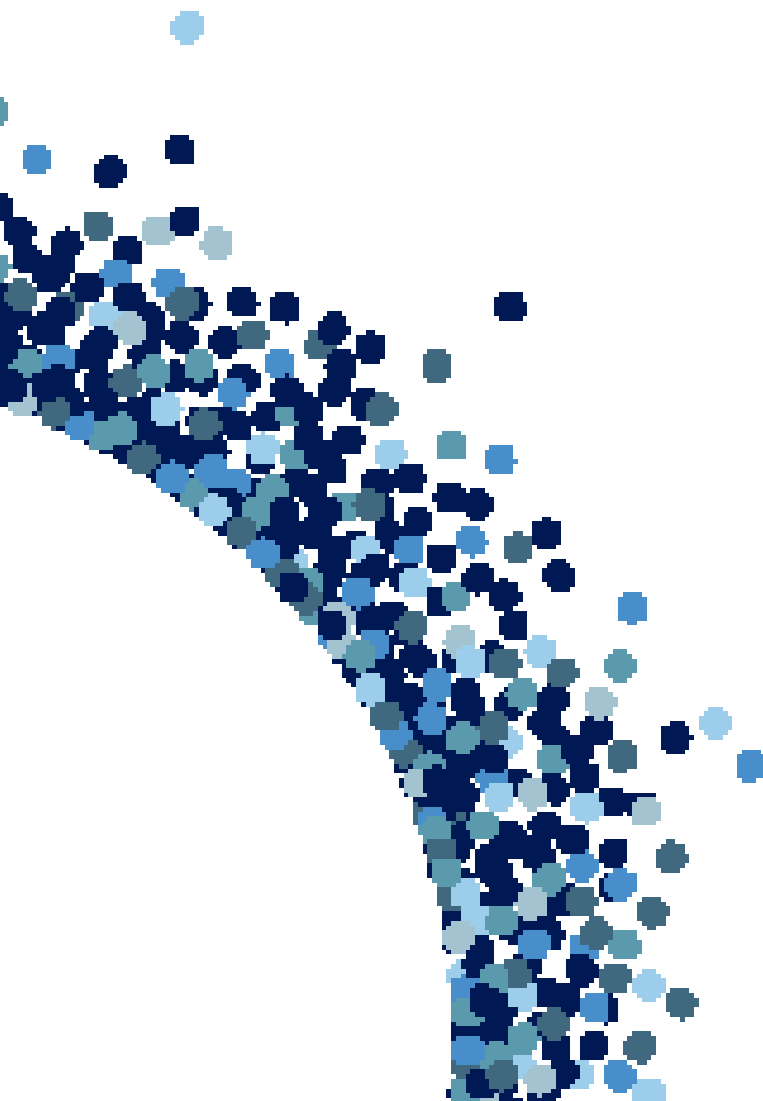




BRIEFING

Work visas and migrant workers in the UK



AUTHORS: Madeleine Sumption
Ben Brindle
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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 in 2022 after a pandemic-induced decline. The large majority of people arriving on work visas in 2022 under the post-Brexit immigration system were from non-EU countries.

The health and social work sector was the biggest contributor to growth in the number of non-EU Skilled Workers over the past decade; in the year ending June 2023, over 60% of Skilled Worker route visa grants were in the Health and Care subcategory.

The Seasonal Workers scheme, for temporary workers in the horticulture and seasonal food manufacturing, issued just under 35,000 visas in 2022.

Take-up of the 'Graduate Route' for international students who want to work after their studies has been higher under the post-Brexit immigration system than it was when a similar visa existed before 2011.

Since free movement ended, take-up of the post-Brexit immigration system was low among EU citizens, who made up only 10% of work visa applications in 2022.

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

Indian citizens were the largest recipients of work visas in 2022, followed by citizens of the Philippines.

Understanding the evidence

From January 2021, the post-Brexit immigration system was implemented. 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 usually earn annual salaries of at least £26,200, 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 £26,200 threshold. Workers in jobs on the shortage occupation list face a minimum salary of £20,960.

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. They must still meet the shortage-occupation salary threshold of £20,960.

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. 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 Worker visa.

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 2023, 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 2023, the caps were 35,000 (Australia), 13,000 (New Zealand), 8,000 (Canada), 3,000 (India), 1,500 (Japan), 1,000 (Hong Kong, Iceland, Monaco, San Marino, South Korea, and Taiwan).

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” in order 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, temporary visas are available for graduating international students who want to remain in the UK after their studies to work. International students graduating from UK higher education from 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 rule change that eliminated the post-study work visa in 2012. From 2008 to 2012, international students could apply for post-study work visas that gave them two years of work authorisation in any job.

Settlement

In some cases, visas are strictly temporary and workers must leave the country when their 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 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.

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, and this was increasingly the case during the pandemic in 2020. 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).

