




Review of Talent Routes

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MAC

MIGRATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Foreword

Talent routes aim to attract the most skilled workers to the UK. Like many other countries, the UK gives more attractive visas to people it perceives to be particularly talented. The visas give more flexibility to visa holders and a faster route to settlement.

We reviewed two talent routes: Global Talent and Innovator Founder. They are very different in practice. Global Talent assesses talent up front based on an individual's track record, with very liberal requirements for settlement. Innovator Founder assesses applicants based on their business plan and then examines whether they are able to implement it. This means there are more requirements for settlement, although they may have limited impact in practice. Both routes are based on endorsements by specialist bodies contracted with the Home Office. Talented migrants will also come to the UK through other larger-scale work routes, such as the Skilled Worker (SW) Route, which enable workers to be sponsored by employers.

The question for this review was whether the Global Talent and Innovator Founder routes are working. Are they accurately selecting the most talented applicants and do the people who arrive flourish in the UK and contribute to their fields of talent? Do they help the UK attract and retain people who might not otherwise have been willing or able to come, or provide these migrants with more flexibility to contribute to their fields?

We have evaluated the routes as thoroughly as the current data permit. Overall, we find that the Global Talent route is largely meeting its objectives, and that the Innovator Founder route is not. We recommend small tweaks to improve the Global Talent route's effectiveness. For Innovator Founder, we recommend either abolishing the route or substantially reforming it to make it more selective.

Global Talent

The Global Talent route is primarily used by academics, although there are also significant numbers in tech, creative industries, and a handful of other fields. Global Talent visa holders have no salary or employment requirements, but their employment rate is high and their earnings are respectable, if not stellar. They earn less than SW visa holders, but this is primarily because such a high share are in academia. Holding constant industry, average earnings are comparable to the SW route.

Using the MAC's fiscal model, we estimate that the cohort of Global Talent visa holders who arrived in 2022/23 are expected to have a positive net fiscal impact over the course of their lifetimes of approximately £420,000 per person or £2.2bn overall. That is 43% less per person than the SW route, again reflecting that they are more heavily represented in lower-paying industries.

The distribution of earnings on the Global Talent route is more concentrated at the extremes, with substantial numbers of high and low earners. We find that between 8% and 21% of Global Talent main applicants granted visas in 2022/23 had earnings below the proposed Earned Settlement minimum income threshold of £12,571 in their second year. The range reflects uncertainty around those with no recorded earnings, who may not have entered or remained in the UK, or whose earnings may not be fully captured in the data. The incidence of low pay is driven partly, but not exclusively, by low-paid workers in the creative industries. One result is that the bottom two deciles of the Global Talent route are expected to be a fiscal cost over the course of their lifetimes. This is concerning for a route aimed at globally talented individuals.

Can this be fixed? There is no straightforward lever to make the Global Talent route more selective at entry, because the concept of talent is more subjective than salary requirements used in other routes. Nonetheless, we suggest tightening aspects of the entry process to improve its integrity. We recommend that reference letters should be sent directly to Endorsing Bodies rather than submitted by the applicant, and that the Home Office should introduce guidelines to prevent referees from supporting applicants where there is a conflict of interest.

At settlement, we believe that liberal requirements are appropriate for a route designed to attract the most talented. However, we are concerned that some Global Talent visa holders have such low incomes that they will struggle to support themselves in the UK in the long term. We estimate that between 14% and 28% of main applicants had earnings below £22,300 in their second year, with the range reflecting uncertainty about those with no recorded earnings, some of whom may not have entered or remained in the UK or whose earnings may not be captured in the data. We recommend that settlement applicants should meet a modest income threshold, based on at least the full-time national living wage. This is not as a proxy for talent, which cannot be measured using salary alone, but to ensure a minimum standard of living in line with other immigration routes and to reduce the fiscal costs of the tail of low earners on the route. We also believe it would be sensible to require evidence of sustained engagement with the field of talent, rather than allowing people to qualify for settlement based on evidence of a single payment. However, we recommend that this assessment should remain light touch.

Finally, we received a considerable number of suggestions from stakeholders on ways to expand or liberalise the route. This included adding new roles, from commercial photographers to DJs. We do not comment on which roles should be included, as it is a matter for the government to decide which fields of talent they believe are most important to the UK. Other suggestions included liberalising evidence requirements. We caution against significantly diluting the entry requirements for roles that do qualify, as this would risk admitting people who struggle to support themselves or contribute to the intended fields of talent. However, to make the route more efficient, we recommend that the Home Office explore possibilities to expand the 'fast-track' option that simplifies the application process for people with job offers at top institutions in Global Talent fields.

Innovator Founder

Selecting successful entrepreneurs is inherently difficult. Many businesses fail, many others subsist without being particularly successful, and it is not always possible to know which will flourish. Entrepreneur visas will always struggle with this challenge to some extent.

In our view, the Innovator Founder IF visa has not cracked the problem. Applicants and advisors find it difficult to manage, the Home Office is concerned that the observed outcomes of the route are not in line with those expected, and the available evidence on Innovator Founder business performance suggests that the route is not working as intended.

We did not have all the data we would have liked to assess the Innovator Founder programme. The main available metrics of business performance was turnover and number of employees. The Innovator Founder criteria require businesses to be 'innovative, viable and scalable'. This suggests that the businesses should in

theory be more successful than UK businesses that have no such requirement. However, the median Innovator Founder business has roughly the turnover of a small independent coffee shop by the time visa holders apply for settlement (after 3 years). Examining the number of employees amongst Innovator Founder businesses demonstrated they are generally low with median employment between one to two employees (some of whom are likely to be the visa holders themselves) across the first 5 years of operation, suggesting the route is not leading to significant job creation.

It is possible that some of the businesses will grow faster in time—for example, if they are developing innovative approaches that take time to scale. From the data we have been able to obtain, we certainly cannot be confident this will happen and we see no evidence of meaningful growth in the initial years for most Innovator Founder businesses. At best, we can conclude that three years is not enough for Innovator Founder visa holders to demonstrate a successful 'innovative and scalable' business. There is a significant chance that the Innovator Founder route is fiscally costly in both the long and short term.

We believe the performance of the Innovator Founder route is poor enough to justify abolishing it. The proportion of low performing businesses, even after several years of trading, and the low incomes of visa holders on the route are concerning. It suggests that the vast majority of visa holders are not meeting the route's objectives. The key question is whether the higher-performing parts of the route can be salvaged. A small percentage of Innovator Founder visa holders and businesses appear to perform very well, and we saw individual case studies of impressive businesses. If the most promising could be identified in advance, it would be possible to retain the route and make it much more beneficial. Endorsing Bodies told us that while some of the most successful businesses can be predicted from the initial application, many cannot.

We would have liked to assess this question using data but ran up against some major data gaps. If the government wants us to examine whether a more selective Innovator Founder route would be possible, we recommend it works with us to improve the data and then commissions a rapid review.

In case the government maintains the Innovator Founder route, we make some recommendations for improvements. We received various suggestions for liberalising the route, such as relaxing the innovation requirement or preventing UKVI from questioning Endorsing Bodies' endorsements. We do not believe that the route should be liberalised at this time, while its performance remains in question. We recommend addressing the potential conflict of interest within Endorsing Bodies by allowing them to provide paid-for support services only to applicants endorsed by other Endorsing Bodies. We also recommend extending the standard period for settlement from three to five years, to give enough time to assess business performance, and introducing more robust performance metrics on which settlement is based.

Investors

Finally, many stakeholders pointed out that investors are not currently eligible for any talent route, after the previous investor visa route closed in 2022. We did not review the impacts of any potential financial investments as this was out of scope of a review focusing on individual talent. However, we looked at whether talented investors could be admitted through Innovator Founder, Global Talent, or a standalone route. We recommend against all three options. This is because we do not believe the current models would be able to distinguish talented investors from the large number of other wealthy people who would want to use an

investor route with limited economic benefits, with significant risks associated with the previous iteration of the route and comparable international schemes.

Introduction

On 27 February 2026, the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) wrote to the Home Secretary informing her of the intention to launch a self-commissioned review into the UK's talent routes. Under the terms of the Framework Agreement with the Home Office, the MAC can self-commission work of our own choosing and comment on the operation of any aspect of the immigration system, alongside commissioned work from the government. The aim of our review of the talent routes is to assess how best the immigration system can be used to admit top talent to the UK.

Context

UK work visa policy usually seeks to prioritise the most skilled migrants. This approach is common across high-income countries and recognises the convincing evidence that highly skilled migration brings economic benefits. In May 2025, the UK Government published an Immigration White Paper, with one of the primary aims being to reduce net migration. However, it also set out measures to expand talent routes explicitly aimed at promoting UK growth. These measures included making it simpler and easier for top scientific and design workers to use the Global Talent visa. They also included a review of the Innovator Founder visa to encourage the transition from student visas, allowing potential entrepreneurs to build their business and career in the UK.

In January 2026, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, also announced at the World Economic Forum in Davos that the UK would reimburse visa fees for select highly skilled individuals in 'deep technology' fields and those recruited by innovative UK firms operating in priority sectors.

This review focuses on two of the 'talent routes' – Global Talent and Innovator Founder. These are the routes we have heard most about from our stakeholders. The Global Talent route is the most widely used talent route for migrants.

Our approach to this review

As part of this review, we have sought information from several different sources to inform our research and support our decision making. These include:

- Stakeholder engagement – Stakeholder feedback played a key role in our understanding of how well the talent routes are working (both in terms of meeting government objectives and attracting the right calibre of people), whether they add value to the landscape of skilled work routes, and how they could be improved. Committee members met with government representatives (including Devolved Governments), immigration advisers, analysts with an interest in talent visas, employers and representatives of relevant fields (arts and culture, technology and science, and academia and research) at a series of roundtable discussions.
- Economic analysis – Quantitative analysis formed a central part of the review and helped us understand who uses the talent routes, how migrants fare in the labour market, and the extent to which the routes contribute to wider economic and growth objectives. Using Home Office administrative data, HMRC earnings and employment records, and Migrant Journey data, we examined

visa volumes and demographics, switching and settlement patterns, salary progression, employment outcomes, and fiscal impacts of the Global Talent route, with comparisons against other immigration routes where appropriate.

- Call for Evidence – We ran a Call for Evidence from 5 March to 1 May 2026, which was open to anyone who wanted to respond. This was key to allowing a range of people to write to us with their views on either the Global Talent route, Innovator Founder route, or both. The Call for Evidence received over 400 responses from a range of people including both Global Talent and Innovator Founder visa holders and former visa holders, aspiring applicants, universities and other employers, Endorsing Bodies, representative bodies and lawyers.
- Discussions with Endorsing Bodies – MAC secretariat and Committee members spoke individually to all Endorsing Bodies and sub-Endorsing Bodies on both the Global Talent and Innovator Founder routes. We reviewed these conversations against a framework of both existing and emerging themes of interest.
- Previous Home Office evaluations of the Global Talent route – particularly drawing on the latest evaluation in 2024 (Global Talent visa evaluation: wave 2). This was a survey of all Global Talent visa holders and achieved a 46% response rate. While there have been several changes to the immigration system since the report was published, we found these evaluations helpful for quantifying some of the behavioural factors relating to the Global Talent visa. [1]

We are grateful to all stakeholders who have contributed evidence and their expertise for use during this review. Their engagement was invaluable in helping us understand the workings of these routes and the experiences of users of these routes.

Structure of this report

This report is organised into the following chapters:

Chapter 1 outlines talent routes and their purpose.

Chapter 2 covers the Global Talent route.

Chapter 3 covers the Innovator Founder route.

Chapter 4 considers cross-cutting issues and Investor visas.

Further to the main report, the Annexes provide additional analysis, further information about the background to our approach, and a glossary of terms and abbreviations that we have used.

[1] The Home Office has previously published evaluations of the Global Talent route: (Wave 1 2022, with fieldwork carried out in 2021) and Wave 2 (published in 2024 based on fieldwork in 2023). Both were based on surveys of Global Talent visa holders (n=307 for Wave 1 and n=4,025 for Wave 2) alongside qualitative interviews with users of the route.

Chapter 1: Talent routes and their purpose

Policy context

This section lays out the policy context for the Global Talent and Innovator Founder visas, the two routes on which we focus in this review. We also briefly touch on other routes available to talented migrants and the routes available globally to talented migrants.

Global Talent visa

The Global Talent visa was introduced in February 2020 replacing the previous Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent) route. The purpose of this route is to facilitate the entry of talented migrants in the fields of science, engineering, humanities, social science, medicine, digital technology, arts and culture.[2]

This is an unsponsored route.[3] Migrants must have either won a prestigious prize or obtained endorsement for entry through an application to an Endorsing Body to prove that they are a leader or potential leader in their field. The endorsement process differs depending on the field the migrant is applying for:

- If the migrant is a researcher or academic leader, there are four routes they can be endorsed under:
    - Route 1 – Academic and research appointments pathway: fast-track endorsement for individuals who have accepted an eligible position at an approved UK higher education institute or research institute with responsibility either for academic, research or innovation leadership and development, or where they will be performing research or innovation as a primary function of their role. Endorsements under this pathway are administered by the British Academy, Royal Academy of Engineering and the Royal Society.
    - Route 2 – Individual fellowships pathway: fast-track endorsement for individuals who have been awarded an individual fellowship on the list approved by the British Academy, Royal Academy of Engineering and the Royal Society.
    - Route 3 – Endorsed funders pathway: fast-track endorsement for researchers and specialists whose name or job title is specified in a successful grant application from an endorsed funder approved by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The list of approved host organisations has recently been expanded to include over 100 research-intensive organisations.[4]
    - Route 4 – Peer review pathway: standard endorsement for individuals who apply to be individually assessed on their talent by the British Academy, Royal Academy of Engineering or the Royal Society.

[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-talent-appendix-w-workers/global-talent-caseworker-guidance-accessible
[3] Sponsorship in the context of the immigration system refers to employers holding licences to bring workers to the UK. Workers on sponsored routes will need to have a job offer, meet salary and skills thresholds for this occupation. Migrants are tied to their employer for the duration of their visa, if they wish to work in a new job with a different employer, they will need to update their visa.
[4] https://www.ukri.org/news/global-talent-visa-expanded-to-innovative-research-businesses/

- If the migrant is a leader or potential leader in arts and culture, they must submit an endorsement application to the Home Office which is then passed to Arts Council England for consideration.[5] Within this application, they need to provide supporting evidence in the form of a CV detailing their experience, three letters of support whereby a well-established organisation or eminent individual verifies the migrant's experience in their relevant field and up to 10 pieces of other evidence (including any media recognition, awards and proof of appearances in artistic programmes of work).
- If the applicant is a leader or potential leader in digital technology, they must submit an endorsement application to the Home Office which is then passed on to Tech Nation for consideration. Within this application, they need to provide a personal statement explaining the contribution they expect to make to the Digital Technology sector in the UK. They provide a CV detailing their experience, three letters of recommendation supporting their application, and up to 10 pieces of evidence in relation to the relevant eligibility criteria.[6]

All endorsement applications are submitted directly to the Home Office; these are then passed on to the relevant Endorsing Body for review. To enter the UK, migrants need to have their endorsement application approved by the Endorsing Body and have their visa application approved by the Home Office. If they wish they can apply for both endorsement and the visa at the same time.

The Global Talent visa gives permission to stay up to five years in the UK.[7] Migrants can apply for settlement after three or five years in the UK.[8] To be eligible to apply after three years, migrants need to meet one of the following conditions:

- Migrants are endorsed by the British Academy, the Royal Academy of Engineering, the Royal Society or UKRI on their original endorsement application.
- Migrants are endorsed by Arts Council England or Tech Nation under 'exceptional talent' only (i.e. not 'exceptional promise') on their original endorsement application.
- Migrants hold a prestigious prize.[9]

Global Talent migrants can count time previously spent on certain other immigration routes towards settlement. These include SW and its Tier 2 predecessor, Scale-up Worker, Innovator Founder and several other work routes.

The total cost to apply for a Global Talent visa is £766. This is made up of £561 for the endorsement application and £205 for the visa application. For those migrants who hold a prestigious prize, the total cost

[5] Arts Council England accept applications on behalf of the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT), the British Fashion Council (BFC), the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), and the Design Business Association (DBA). If the migrant's discipline is covered by one of these organisations, the application will be passed on for specialist assessment.

[6] This evidence should include at least 2 unique documents showing the migrant is either leading talent or potential talent. Where the migrant is a founder or senior executive, they will need to provide evidence of any commercially successful established businesses, share ownership or businesses dissolved in last 5 years.

[7] Global Talent migrants have choice over the number of years they apply for leave (between one to five years).

[8] Migrants will need to meet settlement criteria to be successfully granted settlement

[9] A couple of examples include Academy Awards – Actor in a Leading Role and the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. A full list of awards can be found here.

remains £766 but this is paid in full at the visa application stage. Migrants additionally need to cover Immigration Health Surcharge costs.[10] Migrants on this route can bring dependants to the UK.

Innovator Founder

The Innovator Founder visa was introduced in April 2023, replacing the previous Innovator and Tier 1 (Entrepreneur) routes and consolidating elements of the earlier Start-up route. Existing holders of Start-up visas were not automatically transferred onto the Innovator Founder route when the Start-up route closed to new applications. Instead, they were able to continue their existing leave until it expired and could apply separately to switch into the Innovator Founder route if they wished to remain in the UK.

The purpose of the route is to attract migrants with innovative, viable and scalable business ideas to establish and grow their businesses in the UK.[11]

This is an unsponsored route. However, as for the Global Talent visa, migrants need an endorsement from designated Endorsing Bodies on their business or business idea. Migrants need to show that their business idea is new, innovative, viable and scalable – Endorsing Bodies assess business plans against these criteria. There are currently four Endorsing Bodies who can issue endorsements for Innovator Founder visas. These are UK Endorsing Services, Innovator International, Envestors Limited and The Global Entrepreneur Programme (GEP).

The GEP is a government programme run by the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade for internationally mobile, tech-based entrepreneurs that helps them to scale and internationalise their innovative companies from a UK global, European or other headquarters. This Endorsing Body is unlike the others in that it issues endorsements for founders who have already been invited to participate on their programme. In 2024/25, 18% of new Innovator Founder endorsements were through the GEP.

Finally, there are 63 legacy Innovator Endorsing Bodies from the previous policy design that had a much larger number of endorsing bodies. They are no longer accepting new applications but are authorised to continue maintaining and monitoring existing endorsed migrants.[12]

The Innovator Founder visa provides the migrant with three years' permission to stay in the UK, at which point they can apply for settlement or to extend. During those three years in the UK, they need to meet with their Endorsing Body twice: once after 12 months and once after 24 months. These checkpoint meetings aim to ensure that the migrant is making progress with their business. Settlement normally requires three years spent specifically with permission as an Innovator or Innovator Founder, and time spent on other visa routes cannot be included in that qualifying period. Migrants also need to hold a settlement endorsement from one of the Endorsing Bodies to apply for settlement.

[10] The Immigration Health Surcharge for all the routes discussed in this report is currently £1,035 per year for main applicants/adult dependants and £776 for applicants under 18/child dependants. These costs need to be paid upfront.
[11] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-appendix-innovator-founder
[12] A full list of these Endorsing Bodies can be found here.

The total cost to apply for the Innovator Founder visa is £2,357 (for migrants applying out of country).[13] This is made up of £1,000 for the endorsement application and £1,357 for the visa application. Migrants will also need to pay for the 12-month and 24-month checkpoint meetings, which cost £500 per meeting, as well as the Immigration Health Surcharge. Migrants can bring dependants to the UK on this route.

Other routes for highly skilled migrants

The **High Potential Individual visa** was introduced in May 2022. The purpose of this route is to attract top global graduates to the UK.[14] This is an unsponsored route. To qualify, migrants must have been awarded a qualification from an eligible university in the last five years. The visa lasts for two years, if the migrant holds a PhD or doctoral qualification the visa lasts for three years. The key difference with this route relative to other talent routes is that it does not lead to settlement.

The **Scale-up visa** was introduced in August 2022. The stated purpose of this route is to support UK businesses who have shown a sustained period of growth to sponsor talented individuals to help their businesses continue to grow.[15] This route is sponsored at entry and so migrants need a job offer to work for a scale-up business for at least six months, and this job needs to be on eligible occupation list (and meet salary requirements).[16] Initial grants of permission last for two years, with the possibility to extend. After five years in the UK, migrants can apply for settlement. The MAC recommended abolishing this route in our Salary Requirements review, published in December 2025, based on very low usage, relatively high administrative costs, and a lack of clarity about the value that it added above and beyond the SW route.

The **Skilled Worker route** can also be an option for talented migrants. This route is far larger than the other routes and not specifically aimed at the most talented. Its purpose is to provide access to skilled migrant workers. This route is sponsored, with migrants required to have a job and meet salary and skill thresholds. The SW visa grants permission to stay for up to five years in the UK after which migrants can apply for settlement.

International comparisons

In the international context, there are many comparable routes available in countries similar to the UK. Table 1 covers examples of Global Talent equivalent and Table 2 covers Innovator Founder equivalent routes in other countries. Much like the UK, they offer a range of options for talented individuals to work in those countries. We refer to relevant international examples throughout the report covering various aspects.

[13] For in-country applicants, the total Innovator Founder fees cost £2,693. This is made up of £1,000 for endorsement applicant and £1,693 for the visa application.
[14] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-potential-individual-caseworker-guidance/high-potential-individual-caseworker-guidance-accessible
[15] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/scale-up-worker-caseworker-guidance/scale-up-worker-caseworker-guidance-accessible
[16] The eligible occupation list and the salary thresholds for these occupations can be found here. Migrants need to meet the general salary threshold of £39,100 or the going rate for the occupation they're working in – whichever is higher.

