BioIndustry Association submission: UKRI Survey of R&D Businesses and the UK Immigration System

February 2022

Introduction

1. The BioIndustry Association (BIA) is the trade association for innovative life sciences in the UK. Our goal is to secure the UK's position as a global hub and as the best location for innovative research and commercialisation, enabling our world-leading research base to deliver healthcare solutions that can truly make a difference to people's lives.

2. Our members include:

   - Start-ups, biotechnology and innovative life science companies
   - Pharmaceutical and technological companies
   - Universities, research centres, tech transfer offices, incubators and accelerators
   - A wide range of life science service providers: investors, lawyers, IP consultants, and communications agencies

3. The UK biotech and life sciences sector delivers ground-breaking treatments to a diverse range of patients by creating novel therapies and diagnostics that will help treat and manage conditions enabling a wide scope of people to lead their lives. Access to international talent is fundamental to an innovative biotech sector and BIA has consulted widely on the current immigration system to provide feedback on UKRIs survey of R&D businesses and the UK immigration system. Where possible, individual organisations have submitted their responses, however some organisations felt they could not complete the entire survey based on their experiences and these have been collated into a sector response for your consideration.

4. There is a strong research and development pipeline across the industry, as BIA membership includes start-ups, biotechnology and large pharmaceutical and technology companies and a significant proportion of membership is drawn from the life sciences SME community.

5. Feedback has been obtained from BIA members across the UK. As a sector that relies on the exchange of global talent to remain internationally competitive and at the cutting edge of innovation, most organisations employ non-UK nationals and mainly source their overseas talent from Europe or the United States. However, there is no limit on where organisations source talent and this should be considered an international talent market.

6. There are no specific roles in the sector that are generally recruited from overseas. In general, a life sciences organisation's strategy is to recruit the best talent and so they are open to broadening their talent pool beyond the UK where their budget allows, particularly where the talent market may be more challenging and high-calibre talent is needed to strengthen succession planning. There may be specific roles which require detailed knowledge of the healthcare or regulatory frameworks within an overseas target market that would be considered useful.

7. The majority of our member companies' workforce is UK resident, with 50-74% being by far the most common percentage range reported by our members, with some considerably higher. The proportion of the workforce that are EU nationals was less than 25% and, in some cases, less than 5%, and those that are non-UK and non-EU less than 10%.

8. In the last five years member companies report that the number of staff who are non-UK nationals has either stayed the same or increased slightly, to approximately 5-10%. Although many report an increase in visa applications, this is related to changes in the immigration system rather than an increase of non-UK workforce.

9. Over the last five years there have been considerable changes to the immigration system, making it difficult for member companies to answer whether there has been a change in the number of applications from non-UK nationals to their organisation. The subjective consensus was that this had stayed the same or slightly decreased, but there is no data to support this perception.

10. BIA member companies responded that they find the current UK immigration system in general currently meets the needs of their organisation. However, the timescales for obtaining a visa for an EU worker post-Brexit has been more difficult than obtaining visas for those from outside the EU and although the length of time is improving, the process will become off-putting to EU candidates, limiting companies' candidate pools in the future. Larger organisations with dedicated human resources departments find the system easier to navigate than those without formal infrastructure and many SMEs outsource the application process, increasing the cost significantly as well as time taken.

11. There was little use of the Global Talent Visa route in member feedback and there were no workers that the organisations would like to bring in for which they could not find a suitable visa route. The skilled worker route is by far the most used route with little benefit seen of using alternatives, including the innovator and start-up routes. Speed of application was the main consideration of visa route selection.

12. Feedback shows the Shortage Occupation List (SOL) is less useful than under the previous immigration systems as skilled worker routes are well understood and using the SOL adds additional administrative burden and time to the process. There are a considerable number of roles that fall under the SOL and many within R&D functions that do not, as the list is not updated sufficiently frequently to keep up to date with job titles in the sector. There is also a considerable number of jobs which span multiple occupations in SME organisations which are not dedicated roles on the SOL and therefore there was mixed views on whether the SOL accurately reflected the skills gaps within the sector.

13. Considerable resources are spent on external consultants to navigate the immigration system and process visa applications. Even within large organisations there is a reliance on immigration advisors and company networks to source information and government websites are complex and lack sector specific information. Direct experience of the UKVI customer service is limited and relatively unknown, however it was noted that immigration lawyers and external consultants do use this service.

14. Member organisations pay the majority of costs associated with the immigration licence most of the time, which includes visa application fees, immigration health surcharges, costs associated with dependents and indefinite leave to remain. In general, costs were not considered prohibitive although the health surcharge was noted in some responses, and this did depend on seniority of the role and could prohibit the movement of early-career talent. It is the length of time taken to process applications followed by complexity of the system that are considered the main barriers to using the current immigration system.

15. International talent in life sciences is geographically mobile. With the end of free movement, organisations in the EU may look more appealing to EU nationals. Although working in the UK is perceived as a positive experience to have on a CV, the benefits of living and working in the UK, access to highly skilled careers in the sector and perception of UK life sciences should be made clear to those wanting to apply for jobs from outside the UK to attract more talent.

Summary based on evidence collection:

16. Access to international talent is fundamental to an innovative biotech sector and the BIA has consulted widely on the current immigration system to provide feedback on UKRI's survey with the following conclusions:

    - The Skilled Visa Route is widely used across the sector and generally meets the needs of employers. There is considered to be little or no benefit to the use of the Global Talent Visa, Innovator or Start-up routes as they do not offer reduced time, cost, or complexity.

    - There is little benefit to using roles on the SOL as this does not reduce the time and complexity for visa applications, significant amount of evidence is required to process the application, the list is not up to date with the latest roles and does not include integrated roles valued within the SME community.

    - Members reported the biggest barrier within the current UK immigration system to be the time taken to process applications, currently ranging from 8-12 weeks. Within a large organisation resource can accommodate the skills gap, however within an SME the speed of recruitment is vital.

    - Navigation of the UK immigration system is complex with specialist skills required. Larger member companies are better able to resource the process, either internally through HR departments or by outsourcing to immigration lawyers and technical experts. SMEs usually outsource this function which adds time and cost to their application process.

    - Organisations report that cost was currently not considered a major barrier.

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