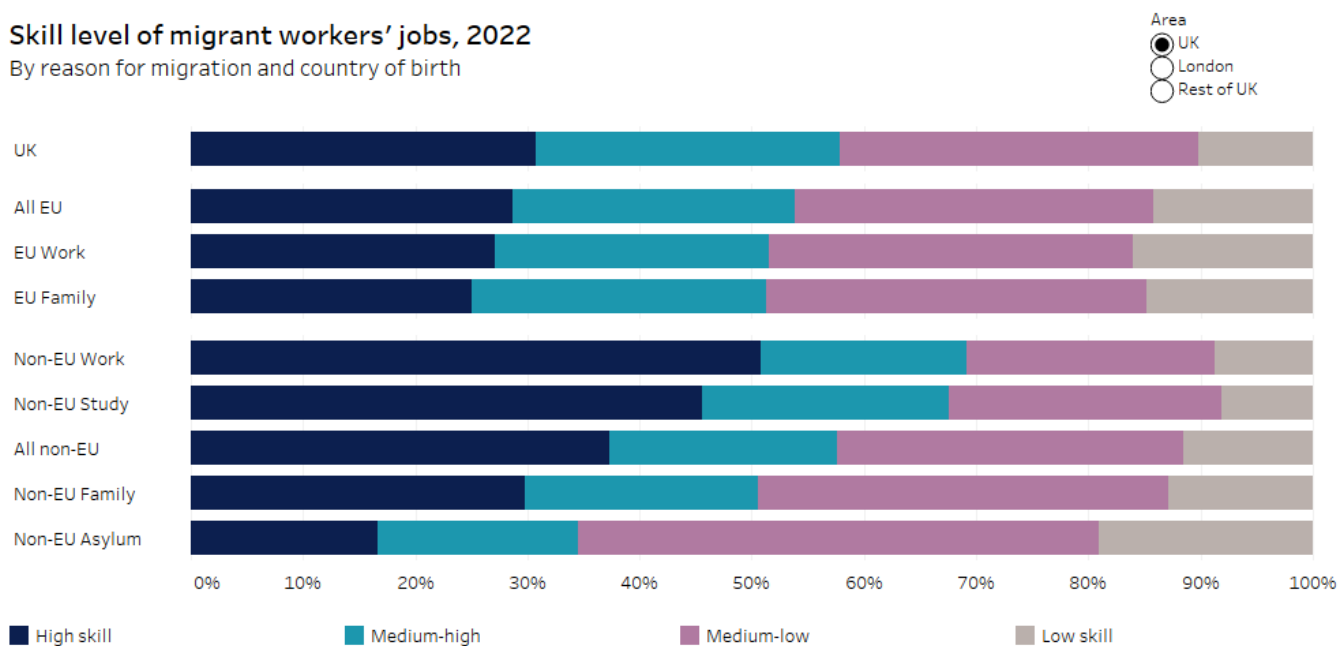
By 2020, an estimated 55% of foreign-born workers who said that they had originally moved to the UK for work-related reasons were born in EU countries, which was largely the result of 15 years of migration from EU countries following EU enlargement in 2004. A key feature of free movement rules that were 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.



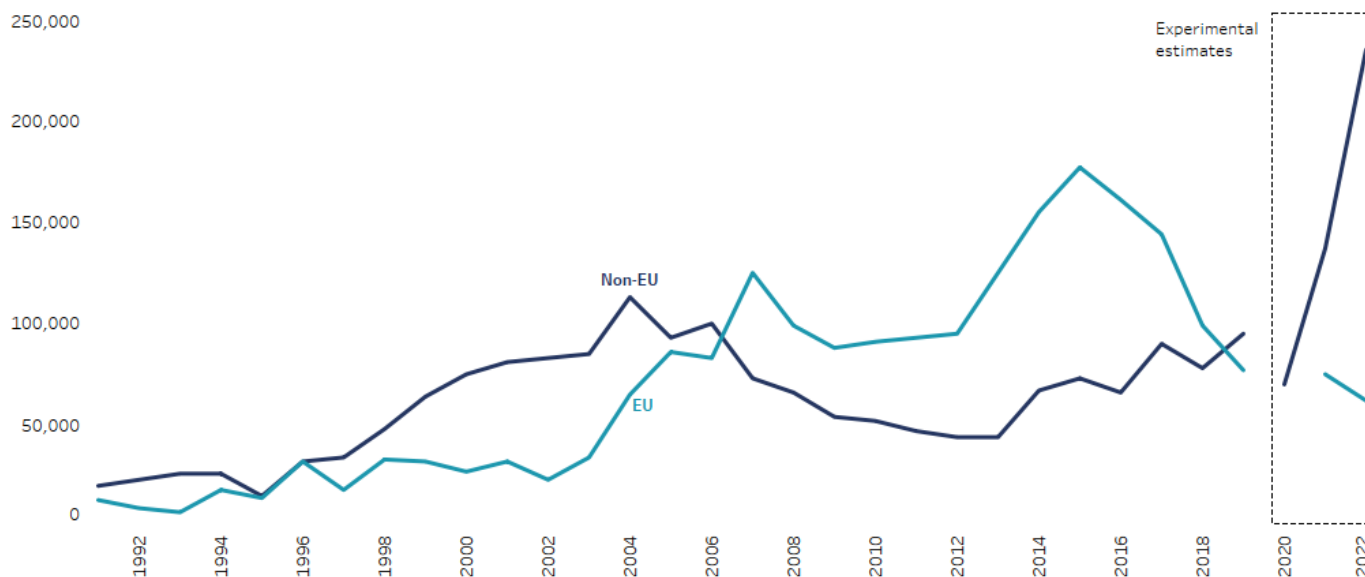
The end of free movement thus represents a major shift in UK immigration policy. Several occupations where employers have relied heavily on EU workers are no longer eligible for work visas under the new system, such as bar staff, cleaners and food processing workers. (For more discussion of eligible 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 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

Long-term work migration by citizenship, 1991 to 2022

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 2022.

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.