Table 1: Global Talent equivalent routes

Country, visa route	Purpose and structure
USA - O-1	For individuals with sustained national or international acclaim in science, education, business, athletics or the arts. The visa is separated into two subcategories, O-1A is for individuals with extraordinary abilities in sciences, education, business, or athletics. O-1B is for individuals with an extraordinary ability in the arts or extraordinary achievement in motion picture or television sector. The visa length is up to three years with the option to extend up to one year.
Canada - Global Talent Stream category A	For highly innovative companies to hire those with unique and specialised talent. Length of stay is dependent on employer.
Australia - National Innovation visa	To bring in globally recognised and high performing individuals (researchers, investors, entrepreneurs, athletes and creatives etc) who are recognised as global leaders or emerging leaders that can add to the innovation, productivity and economic growth mission. The visa uses an invitation-only model to have a very selective intake. This is a permanent residency visa.
France - Talent Passport	To support foreign highly skilled individuals (both employed and self-employed) to contribute to areas such as research, business creation, innovative projects, recognised reputation and artistic or cultural activity. Works as a multi-year talent residence permit with a variety of requirements and visa length dependent on the pathway.
Singapore - Personalised Employment Pass (PEP)	High earning employment pass holders or foreign professionals. Functions as a work pass and requires a minimum fixed salary but is not tied to an employer. The visa length is up to 3 years and not available for renewal, but holders can apply for permanent residence.
New Zealand – Talent (Arts, Culture, Sports) Work visa	For internationally recognised highly skilled individuals to contribute to the artistic, cultural and sporting landscape. Applicants require support from a New Zealand based organisation recognised for its excellence in the sector and to be sponsored. Visa length is up to 2.5 years.
Global Impact visa (now closed)	Pilot visa scheme with the Edmund Hillary Fellowship to attract talented innovative entrepreneurs, investors and start-up teams to New Zealand. Closed once the pilot scheme was completed. The visa length was up to 3 years.

Source: MAC desk-based research

Overall, these visas broadly have the same purpose as the UK's Global Talent visa; they target high-skilled individuals across disciplines to contribute to the country's economy, society and research base. Some of the Global Talent equivalent routes also overlap with Innovator Founder equivalent ones, which is why they have been repeated in Table 2 below where applicable.

Table 2: Innovator Founder equivalent routes

Country - visa route	Purpose
USA - E-2	For individuals from treaty countries to work and live in the US by investing in and operating a US business. This route enables people to create and run a business and be active in that role. The visa length is up to 2 years and then can be renewed in increments of up to 2 years.
Canada - Start-up visa (now closed)	For entrepreneurs with potential to build innovative and high growth start-ups in Canada. Offers permanent residence with applicants needing to have a qualifying business and obtain a letter of support from a designated entity.
Australia - National Innovation visa	This invitation-only visa, outlined in the table above, is also open to people starting their own business.
France - Talent Passport	Talent Passport pathways include 'creating a business in France or taking control of one' and 'engaging in an innovative economic project recognised by a public body'
Singapore - EntrePass	Allows for foreign entrepreneurs to start and operate a business in Singapore. Aimed towards non-conventional businesses with a focus on those that are ventured-backed or have innovative technologies. The visa length is up to 1 year and can be renewed up to 2 years.
New Zealand - Entrepreneur Work visa (now closed)	For entrepreneurs to establish a business or purchase an existing business and play an active role in its operation. The visa requires a minimum investment, to have a business plan, and for the business to be in a suitable sector. The visa length was up to 3 years.

Source: MAC desk-based research

Like in the UK, it is difficult to evaluate the success of these overseas routes and there are few published, rigorous evaluations. One exception is Canada, where an official evaluation of the start-up visa found that there was lack of clarity with the endorsement process, issues with abuse in the application process and significant processing wait times. Since the evaluation, the program has closed to new applications and is under review. Whilst in operation the route had considerable numbers of visas granted (hitting its peak of over 5,000 in 2025)[17] but there is limited data (e.g. amount of investment generated, the proportion of high-growth startups, general challenges with defining success and quantifying growth)[18] to demonstrate the full extent of its impacts.

Purpose of talent routes

The purpose of Talent routes is to attract highly skilled migrants, those at the top of their fields, to the UK. Successive governments have said that admitting highly skilled migrants is a priority as it brings economic and wider benefits. Talent routes have also been linked to economic growth objectives and the industrial

[17] Canada's Start-Up visa Program Sets Record For New Permanent Residents - Canada Immigration and visa Information. Canadian Immigration Services and Free Online Evaluation.
[18] Evaluation of the Start-Up Visa Program

strategy.[19] Talent may take various forms, and current routes recognise skills across a range of fields, including the arts, technology, and research.

Talent routes play a distinct role relative to the rest of the work visa system. Many talented migrants will enter through the SW route, and this route will work perfectly well for them and their employers. They may have no need for a separate talent route. There are two main reasons a talent route might add value beyond what the SW route already offers. First, it may accommodate people who are not eligible for the SW route, for example because they are self-employed. This is the case for entrepreneurs and many people working in the arts. Second, a talent route can offer terms and conditions that make the UK more attractive such as a faster route to settlement or more flexibility to move between employers.

Some stakeholders have told us that simply having liberal talent routes sends a positive message or 'vibes', even if the routes themselves do not deliver concrete benefits beyond the existing routes. Any such benefit is difficult to measure. In our view, what matters in the long-term is that the policy is achieving its objectives, not optics. We cannot see any evidence that supports the idea that messaging should be an important consideration in the future policy design of talent routes. However, a clear and accessible articulation of the rules may be important so potential visa applicants can understand their eligibility.

A perennial challenge for all talent and entrepreneurial routes is how to identify those with the greatest potential. Criteria that are too narrow, or an overly restrictive assessment process, risk excluding people who are genuinely talented and founders who could go on to establish successful businesses. On the other hand, if the eligibility criteria and endorsement process are too generous, the routes may admit people who do not bring the desired benefits and could in some cases even have negative economic and fiscal impacts.

One important caveat is that the talent routes are not the only way for skilled workers to come to the UK, at least if they are employees. Many people who do not secure a talent-route visa will still be able to come to the UK—and have similar impacts—on a SW visa. In cases where the SW visa is a feasible alternative, the stakes are lower: a talent route visa would not make the difference between being eligible and ineligible to come to the UK but would have an impact mainly by offering more attractive conditions.

Key figures

Across the Global Talent and Innovator Founder routes, around 58,600 visas were issued for Out of Country and In Country visa applications between Financial Year (FY) 2022/23 and FY2025/26. Global Talent visas accounted for most visas (55,200), with annual volumes growing steadily across the period. The number of dependants per main applicant arriving in the UK on the Global Talent visa stayed relatively constant across the period. By contrast, the dependant ratio for the SW route rose from 0.71 to 0.81 over this same period.

[19] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/862081/Explanatory_Memorandum_to_HC56_PRINT.pdf

The Innovator Founder route, introduced in April 2023, accounted for a total of 3,400 visas in the first three years to FY2025/26. Volumes were highest in FY2023/24 (1,700 visas) and then declined to 800 by FY2025/26. The dependant ratio decreased from 1.19 to 0.76 over this period.

Table 3: Visa usage by route

Route/applicant type	FY 22/23	FY 23/24	FY 24/25	FY25/26	Total
Global Talent	**10,200**	**14,000**	**14,300**	**16,700**	**55,200**
Main Applicant	6,100	8,300	8,600	9,900	32,800
Dependant	4,200	5,800	5,600	6,800	22,400
Dependant ratio	0.69	0.70	0.65	0.69	0.68
Innovator Founder		**1,700**	**900**	**800**	**3,400**
Main Applicant		800	400	400	1,600
Dependant		900	500	300	1,800
Dependant ratio		1.19	1.30	0.76	1.10
Grant Total	**10,200**	**15,700**	**15,200**	**17,500**	**58,600**

Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics. These figures include both in and out-of-country applications.
Note: Figures are rounded and may not sum due to rounding. Figures under 100 are rounded to the nearest 10, figures over 100 are rounded to the nearest 100. Dependency ratios are calculated using unrounded figures. As a result, ratios derived from the rounded figures presented in this report may differ slightly.

Figure 4.1 below shows that Talent visa issuance has increased significantly over the last five years in absolute terms, but not as a proportion of total work migration. The most substantial growth occurred between 2020 and 2023, as the Global Talent visa gathered more traction and the Innovator Founder visa was introduced. However, for the last 5 years, Innovator Founder (or equivalent routes) visa intake has declined slightly. It is worth noting that, relative to the SW visa, talent intake figures remain substantially smaller. Only 1.6% of all work-related visas in 2025 were talent-related, as Figure 4.2 shows, although there will be talented migrants across other work routes

Figure 4.1 Talent visas issued over time

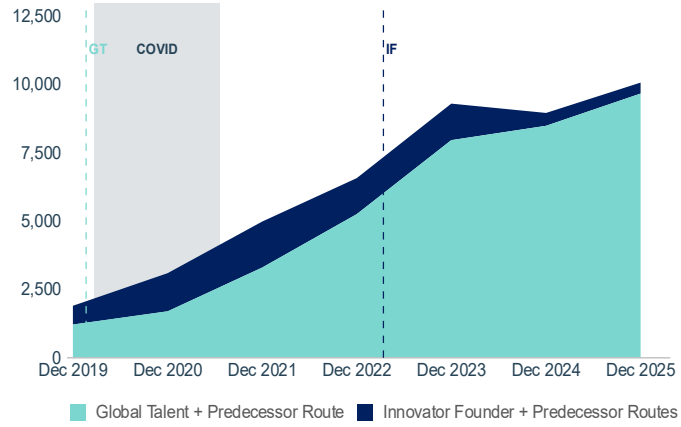
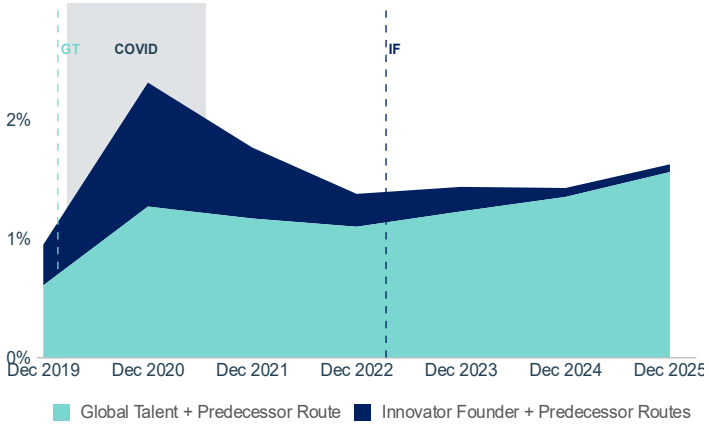


Figure 4.2 Talent visas as a percentage of work visas



Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics. These figures include both in and out of country applications.
Notes: Dashed lines indicate the launch date of a particular talent visa (and the closure of its visa's predecessor routes). Each coordinate on the line graph indicates 31 December of its respective year. Figures exclude dependants. The COVID period is defined to be between 23/03/2020 and 19/07/2021. The predecessor route for Global Talent is the Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent) route and for Innovator Founder are the Innovator and Start-up routes.

Table 5 below breaks down visas by nationality. India is a leading nationality across all three routes, highlighting its importance across both high-skilled work and talent migration pathways. China also featured prominently, appearing among the largest nationalities for both the Global Talent and Innovator Founder routes, while the United States is represented among the largest nationalities for the Global Talent and SW routes.

Both the Global Talent and SW routes have become more concentrated among a smaller number of nationalities over time. For Global Talent, this trend appears to be driven primarily by China and the United States. In contrast, the Innovator Founder route has become less concentrated, as the share accounted for by the top nationalities has fallen over time. This change appears to be driven largely by slower growth among Pakistani nationals relative to the route overall.

Table 5: Visas by nationality

Route/nationality	FY 22/23	FY 23/24	FY 24/25	FY 25/26	Total
Global Talent	**6,100**	**8,300**	**8,600**	**9,900**	**32,800**
China	800	1,300	1,600	1,700	5,400
India	800	1,000	1,100	1,200	4,100
United States	500	700	700	900	2,700
% of all nationalities	34%	35%	39%	39%	37%
Innovator Founder	**0**	**800**	**400**	**400**	**1,600**
India	0	200	100	100	300
China	0	100	40	40	200
Pakistan	0	100	40	20	100
% of all nationalities		46%	36%	35%	41%
Skilled Worker	**129,300**	**154,200**	**152,500**	**147,400**	**539,900**
India	48,400	52,300	51,700	53,300	186,400
Pakistan	5,000	14,500	14,700	10,000	42,700
United States	6,700	6,500	7,000	6,800	24,800
% of all nationalities	46%	48%	48%	48%	47%
Grand Total	**135,400**	**163,200**	**161,600**	**157,700**	**574,300**

Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics. These figures include both in and out of country applications. Only Main Applicant.
Note: IF visa did not exist in FY 22/23 due to its introduction in April 2023. Figures under 100 are rounded to the nearest 10, figures over 100 are rounded to the nearest 100. Figures may not sum due to rounding. Figures exclude visas granted on the Skilled Worker Health and Care route.

Table 6 below shows how talent routes and SW visa demographics compare. There is a noticeable distinction between the even proportion of males and females that make use of the SW route and the predominance of males on both the Global Talent and Innovator Founder visas. Median age is comparable, with average talent route users only being a few years older than the average SW user.

Table 6: Gender and age demographics by route		
Route	**% Female**	**Median Age**
Global Talent	36	33
Innovator Founder	33	36
Skilled Worker	50	31

Source: MAC internal analysis using Migrant Journey (MJ) microdata. These figures include both in and out of country applications.
Note: Figures are based on all granted MJ route records for each route group. Figures exclude visas granted on the Skilled Worker Health and Care route.

Migrant route preference

Our analysis shows that migrants on both the Global Talent and Innovator Founder routes are slightly more likely to apply from outside the UK, although the proportions vary by route. For Global Talent, the split is relatively even, with 47% applying in-country and 53% applying from outside the UK. In-country applicants primarily switched from SW visas (28% of the Global Talent cohort), Student or Graduate visas (14%).

For Innovator Founder, 41% of migrants applied in-country. The largest in-country source route was Start-up (25% of the Innovator Founder cohort), one of the predecessor routes to Innovator Founder. For those switching from other visa types, Student or Graduate (9%) and SW (3%) were the most common. Of those that switched from SW, there may have been migrants who were initially sponsoring themselves (to work in their own companies) that then moved to Innovator Founder. The scale of this is unknown as we were unable to source data on this.

It is also worth commenting on asylum claims and overstaying. Home Office Management Information shows that asylum claims and overstayers for Global Talent and Innovator Founder migrants were extremely low, which can be attributed to the flexibilities offered on these routes (such as not requiring a sponsor, a lack of work restrictions, and a shorter path to settlement in some instances).

Migrants primarily decide to come to the UK for labour market access (professional or career and other factors), but the potential routes available within the visa system influence and enable the decision. The most relevant research for talented migrants comes from the survey of Global Talent visa holders carried out by the Home Office as part of the Global Talent visa evaluation (Wave 2). In the table below, factors related to careers or jobs appeared in the top three factors reported as being important for coming to UK for 74% of migrants, whereas aspects of the Global Talent visa appeared in the top three factors for 19% of migrants.

Table 7: Factors ranked in the top 3 most important when deciding whether to move or remain in the UK

Careers or jobs	74%
Professional environment	71%
Facilities or institutions	32%
Familiarity with the UK	27%
Aspects of the Global Talent visa	19%
Access to services	10%

Source: HO Global Talent Evaluation – wave 2 (2024) Visa holders taking part in the survey were asked, *"Which, if any, of the following factors were important to you when considering coming to, or remaining in, the UK to work and live?"*. The factors they were asked to select from were grouped into themes, covering 'careers or jobs', 'professional environment', 'facilities and institutions', 'familiarity with the UK', 'aspects of the Global Talent visa' and 'access to services'

The evaluation also identified the specific aspects of the Global Talent visa that respondents said were particularly attractive, including the flexibility of the visa (not being tied to a single job/employer), the opportunity to settle and the accelerated route to settlement. Qualitative interviews carried out as part of the work indicated that the prestige of the Global Talent route compared to other routes also influenced migrants to enter the UK this way compared to the SW route for instance.

The value of the Global Talent route to migrants is likely to have changed as a result of recent policy developments. In the past two years, the SW route increased the skills threshold which reduced the number of mid-skilled occupations that can use the route and its salary thresholds increased. The general salary threshold for SW visas increased from £26,200 to £38,700 in April 2024 and again to £41,700 in July 2025, and occupation-specific thresholds increased from the 25th percentile to the median.[20] In November 2026, the government announced future changes to settlement, to be implemented from 2027 onwards. These changes are expected to result in a longer route to settlement for people on SW visas who earn less than £50,270. Global Talent visa holders would continue to have a 3-5 year route to settlement, but this would be longer for those who are not working or who earn less than the mandatory minimum threshold of £12,571.[21]

Stakeholders said that migrants who are eligible for multiple visas now find Global Talent relatively more attractive following the reforms and announcements of potential settlement changes, as this work route offers one of the shortest paths to settlement. A large increase in the number of endorsement applications indicates greater interest in Global Talent since the Earned Settlement proposals were published.

Employers of migrants have varying preferences over work visa routes. Among the employers we spoke to as part of this review, there were clear differences in preference between sectors. Academic and research organisations said that they favour the Global Talent visa over the SW visa because it offers faster settlement,

[20] The government announced in the 2026 Budget that from Spring 2027, occupation-specific salary thresholds will be moving from the median earnings to 25th percentile of occupational earnings.
[21] The government recently consulted on this, more details of this can be found here.

greater labour market mobility, no sponsorship or salary requirement, and more flexibility to undertake consultancy work, start a business or work overseas.

By contrast, some Technology and Science employers and immigration lawyers expressed a preference for the SW route over Talent routes because they view the SW route application outcomes and timings as more predictable. This preference from the technology and science employers we spoke to may be related to the fact that private sector employers use the fast-tracked routes less than universities.

Within the Talent routes in scope of this review, stakeholders (such as immigration lawyers) preferred Global Talent to Innovator Founder as a route because Innovator Founder business and settlement criteria are more complex. Some saw the Innovator Founder route as a 'last resort' where no other route was feasible.

Evaluating the talent routes

This report examines how well the talent routes are performing against their original goals. The 2020 reforms to the Global Talent route were intended to attract internationally recognised and high-potential individuals to the UK, support the UK's science, research and innovation ambitions, facilitate the global recruitment of researchers, reduce barriers for highly skilled migrants, and strengthen the UK's international competitiveness for talent. Although the initial government narrative centred on science and research, the route also covers talent in digital technology and arts and culture.

The government first signalled its intention for a reformed Innovator route in the 2021 UK Innovation Strategy. The Innovator Founder route forms part of the government's wider ambition to make the UK a global hub for innovation and "the easiest country in the world for top innovative talent to enter". The route was designed to attract entrepreneurial talent to establish innovative, viable and scalable businesses in the UK, thereby supporting innovation, business growth and economic prosperity.

We have various metrics available to assess the routes. The two routes need to be assessed differently as they are ultimately attracting different types of talent into the UK.

First, qualitative evidence from stakeholders can tell us about how well the route is working for individuals and employers. For example, we can examine whether talented migrants find the terms and conditions of the route attractive, whether it gives migrants sufficient flexibility to pursue their field of work, or how well employers can use the routes. We can also look at perceptions of the route's reliability, for example whether grant and refusal decisions are consistent with employers' and other stakeholders' perceptions of who is most talented.

Second, and arguably most importantly, data on what talent route migrants do once they are in the UK can tell us whether the people who were selected for these visas are making a valuable contribution to their sectors. While stakeholders' views are illuminating, the real test of these routes is whether the migrants they admit flourish in the UK, working and making contributions to their field of talent. This is more measurable in some cases than others. Data on personal taxable income shows us whether Global Talent migrants can support themselves, and in the case of business and tech fields, may also be a reasonably good metric of success in their field over the longer term. Income data are not a good metric of success in other fields, particularly the arts—where low pay in the sector in general means that even highly talented people who are contributing to the field may not be well paid. For Innovator Founder migrants, we would eventually expect successful

business owners to have reasonably high incomes. However, incomes may initially be low if founders leave their money in their business, and data on the business itself are also needed to evaluate' business success, which may not be captured in income data alone.

Employment rates provide another measure of contribution. Regardless of sector, we would expect migrants on both routes to be working and paying at least some tax, and this is a measure that can be used across all sectors. However, this figure alone will not be enough to understand whether migrants are working in their fields or the nature of their specific contributions to those fields.

In theory, a useful metric would be actual contributions to the field, including artistic performances, academic publication or business innovations. In practice, these contributions are difficult to quantify or compare across fields. Given the diverse nature of these wider contributions, we have not been able to produce any objective measure of how Global Talent and Innovator Founder migrants have affected their fields of talent for this report. We outline other data gaps in more detail later.

Finally, we only have data on people who applied successfully and joined the talent routes. It is much harder to know whether people who were not selected for the talent route would have made significant contributions if the routes had been more accessible to them. Stakeholders had their views on this topic, although it is hard to test them empirically. This is a natural limitation of this review.

