

Evidence Submission



SMEs: Talent availability and the UK Immigration White paper

Key themes from the SME Immigration Roundtable

13 June, 2019

Hosts: Royal Society of Chemistry and Royal Academy of Engineering

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Background

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4. The UK immigration system should be more streamlined and agile.

SMEs in particular find it hard to navigate and deal with the visa system and often have to outsource to legal firms, which only adds to an already expensive system. Both ever-ch

SMEs require niche skills and knowledge, and these are hard to find

7. Whilst employees are normally recruited into SMEs for a specific set of skills, once they are employed, there is an expectation that they will show flexibility in what their role entails as the company grows and the skills needed from employees will grow and change with it. Salary is a factor in attracting the right staff, but companies are also looking for those who have an interest or passion for the work of the company as a whole. Employees will need to show a willingness to be flexible and be enthusiastic about working for them for a reasonable salary, but possibly not the highest the labour market has to offer for those skills.
8. Employers spend a lot of time developing overseas workers with the right skills and then after a certain amount of time, they are no longer able to work in the UK and go back to their country of origin with the skills they have acquired, no longer contributing to the UK. They should be encouraged to stay so that UK economy and society can benefit from the productive workers that have been trained here. There should be simple routes for valuable workers to remain in the UK, either through visa extensions, temporary leave to remain or applying for citizenship.
9. SMEs in science and innovation need niche skills and knowledge and, where they cannot source it from the existing UK labour force, the immigration system should help them attract that talent. The right skills and knowledge are often very hard to find and employers are required to look overseas, so barriers including time limits on visa routes and salary thresholds are unhelpful to SMEs. Examples of skills and knowledge cited around the table as difficult to find included nanomaterials, catalysis and robotics.
10. It is generally accepted that there is a general skills gap in 'hi-tech' industries, but ultimately for SMEs it comes down to funding to pay salaries and often they have to resort to employing part-time or using contractors, neither of which is desirable.

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SMEs would like to see a more streamlined and agile system

18. Many felt that the visa system is a 'bad experience' for both employers and employees and it has become 'more expensive and more hostile' over time. Many noted that they do not have the in-house capability to deal with visas so outsource to legal firms, but this is expensive and prohibitive.

19. The combination of only being able to offer lower salaries with high visa costs that must be absorbed by the employee and/or employer creates a difficult environment for smaller employers.

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26. SMEs felt that employing from abroad, though not exclusively, adds to the diversity of knowledge, skills and experience and these are all positive drivers of a successful, growing and ambitious SME. It also adds to the 'family' culture of smaller offices. For this reason, it is vital that SMEs have the flexibility to access the skills and experience they need.
27. Some SMEs noted that they have partnerships with universities through specific research programmes and research networks, which gives them potential access to students and researchers. This arrangement provides a window to the skills SMEs may be looking for and often represents a more efficient way of recruiting compared to some conventional routes. As SMEs and universities have formed partnerships through these networks, it was suggested that formalising this type of access to skilled workers at macro-level could be beneficial to SME employers.
28. Employers would like to have more trust from the Home Office: faith that the vast majority of employers are trustworthy and will employ based on the skills they need, this will mean less admin for both

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SMEs and skilled workers are highly mobile

29. Most SMEs agreed that if they could employ locally, they would and try to where they can; forming partnerships with universities, for example. However, access to top talent globally remains paramount, which ultimately makes them more productive as companies and economic contributors. It was suggested that the temporary worker route would be used by larger companies to train staff in the UK and then send them back to their country of origin with the purpose of employing them in their office in that territory or setting up an office in the single market. This could mean the UK is u5d.9 (m)-5 (is)3 (u5d