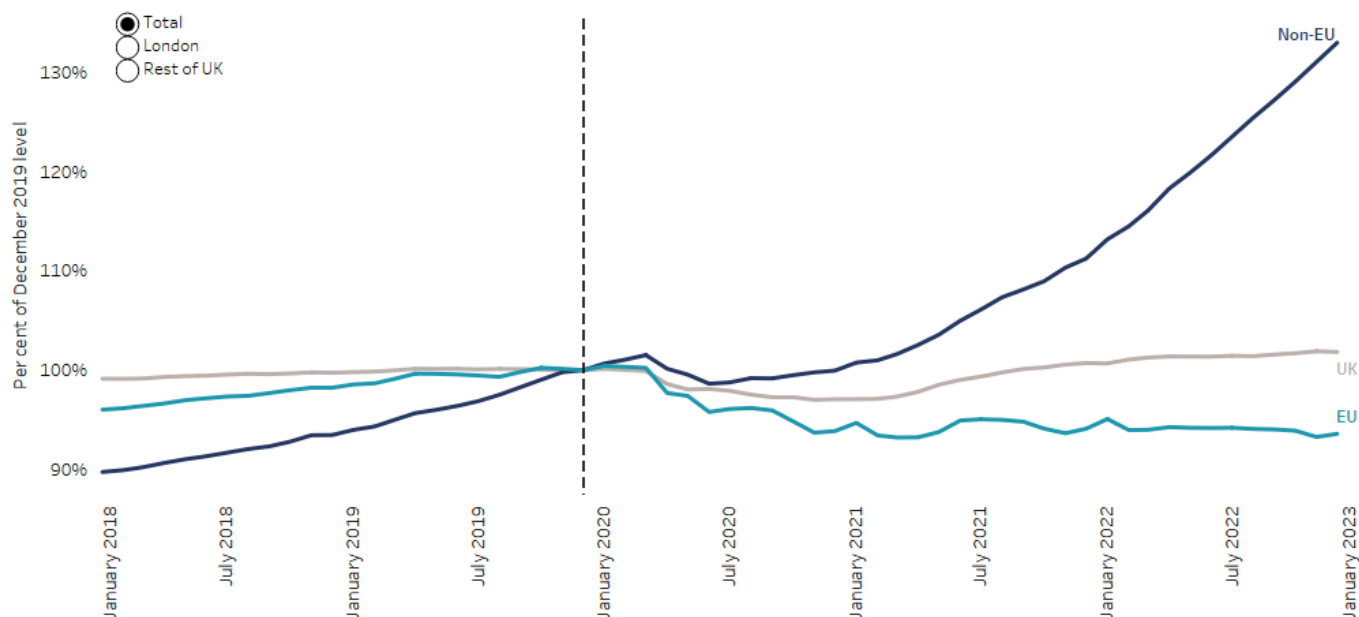


The Covid-19 pandemic had a further impact on the EU workforce in the UK. EU employees suffered large job losses in 2020, particularly in London. By December 2020, the number of jobs held by EU migrants in the UK had fallen by 6%, much higher than the 3% seen among their UK counterparts (Figure 3). By December 2022, EU worker employment had not reached its pre-pandemic (December 2019) level: there were 159,000 fewer EU employees in December 2022 than three years earlier before the pandemic (-6%), whereas there were 631,000 more non-EU employees (+33%).

Figure 3

Employees by original nationality, 2018 to 2022

December 2019 = 100%



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HMRC PAYE data from ONS, “Employments from Pay As You Earn Real Time Information: Ad hoc estimates of payrolled employees by NUTS1 region and nationality, seasonally adjusted.

Note: ‘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 has grown strongly since 2021, following a pandemic-induced decline

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, 2021). By the end of 2022, however, non-EU citizens’ demand for work visas far surpassed its pre-pandemic levels. In total 241,000 work visas were granted to non-EU citizen main applicants in 2022 (excluding frontier workers), compared to 137,000 in 2019.

The work visa categories that grew the most in 2021 and 2022 were the Skilled Worker and Seasonal Worker visas (Figure 4). The Skilled Worker route saw the largest growth, with 130,000 visas granted (to main applicants) in 2022—more than double the number granted in 2021 (59,000). Similarly, the cap on the number of Seasonal Worker visas available has been raised in each successive year since 2019 (see Understanding the Policy, above).

Figure 4

Work visa grants to non-EU citizens, by type

2018 to 2022, main applicants only



Source: Home Office Immigration System Statistics, year ending December 2022, Vis_D02



“High value” visa grants, e.g. to ‘innovators’ and ‘global talent’, increased in 2022. However, they make up only a small part of the work visa system (1% of work visas granted to non-EU citizens in 2022).