Chapter 2: Global Talent

In this Chapter we examine the labour market outcomes for migrants on the Global Talent route, including fiscal impacts and regional distribution. We first consider the eligibility and endorsement requirements for the route, including how applications are assessed by Endorsing Bodies and the Home Office. Then we look at the use of fraudulent evidence, what role the Home Office has in endorsement decisions, endorsement rates and satisfaction rates. Finally, we explore what happens to Global Talent visa holders after they enter the route, their pathways to settlement, and assess whether the settlement offer is appropriate.

Migrant labour market outcomes

One of the expected outcomes of Global Talent migrants coming to the UK is that they work in industries related to their Endorsing Body. Table 8 below breaks down the sector respondents reported working in by their Endorsing Body (Home Office Global Talent visa evaluation: Wave 2). As expected, most migrants endorsed by UKRI, Royal Society, British Academy and Royal Academy of Engineering reported working in academia and research. Most migrants endorsed by Tech Nation work in business or commerce and most migrants endorsed by Arts Council England stated that they worked in creative industries. However, sectors are broad and diverse, and migrants' specific contributions may span different sectors or be unrelated to the sector in which the migrant works, for example an administrative role in a technology company.

Table 8: Global Talent visas breakdown by Endorsing Body and sector

Sector	UKRI	Royal Society	BA	RAEng	Tech Nation	Arts Council England	Total
Academia or university	96%	92%	97%	87%	4%	6%	67%
Business or Commerce	2%	4%	1%	6%	66%	6%	14%
Creative industries	0%	1%	1%	0%	4%	82%	11%
Technology or IT	0%	1%	0%	1%	21%	0%	4%
Charity or Third sector	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%
Civil service or Local Government	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%

Source: HO Global Talent Evaluation – wave 2 (2024). Visa holders taking part in the survey were asked: *"Which of the following best describes the broader field in which you work? If you feel that more than one applies, please select the main one."*

We can also compare this against HMRC data to show a breakdown of sectors for all Global Talent migrants (the data do not allow us to observe at Endorsing Body level). Table 9 below shows that the majority of those on Global Talent visas are in the UK's higher education sector, in line with the self-reported data above. Higher education accounts for 60% of Global Talent main applicants, while tech is the only other sizeable sector at

15%. As we will see later (see Table 10 below), the high concentration of academics will affect the average pay in the Global Talent route, as academic pay is generally lower than in many of the industries making substantial use of the SW route.

Table 9: Top 5 industries for Global Talent visa holders reporting taxable earnings in their second year of arrival (visas granted in 2022/23)

Sector	Median incomes of GT visa holders	Share of GT visas
Higher education	£42,900	60%
Tech	£61,500	15%
Professional, scientific and technical	£57,400	5%
Arts, culture and media	£38,500	4%
Administrative and support services	£59,200	4%

Source: MAC internal analysis using HO/HMRC matched data. Notes: Includes both in and out-of-country visas. Includes both PAYE and Self Assessment income. Excludes visa holders with no known SIC code. See Annex E for definition of industries.

Several factors will shape the earnings of Global Talent migrants. Migrants at the top of their fields, with global recognition, may be expected to have high earnings. Global Talent migrants are not tied to an employer, so should in theory have more bargaining power than people on the SW route. This could translate into higher earnings for some. However, the Global Talent route skews towards academia, which has relatively lower wages compared to other more prominent sectors on the SW route. Additionally, unlike the SW route, the Global Talent route does not have salary thresholds.

Among individuals with observed PAYE and Self Assessment income who arrived in 2022/23, Global Talent migrants earn less on average than those on SW visas in their second year after arrival, as shown in Table 10. This does not control for any differences in the composition of the two routes. The proportion of these Global Talent migrants with any recorded earnings in HMRC data is 87%, compared to 92% for SW migrants. This measure, known as the earnings rate, does not account for arrivals and departures, meaning estimates may include visa holders who never entered the UK or who left before their visa expired.

HMRC has identified limitations in the matching of Self Assessment records within the linked dataset, with individuals who only receive Self Assessment income less likely to be identified in the data than those who also receive PAYE income. This is likely to understate the earnings rate for Global Talent to some extent. The impacts on the income distribution among those with observed earnings is uncertain but is likely to be relatively small since the large majority of Global Talent migrants do have PAYE income and so will be included in the data.

Table 10: Second year annual income distributions of individuals with observed PAYE or Self Assessment income for visas granted in 2022/23

	10th percentile	Median	90th percentile	Mean	Earnings rate
Global Talent Main Applicant					
PAYE income	£15,200	£43,200	£103,700	£64,600	77%
Self Assessment income	£300	£8,400	£52,700	£28,800	24%
Total income	£13,400	£42,800	£101,500	£60,600	87%
Skilled Worker Main Applicant					
PAYE income	£25,800	£54,900	£140,000	£79,500	92%
Self Assessment income	£0	£600	£7,700	£12,500	9%
Total income	£26,000	£55,300	£140,900	£80,500	92%

Source: MAC internal analysis using HO/HMRC matched data. Notes: Includes both in and out-of-country visas. Figures for PAYE and Self Assessment income are reported by percentile in the distribution of Total Income. See Annex C for further details on deriving earnings rates for this visa route.

We ran log income regressions to test whether income differences between routes remain after controlling for factors such as age, gender, and sector, rather than simply reflecting differences in the composition of each route. Occupation data was not available.

When controlling for these compositional factors, Table 11 shows that Global Talent incomes were around 1% lower than SW incomes in the first year, although this difference was not statistically significant. By the second year, Global Talent incomes were around 5% lower, with the difference statistically significant. This suggests that much of the raw income gap reflects the concentration of Global Talent visa holders in sectors such as higher education and research, rather than Global Talent visa holders earning substantially less than comparable SW migrants working in the same field.

Given that Global Talent is designed to attract particularly talented individuals, one might reasonably expect those admitted through the route to financially outperform comparable SW migrants. We do not find evidence of this: after controlling for observable differences, Global Talent incomes are similar in the first year and somewhat lower in the second year. Note that we are not able to control for all important differences, most notably occupation, which could vary for SW and Global Talent visa holders even within industries.

Of the controls included in the regression, sector has the greatest explanatory power, accounting for substantially more variation in income than age or gender. Age also makes a meaningful contribution, while gender adds relatively little explanatory power.

Table 11: Log income regressions comparing Global Talent incomes with Skilled Worker for visas granted in 2022/23

Visa route	Adjusted income difference vs Skilled Worker	95% confidence interval	Statistical significance
First year	-1%	-4% to +1%	
Second year	-5%	-8% to -2%	**

Source: HMRC/HO visa data match.
Notes: Dependent variable is log total income. Skilled Worker is the reference route. Controls include age, age squared, gender and sector. *** indicates $p < 0.001$. ** indicates $p < 0.01$. * indicates $p < 0.05$. This means that the difference between the Global Talent and Skilled Worker salaries in the first year was not deemed to be statistically significant. Includes both in and out-of-country visas.

Fiscal impacts

This section focuses on public finances, setting aside wider social contributions. We estimate that Global Talent main applicants make a positive fiscal contribution over their lifetime, with a net present value of approximately £403,000 per person as in Table 12 below. This estimate is produced using our fiscal model, full details of which are provided in The Fiscal Impacts of Immigration publication (we have made some amendments to the model which can be found in Annex B). The estimated lifetime fiscal impact is substantially lower than the estimated £676,000 per person for SW main applicants, primarily reflecting the lower earnings observed among Global Talent migrants. Global Talent main applicants are still comfortably estimated to contribute more in tax revenues than they receive in public expenditure, resulting in a positive net fiscal contribution overall. SW adult dependants are more fiscally positive than Global Talent adult dependants as they have higher starting salaries and marginally better starting employment rates.

Table 12: Lifetime fiscal estimates of the Global Talent and Skilled Worker route in net present value for visas granted in 2022/23

Migrant type	Total tax revenue	Total visa fees	Total expenditure	Net fiscal estimate	Net per person
SW Main Applicant	£134.1bn	£1.2bn	£48.2bn	£87.2bn	£676,000
SW Adult Dependant	£20.2bn	£198m	£18.3bn	£2.1bn	£46,000
GT Main Applicant	£4.7bn	£23m	£2.2bn	£2.4bn	£403,000
GT Adult Dependant	£871m	£9m	£920m	-£40m	-£18,000

Source: Internal MAC analysis. Note: This analysis assumes that Global Talent visa holders have similar earnings and employment trajectories to SW migrants and British workers starting from a similar wage. If the talent routes disproportionately selected people who are expected to have faster earnings growth (e.g. because of their talent), the model would not pick this up. However, as highlighted by Table 9, many of these visa holders work in academia which may not see fast earnings growth. Includes both in and out of country visas.

However, the average masks substantial variation within the route. Table 13 shows that fiscal outcomes differ considerably by sector, reflecting large differences in observed earnings. Migrants working in professional, scientific and technical, finance and insurance, and technology generate the largest net fiscal contributions, often exceeding £1 million per person over their lifetime.

By contrast, those working in arts, culture and media, wholesale and retail, higher education, and other education sectors make smaller, but still positive, net fiscal contributions per person. This pattern reflects the broad nature of the Global Talent route, which encompasses individuals working across a diverse range of sectors with very different earnings profiles. As a result, the fiscal contribution of Global Talent migrants is disproportionately driven by highly remunerated individuals within some sectors.

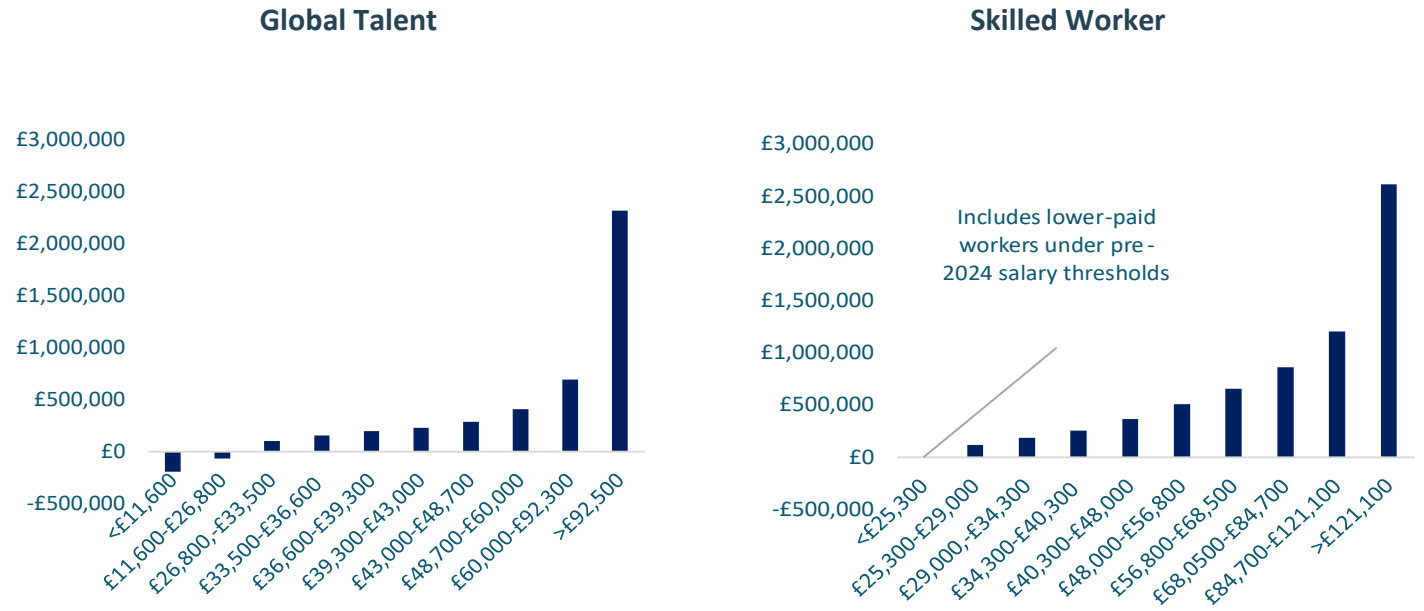
Table 13: Lifetime fiscal estimates of the Global Talent route in net present value for visas granted in 2022/23

Sector	Total tax revenue	Total visa fees	Total expenditure	Net fiscal estimate	Net Per Person
Professional, scientific and technical	£418.0m	£726,000	£71.1m	£347.6m	£1.8m
Finance and insurance	£130.5m	£269,000	£26.1m	£104.6m	£1.5m
Technology	£615.7m	£1.5m	£151.8m	£465.5m	£1.1m
Manufacturing	£40.7m	£120,000	£11.9m	£29.0m	£906,000
Administrative and support services	£131.7m	£430,000	£41.9m	£90.2m	£785,000
Arts, culture and media	£57.7m	£326,000	£33.8m	£24.2m	£278,000
Higher education	£1.7bn	£10.0m	£990.9m	£693.8m	£260,000
Wholesale and retail	£33.4m	£202,000	£21.0m	£12.6m	£232,000
Education - other	£27.4m	£172,000	£17.5m	£10.1m	£219,000

Source: Internal MAC analysis. Notes: Includes in and out of country visas.

Another way of portraying this diversity within the route is through looking at lifetime fiscal contributions by starting income decile. As Figure 14 shows, Global Talent fiscal contributions have higher shares of people at both the top and bottom ends of the distribution compared to the SW route. Those who start in the top 10% of earners for Global Talent have an expected lifetime net fiscal impact of £2.3m per person whilst those in the top 10% or earners on the SW route have a lifetime net fiscal impact of £2.6m. By contrast, the bottom 20% on the Global Talent route have a negative lifetime fiscal impact – they will be a fiscal cost over their lifetime. While the bottom 10% of SW entrants in 2022/23 are also negative, this is unlikely to be the case for more recent cohorts, because the increase in salary thresholds and the restricted eligibility of many mid-skilled jobs will have shifted the SW distribution towards the more positive net fiscal contributions. As noted above, these estimates are highly dependent on people's earnings progression over their lifetime, which could make the lifetime fiscal impacts significantly different.

Figure 14: Lifetime Fiscal Contribution of Global Talent and Skilled Worker (excluding Health and Care) Main Applicants for visas granted in 2022/23, by income decile at entry



Source: Internal MAC analysis. Notes: Includes both in and out of country visas. This only looks at those who earn in their first year and does not include those who are initially unemployed.

During this review, we were unable to use the administrative pay data from HMRC to understand which parts of the Global Talent route are having the most significant economic and fiscal contributions by looking at outcomes by Endorsing Body and had to rely on partial survey data to do so. **We recommend that the Home Office records which Endorsing Body endorsed the visa application in a consistent format at the stage when someone applies to a visa, to allow a fuller statistical analysis of the impacts of each part of the route.**

Note that the fiscal impact only captures one relatively narrow aspect of Global Talent migrants' expected contribution to the UK, and this is especially important in a route that explicitly includes lower-paying sectors (the arts and academia) due to their expected non-financial contributions. For example, a person endorsed in the arts could in theory improve their fiscal impact by leaving the arts and working in finance instead, but this would not be in line with the purpose of their endorsement.

Regional visa use

Using the Home Office and HMRC matched data, we are now able to observe the regional distribution of Global Talent migrants. As shown in Table 15, London accounts for the largest share of Global Talent migrants, at 38%, although this is lower than the 47% observed among SW. The South East and East of England also account for relatively large shares of Global Talent migrants. This concentration in London is consistent with findings from the Home Office Global Talent evaluation, where qualitative research suggested that migrants viewed London as a hub for talent.

Table 15: Regional distribution of Global Talent migrants across the UK for visas granted in 2022/23

Region	Global Talent share	Skilled Worker share
London	38%	47%
South East (excluding London)	13%	13%
East of England	11%	8%
West Midlands	7%	7%
North West	6%	6%
Scotland	5%	4%
South West	5%	4%
Yorkshire & Humber	5%	4%
East Midlands	4%	4%
North East	4%	1%
Northern Ireland	2%	2%
Wales	2%	1%

Source: HMRC visa data match Region is based on employee's reported place of residence. Notes: Includes both in and out-of-country visas.

Global Talent eligibility and endorsement

Assessing applications

As covered in Chapter 1, depending on the nature of the application and the applicant's field of work, there are several ways an applicant can demonstrate that they qualify for the Global Talent route. Some of these are through 'fast track' pathways, meaning that the applicant must demonstrate that they have an eligible job offer as an academic or researcher, or that they have been granted a fellowship or appropriate role on an eligible grant programme (as well as satisfying the other requirements of the visa). Applications are then checked by Endorsing Bodies to confirm eligibility against endorsement criteria. Given that there is a high bar to obtain these positions, both the Home Office and Endorsing Bodies are satisfied that meeting their endorsement criteria is sufficient demonstration of talent, and that it is not necessary for further evidence to be provided or evaluated, so individuals are not required to undergo a full peer review.

> *"If you are working on an expert-reviewed grant from a particular funder who we have endorsed… then we're willing to put the trust in you, because we know that that evaluation of the actual research has already taken place because money for research and innovation is not competitively awarded easily."*
>
> Endorsing Body discussion

Applications on a 'standard' (non-fast-track) pathway[22], i.e. peer review applications to the science Endorsing Bodies, or applications to Arts Council England or Tech Nation, require a different assessment. The applicant submits evidence of their talent or promise, which the relevant Endorsing Body then reviews to assess

[22] Throughout this paper, where we mention the standard pathway we are referring to the peer review pathway for Royal Academy of Engineering, Royal Society and British Academy endorsements or endorsement/assessment pathways for Tech Nation and Arts Council England endorsements.

whether they meet the required bar. Academia and research peer review assessments are carried out by the Fellows who are members of the Royal Society, British Academy, and Royal Academy of Engineering. Tech Nation runs a panel of expert assessors. At Arts Council England the assessment is carried out by a team of officers working for them, who have expertise in various art forms (although officers may assess applications in any art form). Arts Council England sub-Endorsing Bodies have either a small team or a single person to review endorsement applications, which are then checked by Arts Council England. All Endorsing Bodies described training or induction processes for assessors and efforts to ensure that evidence is reviewed consistently. For example, two assessors may review the same application (with a third or a panel chair to act as a tiebreaker, if necessary), or a single assessor may review after which the decision is checked by someone senior at the organisation. Despite the training, feedback, and monitoring processes described to us by Endorsing Bodies, some applicants and their representatives viewed the outcomes as inconsistent.

Some assessments are easier for Endorsing Bodies to carry out than others. As the peer review and assessment process requires the Endorsing Body to assess whether the applicant meets the bar for approval as demonstrated by the evidence they have submitted, this tends to be a more time-consuming process than 'fast-track' review.

An important feature of the peer review and endorsement assessment is that Endorsing Bodies are assessing someone's talent or promise based on their track record. For example, assessors in the arts do not listen to musicians performing and assessors in the social sciences do not interview applicants about their knowledge of research methods. Instead, assessors make their judgement using proxies and indirect evidence. Different indicators are used depending on the Endorsing Body, including journal articles, press coverage, sales figures, or other evidence of esteem such as awards. Assessors place greater weight on some indicators than others. The quality of the sources – for example, an applicant's publication record or the eminence of the author of a letter of recommendation – form part of the assessment. Endorsing Bodies consider letters of recommendation to be particularly important in evidencing talent.

This approach has advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, it is probably more objective than relying on an assessor's own opinion of the quality of an applicant's work. On the other hand, some proxies will be more reliable or easier to verify than others.

> *"I think we have a number of proxies for that kind of judgment. That's exactly why we're asking for reviews. That's exactly why we're asking for proof of appearances. That's exactly why we're asking for letters from eminent individuals and organisations. Those are all things which tell you with a degree of objectivity that is not down to your own personal judgment, why a person is exceptional."*
>
> Endorsing Body discussion

Applicants collect reference letters from their referees and submit them to the Endorsing Body. This creates opportunities for fabrication or unauthorised editing. It may also put pressure on referees to provide a more positive assessment, especially where they have an existing personal or commercial relationship with the applicant (as will naturally be true in many cases). Almost all Endorsing Bodies described an additional process of verifying that reference letters are genuine and that the letter has not been altered. For example, this is

done as an automatic step as part of the peer review and other assessment processes. Endorsing Bodies report occasionally finding problems with letters that range from slight alterations to the text to complete falsification.

> *"Our checks would include verifying letters of support, for example, ensuring that referees are genuine, the letters are authentic and credible, and that the content accurately reflects what the author has provided…. [One factor that may affect the strength of an application is] where supporting letters contain limited evidence of achievements, outputs, or impact. In such cases, these letters may carry less weight than those that provide clear, specific examples of an applicant's contributions and standing within their field."*
>
> Endorsing Body discussion

Given the risks of alteration, fabrication and influence of personal relationships, **we recommend that references should be submitted directly, and confidentially, to Endorsing Bodies.** This should be done in a way that prompts referees to provide all necessary information (for example, by requesting specific fields to be completed rather than simply uploading a letter) and includes a process to chase referees and to enable applicants to find another referee in the case of non-response.

Employers, lawyers and visa applicants providing evidence to this review suggested that the endorsement process can advantage the people who are best at preparing applications, rather than the most talented. The requirement to have recommendation letters from UK experts was particularly criticised: indeed, in the Call for Evidence the view was expressed that some Global Talent applicants might be applying specifically because they want to work in the UK and obtain experience there. Arts organisations and others made the point that this requirement could disadvantage some talented people, especially those from outside Europe, who had not previously worked in the UK or with UK-based experts. It also appears that in some fields, non-UK recommendation letters and other evidence can be harder to assess robustly, unless the writer has a substantial reputation. Some Endorsing Bodies/sub-Endorsing Bodies said they were aware of this issue and were taking steps to address it, for example by actively seeking and verifying information on non-Western press sources, although there are limits on their ability to do this. On balance, we think it is reasonable to require at least some UK evidence, not just because it is easier for Endorsing Bodies to be confident in it, but also because it is more likely to provide an indication that the individual will be able to apply their talent in the UK context.

