

Can the UK Successfully Achieve Brain Gain With Fast-Track Visas?

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The Brexit deadline of October 31 is looming with no clear resolution in sight. The companies and institutions in the UK continue to scramble for solutions. While a deal is still possible, the recent [decision to prorogue Parliament](#) has skeptics worried that a no-deal Brexit is now inevitable. The Brexit may or may not result in a deal. However, the prospect of Brexit has left many EU citizens troubled. Their major concern being

whether their UK qualifications will be recognized in the EU. This in turn has led to fears of brain drain as companies relocate to Paris, the Netherlands, and other EU hubs. Now, Prime Minister (PM) Boris Johnson has [announced a plan to fast-track visas](#) for foreign scientists who wish to study or work in the UK. Will this plan be able to reverse the potential brain drain, and result in a net brain gain?

The Fast-Track Visa Plan

On August 8, PM Boris Johnson announced a shake-up of immigration rules in the UK, stating that a new fast-track visa [would be made available](#) to scientists wanting to work and study in the country. While details about the visa remain slim, the Prime Minister's Office expect this plan to attract elite researchers and specialists in science, engineering and technology. These elite researchers would include olympiads who are at the very start of their careers. This team would also include the winners of internationally recognized prizes and fellowships. The visa is expected to be finalized and launched by the end of 2019.

Different options that the visa may encompass include abolishing the cap on Tier 1 Exceptional Talent Visas. This visa improvisation will allow more universities and institutions to endorse candidates. Dependents of researchers will be able to work freely in the country. This visa will also offer a fast path to residency. It will also eliminate the need for candidates to have a job offer before they travel to the UK.

The Prime Minister's Office has also offered to give additional funding to scientists who have secured funding from the EU before Brexit occurs. This is an attempt to [mitigate the expected cutoff of funds](#) available to UK-based researchers once the country leaves the EU. In other words, the government has signalled its intentions to make it easier and faster for non-UK citizens to work and study in the UK post Brexit.

Why is the UK Offering this Deal to Scientists?

The UK leaving the EU will result in lowered enrollment of non-UK citizens at universities. Fewer scientists would be coming to work there. The announcement of fast-track visas comes among such ongoing fears. Discussions of the potential for Brexit to result in brain drain [have been ongoing since the referendum](#) was held three years ago. A variety of science fields in the UK could be affected if the government fails to make it easy and attractive for professionals to stay. Staffing firm Kelly Services found that up to 14% of the UK's life sciences workforce could relocate abroad due to Brexit. Currently, the EU offers generous funding to scientists including the groundbreaking Horizon 2020 initiative. On leaving the EU, such funding will no longer be available to UK scientists and researchers.

However, this is why the British government is trying to prevent researchers from leaving. They are also thinking of new ways to ensure that the country remains an attractive destination for top talent. The government has proposed that the United Kingdom Research and Innovation department will [automatically review any Horizon 2020 proposals](#) which are still mid-process when Brexit arrives in order to maintain

funding opportunities. Ultimately, the government states that it hopes to establish a points-based visa system similar to that of Australia. This would make it easy for skilled, educated professionals to relocate to the UK.

Venki Ramakrishnan, president of the Royal Society, welcomed the announced changes. Ramakrishnan pointed out that the UK has long had complex and expensive immigration restrictions preventing it from attracting top talent. With this kind of reform, the UK may [become an attractive destination for scientists](#). If these changes go through, Brexit can benefit the research community as a whole by offering more opportunities and funding. This will also result in net brain gain for the UK.

Tightening Immigration Restrictions Worldwide

UK loosening its immigration restrictions will make it easier for skilled scientists to live and work there. It will be bucking the trend that has swept across the Western world in recent years.

Researchers from developing countries [have faced increasing difficulties](#) in traveling to places like the US, Canada, and the UK even as science becomes more globalized. Many scientists from developing countries face difficulties in traveling for conferences or being approved to study or work overseas. Rejections for H1B visas have skyrocketed since President Donald Trump took office in the United States. Many researchers have been choosing to [work and study in places like China](#), where visas and funding are abundant, instead of the US as a result. If researchers find it easier to live and work in the UK, they would choose UK instead. This could result in overall brain gain for the UK.

PM Boris Johnson's plan is good news for both the UK and the research community as a whole. Attracting top talent to the UK can ensure that Brexit doesn't do as much damage to the scientific community as feared. This step symbolizes going against the trend of restricting immigration opportunities. As a result of this step, a globalized, highly skilled and talented UK scientific community would form. This scientific community may later result into a major workforce for the future.

Would you like to work or study in the UK? What do you think of the new fast-track visa announcement? Let us know your thoughts in the comments below.

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