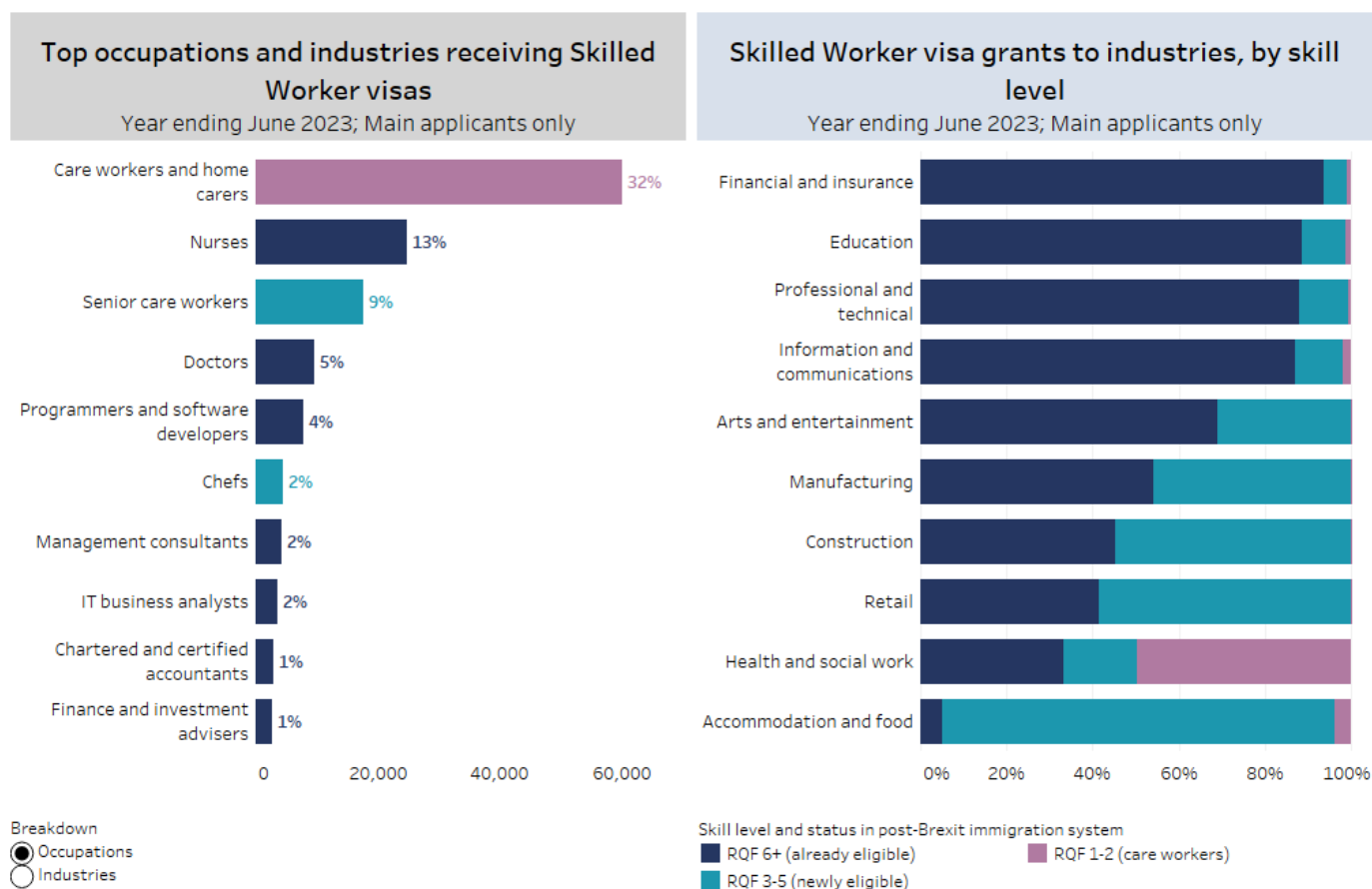
The number of young people moving to the UK under the Youth Mobility Scheme has remained lower than pre-pandemic levels, with 16,900 visas granted in 2022—primarily to citizens of Australia (45%), New Zealand (19%) and Canada (16%). People arriving via this route can work in any occupation so will include 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.

The health sector accounted for over half of Skilled Worker visas in the year ending June 2023

After the financial crisis depressed demand for work visas in 2009, 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. As noted earlier, visa grants dropped sharply during the pandemic in 2020, but rebounded in 2021 and rose strongly in 2022.

Of the 189,000 Skilled Worker visas granted to both EU and non-EU citizen main applicants in the year ending June 2023, more than 60% went to workers in the health sector (118,000). Indeed, the four occupation groups with the most Skilled Worker visas granted were care workers (32%), nurses (13%), senior care workers (9%) and doctors (5%) (Figure 5). The sharp rise in visa grants to care workers followed their addition to the Skilled Worker route in February 2022. This enabled UK employers to hire from overseas to fill these roles despite not meeting the skills threshold for this route (although they must still meet a salary threshold of £20,960).

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



Most of the top ten occupations receiving visas in year ending June 2023 were already eligible for work visas under the pre-Brexit immigration system. Of those occupations that are newly eligible under the post-Brexit system, care workers were the largest recipients of work visas, followed by chefs. In total, in the year ending June 2023, 54% of all entry visas for main applicants in the Skilled Worker route went to newly eligible occupations (including care workers).