Assessment on the Global Talent standard peer review or assessment pathways was criticised by some stakeholders as inconsistent. Immigration lawyers cited examples of applications from people they thought were talented being rejected, applications from those they viewed as less talented being granted, and those who had applied to the same Endorsing Body on multiple occasions receiving different and conflicting feedback.

"One key issue with the Global Talent visa route is inconsistency in assessment. Applications from the same individual are often reviewed by different assessors, leading to contradictory outcomes… Upon reapplication, entirely different criteria may then be rejected. This inconsistency reduces confidence in the process and suggests a lack of standardisation in decision-making."

Individual in the UK on a Skilled Worker visa, Call for Evidence

During discussions with some Endorsing Bodies and sub-Endorsing Bodies, we were told that in some cases, these apparent inconsistencies were a result of problems with the application. These include not presenting evidence correctly, submitting extensive evidence against one criterion and none against others, not ensuring that supporting letters cover everything they needed to, or viewing examples given in guidance as a checklist.

"It's always evidence based. So, if they have the right evidence, then we will endorse them. Sometimes we are in a difficult situation where it's a strong applicant who hasn't unfortunately read the guidelines properly and wasn't able to send in the right evidence, in which case we just can't accept it because of… how stringent the rules are to make it fair for everybody. And that's always a bit of a shame because you know that if you were to review them on talent alone, they should 100% get it."

Endorsing Body discussion

Endorsing Bodies said that they make efforts to minimise differences in decision-making, and sometimes inconsistencies in outcomes reflect inaccurate interpretation of the guidance by individuals. However, the evidence we received from both immigration lawyers and visa applicants indicated that some inconsistencies remain and that sometimes the same evidence is viewed differently by assessors. To some extent, it is not surprising that some inconsistency would exist on the standard pathway, given that these decisions involve individual judgements. Endorsing Bodies should make sure their guidance supports applicants to provide the correct evidence and decisionmakers to consider that evidence consistently. We discuss improvements to the guidance in Chapter 4.

Fraudulent applications, business plans and endorsement letters

Global Talent applicants provide evidence of their talent at the endorsement stage. One form of abuse that Endorsing Bodies and the Home Office have identified is fraudulent evidence. Some Endorsing Bodies said they had observed an increase in fraudulent applications (ranging from small increases to more extensive depending on the Endorsing Body). For example, one noticed an applicant falsely claimed support from a research organisation, and this was picked up in verification checks. It is not possible to assess how often fraudulent evidence is not identified. The Home Office should ensure that there is sufficient data sharing between them and Endorsing Bodies to flag potentially concerning aspects of applications in both stages of the application process (endorsement and visa application). One concern is that some migrants may have their letters of endorsement written by institutions or organisations with which they have a personal or financial relationship. An example described to us by the Home Office indicates a risk that Global Talent references could be influenced by pre-existing financial relationships, specifically where an applicant has made payments to an organisation that subsequently provided a reference in support of their endorsement. We recognise that it may be common for the financial relationship to go in the other direction, i.e. where the referee has hired or purchased services from the applicant, and this should not be seen as problematic. **However, the Home Office**

should ensure that there is no conflict of interest (whether commercial or personal) between referees and applicants.

Home Office involvement in endorsement decisions

Endorsement decisions for Global Talent visas are outsourced to Endorsing Bodies and, in turn, experts in the eligible Global Talent fields, as they are best placed to evaluate talent. For this reason, the Home Office does not review Global Talent endorsement decisions.

The Home Office note that Endorsing Bodies can detect false documentation. However, in some instances the Home Office has been notified by third parties that applicants have successfully used false documents or non-genuine evidence to gain endorsement. Where possible this is shared with the Endorsing Bodies.

Given that it is unclear how successful Endorsing Bodies are in detecting false information and that new types of false documentation are constantly being developed, Endorsing Bodies may require additional support to detect these problems.

Eligibility for the route

Some stakeholders perceived a gap in the Global Talent route for those who are highly qualified or talented and in the early stages of their career, but do not have enough experience to apply. Very young but extremely talented classical dancers were one such example. However, other stakeholders said it was important to maintain the overall principle of Global Talent being a highly selective route. In most cases, people with high talent but insufficient experience will be eligible for SW visas. The main reason SW would not be possible is where the job does not meet requirements such as salary or language. This is likely to be more common in the arts. We do not think that diluting the Global Talent entry requirements to address such cases is the right solution, as it could have unintended consequences such as making the route less economically beneficial, or further increasing the workload for Endorsing Bodies who are already seeing large numbers of unqualified candidates applying. However, our suggestion below to consider expansions to the fast-track process could help deal with this issue, by including the UK's most reputable arts employers in the fast-track system (as the Home Office has recently done for some non-university research-intensive organisations).

A related issue emerged in academia. Some academic stakeholders also said it was more difficult for those approaching the end of their PhD, but who had not yet received it, to apply for Global Talent. In many cases, and especially in academia and well-paid graduate jobs in other fields, employers can simply use the SW route in the short term instead, potentially moving the applicant to Global Talent once they qualify.

Those stakeholders who expressed a view on the eligibility bar for the route generally perceived it to be in the right place, with some providing examples where they thought criteria could be expanded. Some stakeholders, including government departments, some Endorsing Bodies and visa holders or potential visa holders made suggestions for specific changes to the criteria in the Call for Evidence, written submissions, or roundtable discussions to expand eligibility. The suggestions can be grouped as follows, for reference:

- University roles: non-research roles or those whose roles are more than 50% teaching; suggestions to include all at a certain level e.g. fellowship; university business spinoffs (companies created to market products or services developed at universities, for example in engineering or deep tech).
- Non-academic or commercial sector roles: well-qualified experts who work in fields such as engineering, life sciences, pharma, who do not have a publication record but have experience in technical, product, or international project leadership or product design.
- Commercial applications of the arts: for example, commercial photography, DJing, interior design. Some digital game design roles were felt to fit more naturally into arts than tech. We were told that some artists build followings on social media rather than live performances or exhibitions, which may be harder for those with disabilities.
- Roles bridging technological and non-technological expertise: roles relying on technology to advance non-technical businesses (for example, AI-enabled marketing); or conversely non-technical roles such as CEOs, COOs, or public information specialists that require specialist expertise and knowledge of technology.

We do not make recommendations on these minor proposed changes to the eligibility criteria, both because they would require a detailed occupation-specific review that is beyond the scope of this report, and because it is primarily up to the government to decide which types of talent are most important to the UK. A review of eligible occupations would be better taken forward through discussions between Endorsing Bodies and their own stakeholders, and Endorsing Bodies and the Home Office.

Regardless of the precise scope of the occupations eligible for the route, we do note that it is important to maintain a high bar at entry given that the route currently has very generous settlement requirements. We know that the settlement provisions are an important reason people are attracted to the visa, and to retain the generous settlement requirements there must be a high degree of confidence that the initial entry requirements are selecting the right people. **We therefore recommend not diluting the eligibility requirements significantly.** Liberalising the route requirements risks admitting fiscally costly or less productive applicants, reducing the value of the route as a whole. While most Global Talent visa holders do relatively well financially after admission, the route does also admit some people whose low incomes mean they will struggle to support themselves financially, and further liberalising requirements could exacerbate this problem.

Endorsement rates

Table 16 shows that UKRI (which only deals with ‘fast-track’ applications) has the highest number of successfully endorsed applications. Home Office Management Information shows that overall, just over half of the assessments carried out by Endorsing Bodies between October 2024 and September 2025 resulted in an endorsement. Endorsement rates vary substantially between Endorsing Bodies. This is to be expected, as endorsement rates reflect (among other things) the number and quality of applications, the balance of ‘fast-track’ and standard applications, and the complexity of the process of evidencing that criteria have been met. As discussed in the previous section on assessing applications, ‘fast-track’ applications are expected to have the highest success rate as the assessment of the applicant’s talent has already been carried out.

Table 16: Global Talent applications and endorsement rates, October 2024 to September 2025

Endorsing Body	Total endorsements
UKRI	3,000
British Academy	1,000
Royal Academy of Engineering	1,000
Royal Society	1,100
Arts Council	1,400
Tech Nation	900
Total	**8,300**

Source: UKVI internal data.
Notes: Numbers rounded to nearest 100 and may not sum due to rounding

Endorsing Bodies have reported an increase in poor-quality applications on the standard 'non-fast-track' pathway for Global Talent. These include completely unsuitable applications as well as some that are considered slightly premature, with the applicant likely to qualify for endorsement once they have gained more experience. An increase in AI-generated applications was also reported, as were some fraudulent applications. Endorsing Bodies, roundtable participants and Call for Evidence respondents attributed this increase in applications to restrictions on SW visas and the proposed Earned Settlement changes that would lengthen the path to settlement for many on the SW route. This may displace demand to work in the UK towards other routes and make the Global Talent visa relatively more attractive. Stakeholders also ascribed the increase to broader changes, increased difficulty finding post-PhD positions in academia, and global instability making the UK a more appealing destination. Table 17 shows the increase in standard pathway applications since the introduction of the route, alongside the declining endorsement rate for these applications.

Table 17: Increase in standard pathway applications since introduction of the Global Talent route

Year	Total Global Talent standard pathway applications (all Endorsing Bodies)	Endorsement rate
2020	2,700	70%
2021	2,100	74%
2022	4,300	61%
2023	6,400	55%
2024	6,700	55%
2025	9,400	44%

Source: Endorsing Body data. Rounded to nearest 100
Data is from all Endorsing Bodies endorsing on the standard pathway and hence no data from UKRI is included

The declining endorsement rate makes sense in this context and suggests that Endorsing Bodies are screening out many lower-quality applications. However, the increase in applications, particularly on the standard

pathway, has resourcing implications. For example, some Endorsing Bodies and sub-Endorsing Bodies said they had had to increase the number of assessors in order to review the increased number of applications.

Some stakeholders suggested a higher bar for entry through either increased requirements or other requirements to deter low-quality applications. For example, one immigration lawyer suggested a higher endorsement fee, which would be offset against a lower visa fee if endorsement is successful. This may deter some speculative applications but could also penalise people who do meet the bar for endorsement but do not manage to submit all the evidence in the right format the first time around. Another option is to decrease the number of applications that go forward to a full peer review or assessment on the standard pathway. Some Endorsing Bodies say that they are considering clarifying the bar for the standard pathway. Endorsing Bodies could consider a triage process whereby applications are scored by support staff initially, with only those scoring over a certain level being reviewed fully. This would be successful in reducing the number of applications undergoing a full review.

Alternatively, or additionally, the Home Office and Endorsing Bodies could decrease the number of applications being considered under the peer review or assessment processes by expanding the 'fast-track' route where doing this makes sense on its own merits. For example, in August 2026 the Global Talent route was expanded to allow applicants to access the 'fast track' pathway where their name or job title is specified in a successful grant application from an endorsed funder approved by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and will be hosted or employed by one of 100 commercial research companies. Previously, individuals could not qualify for the route on the basis that they would be based at a commercial company, regardless of whether they had a relevant research grant. Further expansion of the 'fast-track' route might also be possible for the Endorsing Bodies that currently use the assessment route only (Tech Nation and Arts Council England). This could assume that being able to secure a full-time position with prestigious arts organisations or other employers is in itself a sufficient marker of talent, and those who obtained such a position at an eligible organisation could then be fast-tracked in the same way as those being named on an eligible successful grant application. The Home Office would have to decide which organisations were eligible based on their role in the field and their ability to comply fully with the rules—as it has already done in the case of the 100 commercial research companies recently added to the fast-track system. Many arts and tech organisations would not be suitable for this approach, especially if they were smaller and not sufficiently established. However, for those organisations that do have a high quality and compliance track record, removing the need for a full peer review or assessment process would be beneficial.

The increased number of applications going through a full assessment or peer review process is clearly creating strain on the system. **We recommend the Home Office consider the feasibility of expanding the fast-track process for specific positions within highly reputable arts and tech organisations with an excellent record of compliance in the SW route. We also recommend the Home Office works with Endorsing Bodies to consider how the number of applications that go through the peer review route could be reduced through raising the bar for a full review. This should still aim to maintain the integrity of the overall bar for endorsement.**

Satisfaction with the endorsement and visa application processes

Visa holders generally appeared to be content with the Global Talent visa application and endorsement processes. Considering the overall application process, 90% of visa holders surveyed by the Home Office as part of its 2024 Global Talent visa evaluation (Wave 2) said they were "very" or "fairly" satisfied with the overall visa application process. As Table 18 shows, satisfaction with the endorsement process was slightly higher than this, and with the visa application process slightly lower.

Table 18: Satisfaction with the Global Talent endorsement and application processes

Satisfaction	Overall application process	Endorsement application process	Visa application process
Very satisfied	59%	66%	56%
Fairly satisfied	31%	26%	31%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	5%	6%	7%
Fairly dissatisfied	3%	2%	4%
Very dissatisfied	1%	1%	2%

Source: Home Office Global Talent visa evaluation, Wave 2 (2024). Visa holders taking part in the survey were asked, *"Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the Global Talent application process as a whole?"* and *"How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the following? The endorsement application process; the visa application process."*

What happens after applicants enter the Global Talent route?

This section uses Home Office Migrant Journey data to examine what happens after main applicants receive a Global Talent visa. It considers whether migrants remain on their Global Talent visas, obtain settlement, switch to another immigration route or reach the end of their recorded leave. It is worth noting here that after entering the UK, the Global Talent visa allows people to work freely both in and out of the UK or to set up their own business.

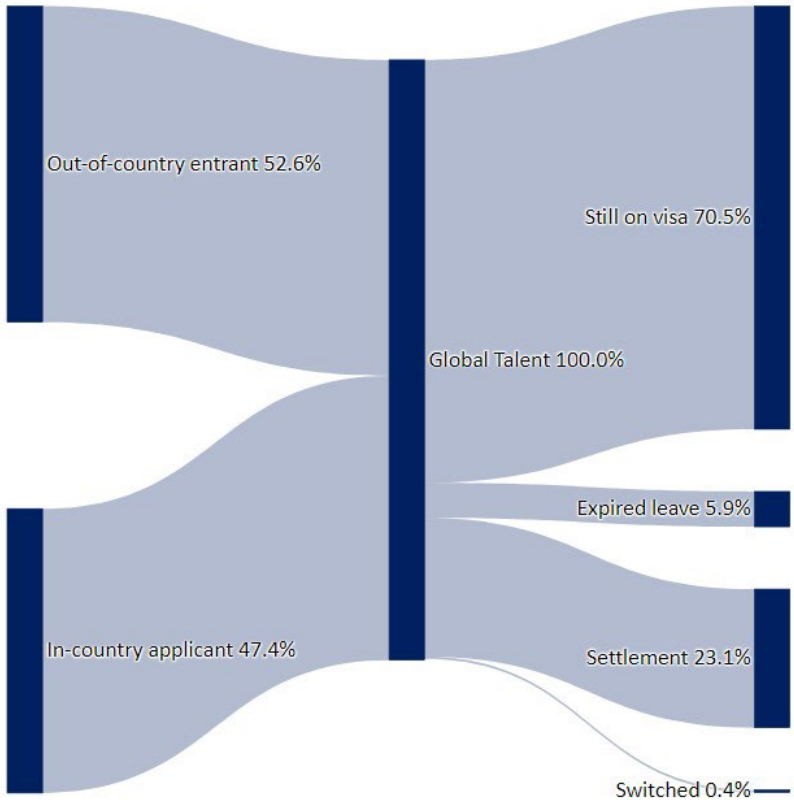
Global Talent migrants' pathways towards settlement

Among migrants entering the Global Talent route, including its Tier 1 Exceptional Talent predecessor, between 2012 and 31 December 2024, the vast majority remained on the route or had obtained settlement by 31 December 2024. Overall, 71% remained on a Global Talent visa and 23% had obtained settlement. Less than 1% had switched to another immigration route.

These figures cover the full cohort, including recent entrants who had not yet had three years to progress towards settlement. Looking only at migrants whose first Global Talent visa began at least three years earlier, 95% still held a valid UK immigration status three years after entering the route and 28% had obtained settlement. This suggests that only a small share of Global Talent migrants leave the UK in the first few years.

Among Global Talent migrants who had obtained settlement, the median time from their first Global Talent visa to settlement was approximately 2.1 years. This is below the standard three-year qualifying period because, as covered in Chapter 1, some migrants can count time spent on other eligible immigration routes towards settlement.

Figure 19: Global Talent pathways for those who arrived before the end of 2024



Source: MAC Internal Analysis using Migrant Journey microdata.
Notes: The Global Talent cohort includes main applicants whose first Talent visa in their final retained journey began by 31 December 2024 and was Global Talent or Tier 1 – Exceptional Talent. The final retained talent journey is the most recent eligible immigration journey in which an individual held a Global Talent, Tier 1 Exceptional Talent, High Potential Individual or Innovator Founder visa. Where an individual had more than one eligible talent journey, only the most recent was retained for the analysis. Each person is counted once, and only records from that journey are used. Outcomes show immigration status at 31 December 2024. Percentages are of the full route cohort. Settlement includes recorded settlement and settlement inferred from citizenship.

Does the current Global Talent settlement offer remain appropriate?

The current settlement requirement

Global Talent visa holders have a relatively generous route to settlement. Many can settle after three years on qualifying routes, subject to them meeting the English language and Knowledge of Life in the UK requirements. The principal requirement for those applying for settlement is to provide evidence that they have earned money in the UK in the field linked to their endorsement or eligible prize, but there is no minimum earnings threshold. Liberal settlement requirements on talent routes are not unusual internationally: the UK's settlement offer is broadly similar across most of the countries we have looked at (see Annex A).

Nonetheless, the lack of requirements at settlement raises the concern that visa holders may not be applying their talent in the UK in practice, and that people on very low incomes would not have a good standard of living and would likely present a net fiscal cost over the course of their lifetimes in the UK.

For example, we were made aware of one visa applicant who was endorsed for their work in literature. They had written a book before entering the UK and this was showcased as evidence to be able to enter through the Global Talent route. Once they entered the UK, they worked in social care and did not produce any additional literature and throughout their time in the UK they sold 100 copies of their book. The migrant had supported their life in the UK by working in an unrelated occupation to their field of endorsement and the total contribution to their sector was selling copies of the book they had already written. This is a clear example of where a migrant has not made a significant contribution to their sector.

While overall earnings on the Global Talent route are relatively good, a non-trivial share appear to have extremely low earnings, according to HMRC data (as highlighted in Table 10). In some cases, particularly in the arts, this is not necessarily inconsistent with making contributions to the field of talent—although even in the arts we would expect cases of people earning less than £12,571 (the level of earnings to get settlement after 10 years, recently announced by the Government under the new Earned Settlement Framework) to be rare. We have considered three broad approaches to providing greater assurance that the Global Talent settlement offer is appropriately targeted, and each is discussed below:

1. Determining the right bar at entry;
2. Assessment of contribution to the field;
3. Salary requirement.

These options address different concerns. A higher entry threshold could instead change who was admitted to the route in the first place. A contribution assessment would examine what the applicant had achieved after entering the route or whether they had remained engaged in their field. A salary requirement would ensure that talent route migrants are able to support themselves and guard against the risk of fiscal costs after settlement is granted. The remainder of this Chapter discusses the merits of these three options to ensure the UK gets the greatest benefits from the route.

Determining the right bar at entry

If the government wants to maintain very liberal requirements for settlement, in theory it could apply a very high threshold when applicants first apply for a Global Talent endorsement. The goal would be to concentrate the main assessment of talent and potential at the point at which the first decision is made, rather than introducing an additional assessment after the applicant had established themselves in the UK. The main benefits of making the substantive assessment before the applicant moves to the UK is that it gives migrants more certainty about the future and avoids the disruption of refusing settlement to people who have already established their lives in the country.

On the other hand, delaying substantive assessment of talent until the settlement stage gives policymakers more information. For example, people with an excellent overseas track record will not always be able to establish themselves in the UK market. While in theory making the 'right' decision up front sounds appealing, it may not be possible simply to raise the bar at entry if the measures of talent and promise that Endorsing Bodies have available to them are inevitably imperfect. As an illustration, earlier we showed data estimating that the bottom 20% of earners on the Global Talent route were projected to be fiscally negative over the course of their lifetimes. If policymakers decided they did not want to admit people with a negative expected

lifetime fiscal impact, it is not clear they would always be able to identify these individuals in advance. As a result, a higher bar at entry is possible but is not straightforward and might exclude the wrong applicants.

Assessment of contribution to the field

In theory, the Home Office could change the rules to require stronger evidence of contribution during the visa holder's time in the UK at either extension or settlement (or in the form of a checkpoint, as in the Innovator Founder route). A light-touch version might require evidence of activity over a minimum period, rather than the current requirement of evidence of a single payment. A more involved version would require a more substantive demonstration of contributions to the field, detailing the applicant's activities in a process similar to the initial endorsement.

On one hand, a stronger contribution test could justify the route's accelerated settlement offer. A later assessment may be particularly relevant for those admitted based on exceptional promise, as it could examine whether that promise is being realised. Given the significant flexibility the visa offers, it is not unreasonable to expect applicants to be substantively involved in their field of talent.