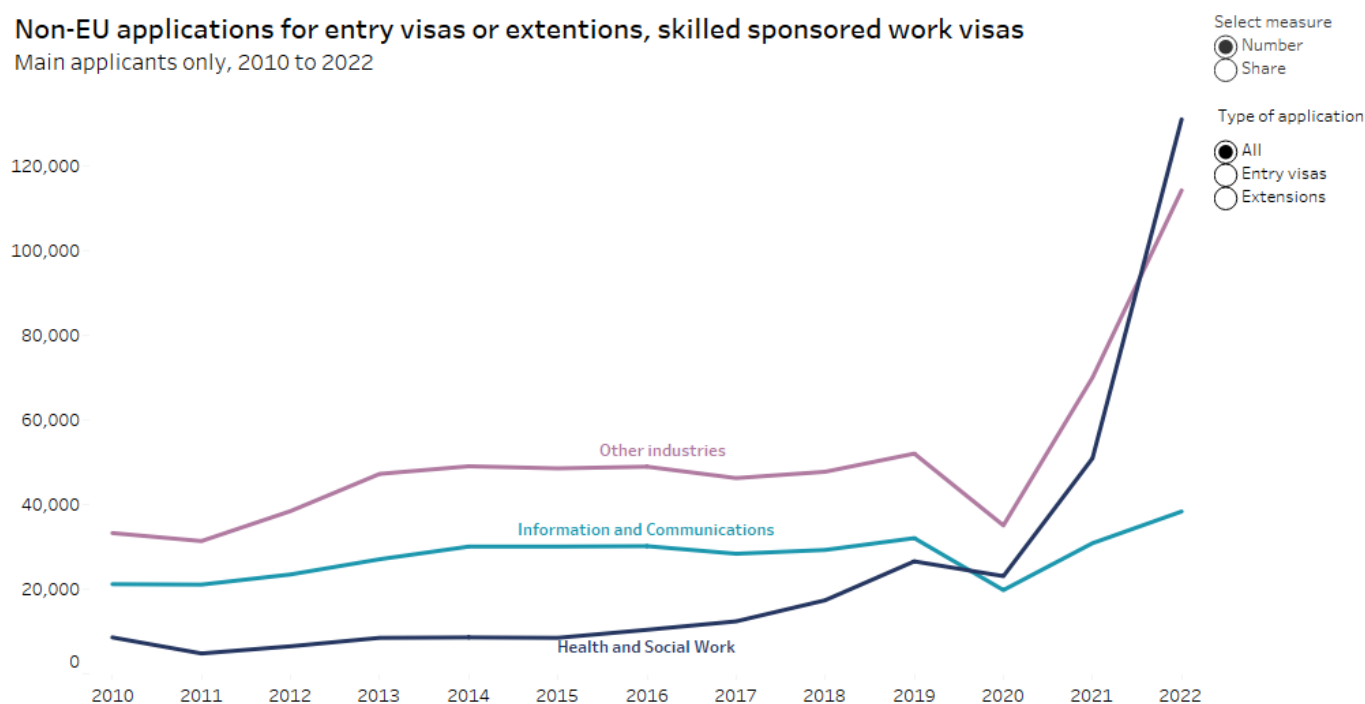
Health professions in the UK have relied heavily on migrant workers over the past decades, including both people on work visas and those on other immigration routes—although the overall reliance increased after the pandemic. For more information on the role of migration in the UK’s health and care sector, see the Migration Observatory briefing [Migration and the health and care workforce](#).

After the health sector, the industries granted the highest number of Skilled Worker visas in the year ending June 2023 were professional and technical services (8%), finance (5%) and IT (5%) (Figure 5).

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. Although the proportion of skilled sponsored work visas granted to the IT sector was far lower in 2022 than during the 2010s, when it regularly received around 40% of entry visas, the absolute number of grants were similar to this earlier period (Figure 6). By contrast, the hospitality industry received over 9 times more entry visas in 2022 than it did on average between 2010 to 2019 (6,000 compared to 575), driven primarily by visa grants to chefs.

Figure 6

Non-EU applications for entry visas or extentions, skilled sponsored work visas
Main applicants only, 2010 to 2022



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 2020 cannot be categorised as an entry visa or extension due to data quality issues.



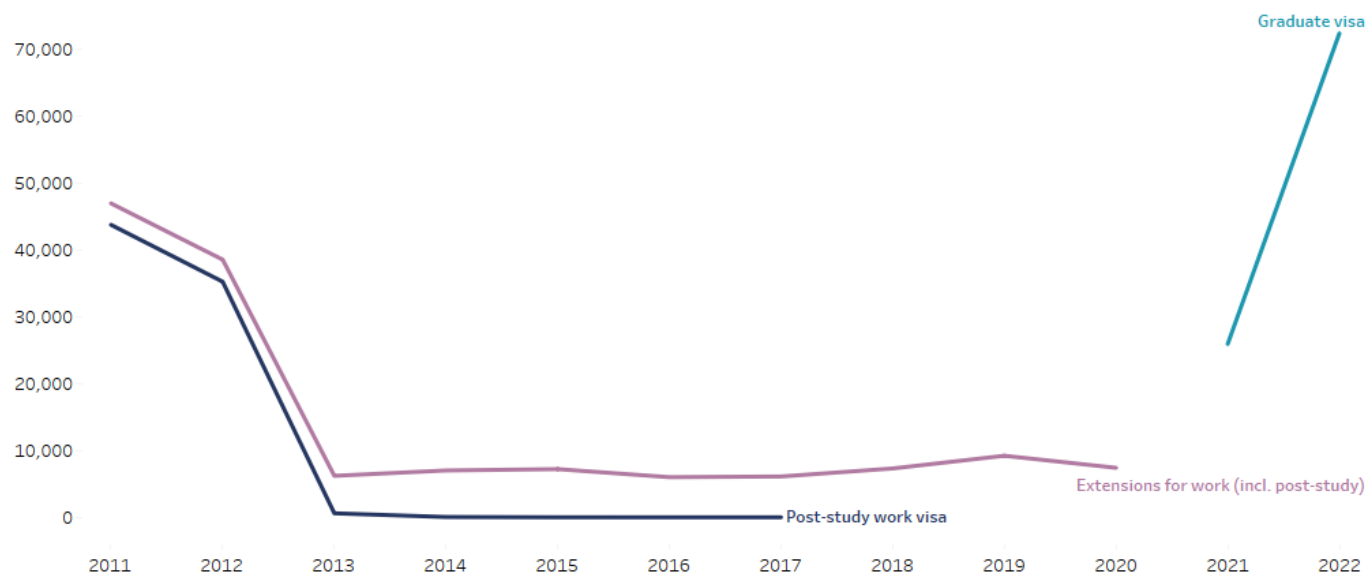
Some non-EU international students stay on to work after their studies

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—over 72,000 former students were granted one of these visas in 2022 (main applicants only) (Figure 7). Another 56,000 Graduate visas were granted in the first six months of 2023.

Figure 7

International students switching from study to work, 2011 to 2022

Main applicants only



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office immigration statistics: extensions for work obtained from table Exe_D01; post-study work and graduate visa grants obtained from table Exe_01.

Note: Data do not include EEA and Swiss nationals before 2021. "Extensions for work" figures refer to grants of leave to people who previously held student visas, including issuances of post-study work visas.



However, student migration patterns from recent years suggest that those using the Graduate work route may only stay in the UK temporarily. Among non-EU migrants issued an initial study visa in 2008, for example, when the previous post-study work regime was in place, 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](#).

The Seasonal Agricultural Workers’ Pilot saw 34,500 visa grants in 2022

The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Pilot is the only work visa designed to allow employers to sponsor migrant workers in low-wage work (although since 2022, care workers have been able to use the Skilled Worker route). This scheme was introduced in 2019, when nearly 2,500 issues were issued, in anticipation of the end of free movement.

The cap for the Seasonal Workers scheme was 45,000 places in 2023 and 2024, which could be increased by 10,000 places each year if needed. This was up from 40,000 in 2022 (after the option to raise the quota by 10,000 places was triggered), 30,000 places in 2021, 10,000 places in 2020, and 2,500 places in 2019. Ukrainians have received more visas than any other nationality in each year of the scheme, although their share of the total fell from 67% in 2021 to 21% in 2022 due to the restrictions placed on Ukrainian men leaving the country since the beginning of the war in the country.

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. A Home Office and DEFRA [review of the scheme](#) in 2021 identified concerns among some seasonal workers, including complaints of poor quality accommodation and mistreatment by managers.

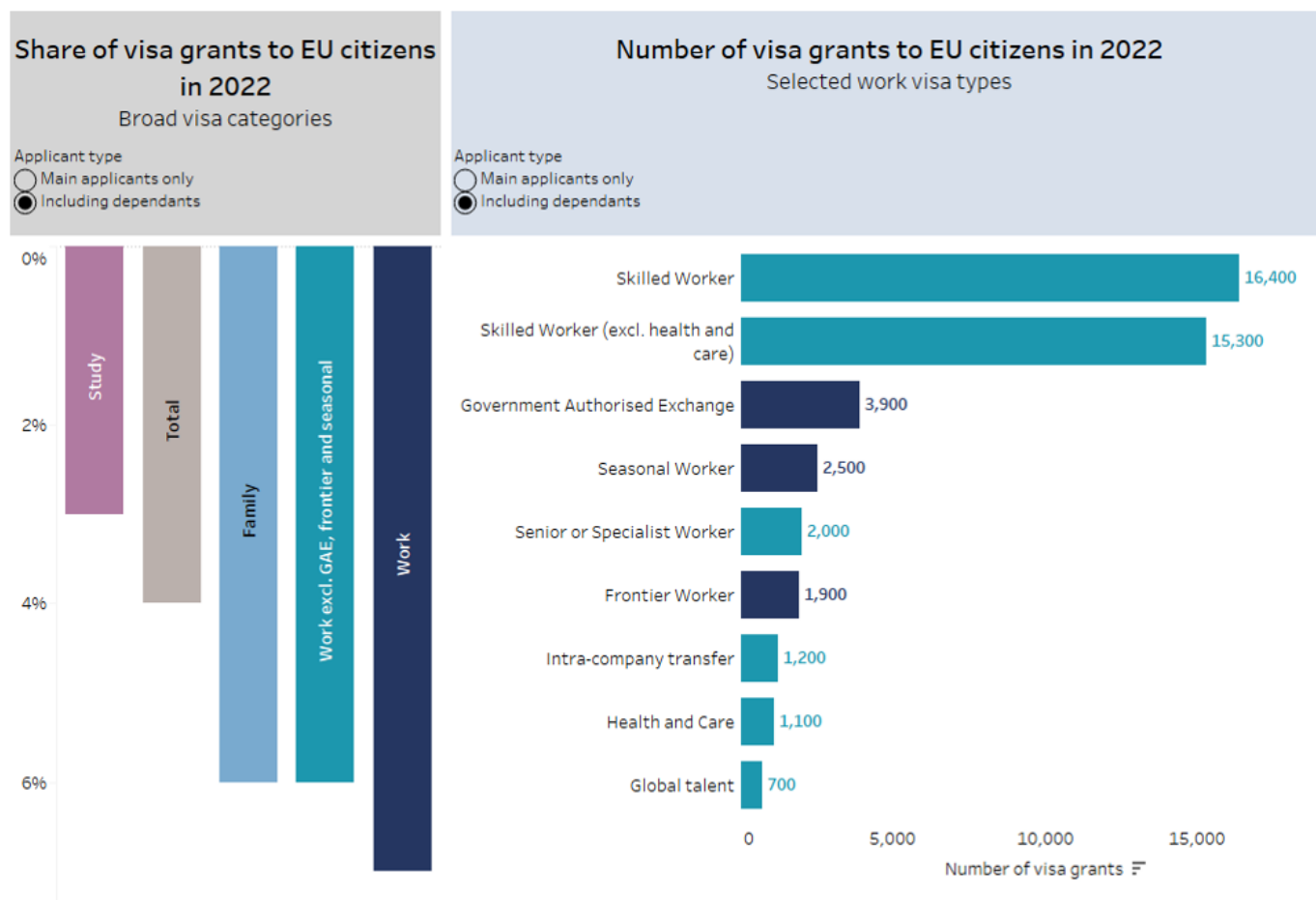
EU citizens' demand for work visas has been low since the post-Brexit immigration system came into force

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 (Sumption, 2019).