However, there are also strong arguments against introducing significantly more rigorous settlement "contribution to the field" requirements. First, the liberal post-entry requirements are a core part of the Global Talent offer. They make the route attractive to talented individuals and give visa holders more certainty than other visa categories, because there are no meaningful criteria that could later create a barrier to settlement. A second endorsement would also add costs and administrative burdens for Endorsing Bodies and the Home Office.

Second, the current rules give visa holders flexibility to contribute to their fields in a way that the (necessarily formulaic) immigration rule**s** might not anticipate. Contribution is subjective and differs substantially between sectors, making a common test difficult to apply fairly and consistently. Salary is an imperfect indicator of contribution, especially in lower-paying fields, and more direct measures such as academic publications or arts performances are hard to assess and compare consistently. As we note in the Innovator Founder Chapter, the settlement requirements for that route are not a particularly convincing metric of business success, and there is a risk that similar problems would emerge in any attempt to create metrics of contribution at the settlement stage. A lighter-touch option, assessing some ongoing activity in the field of talent, would be administratively easier to implement and less burdensome for applicants, but depending on its design could still add some uncertainty and costs.

On balance, **we recommend against a full-scale assessment of contribution for Global Talent visa holders at the point of settlement**. **Instead, we recommend that the Home Office consider options for a light-touch assessment that would provide more confidence the applicant had been working in the field of endorsement, without onerous documentary requirements**. For example, this could include requiring employment over a longer period of time in the relevant field, or multiple paid engagements (in the case of freelancers) rather than just one. If implementing this approach, it should ensure that the documentary requirements are easy to meet for genuine applicants across a range of fields.

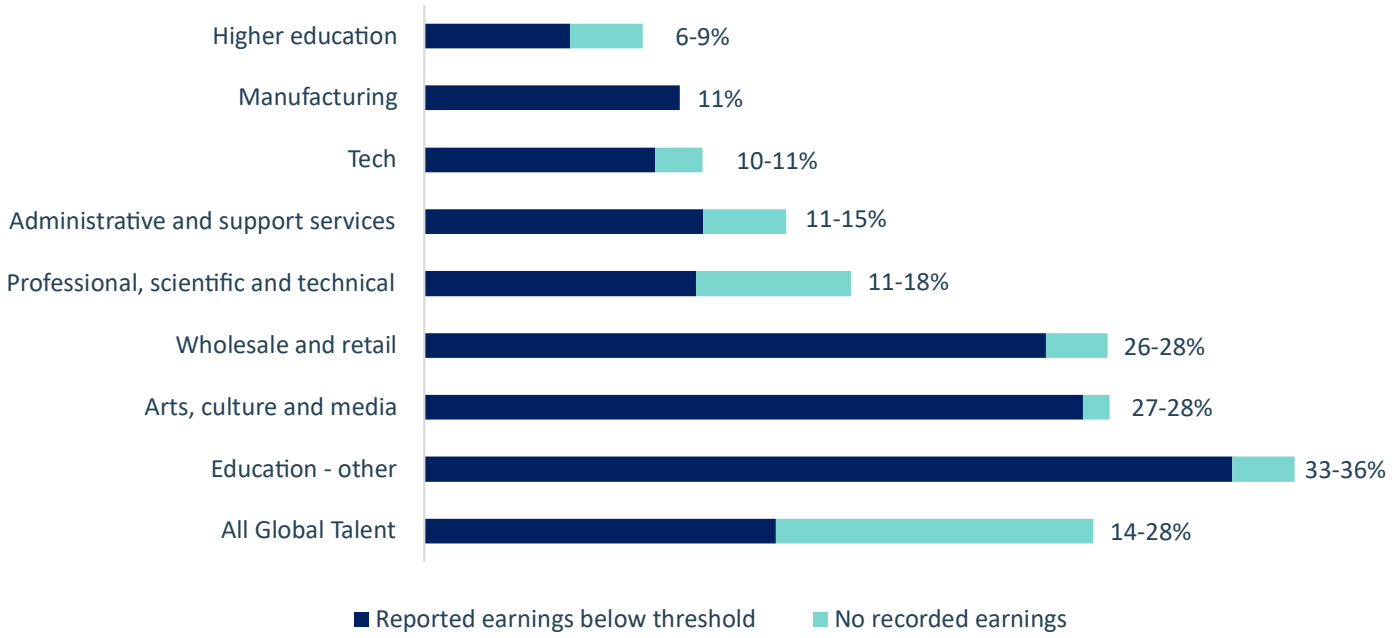
Salary requirement

Separate from the contribution to the field is whether Global Talent migrants can support themselves in the UK long-term. Other immigration categories require people to be able to support themselves financially in the short and long term, including outside of work routes. For example, British citizens wishing to sponsor their spouse to live with them in the UK must meet an income threshold. When we reviewed these financial thresholds in 2025, we presented various income levels sufficient to ensure a decent standard of living. One benchmark considered was the full-time National Living Wage, which we estimate to have been £23,800 in 2025.

The median income for main applicants in the second year of their Global Talent visa is £42,800, which is sufficient to maintain a given standard of living and with the ability of visa holders to support themselves, but this conceals significant differences in income between Global Talent sectors. As we noted in the section about migrant labour market outcomes, Global Talent visa holders in some subsectors have very low earnings. Arts stakeholders, including Arts Council England, highlighted that many arts careers involve relatively low, irregular, or project-based earnings. However, the problem of low earnings is not exclusively found in the arts, as highlighted by Figure 20.

Given the talented nature of the route and the fact that it is a work visa, it is not unreasonable to expect Global Talent migrants to achieve earnings at least at this level. We estimate that between 14% and 28% of Global Talent main applicants granted visas in 2022/23 had taxable earnings below £22,300 in their second year. The lower estimate includes only those with reported earnings below this threshold, while the upper estimate also includes those with no recorded earnings. This range reflects uncertainty about whether individuals without recorded earnings were in the UK or had earnings that were not captured in the available data, particularly in sectors with higher levels of freelance work (see Annex C for further details). The £22,300 threshold is approximately equivalent to the annual earnings of someone working full time at the 2024/25 National Living Wage. We use this benchmark because the majority of the second year earnings periods fall within 2024/25. At this income level, it is likely that many individuals will be fiscally negative over their lifetime.

Figure 20: Share of Global Talent visa holders for visas granted in 2022/23 with earnings under £22,300 in their second year, by sector



Source: Internal analysis using HO/HMRC matched data.
Notes: The chart covers main applicants whose second year total income was below £22,300. This is calculated using the 2024 NLW (£11.44) and assuming a 37.5 hour week. Industries with less than 30 visa holders in have been excluded and several visa holders have no recorded industry. Includes both in and out-of-country visas.

A relatively low income requirement along these lines would not affect most applicants, who would meet it with ease (though it would add some administrative burden in the application, especially if implemented with the same complexity that currently exists in the family migration rules). The area where it could pose most difficulties is in the lowest-paying fields, particularly arts and culture. It could also be more difficult for self-employed or business owners to demonstrate – a problem we encountered in the review of family financial requirements.

Here, there are some trade-offs. For example, there is a risk that Global Talent visa holders in low-paid fields such as the arts could be diverted *away* from maximising the contribution to their field in order to ensure they earn enough money to meet an income requirement. This would be a particular problem if the income requirement was relatively high. The Home Office would also need to decide how to treat applicants who have taken time away from work because of illness, disability, parental leave or caring responsibilities.

In the short run, the proposed earned settlement framework would require annual taxable earnings of at least £12,571 for at least three years to access the shortest settlement pathway. This would function as a (very low) salary requirement at settlement within the Global Talent route. We estimate that between 8% and 21% of Global Talent main applicants granted visas in 2022/23 had earnings below £12,571 in their second year, depending on whether those with no recorded earnings are included.

While we recognise that it would increase the administrative burden, we believe it is also important to ensure applicants can support themselves with a basic standard of living in the UK in the long-term and not risk being

a fiscal cost over the course of their time in the UK. **We recommend a salary requirement set at a level needed to sustain a basic standard of living of at least the full-time national living wage for Global Talent visa holders applying for settlement.** When implementing the threshold, the Home Office should give flexibility for people with temporary reductions in income due to parental leave or illness. It should not simply carry across the unnecessarily detailed and complex documentary requirements from the UK's Family rules.

Overall, the liberal settlement requirements are a strength of the Global Talent visa and should not be completely reversed. However, there is a case for slightly strengthening them. We do not think that a full re-assessment of the contribution to the field would be worth the resources, especially since most Global Talent visa holders appear to perform relatively well economically. However, we believe it would be reasonable to require evidence of more than having earned money in the UK in the field between entry and settlement. This should not be onerous given the route is intended to attract highly talented individuals. We also find it problematic that a non-trivial minority of Global Talent visa holders have very low taxable income. We think that it would be reasonable to require Global Talent workers to demonstrate enough income to have a reasonable minimum standard of living at settlement and reduce the risk of being a fiscal cost over the course of their lifetimes.

Chapter 3: Innovator Founder

Migrant labour market outcomes

Unlike Skilled Worker and many Global Talent migrants, Innovator Founder migrants are primarily business founders rather than employees. As a result, their economic activity may not be well reflected in conventional measures of personal income. Start-up founders often reinvest earnings into their businesses, delay remuneration while firms are in their early stages, prioritise paying any employees, or choose to extract income in forms that are not fully captured by standard employee earnings measures. Consequently, personal income is likely to be a more limited measure of economic activity and contribution, especially in the short run while businesses are getting underway.

In the longer term, it is reasonable to expect that migrants who have developed successful innovative businesses would have high earnings. However, it may take some time for these companies to establish themselves as high-revenue firms. Endorsing Bodies we spoke to indicated that they would expect most Innovator Founder visa holders to be able to rely on income earned from the business by the third year, although even at this stage income may still be low for the reasons outlined above.

It is also worth noting that innovation is a relatively difficult concept to measure and the data we have access to for this review was limited in what we could say about the level of 'innovative activity'. A few measures of innovation would include company spending on research and development, investment in technology, patent application data. Additionally, innovative companies are likely to behave differently to the average UK company. Innovation requires time and funds, which could mean that an innovative company's turnover information may look different from the average firm, whose business objective may be to turn a profit as soon as possible.

Table 21 shows that median personal income reported was £15,800 in the second year after arrival, while mean income was £31,100. The difference between the mean and the median results from smaller numbers of particularly highly paid visa holders at the top of the distribution. Endorsing Bodies suggested that by the third year, applicants would typically be relying on income earned from the business, however we did not observe a significant progression in employment rates or earnings levels in the data over the first few years. (The data do not allow us to distinguish between PAYE income paid by the company itself, compared to the income Innovator Founder visa holders might in theory have earned from working as employees for another employer unrelated to their business.)

As mentioned previously, HMRC has identified limitations in the matching of Self Assessment records within the linked dataset, with individuals receiving Self Assessment income only less likely to be identified than those who also receive PAYE income. This is likely to understate the total earnings rate. The impact of the missing data on the income distribution among those with observed earnings is uncertain; however, analysis of a sample of British company directors suggests that people with only Self Assessment data tend to have lower earnings than those with either PAYE only or a combination of PAYE and Self Assessment (see Annex C).

Therefore, it is likely that if the individuals with only Self Assessment income were captured fully, the picture on Innovator Founder performance would not change, or may even become poorer.

Table 21: Innovator Founder second year annual income distributions of individuals with observed PAYE or Self Assessment income for visas granted in 2022/23

	10th percentile	Median	90th percentile	Mean	Earnings rate
PAYE income	£6,100	£14,000	£64,000	£27,300	51%
Self Assessment income	£200	£9,900	£39,400	£15,900	22%
Total income	£6,700	£15,800	£66,700	£31,100	60%

Source: Internal analysis using HO/HMRC matched data. Notes: Includes both in and out-of-country visas. See Annex C for further details on deriving earnings rates for this visa route.

The distribution of income is highly uneven. For the bottom 10% of earners, total income was only £6,700, reflecting a non-trivial number of founders with little measured personal income. However, incomes are substantially higher among a smaller subset of founders, with total income reaching £66,700 for the top 10% of earners.

Consistent with this finding, the regression analysis shown in Table 22 indicates that Innovator Founder migrants earn substantially less income than those on the SW visa in the short term. After controlling for age, gender and sector, second-year total incomes remain around 62% lower than those on the SW visa.

However, because business owners may have different trajectories from regular skilled employees, short-term income measures alone provide only a partial assessment of the route's performance. To assess this more effectively, it is necessary to look at how the business, as well as the individual's earnings, progresses.

Table 22: Log income regressions comparing Innovator Founder incomes with Skilled Worker for visas granted in 2022/23

Visa route	Adjusted income difference vs Skilled Worker	95% confidence interval	Statistical significance
First year	-68%	-71% to -66%	***
Second year	-62%	-66% to -58%	***

Source: HMRC/HO visa data match

Notes: Dependent variable is log total income (includes PAYE and Self Assessment income). Skilled Worker is the reference route. Controls include age, age squared, gender and sector. *** indicates $p < 0.001$. We use the Innovator predecessor route as a proxy for the Innovator founder route here (see Annex for more details). Includes both in and out-of-country visas.

Innovator Founder business performance

We therefore turn to measures of business performance. To assess business outcomes, visa records were linked to the Longitudinal Business Database. We consider these relative to a group of comparator businesses in the UK, made up of firms of the same age. As shown in Table 23, Innovator Founder and Innovator (the predecessor route) businesses are concentrated in a relatively narrow range of industries, particularly Information and Communication, which accounts for around one-third (34%) of all firms linked to the route, compared with just 8% of comparable UK-owned businesses. Within this sector, activity is concentrated in

software development (36%), computer consultancy (21%) and other information technology services (18%). Innovator Founder firms are also more likely than comparison businesses to operate in Manufacturing (11% compared with 3%), while having a similar presence in Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities and Wholesale and Retail Trade. In contrast, UK-owned comparator firms are more heavily represented in sectors such as Construction, Accommodation and Food Services, and Administrative and Support Services.

Table 23: Sector distribution of Innovator Founder and comparison companies

Sector	Innovator Founder companies	Comparison companies
Information and Communication	34%	8%
Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles and Motorcycles	16%	9%
Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	16%	17%
Manufacturing	11%	3%
Administrative and Support Service Activities	5%	9%
Education	4%	1%
Other Service Activities	3%	2%
Accommodation and Food Service Activities	2%	8%
Human Health and Social Work Activities	2%	4%
Transportation and Storage	2%	2%
Construction	1%	13%
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	1%	2%
Financial and Insurance Activities	1%	7%
Real Estate Activities	1%	13%
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	<1%	1%
Electricity, Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning Supply	<1%	2%
Water Supply; Sewerage, Waste Management and Remediation Activities	<1%	<1%
Mining and Quarrying	-	<1%
Public Administration and Defence	-	<1%

Source: Longitudinal Business Database 2021-2025
Note: Comparator UK companies are defined as those that are not associated with migrants on Innovator Founder visas, and that are active British-owned businesses.

Table 24 compares turnover among businesses associated with Innovator Founder migrants and the predecessor Innovator route against UK owned businesses of a similar age. The results suggest that businesses associated with these routes generate lower turnover than comparable UK owned businesses throughout their first five years. At firm age four, median turnover among Innovator Founder businesses was approximately £105,000, compared with £360,000 for UK owned comparators. To put this in context, the average UK independent coffee shop generates between £100,000 and £150,000 in annual turnover across all ages.

Similar gaps are observed at the upper end of the turnover distribution. At the 90th percentile, turnover among Innovator Founder businesses reached £569,000, compared with £3.98 million for comparator firms. These findings are supported by the regression analysis. After controlling for employment, sector and calendar quarter, Innovator Founder firms had substantially lower turnover than comparable UK firms at each firm age.

The estimated gap was around 50% at age zero and remained substantial across later firm ages, with no evidence that it narrowed as firms aged. There were also some small differences in turnover between Endorsing Bodies, but the overall picture was similar, including for the Global Entrepreneur Programme, despite its very different selection model.

It is important to note that this analysis uses the Longitudinal Business Database (LBD), which only includes businesses registered for VAT or PAYE. As a result, the findings do not necessarily reflect the wider population of UK businesses. For context, in 2024, the Inter Departmental Business Register, which provides the underlying data for the LBD, contained 2.63 million businesses, compared with an estimated 5.5 million private sector businesses in the UK.

We have used these UK-owned businesses of a similar age as comparators given that their starting points are similar. It is possible that the Innovator Founder cohort has important differences to its Innovator predecessor route, in which case we will not know this until the route matures further.

However, given the broad continuity in route policy since 2019, we would not expect business growth under Innovator Founder to differ substantially from the predecessor Innovator route. This is supported by the analysis in Annex D, which shows similar business outcomes for the two routes at comparable stages in a business's early development. One Endorsing Body suggested that although policy remains the same, the Home Office and Endorsing Bodies have become more selective and better at identifying the best applicants over time. While this could be true, we have not been able to verify this argument. Initial outcomes in year 1 to year 3 where data is available do not seem to have changed substantially across Innovator/Innovator Founder cohorts (see Annex D) so if there have been changes in the quality of applicants over time, they are not visible at least at this early stage.

The turnover gap between Innovator Founder companies and UK comparators widens materially during the first five years. While turnover increases among some Innovator Founder businesses as they mature, turnover growth is generally weaker than that observed among comparable UK-owned firms. Several factors may contribute to this pattern. Migrant entrepreneurs may face additional barriers when establishing a business, including more limited local networks, less familiarity with the UK market, and greater challenges in accessing finance. In addition, Endorsing Bodies noted that UK entrepreneurs may have been working on their business for some time before it is formally registered, whereas Innovator Founder visa holders may not have been able to do this. These constraints may reduce business performance in the early years.

We also examined employee counts among Innovator Founder businesses and found they are generally low and broadly similar to those observed among comparable UK-owned start-ups. Median employment remains between one and two employees across the first five years of operation, and where a visa holder receives PAYE income from their company, the employment figures will likely include the applicant themselves. This suggests that most businesses remain small during the early stages of development and the route is not leading to significant job creation, even after 5 years of business operation.

Table 24: Turnover by firm age for Innovator Founder and comparison companies (£)

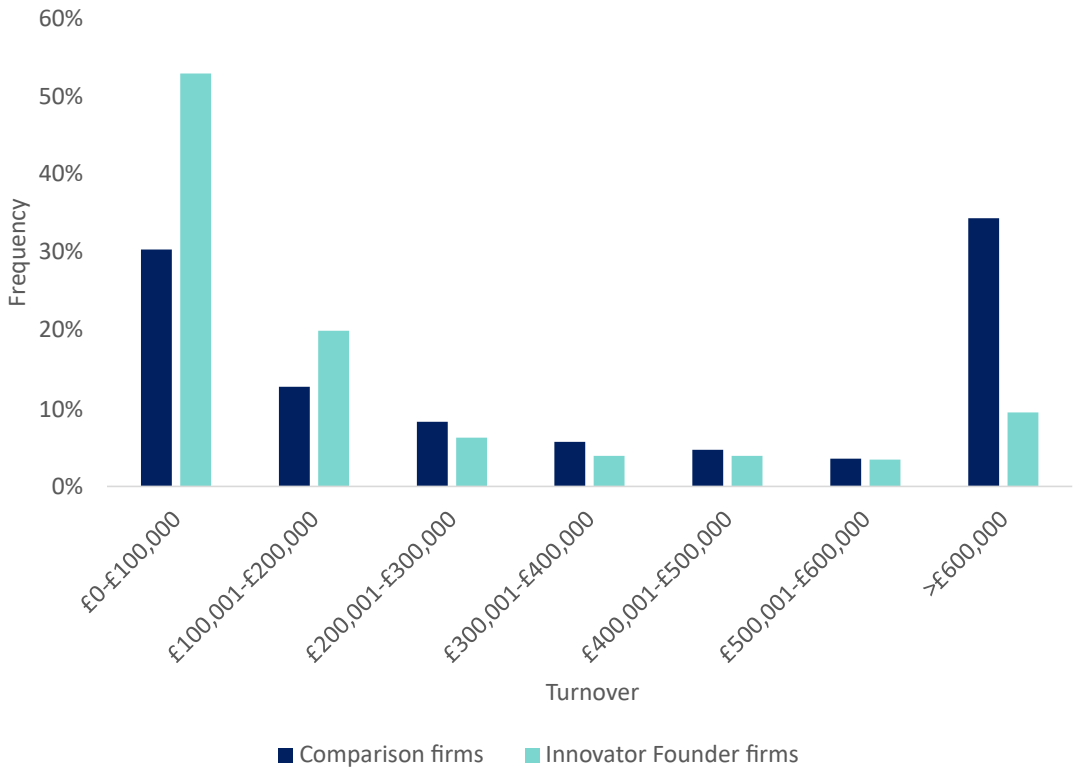
Firm age	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	90th percentile	99th percentile	Mean
Innovator Founder Companies						
0	71,000	100,000	152,000	276,000	999,000	166,000
1	74,000	100,000	162,000	394,000	758,000	168,000
2	55,000	91,000	154,000	414,000	1,443,000	179,000
3	31,000	96,000	187,000	730,000	2,403,000	1,663,000
4	55,000	105,000	269,000	569,000	3,089,000	2,322,000
UK-owned comparators						
0	100,000	200,000	674,000	2,000,000	12,000,000	1,078,000
1	100,000	214,000	700,000	2,209,000	12,668,000	1,159,000
2	92,000	269,000	942,000	2,864,000	18,541,000	1,543,000
3	103,000	333,000	1,195,000	3,733,000	26,916,000	2,589,000
4	105,000	360,000	1,256,000	3,979,000	30,673,000	2,982,000

Source: Longitudinal Business Database 2021-2025.
Note: Comparator UK companies are defined as being those that are not associated with migrants on Innovator Founder visas, and that are British owned businesses. The results are from a balanced panel of firms observed at every firm age from 0 to 4 years. We use the Innovator predecessor route as well as the Innovator founder route here as the Innovator Founder route was only started in 2023 (see Annex for more details).

Turnover distributions show substantial variation among Innovator Founder businesses as shown by Table 24. Innovator Founder firms are more concentrated at the lower end of the turnover distribution than comparable UK-owned firms of a similar age. In their fourth year of operation, around 53% of businesses reported annual turnover of £100,000 or less, compared with 30% of comparator firms. Comparator firms were more likely to fall into higher turnover bands, particularly those above £100,000.

While many remain relatively small, a minority achieve much higher turnover. For example, over 5% of firms generated over £1 million in turnover. However, this is still below the 25% of UK-owned comparison firms. This comparison is based on firms recorded in the LBD, which captures businesses registered for PAYE and/or VAT. As a result, the comparison group is less likely to include very small businesses, which may partly explain its higher share of firms with turnover exceeding £1 million. The highest-performing firm generated over £200m in its fourth year and contributed £600,000 corporation tax according to Companies House (other firms only tend to publish micro accounts due to their size and therefore we cannot observe their profit and corporation tax). This suggests that assessing average outcomes alone may obscure potentially important contributions from a smaller number of particularly successful firms. It is possible that the route is not particularly successful in generating large numbers of reasonably high-performing businesses but does manage to attract a very small number of innovative ventures with the potential for much more significant economic impact. For this reason, analysis of high-growth firms and particularly successful businesses may provide additional insight into route performance beyond average turnover measures.

Figure 25: Innovator Founder turnover distribution compared to UK-owned firms in year four



Source: Longitudinal Business Database 2021-2025

We next estimate the Corporation Tax that could be generated by Innovator Founder businesses. We apply a range of profit margins by broad SIC industry and firm age, provided by HMRC, to the observed turnover of each company in the Longitudinal Business Database. We then apply the relevant UK Corporation Tax rates to the estimated company profits.

Table 26 shows that estimated Corporation Tax contributions are relatively low across the different assumptions. Using the 25th percentile profit margin produces an estimated average liability of close to zero across all firm ages. Under the median assumption, estimated Corporation Tax is only around £1,300 to £2,800 per business per year. Even using mean profit margins, the estimated contribution is between £5,800 and £10,100 per business, while the 75th percentile assumption produces estimates of around £9,600 to £17,900.

Although estimated Corporation Tax generally rises as firms mature, the amounts remain relatively modest even under more favourable assumptions about profitability. This suggests that Corporation Tax generated by Innovator Founder businesses is unlikely to materially offset the lower personal incomes observed among Innovator Founders.

Table 26: Estimated corporation tax (£) per year

Firm age	25th percentile	Median	Mean	75th percentile
0	0	1,800	6,200	10,700
1	0	1,300	5,800	9,600
2	0	1,300	6,100	10,700
3	0	1,700	7,200	12,800
4	0	2,800	10,100	17,900

Source: Turnover data from Longitudinal Business Database 2021-2025 and profit margins from HMRC business data.

Our findings also illustrate why the MAC's existing fiscal model is not well suited to assessing the Innovator Founder route. The model is designed primarily around observed employment income, whereas the contribution of founders may be realised through a combination of earnings, retained profits, dividends, capital gains and wider business activity. Estimating these effects requires assumptions about how businesses grow and how founders' incomes evolve over time. However, there is limited evidence on the long-term performance of Innovator Founder businesses, making it difficult to project future earnings or business profitability with sufficient confidence. While corporation tax could in principle capture part of this contribution, the available data do not provide information on profits, ownership shares or how returns are distributed. As a result, neither an income-based approach nor a corporation tax-based approach provides a sufficiently robust basis for estimating the route's lifetime fiscal impact.

One possible predictor of a company’s future success is the level of capital invested at an early stage. The LBD does not contain direct information on capital investment, so we used the number of employees at the start of a company’s life as a proxy, on the assumption that firms with greater initial investment may use some of this funding to employ staff from an early stage. Firms that started with more employees had substantially higher turnover initially, but we found little evidence that this translated into stronger subsequent turnover growth.

Given that innovation is a core objective of the route but is difficult to measure directly, we also examined patent activity as one observable indicator. Among Innovator and Innovator Founder firms observed in the LBD, 6.8% had at least one pending patent application and 1.3% held at least one granted patent that remained in force. This compares with just 0.2% for each measure among comparable UK owned firms of a similar age in the LBD. These figures may understate patenting activity where businesses could not be successfully matched.

These results suggest that Innovator Founder firms are more likely to engage with the patent system, although they should be interpreted cautiously. Patent applications can take several years to reach a decision, meaning many applications from relatively young Innovator Founder businesses may not yet have had time to be granted. It is also possible that because patent applications can provide evidence of innovation activity and is one of the criteria that can be used to qualify for settlement, applicants may have an incentive to submit an application regardless of its commercial value or likelihood of success. We therefore cannot yet assess whether the higher rate of patent applications translates into a similarly higher rate of successful grants or commercially valuable innovation.

Route performance

Overall, the evidence suggests that Innovator Founder migrants have substantially lower observed incomes than those on the SW route and that this gap is not fully explained by differences in age, gender or sector. Business outcomes are also weak on average, with Innovator Founder firms generating lower turnover than comparable UK-owned businesses and relatively modest estimated corporation tax receipts. However, there is considerable variation within the route, with a small number of businesses achieving substantially higher turnover. This suggests that the route's overall low performance is mitigated to some extent by its ability to attract and support a smaller number of innovative, high growth businesses capable of generating significant economic benefits. However, we consider this effect likely to be limited, particularly as UK comparator firms at the top of the distribution still outperform Innovator Founder firms.

There are a large number of visa holders that, unless they see income and business growth far beyond the typical trajectory of other entrepreneurs in the UK, are unlikely to make substantial economic contributions and may be fiscally costly over their lifetimes. This brings into question whether it is feasible at the endorsement stage to identify those exceptionally high-growth businesses compared to the large tail of underperforming visa holders, in order to consider whether the bar could be set higher to improve the overall contribution of the route to the UK.

Overall, based on the data we have reviewed, the average Innovator Founder businesses are not performing well. The strong performance of a small number of successful visa holders on the route does not make up for the poor outcomes for the majority of the route and may not be sufficient to prevent the route from creating a net fiscal cost over the long term. The outcomes of those on the route are poor and the route is not meeting its objectives set out by the government.

We recommend that the government abolishes the Innovator Founder route in its current form. If the Government wishes to keep the route open, we recommend it should immediately undertake substantial reform of the eligibility, endorsement and settlement process to make the route much more selective. We discuss detailed recommendations on these issues in the remainder of this chapter. **If the route remains open, we recommend that the Home Office urgently works to improve the quality of data to evaluate the route to gather complete data on personal income, business profits, innovation measures, and corporate tax paid, and how these metrics vary by Endorsing Body. It should then review the route again in one year with a view to closing it unless new data show a considerable improvement.**

The data improvements are a crucial part of any choice to keep the route open or reform it. During the review, we faced many data gaps, such as information on actual profits and corporation tax paid by the businesses, and how personal income is linked to data on business performance, as well as any other measures of innovation that the Home Office considers relevant for assessing the route.

Finally, if the Home Office abolishes the route, it may come under pressure to create a replacement. There could therefore be some value in taking more time to identify whether some parts of the programme are performing better and could be salvaged. This would require more detailed analysis beyond the scope of this review.

The remainder of this chapter discusses potential improvements in the event that the Home Office does decide to retain the route, but a more fundamental redesign would require consultation.

Innovator Founder eligibility and endorsement

Assessing applications

All applicants, whether a new or existing business, must meet the mandatory requirements for English language ability and for access to sufficient savings to support themselves. New businesses must have a business plan where they have either generated or made a significant contribution to the ideas in that plan. The business plan is then assessed against the route's innovation, viability and scalability requirements by a Home Office approved Endorsing Body. Unlike the Global Talent visa, which assesses applicants' past track record, the Innovator Founder endorsement process does not have specific requirements to have a background of entrepreneurship or starting a business, although having successful business experience may increase the viability of the business plan.

Endorsing Bodies told us that new applications were assessed through a multi-stage process, involving an initial assessment against a scoring framework testing the innovation, viability, and scalability criteria, followed by an interview with the applicant. Scoring frameworks were developed with Home Office input, and their purpose is to make decision making consistent across applications and alignment with policy guidelines. The person is only eligible for an interview if they reach a sufficient threshold. Endorsing Bodies highlighted the importance of the interview stage in picking up on exaggerated or falsified applications, as this is where they can question applicants on their business plans.

On the Innovator Founder route, the Home Office and some Endorsing Bodies have identified some firms offering idea generation and accompanying business plan writing services to migrants. For a high fee, these companies produce business ideas and accompanying plans that migrants can use to apply to enter the UK. This activity is abuse, as Innovator Founder applicants need to present their own business plans for which they will later be accountable for progress made. Although Endorsing Bodies have told us that assessment processes identify where applicants' plans are not credible and such business plans will therefore fail to meet the criteria for the route, the extent to which these have been successfully identified upon endorsement application is not clear to us. This activity needs to be carefully monitored by Endorsing Bodies, which need to continue to make checks and ensure that they are intercepting all such cases. Any cases identified need to be reported to the Home Office.

Endorsing Bodies also commented on the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in applications. They noted that AI can be a legitimate tool to help applicants, but said that prior to AI, it was relatively straightforward to distinguish between stronger and weaker applications. As applicants can now use AI to write large parts of their applications, weak evidence or applications can now be made much more plausible. Endorsing Bodies noted that AI was sometimes being used to generate business plans entirely, which would become a problem if the applicant was then unable to deliver. Given that AI is constantly evolving, identification of AI-produced documentation and applications may become harder. The interview process is critical to identifying this

problem and should be retained and mandated across all Innovator Founder applicants in any future Innovator Founder model.

We consider that interviews are an important part of the assessment process and recommend that interviews should be retained in future. They are a vital part of assessing the credibility of the applicant, whether they have written the business plan themselves, and more importantly whether they have a genuine understanding of the business and the ability to deliver it in practice.

Meeting criteria for endorsement

Stakeholders expressed differing views about the innovation requirement. A widely held view was that the current definition excludes businesses that may have strong growth potential but do not meet the innovation threshold, such as those that are highly productive and competent in their field but are not doing something unique. [23] Some Endorsing Bodies and other government departments proposed greater flexibility in how the criterion is applied, including revising the innovation criterion to align with growth sectors such as those recommended in the Industrial Strategy. Another proposal was to make the innovation criterion or either of the other two criteria less stringent for applicants who can demonstrate significant contribution in growth sectors. However, even among those favouring greater flexibility, there were concerns that relaxing the innovation requirements could simply displace existing UK business activity in some sectors rather than genuinely add to it.

Other stakeholders supported innovation as being a core requirement, given concerns that predecessor routes (which did not have this requirement) operated under a less tightly controlled endorsement system and admitted applicants whose businesses lacked genuine innovation and had easily replicable ideas. Examples cited included a hairdressing business with a booking app and a birthday card business.

> *"We receive applications from highly credible founders whose business plans do not meet the innovation criteria. This is a loss to the UK in terms of potential job creation and having more talented people in the UK. If the scope of the IF route were widened to include these people, that would be highly positive in our view."*
>
> Endorsing Body, email response

> *"A lot of the ones that we reject, back in the day when there was a startup visa, we probably would have approved them."*
>
> Endorsing Body discussion

[23] To meet the criteria applicants must demonstrate a genuine and original business proposition with a clear competitive advantage, that is not easily replicable. Innovation must be central to the business proposition rather than incidental. The innovative element must be developed by the applicant and cannot be substantially outsourced to a third-party provider.

We do not consider that the performance of Innovator Founder businesses as a whole demonstrates that innovation is necessarily a guarantee that a business will perform well. Given that the purpose of the route is to generate growth, this is best achieved through high productivity. Nevertheless, we consider that the innovation does have a function in encouraging businesses that are viable and do not simply displace existing UK business activity. **We therefore do not recommend removing the requirement for innovation as one of the core eligibility criteria unless it is replaced with a similarly stringent criterion to ensure that endorsed businesses will be concentrated in higher-productivity activities.** Without this, there is a significant risk that removing innovation as a criterion could result in the visa route being used to admit more people setting up low-value added businesses. Any such shift would need to be very carefully managed and monitored, to show that the change in criteria resulted in more productive businesses and did not simply displace other business activity or result in individuals setting up businesses that are not filling any particular gap in the market.

One way to make the Innovator Founder route more selective would be to impose tighter criteria on the backgrounds of the individual applicants, not just their business plans. Some Endorsing Bodies said that the strongest applicants tend to have a good track record of running businesses and raising investment, and to have money in the bank to draw on, and that these applicants tended to do very well on the route. Applicant background can only partially predict future success, however. Endorsing bodies said that, for the average applicant, it was harder to predict at initial endorsement stage which would be most successful. In practice, the applicant's business background and access to resources already form part of the 'viability' assessment, i.e. the individual's demonstrated ability to implement a business idea makes the business easier to consider viable. However, if the government wished to make the route more selective, it could consider either placing greater weight on founder capability and track record or specifically requiring that applicants to the route demonstrate previous entrepreneurial experience and a track record of running successful businesses.

Finally, **we recommend that the Home Office reviews whether the 'scalability' criterion is currently strong enough, as endorsed businesses have generally not demonstrated significant scaling.** We do not consider businesses with less than £200,000 in turnover to be operating at a meaningful scale. The list of criteria for settlement currently contains several requirements related to scalability, including having turnover of at least £1,000,000 (or £500,000 in businesses with at least £100,000 revenues from exports) and creation of jobs. However, as discussed later, applicants are not required to meet them and can instead choose to rely on other criteria that are easier to meet (see discussion on pages 58-59).

Endorsement outcomes

Endorsement rates for new applications varied across Endorsing Bodies ranging from 13% to 25% among the non-government Endorsing Bodies in FY 2024/5. GEP has an invitation only model, under which applicants are pre-screened by 'deal makers' working for GEP before reaching formal endorsement stage, so its endorsement rate by definition was 100%. Endorsing Bodies have received increasing application volumes and expressed concerns over the authenticity of some applications they receive, with use of AI to generate (rather than help write) business plans and involvement of third-party agencies. Against this background, the low endorsement rate is reassuring.

Home Office involvement in endorsement decisions

Endorsing Bodies assess applications put forward by prospective Innovator Founder migrants. Additionally, the Home Office has powers to examine aspects of the endorsement decision as part of their application for permission. Stakeholders across multiple groups, including visa holders and applicants, immigration lawyers, and Endorsing Bodies, questioned the role of the Home Office in reviewing endorsement decisions. They argued that the Home Office should trust the decisions of those they had appointed as endorsers. They reported that applicants sometimes had to resubmit evidence to the Home Office, adding to processing times and uncertainty. In one example, a CfE respondent said that after submitting their documents to an Endorsing Body and having a 75-minute interview where their business plan was interrogated, they received two separate requests for information from UKVI, submitted 23 documents and were still waiting for a decision. Some stakeholders said this further scrutiny reduced the attractiveness of the route – for example, immigration lawyers said it influenced the advice they gave to prospective applicants and encouraged them to recommend the route only as a last resort.

"The current structure is inefficient: Endorsing Bodies assess applicants in detail, yet UKVI effectively re-assesses the business during the visa application stage. This duplication adds time, cost, and uncertainty and undermines confidence in the route."

Immigration lawyer, Call for Evidence

"My recommendations: trust the Endorsing Bodies the Home Office has accredited, or don't accredit them. Introduce binding processing timeframes. Standardise endorsement criteria so founders are not rejected by one body and accepted by another for the same business."

Innovator Founder visa applicant, Call for Evidence

The Home Office told us that they carry out additional checks on endorsement decisions where they have concerns, to verify authenticity of applications, and for administrative reasons where information has not been provided. Reasons for additional checks include missing information such as an endorsement letter not attached to the visa application, lack of clarity on how the business meets the innovation criteria, and financial statement discrepancies.

Sometimes the information the Home Office holds will not have been available to the Endorsing Body at the point they considered the endorsement application. For example, the Endorsing Body would not know if an applicant has also applied for a visa fee waiver on the grounds of destitution or had made previous fraudulent applications via a different Endorsing Body. It is reasonable for the Home Office to reject or refuse an application post-endorsement in such circumstances. In most cases, the additional review does not lead to refusal, although a non-trivial minority of reviews did identify irregularities. UKVI has provided us with post-endorsement review data indicating that for all years, refusal rates for new business applications where UKVI had had concerns were between 10% and 14%. For extensions, refusals were between 12% to 19% and for settlement refusals were much lower, between 0% and 9%. UKVI have told us that refusal rates are lower because they do not have the provision to reassess whether the business is genuine at this stage, and this is a

common reason for refusal earlier in the route. They consider the refusal rate would almost certainly be higher if a relevant rule was available.

While stakeholders raised concerns about the impact of additional checks, the Home Office continues to identify concerns with a proportion of applications. **We believe it is appropriate for the Home Office to undertake additional checks in some cases, particularly where pertinent information would not have been available to Endorsing Bodies at the time they issued the endorsement. We do not take a view on how these checks are carried out but consider the principle of additional scrutiny to be justified.**

Although the Home Office and Endorsing Bodies already communicate with each other, we think there is scope for stronger feedback mechanisms on disputed cases. **We recommend the Home Office and Endorsing Bodies should strengthen information sharing on disputed Innovator Founder endorsed cases.** Where possible, when the Home Office refuses an endorsed application on the basis of the endorsement criteria (rather than wider visa requirements, such as failing the English Language Requirements), the reasons for concern should be fed back to the Endorsing Body. In turn, Endorsing Bodies should provide evidence where they disagree with a refusal. The Home Office should also make it clear in the guidance for applicants that endorsement is not the final stage of the process, and that an endorsed application may still be subject to further Home Office review, which may add to the time taken and could result in refusal. This would improve consistency and transparency in decision making and encourage applicants to submit the best possible evidence.

Frequency and effectiveness of checkpoints

After a new application endorsement, businesses are monitored through checkpoints at 12 and 24 months. Endorsing Bodies check progress against the original business plan on relevant data such as sales growth, job creation, IP creation and investment obtained. As shown in Table 27, endorsement withdrawals were often linked to non-compliance such as missing a checkpoint review or personal circumstances than to concerns about business progress. The low number of endorsement withdrawals in comparison to application numbers raises a question about the effectiveness of the checkpoint process, and whether it should require more extensive checks. The data in Table 27 demonstrate that only 19 visa holders had their endorsement withdrawn by the Endorsing Body due to insufficient business progress out of a total of 1,600, representing 1% of visa holders[24]. Even if we were to assume that all such withdrawals were from the 800 visas Table 3 shows were used in FY2023/24 (given that only some of the 2023/24 cohort will have reached all three checkpoint stages), this would represent just 2% of visa holders. A further 19 visa holders (1%) withdrew themselves for business performance reasons, and it is possible some of these were encouraged to do so by the Endorsing Body. However, overall we find the low number of endorsement withdrawals astonishing given the poor business performance data we found for the route.

[24] Some voluntary withdrawals recorded under Applicant: Business reasons may also have included poor business progress, but these cases cannot be identified separately.

Table 27: Innovator Founder endorsement withdrawal reasons by checkpoint month

Withdrawal reasons	Pre-12 month	12 months	18 months	24 months	36 months	Total	% of withdrawals
Non-compliance	1	15	0	16	4	36	27%
Applicant: Personal circumstance	10	15	0	6	0	31	23%
Applicant: Business reasons	0	10	0	9	0	19	14%
Switching visa	2	5	0	9	0	16	12%
Insufficient business progress	0	9	3	7	0	19	14%
Applicant: Relocation	0	4	1	8	0	13	10%
Other	0	0	0	1	0	1	1%
Total	13	58	4	56	4	135	100%

Source: UKVI (received from Endorsing Bodies). Relocation includes both cases where the applicant failed to enter the UK and cases where they subsequently moved elsewhere. Not all Endorsing Bodies carry out checkpoints at all stages. Data from Endorsing Bodies show, 1,600 individuals were endorsed between 2023-2026. Excludes one withdrawal case where applicant was accepted by another Endorsing Body as the withdrawal stage was not provided.