In 2022, the second year after free movement ended, approximately 26,000 EU citizens received work visas (excluding dependants), making up only 10% of work visa grants (Figure 8). Almost half of total work visa grants were for the Skilled Worker route but, 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 (4%).

The 26,000 work visas issued to EU citizens include grants to people coming for short work-related trips and not necessarily relocating to the UK. Indeed, almost a third of visas granted to EU citizens were for Government Authorised Exchanges (GAE) (15%), Seasonal Workers (9%) or Frontier Worker Permits (7%). GAE visas are for people coming to the UK for a short time for work experience, training or research, while Frontier Worker visas are 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).

Figure 8



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

Note: '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. 'All visas' excludes visitor visas.



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. Visa figures are typically considerably higher than long-term immigration figures because they include short-term movers and people who apply but never come to the UK, although they do not include EU citizens who have previously lived in the UK and are returning to the country with status under the EU Settlement Scheme.

Not all of the reasons for low EU demand for work visas under the new immigration system will persist. It is possible that numbers of EU visa applicants will increase as employers become more familiar with rules on how to sponsor them. However, the data available so far are certainly consistent with the idea that the post-Brexit immigration system has substantially reduced work migration from the EU.

Work-related migration is often temporary; most non-EU citizens receiving work visas leave the UK within 5 years

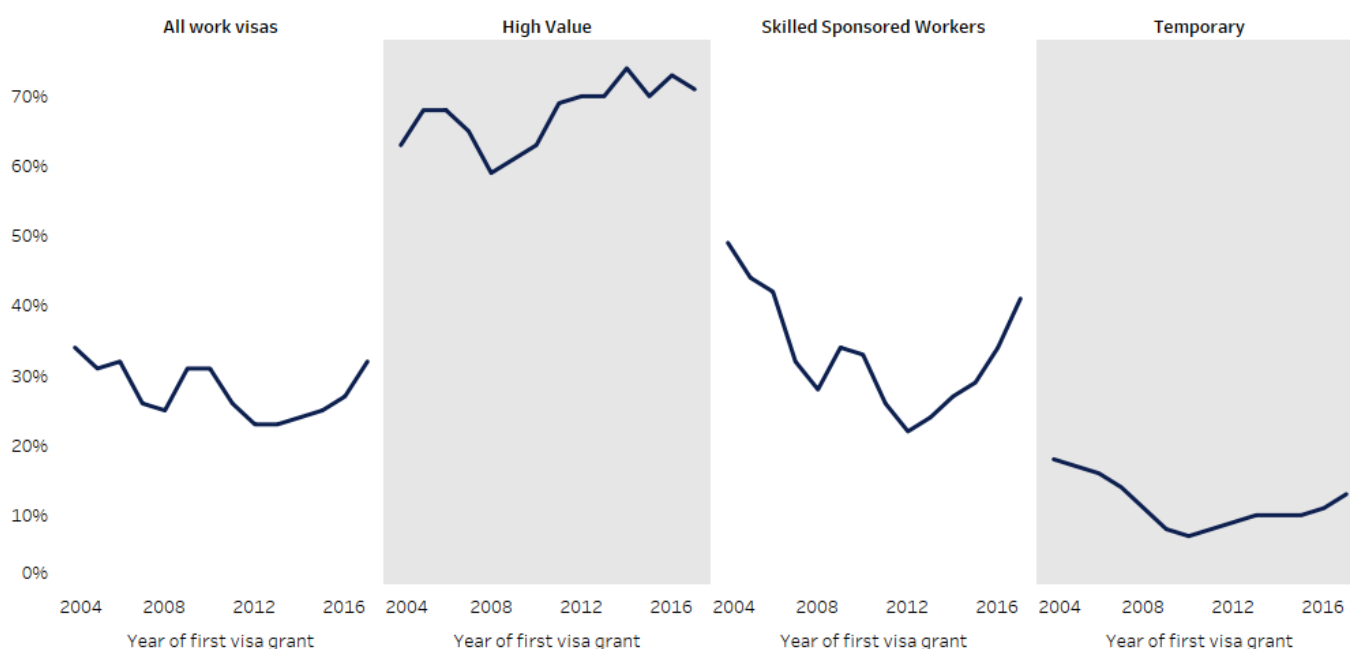
Some migrants who come to the UK for work stay for short periods, while others stay long-term and receive permanent status (settlement) or UK citizenship. Temporary migration can have economic benefits, for example because recently arrived migrants tend to have more positive impacts on public finances (see the Migration Observatory briefing on the [Fiscal Impacts of Migration](#)). 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 2022, 32% of non-EU citizens who received work visas in 2017 still had permission to be in the UK (this includes both main applicants and dependants). This is the same proportion as those receiving work visas in 2006, by the end of 2011 (Figure 9).

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 dependants) in 2017 were also more likely than men still to have permission to be in the UK five years later, at the end of 2022: 45% vs. 37% (Home Office migrant journey data, age and sex summary table MJ_04). For more information on temporary migration, see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Permanent or Temporary: How long do migrants stay in the UK?](#)

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.



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 (IHS) (as of early 2023, a total of £3,120 for a single person over five years, and more if they are bringing family members). It also includes fees made as part of settlement applications, which increased by 20% in October 2023 to £2,885 (see the Migration Observatory briefing [Settlement in the UK](#) for more details). In August 2023, the government announced its intention to raise IHS by 66% (to £5,175 over five years). While in some cases these costs are absorbed by employers who pay these fees on migrants’ behalf, others acquire debt in order to pay these fees themselves.

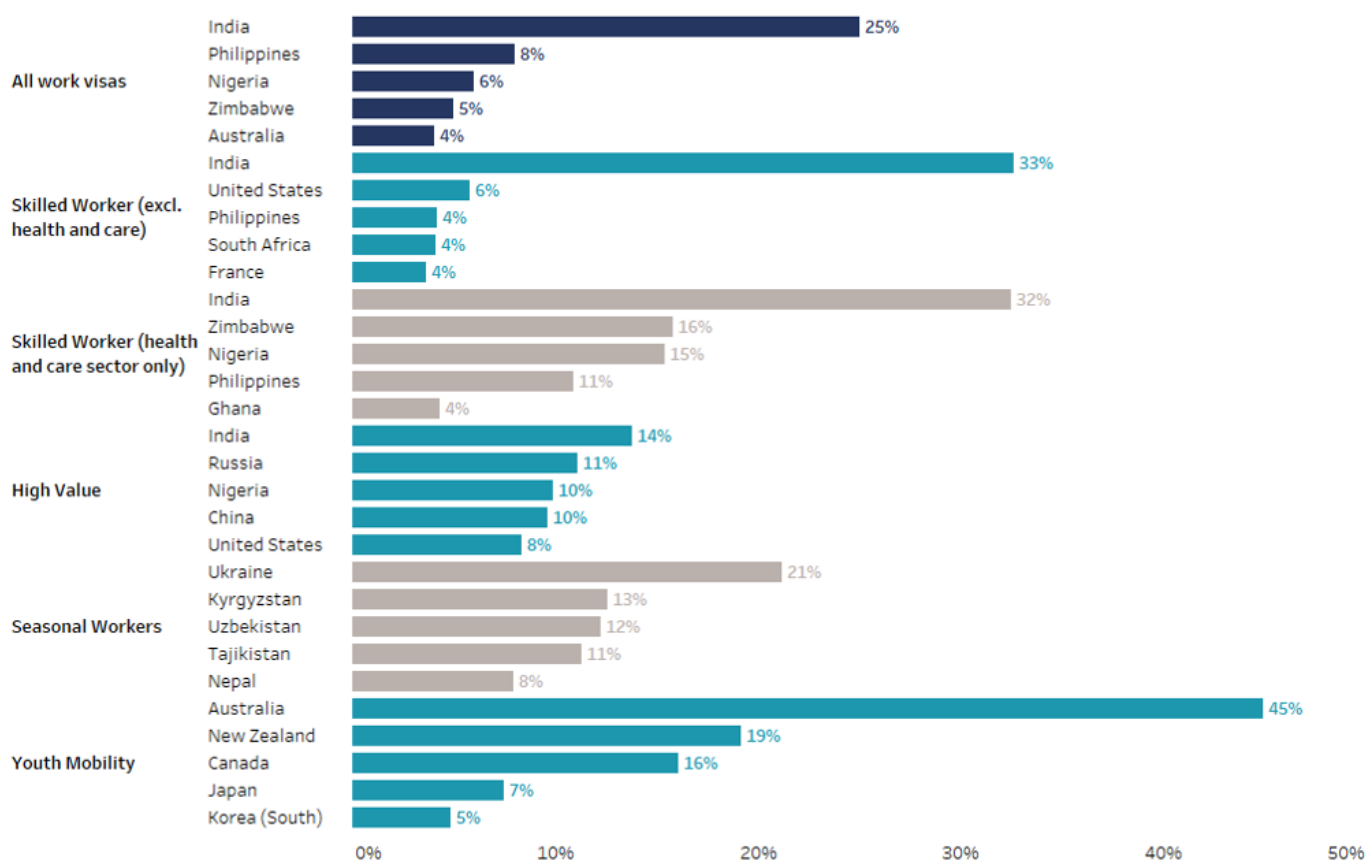
Indian citizens were the largest recipients of work visas in 2022, followed by citizens of the Philippines

Among non-EU citizens on work visas, the top countries of origin vary depending on the visa type (Figure 10). Indian nationals were by far the largest nationality for Skilled Worker visas in 2022, receiving around a third of visas to work both in the health sector and in all other industries. Ukrainians are more likely to participate in the Seasonal Workers scheme, discussed above, while the proportion of seasonal visas received by citizens of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan sharply increased from 2021 to 2022 (from 6% collectively to 36%). Indian citizens received the largest numbers of ‘High Value’ visas in 2022, followed by Russian citizens who predominantly arrived via the Global Talent route. The nationality receiving the largest share of Youth Mobility visas were Australians. Overall, Indian citizens received 25% of all main applicant work visas in 2022.

Figure 10

Top 5 nationalities by work visa type

Main applicants, 2022



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. However, 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 limited 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 analyse 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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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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About the authors

Madeleine Sumption
Director,
The Migration Observatory
madeleine.sumption@compas.ox.ac.uk

Ben Brindle
Researcher,
The Migration Observatory
ben.brindle@anthro.ox.ac.uk

Press contact

Rob McNeil
Head of Media and Communications
robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk
+ 44 (0)1865 274568
+ 44 (0)7500 970081

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