Endorsing Bodies are also required to carry out site visits at either the 12- or 24-month checkpoint. There are limited exceptions to this, such as where the visa holder does not have an existing business site, or if there are safety concerns. However, we understand that some Endorsing Bodies do not routinely conduct site visits because of resource and staffing constraints. We have not reviewed evidence of site visits in identifying non-compliance or poor business performance. **The Home Office should continue to maintain oversight of site visits made by Endorsing Bodies and the reasons why they are not taking place where required and consider evaluating their value as part of any wider review of the checkpoint process.**

Endorsing Bodies noted that some sectors such as those in tech or research-intensive industries, are slower to realise commercial success, and may consequently struggle to demonstrate progress at checkpoints. GEP operates an optional additional check point at 18 months for this reason. Other Endorsing Bodies suggested that waiting until 12 months to assess progress may mean issues are identified too late, particularly where founders struggle to establish a business while settling in the UK, and that an earlier checkpoint could enable better oversight and support. Almost all visa holders who attend checkpoint meetings appear to pass them, given the limited number of endorsement withdrawals overall, and an even smaller number of these withdrawals are for lack of business progress. Currently the progress of the business is assessed against targets that the founder has set in their business plan. **We think the purpose of the checkpoints should be clarified, with an emphasis on ensuring genuine and stronger objective progress of the business, as well as progress against self-defined objectives.**

Post-arrival support for migrants

Stakeholders responding to the CfE and in the roundtable discussions told us that there should be more support for migrants using the Innovator Founder route. During our interviews, Endorsing Bodies underlined the difficulty of setting up a business in the UK when arriving from overseas, with time needed to build awareness of business culture and set up logistics such as banking. Some visa holders thought it would be helpful to have more information about living in the UK, for example on how to set up a bank account. Some visa holders also thought it would be useful to be able to network and share experiences with other people using the same visa. Innovator Founder visa holders in particular expressed the need for support with setting up and managing their businesses.

> *Throughout this process, I felt profoundly alone. My lawyer and Endorsing Body were limited in the support they could offer due to regulatory constraints. Founders navigating this route need structured support—such as peer cohorts or mentorship programmes—that accompanies them through the journey, not just at the point of assessment."*
>
> Innovator Founder visa holder, Call for Evidence

In addition to their role in assessing applications, Endorsing Bodies offer 'support' packages to help migrants settle into, start and grow their businesses for several thousands of pounds. Endorsing Bodies told us that the staff member making the endorsement decision would not be the same person providing ongoing guidance to the business or any additional purchased support services, but that the teams on either side might still communicate with each other. Applicants are explicitly told that these services are not required for applications and do not affect endorsement decisions. If the additional support genuinely helps their business to progress and keep it financially viable, this should not be problematic.

However, it is possible that some people may be influenced into purchasing packages they do not need if they believe that this may boost their endorsement prospects. In that case, the extra costs would substantially increase the cost of running their business.

This is a potential conflict of interest for Endorsing Bodies due to the imbalance of power between Endorsing Bodies and the migrants they are endorsing. The relationship between Innovator Founder Endorsing Bodies and the applicant is different from the equivalent relationships in the Global Talent route. Endorsing Bodies in the Innovator Founder category have ongoing contact with the applicants as they set up their business. Many have the dual role of providing guidance in the form of additional services the applicant can purchase, as well as assessing whether the business meets the criteria for initial endorsement, extension or settlement. While Global Talent applicants would typically have no choice of Endorsing Body, most Innovator Founder applicants can choose between three, potentially creating some market competition between Endorsing Bodies. This at least in theory sets up a potential conflict of interest, where Endorsing Bodies have an incentive to provide endorsements to businesses they have supported. We are not well positioned to assess the impacts of the potential conflict of interest. The low number failing checkpoint meetings or being refused settlement endorsements could be considered to be another, although these trends could also simply reflect that the criteria Endorsing Bodies are applying have limited effect.

We recommend that Endorsing Bodies should only be able to offer paid additional services to Innovator Founder visa holders who are not endorsed by them (i.e. who are endorsed by other Innovator Founder Endorsing Bodies). This will avoid any conflict of interest. We do not anticipate demand for these services to go down if migrants truly find them useful, as demand will now come from migrants endorsed by other Innovator Founder Endorsing Bodies.

What happens after a migrant enters the Innovator Founder route?

Using Migrant Journey data, as above for the Global Talent route, we examine what happens after main applicants receive an Innovator Founder visa – whether they remain on their Innovator Founder visa, obtain indefinite leave to remain, switch to another immigration route or reach the end of their recorded leave. These figures cover the full cohort, including those who had not yet had three years to progress towards settlement. Given the age of the Innovator Founder route, most people would not have held their visa for three years.

Innovator Founder migrants' pathways towards settlement

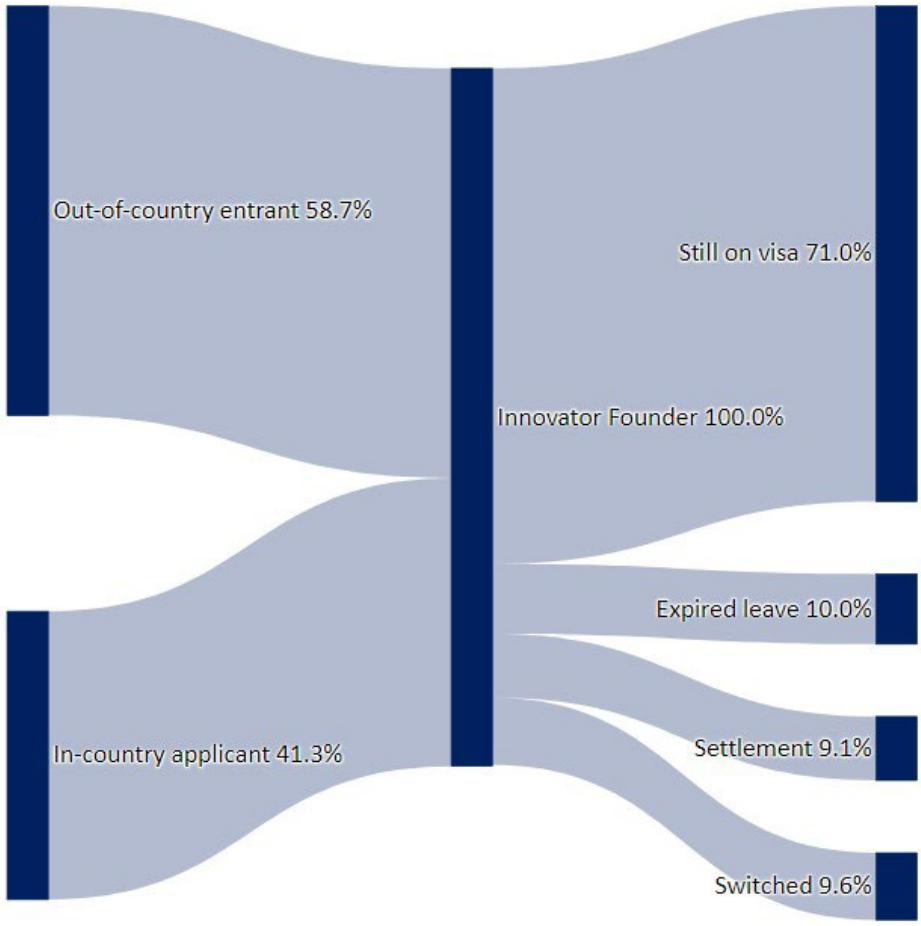
As of 31 December 2024, 71% of Innovator or Innovator Founder migrants remained on an Innovator Founder visa, while only 9% had obtained settlement. This high share likely reflects the fact that most had not yet been in the UK for long enough to settle.

Among Innovator Founder migrants who had obtained settlement, the median time from their first Innovator Founder visa to settlement was 3 years, which is the route's minimum qualifying period. Data received from Endorsing Bodies for those who had passed checkpoint meetings and gone on to apply for settlement indicates that in 2024/2025, 51 decisions were taken on settlement endorsement, of which 50 were endorsed and 1 was refused. For 2025/2026, the first year in which it would be possible for those endorsed under the Innovator Founder visa to reach settlement, 53 endorsement decisions on settlement were taken, of which 45 were endorsed and 8 were refused. Where an individual applies for settlement but is not endorsed, they are usually given an extension to their visa.

Switching was also a notable part of the Innovator Founder pathway. By the end of 2024, almost 10% of the cohort had switched to another immigration route. SW route was the most common first onward route, accounting for approximately 60% of switchers, followed by Global Talent, which accounted for approximately 11%. Among Innovator Founder migrants who switched, 54% had subsequently obtained settlement by 31 December 2024. This shows that switching formed part of the progression towards settlement for a substantial proportion of this group.

10% of those who received an Innovator Founder visa had expired leave, a higher proportion than for Global Talent (5.9%), representing over a third of those who were no longer on the visa. This is likely to reflect a mixture of those who had always intended to stay in the UK short term, and those who left because their business was not succeeding.

Figure 28: Innovator Founder pathways for those who arrived before the end of 2024



Source: MAC Internal Analysis using MJ microdata.
Notes: The Innovator Founder cohort includes main applicants whose first Talent visa in their final retained journey began by 31 December 2024 and was Innovator Founder or Innovator. Each person is counted once, and only records from that journey are used. Outcomes show immigration status as at 31 December 2024. Percentages are of the full route cohort. Settlement includes recorded settlement and settlement inferred from citizenship. Not shown in the figure, but of those who switched, 54.2% settled, 8.4% had expired leave, 32.5% were still on a valid visa as at 31 December 2024.

Is the current Innovator Founder settlement offer appropriate?

To qualify for settlement, Innovator Founder visa holders must obtain endorsement confirming that the business remains active, trading and sustainable, demonstrate significant progress against their business plan, and meet at least two business performance criteria relating to investment, growth, innovation, revenue or job creation.

Endorsing Bodies and the Home Office have told us that people applying for settlement most often qualify using two criteria: investing £50,000 in the business, and by applying for intellectual property protection (a patent). There is currently no requirement to demonstrate where this investment has come from (whether it came from a founder's own funds, was borrowed, or from an external investor), although the Endorsing Bodies are required to have undertaken due diligence to ensure the funds are from a legitimate source. However, there is little to prevent the investment from being sourced from family members and then removed from the business once the settlement application has been approved. Similarly, applicants can

qualify through the intellectual property criterion without needing to demonstrate that a patent has been granted, presumably because long waiting times for patent application decisions would make it infeasible to require a grant.

Because applicants can qualify for settlement based on investment (that could in theory be money borrowed from friends or family) and a (potentially unsuccessful) IP application, the criteria that genuinely indicate scale are optional. The data indicate that very few Innovator Founder businesses would be able to meet the turnover-related requirements of £500,000 (with £100,000 of export revenues) or £1,000,000 without the export requirement. Only a small share would meet job creation requirements, which are set at 10 full-time employees (who cannot be other temporary visa holders) or 5 full-time employees on £25,000 or above. The £25,000 threshold has not been increased with inflation since the Innovator Visa was introduced in 2019, and is now close to the minimum wage, rendering the 10-job requirement largely redundant.

In summary, these requirements provide limited assurance about the scale of business progress achieved at the point of settlement.

Start-ups are volatile and can take several years before generating profits and growth, and three years may not be sufficient time to judge whether they will be successful over the medium to long term. It would therefore be logical to consider whether most applicants will need to demonstrate stronger evidence to qualify for settlement. We are concerned by the large tail of visa holders who appear to have weak economic and fiscal contributions in the initial years of the visa, and will be eligible for settlement at three years. Unless business growth is significantly better than the usual trajectory of UK entrepreneurs, then these individuals are unlikely to make substantial economic contributions and may be fiscally costly over their lifetimes.

Therefore, we recommend that if the Home Office retains the Innovator Founder visa, it extends the time to settlement to five years to allow indicators to more accurately capture medium term business success and to enable a more accurate assessment of contribution to the UK due to the nature of business growth and innovation. It should also consider making the business success requirements more robust to ensure the scalability requirement is genuinely met. While this may make the route less attractive to some entrepreneurs we consider this trade off justified.

There are currently no financial requirements at settlement for Innovator Founder visa holders. As with Global Talent, we think it is reasonable to require applicants to demonstrate that they can support themselves to maintain a basic standard of living whilst in the UK and should not risk being a fiscal cost over the course of their time in the UK. **We recommend a personal income requirement set at a level needed to sustain a basic standard of living – at least the full-time National Living Wage for Innovator Founder visa holders applying for settlement.** As we have also recommended for Global Talent visa holders, we therefore recommend that an earnings threshold for Innovator Founder should be set at least at the full-time national living wage and should be implemented with appropriate flexibility for temporary personal circumstances in cases of illness or parental leave.

Chapter 4: Cross-cutting issues and investor visas

Fees and other cross-cutting issues

This section examines cross-cutting themes that relate to both the Global Talent and Innovator Founder routes, including fees, application processing times, and improvements to guidance.

Fees and costs

The issue of fees was raised extensively in the engagement and research we carried out as part of this commission. Several stakeholders expressed the view that fees and costs were too high, and that the need to pay them upfront constitutes a barrier to visa uptake. Roundtable attendees (in particular government departments and academia), Call for Evidence respondents and Endorsing Bodies expressed the view that fees, especially the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), deter talented migrants from coming to the UK. We were told that in some cases, migrants may get to the point of making their application and receiving endorsement, before finding out about the fees they need to pay.

> *"Applicants don't necessarily know what the situation will be [...] maybe they've decided to take up the job and even applied for their visa. And there is absolutely the evidence that they get to that point, realise they have this cost barrier and then don't take up the role. And that's not good for the UK's research sector."*
>
> Endorsing Body discussion

Stakeholders, including among Endorsing Bodies, universities and research institutes, said that even if high fees do not deter migrants from coming to the UK entirely, they may still reduce retention. For example, some migrants may commit to shorter-term visas even though they are supported by longer-term funding, come alone while leaving their family behind, or delay starting a family or limit family size to reduce the amount they need to pay, which means their presence in the UK over the longer term may be less certain.

> *"Applicant decisions that are made on the IHS they can afford... that isn't good for ambition. We want people to commit for a much longer period of time. We don't want people to constrain their thoughts in one-year buckets"*
>
> Endorsing Body discussion

Visa fees, excluding IHS, make up a relatively small proportion of migrants' total costs when migrating to the UK and compared to their expected salary once here (about 2% of the Global Talent median salary for each year they are on a visa). However, the larger issue is that migrants entering the UK face large upfront costs driven by the IHS, particularly if they also need to pay for dependants. For these Global Talent applicants, the fees can be a much higher share.

"The Global Talent visa's attractiveness is… also undermined by the fee structure applied across the wider immigration system, particularly high upfront visa costs and Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) - higher than other leading scientific nations – which can total nearly £14,000 for a researcher on a three-year contract relocating with a family of four. This contrasts with other countries that offer preferential fee structures for highly skilled roles."

Research Institute, Call for Evidence

The Home Office survey of Global Talent visa holders carried out as part of the Global Talent Evaluation (Wave 2) indicated that 65% of visa holders felt that the combined application and endorsement fee was "*fair*", with 27% saying that it was "*unfair*". When asked specifically about the IHS only 24% of visa holders said that it was "*fair*", with 65% saying that it was "*unfair*". That is, people found the application and endorsement fees to be fairer than the IHS. The follow-up qualitative research indicated that they objected to paying for healthcare both from taxation and through this separate charge. Over half (52%) of visa holders also said that the additional cost for dependants was "*fair*", with 40% saying it was "*unfair*". However, it should be noted that the survey covered people who went ahead with the talent visa despite the fees.

There is limited general evidence on the extent to which fees are a significant deterrent for migrants either at entry or after arrival. A Home Office literature review found that the demand for work visa products is inelastic, meaning migrants are relatively insensitive to visa fee changes, although it had limited relevant data to draw on. The Home Office literature review uses labour supply elasticities as a proxy for visa demand and focuses on a range of migrant groups with differing skill levels. In contrast, this report specifically examines migrants on talent visas, who may have different characteristics and different alternatives available to them. This might influence their responsiveness to visa costs and, therefore, the estimated price elasticities.

Our assessment is that there is not enough evidence to draw conclusions about the impact of fees for talent visas. Costs are more likely to be a barrier for people from countries where earnings are lower, for people on longer grant programmes (who will need to pay for several years upfront), and for some people working in sectors such as the arts and academia, where earnings can be relatively lower. However, we cannot quantify the scale of this effect, and it is possible that it is relatively small given that most people on talent routes have relatively comfortable salaries. If fees affect retention on the visa, the scale of this is not likely to be very large, given the high share of those not on the visa who progress to settlement (Figure 18, above).

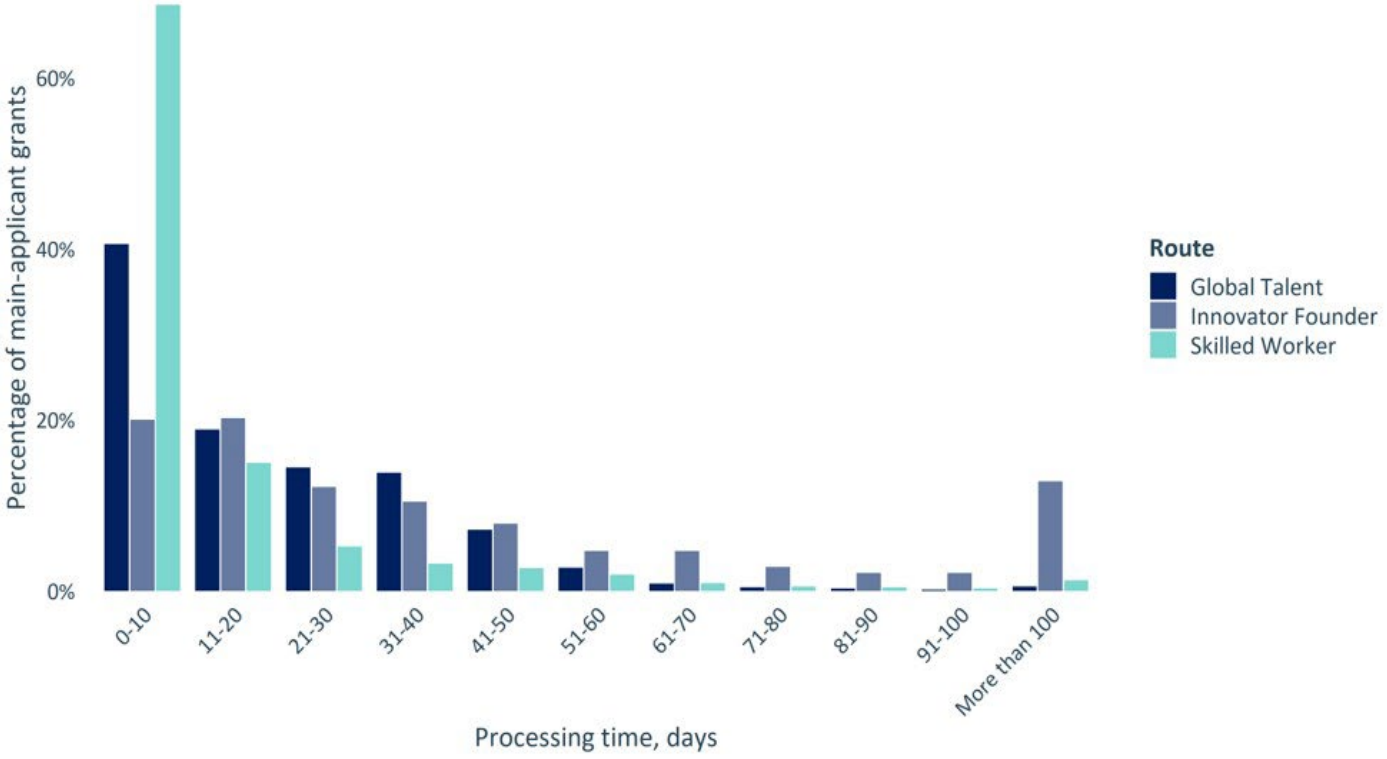
Any proposals to reduce fees need to be considered against the potential lost income for the government to cover the resources to assess applications properly. **We recommend Home Office reviews uptake of the Global Talent visa in specific fields once the recent announcement of fee reimbursement for relevant applicants have been implemented.** The recommended review should assess whether economic benefits from any increased uptake outweigh overall costs of reducing fees. If increased uptake is seen, and the benefits from that outweigh costs, it may indicate it would be sensible to extend this fee policy further.

Processing times

Figure 29 shows processing times for the visa application part of the process which Home Office undertake. We do not have the equivalent data on the length of time which Endorsing Bodies take to consider the endorsement stage, but the service standards are that Global Talent and Innovator Founder Endorsing Bodies

decide 100% of cases within 8 weeks and 2 months respectively. Nonetheless, the data show that the Home Office part of the process is generally quite fast for Global Talent but can take much longer for Innovator Founder in a substantial minority of cases. Of the 13% of Innovator Founder applications that took more than 100 days, we found that 23% took between 6 and 12 months and a further 10% took longer than a year.

Figure 29: Processing time for main applicant visa applications



Source: MAC Internal Analysis using MJ microdata.
Notes: This data refers to visa application processing time. It does not refer to overall application processing times, which would also include time taken for the endorsement process. Covers visa applications decided between 2021 and 2025.

During engagement carried out for this commission stakeholders voiced concern about the length of Global Talent and Innovator Founder application processing times. Stakeholders said that Global Talent 'fast-track' applications are generally decided speedily, but other routes may take longer than applicants would like or expect. The peer review process (or assessment in the arts and tech fields), verification, and subsequent processing by the Home Office all take time. If the application is not for the fast-track route, applicants often submit the two stages separately, meaning the two stages take place consecutively rather than concurrently. For Innovator Founder, where the Home Office re-examines applications, this was also said to add to the time taken, as previously discussed.

Where processing times are particularly long, visa holders and immigration lawyers told us there can be consequences for applicants and their businesses. Several Call for Evidence respondents on the Innovator Founder route mentioned the uncertainty and business difficulties arising from long processing times, particularly at settlement stage, when the business has been trading for some time.

"Many applicants, including myself, have experienced waiting periods exceeding six months. During this time, due to visa restrictions, applicants are unable to travel freely, which creates real challenges for those operating international businesses and limits business development opportunities. This level of uncertainty may also affect future applicants' confidence. If decisions continue to be delayed and criteria remain unclear, it may discourage genuine entrepreneurs from choosing the UK as a destination to start and grow their businesses."

Innovator Founder visa holder, Call for Evidence

Where stakeholders, particularly employers, were frustrated with processing times this was often expressed relative to processing times for SW applications, which are normally concluded over a much shorter period as Figure 29 shows. Some employers prefer the SW route, and some immigration lawyers recommend it to their clients, at least in part due to these shorter processing times. This comparison fails to recognise the relatively straightforward consideration of a SW application where the individual already has a job offer for an eligible role from an employer who has already received a sponsor license. For the talent routes, there is a more complex two-stage process. International evidence suggests that Global Talent and Innovator Founder processing times compare favourably with similar visas in comparator countries as highlighted by Table 30.

Table 30: Visa processing time for in-scope countries

Country	Processing time
UK	Global Talent/Innovator Founder: 3 weeks for out-of- country, 8 weeks for in-country
USA	O-1: USCIS standard processing times vary; current average is 9-26 weeks. Premium processing is 15 business days. E-2: Vary from 9-21 weeks, premium processing available
Canada	Global Talent Stream: 2 weeks for LMIA processing and supporting work permits Start-up visa (now closed): Estimated to be over 520 weeks (10+ years)
Australia	National Innovation visa: Median time of approximately 13 weeks
New Zealand	Global Impact visa (now closed): 4-6 working weeks Talent (Arts, Culture, Sports) Work visa: 7 weeks Entrepreneur Work visa (now closed): was within 65 weeks
France	Talent Passport: 2-6 weeks days if further examination is needed
Singapore	Personalised Employment Pass (PEP): 6 weeks EntrePass: 6 weeks

Source: MAC desk-based research
Notes: Country sources did not always specify whether processing times applied to in- country or out-of-country applications. The methods used for processing vary across countries, some use service standards, others actual processing times such as using medians and percentiles. Most countries use different timeframes, and we have used a consistent measure (weeks) for comparability.

Improving guidance

During the engagement we undertook for this commission, several stakeholders told us they perceived a need for better guidance for prospective Global Talent and Innovator Founder applicants, underlining the importance of good guidance to make the process as frictionless as possible. One problem cited was that the guidance is not published in one place on GOV.UK, but is fragmented across Endorsing Body websites, meaning that it is more difficult to access and can be presented inconsistently by different organisations.

Some individuals also expressed the view that guidance for their area was not clear enough on how people can meet the requirements for each route, and on the type of evidence that is required.

> *"For many individuals, the main issue is a lack of clarity. Applicants often find it hard to interpret what kind of evidence is expected and how to present their experience in a way that aligns with the criteria. As a result, some strong candidates either apply with weak documentation or decide not to apply at all."*
>
> Respondent, Call for Evidence

When respondents to the Home Office survey carried out as part of the 2024 Global Talent Visa Evaluation were asked to consider what could be done to improve the endorsement process, the most common responses related to better guidance. 32% of Global Talent visa holders surveyed suggested that the process could be improved through provision of more guidance about what the endorsement process involves, whilst a similar proportion (34%) proposed clearer guidance on the information that needs to be provided, although it should be noted that this survey was carried out in 2023 and reflected the guidance then available. Several participants in both this research and in our engagement mentioned that providing examples of strong, moderate, and weak evidence for the Global Talent route could be very helpful at application stage. For Innovator Founder, the engagement we undertook suggested that there was a need for much clearer guidance on when pivoting a business is acceptable and how progress is measured, and we recommend this is strengthened.

There is clearly a balance to be struck between providing prescriptive guidance that gives applicants clarity about what is needed for an application to be successful and allowing the flexibility for Endorsing Bodies to make a holistic assessment of an applicant's talent. There was also a desire for better communication and publicity about the talent routes, who is eligible to apply – for example, some people thought only prestigious prize winners were eligible – and the associated visa conditions such as the right to work in the UK without sponsorship. This applies to applicants, visa holders and employers. **We recommend that the Home Office conducts a major review of all talent guidance (Endorsing Body guidance and Home Office guidance), including how and where it is displayed to applicants and reviews this guidance annually.**

Considerations for Global Talent and Innovator Founder dependants and family life

As already mentioned, Innovator Founder main applicants can qualify for settlement after three years, and many main applicant Global Talent visa holders have a 3-year pathway to settlement. Dependants of Global Talent and Innovator Founder migrants currently have a 5-year pathway.

The fact that this is a longer pathway than that available to many main applicants was a concern among some stakeholders. They argued that the ability to bring family members and provide them with a clear and achievable pathway to long-term status may influence highly skilled migrants' decisions about where to move and whether to remain.

"A major drawback of the route is the misalignment between the main applicant's accelerated path to Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) and the position of their dependants. While the main Global Talent holder can qualify for ILR after three years in many cases, dependants are required to complete five full years on dependant visas before they can settle, and cannot usually 'accelerate' in line with the main applicant. In practice, this creates a significant family-level constraint: the main applicant may be settled years before their spouse or children are eligible, forcing additional extensions, fees and uncertainty for dependants even where the family has clearly established its long-term future in the UK."

Global Talent visa holder, Call for Evidence

"The accelerated settlement option helps UK competitiveness as a destination country and facilitates long term mobility for people with international work. Settlement in line for dependants would improve this, since families make mobility decisions as a unit."

Immigration lawyer, Call for Evidence

One rationale for retaining a minimum 5-year pathway for dependants is to avoid giving work-route dependants more generous treatment than partners of British citizens and to take into account the economic and fiscal impacts of dependants as individuals.

A greater concern among stakeholders was about the potential for the difference between main applicants' and dependants' settlement pathways to widen under the Earned Settlement consultation proposals. However, the new announcement which responded to the consultation, published in November 2026, addressed these concerns by bringing dependants' path to settlement in line with the main applicants', and enabling couples to meet mandatory earnings requirements at the household level rather than the individual level. The small discrepancy may still exist between main applicants on a 3-year pathway to settlement and dependants on a 5-year pathway, but not the much wider discrepancies that had been floated. This change to the proposals is sensible, since there is a strong rationale for considering the position of the household when it comes to settlement, rather than treating the main applicant and partner as separate.

Investor visas and high net worth individuals

The UK's previous investor visa route was closed in February 2022.[25] This was due to a lack of economic benefits, coupled with security concerns about people with illegitimately acquired wealth using the scheme. People who want to invest in the UK do not have to live here, but some physical presence can be helpful. Investors can come as business visitors for temporary periods. Directors of overseas companies setting up a presence in the UK may also be able to apply for SW visas, with some significant restrictions. However, there is now no route for people to move year-round to the UK purely based on their investments.

[25] Tier 1 Investor visa route closes over security concerns - GOV.UK

Whether the UK should set up a scheme that allows people to qualify for a visa purely based on a financial investment, and not based on their skills, is out of scope for this review. Talent routes are aimed at attracting talented individuals, and high net worth is not an indicator of talent.

Despite this, many stakeholders that we engaged with proposed expanding existing talent routes or creating new routes to include investors. We heard from cross government representatives that the lack of routes for investors was a problem.

> *"We have anecdotally seen quite a few incidences where investors who are highly talented and who are unlocking growth for other companies for founders have been denied Global Talent visas. ... I think there is a general gap in terms of investors who are highly talented and trying to bring them into the country, and they are obviously a key source, also, for economic growth. ...* [It] *may be, that they can be included in a tweak of the Global Talent visa or perhaps more the Innovator Founder visa."*
>
> Roundtable attendee, cross government

There have been increasing calls to reintroduce a form of the investor route to the UK. However, several other countries such as Australia, Spain, and Ireland have closed their investor routes due to similar issues and concerns as the UK. We have not found strong examples of investment programmes that have successfully admitted talented migrants. Some investor visa schemes, such as the US EB-5 programme, could be considered at least partially successful despite concerns about fraud and distorted investment incentives. However, their benefits have largely stemmed from the financial investment itself, rather than the talent of the investors.[26] Some argue that the UK government should not reintroduce an investor route but should prioritise visa routes that value talent rather than wealth, focusing on skills and success to attract talent and investment.[27]

In theory, the Global Talent or Innovator Founder routes could be adapted to include investors. The main difference between the Innovator Founder route and the Global Talent route is that the former has substantial post-entry requirements and the initial assessment is primarily forwards-looking (i.e. what will the person do in the UK with their business plan); while the Global Talent route has minimal post-entry requirements and the initial assessment is primarily backwards looking (i.e. how does their track record demonstrate talent).

However, designing transparent selection criteria to identify talented investors would not be easy. In theory, the Global Talent route could be adapted to endorse individuals with a past track record in investment. The challenge with this approach is that a successful track record does not guarantee future activity. The route may thus attract retirees and other wealthy people with no substantial investment plans. This trend has been a persistent feature of other countries' investor visa routes. As a result, **we recommend against adding investors to the Global Talent route**.

[26] Challenges selecting 'desirable' migrants: A case study of immigrant investor programmes in the United Kingdom and the United States
[27] Op-ed | A Camel Called the Investor Visa - The Foreign Policy Centre and Doomed to repeat it: why the UK shouldn't reopen the golden visa door | Transparency International UK

If the government wanted to require investors to implement a programme of investments in the UK, a sub-category of the Innovator Founder route could also be considered. The main challenge is that investments can be outsourced to professionals, unlike other activities on the talent routes. There is a risk that a transparent system with clear eligibility requirements would admit people with no particular investment talent, who use intermediaries to ensure they meet any requirements for checkpoints and settlement. As we have discussed in Chapter 3, there are wider concerns about the poor economic outcomes of the Innovator Founder route already, which could be exacerbated by introducing investors as a sub-category of this route.

A third option is a discretionary system, such as an invitation-only programme. To some extent, this might get around the problem of applicants being able to tick the boxes on the selection criteria despite having limited personal involvement in investment, albeit at the cost of transparency. The Global Entrepreneur Programme (GEP) subcategory of the Innovator Founder route is a potential model. The data has been insufficient to allow us to evaluate its success fully, although business performance on the GEP appeared to be no better than for other Endorsing Bodies.

In all cases, there is a risk that a route designed to identify people based on their skill in investment would primarily admit wealthy individuals with limited ambitions for UK investment, who instead outsource the required activity to financial professionals. This would risk reproducing some of the weaknesses of the previous Tier 1 (Investor) route.

As the MAC explained in its 2014 review of the Tier 1 (Investor) route, the economic benefits associated with this type of migration are likely to be limited. Some benefits may arise through increased demand for high value goods and services, which could support businesses and employment in those sectors.

Investment could also increase the amount of capital available to UK businesses. However, the extent to which this produces additional economic activity would depend on how the investment is used. For example, investment in an existing business could support expansion and productivity growth, but simply purchasing existing assets would not necessarily generate substantial additional economic activity.

There is therefore considerable uncertainty around the scale and additionality of the economic benefits. Any such benefits would also need to be weighed against the wider social costs and risks associated with admitting individuals with illicit wealth, particularly given the inherent limitations of due diligence procedures.

We believe that the difficulty selecting people based on investment talent in schemes with transparent selection criteria are structural and cannot be solved simply by tweaking the programme design. We are also not convinced that an endorsing body model would work well for investors, and we have sufficient concerns about the endorsement process in the Innovator Founder case (arguably the closest equivalent) that **we think further expanding Innovator Founder to include investors at this time would be unwise.**

We do not recommend reinstating a standalone investor route given the risks associated with the previous iteration of the route and of comparable international schemes. If the government did re-establish an investor route, they would need to guarantee robust safeguards such as ensuring sources of investment are easily traceable and not associated to criminal activity, money laundering, or fraud. This may be challenging to implement in practice.

Conclusion

This review aimed to assess how best the immigration system can be used to admit top talent to the UK. We have focused on the functioning of the Global Talent and Innovator Founder routes, though many talented migrants will also enter the UK on other visas such as the SW route.

Overall, we believe that the Global Talent route is largely functioning well, even if it can still be improved. Labour market outcomes are respectable despite the fact that the route has no employment or salary requirements and includes large numbers of academics, who do not have particularly high earnings. Survey data and stakeholder evidence suggest that talented migrants find the Global Talent route attractive, although it is difficult to quantify any impact on the UK's ability to attract and retain the most skilled. Previous literature, including the Home Office's published Global Talent evaluation, shows that there are a variety of factors that influence migrants to come to the UK and they are naturally difficult to disentangle.

We have made recommendations to help the route function more effectively. Given the non-trivial number of low earners on the route, we have recommended introducing a settlement earnings requirement which would help to ensure that Global Talent visa holders who wish to settle in the UK long term have an adequate income to maintain a basic standard of living and would not be a fiscal cost over their lifetime.

As for the Innovator Founder route, the objectives of this route are to support the government's wider ambitions to make the UK a global hub for innovation and to attract entrepreneurial talent to establish innovative, viable and scalable businesses in the UK. From our analysis, the route does not appear to be achieving these objectives. Innovator Founder businesses are not performing as well as would be expected from 'innovative, viable and scalable' businesses. A handful of visa holder businesses appear to be quite successful, but the average Innovator Founder business has roughly the turnover of a small coffee shop by the time visa holders apply for settlement and business outcomes are lower than that for equivalent domestic entrepreneurs. The strong performance of a small number of successful visa holders on the route does not make up for the poor outcomes for the majority of the route and may not be sufficient to prevent the route from creating a net fiscal cost over the long term. We make some more fundamental recommendations given the concerning outcomes we have found for this route.

Data limitations

Throughout this review, we have gathered a large amount of evidence from stakeholders and undertaken analysis of newly matched datasets to assess the impacts of the routes. As with all MAC reviews, there were some additional data we would have liked to enable us to fill further gaps in our analysis. For Global Talent, we would have liked more information on migrants' concrete contributions to their field of talent, although these will differ considerably across fields and are therefore difficult to capture systematically. Information on occupation, and whether visa holders were actually working in the field for which they were endorsed, would also have helped us better understand how Global Talent migrants contribute to the UK labour market. To understand the impacts of different parts of the route, it is critical to be able to break down outcomes by Endorsing Body, and we have made a recommendation to enable this in future. More complete coverage of Self Assessment income would also have improved our understanding of outcomes for visa holders who are

self-employed or freelance. Finally, information on migrants' entry to and exit from the UK, or other measures of UK presence, would have helped us distinguish between those with no observed earnings because they were not working and those who had not entered, or had subsequently left, the UK.

The same issue applies to the Innovator Founder route, where having outcomes split by Endorsing Body is important for understanding differences in the selectivity and subsequent performance of applicants. While we were able to obtain this breakdown for business turnover, we were not able to do so for visa holders' personal income, limiting our ability to assess whether outcomes differed systematically across Endorsing Bodies.

We were able to examine patent applications and grants as one measure of innovation. However, innovation can take many forms that will not result in a patent, and more systematic information on research and development expenditure and investment or funding raised would have provided a broader picture of the innovative activity and growth potential of these businesses. Information on founders' previous experience, such as their track record of starting or scaling businesses and raising investment, would also have helped us understand the characteristics associated with stronger subsequent business outcomes.

While we had good data on firm turnover and employee numbers, other important measures of business performance, including profits and Corporation Tax liabilities, were not available. This limited our ability to assess the underlying financial performance of businesses and their wider fiscal contribution. It would also have been useful to have data on which settlement criteria applicants chose to meet, allowing us to understand which criteria are most commonly used and whether some have limited practical relevance because they are particularly difficult to meet.

Despite these limitations, we remain confident in our overall conclusions on the routes.

Recommendations

We have made various recommendations throughout this report. These are summarised in this section under the relevant route.

Global Talent

- We recommend that the Home Office records which Endorsing Body endorsed the visa application in a consistent format at the stage when someone applies to a visa, to allow a fuller statistical analysis of the impacts of each part of the route;
- We recommend that reference letters for endorsement should be submitted directly, and confidentially, to Endorsing Bodies;
- We recommend not diluting the eligibility requirements significantly for the Global Talent route, but do not take a position on the precise scope of the occupations that should be eligible;
- We recommend the Home Office consider the feasibility of expanding the fast-track process for specific positions within highly reputable arts and tech organisations with an excellent record of compliance in the SW route;
- We recommend the Home Office works with Endorsing Bodies to consider how the number of applications that go through the peer review route could be reduced by raising the bar for a full review. This should still aim to maintain the integrity of the overall bar for endorsement;
- We recommend against a full-scale assessment of contribution for Global Talent visa holders at the point of settlement. Instead, we recommend that the Home Office consider options for a light-touch assessment that would provide more confidence the applicant had been working in the field of endorsement, without onerous documentary requirements; and,
- We recommend a salary requirement set at a level needed to sustain basic standard of living, with at least a full-time National Living Wage based threshold for Global Talent visa holders applying for settlement.

Innovator Founder

- We recommend that the government abolishes the Innovator Founder route in its current form.

If the route remains open, we recommend the following:

- The Home Office should work urgently to improve the quality of data to evaluate the route, gathering complete data on personal income, business profits, innovation measures, and corporate tax paid, and how these metrics vary by Endorsing Body. It should then review the route again in one year with a view to closing it unless new data show a considerable improvement;
- The Home Office should immediately undertake substantial reform of the eligibility, endorsement and settlement process to make the route much more selective;
- We consider that interviews are an important part of the assessment process and recommend that they should be retained in future;
- We do not recommend removing the requirement for innovation as one of the core eligibility criteria unless it is replaced with a similarly stringent criterion to ensure that endorsed businesses will be concentrated in higher-productivity activities;
- The Home Office should review whether the 'scalability' criterion is currently strong enough, given that most endorsed businesses have not demonstrated significant scaling;
- The Home Office and Endorsing Bodies should strengthen information sharing on disputed Innovator Founder endorsed cases;
- Endorsing Bodies should only be able to offer paid additional services to Innovator Founder visa holders who are not endorsed by them (i.e. who are endorsed by other Innovator Founder Endorsing Bodies);
- The Home Office should extend the time to settlement to five years to allow indicators to more accurately capture medium term business success. It should also consider making the business success requirements more robust to ensure the scalability requirement is genuinely met; and,
- A personal income requirement at settlement should be set at a level needed to sustain a basic standard of living, with a threshold of at least the full-time National Living Wage.

Cross-cutting

- We recommend that the Home Office reviews uptake of the Global Talent visa in the fields of deep tech, AI and quantum once the recent announcement of fee reimbursement for applicants in these fields has been implemented and assesses whether the overall costs involved versus any economic benefits from increased uptake mean it would be sensible to extend this further;
- We recommend that the Home Office conducts a major review of all Global Talent and Innovator Founder guidance (Endorsing Body guidance and Home Office guidance), including how and where it is displayed to applicants and reviews this guidance annually; and,
- We recommend against reinstating a standalone investor visa, given the risks associated with the previous iteration of the route and of comparable international schemes. We also recommend against adding investors to the Global Talent or Innovator Founder routes.

Annexes

A. Visa type and settlement offer for in-scope countries

Table A1: Visa type and settlement offer for in-scope countries

Country	Visa	Settlement?	When is Settlement granted?
UK	Global Talent	Yes	After 3 or 5 years depending on field
	Innovator Founder	Yes	After 3 years
USA	O-1	No	Not direct but could apply for EB-1 (pathway to green card)
	E-2	No	
Canada	Global Talent Stream (GTS)	No	Not direct path but can be helpful towards attaining it
	Start-up (now closed)	Yes	At entry
Australia	National Innovation (Subclass 858)	Yes	At entry
New Zealand	Global Impact (now closed)	Yes	Related visa grants permanent residency after a minimum of 2.5 years on the Global Impact visa
	Talent (Arts, Culture, Sports) Work visa	No	Not direct but can lead to permanent residence
	Entrepreneur Work (now closed)	Yes	Related visa grants permanent residency
France	Talent Passport	Yes	Eligible for a permanent resident card (valid for 10 years) after 5 years.
Singapore	Personalised Employment Pass (PEP)	Yes	Can apply for Permanent Residency, after working at least 6 months (2-3 years is recommended for a stronger application)
	EntrePass	Yes	Same as above

Source: MAC desk-based research

B. Fiscal methodology update

The analysis presented in this report uses an updated fiscal methodology compared with that used in the MAC's previous fiscal work. The principal change is the incorporation of newly available HMRC data covering a broader range of taxable income sources. Previously, earnings measures were based largely on PAYE records. The updated data now include PAYE income alongside income reported through Self Assessment, including self-employment income, partnership income, dividends, property income and other taxable investment income. This provides a more comprehensive picture of migrant incomes, particularly for routes where earnings may not be received primarily through employment. However, as reported earlier, there were also limitations with the HMRC Self Assessment data, where issues with the matching process meant that

individuals receiving Self Assessment income without also having PAYE income were less likely to be identified, limiting our ability to fully capture the incomes of the routes.

In previous work, gaps in the monthly PAYE data meant that annual earnings were estimated by annualising an individual's average month of positive pay. Improvements in data completeness mean that we now sum observed PAYE earnings over the full 12-month period. This produces a measure that is more directly observed and less reliant on modelling assumptions.

The expenditure side of the fiscal model has also been updated. Rather than using benefit receipt estimates derived from the Family Resources Survey, the model now uses more detailed DWP administrative data on migrant benefit receipt, incorporating variation by earnings level and EEA/non-EEA status.

Finally, we have data for both in and out of country visas so estimates include both.

These methodological changes have had a minimal impact on fiscal estimates. For example, the estimated lifetime net fiscal contribution of SW main applicants arriving in 2022/23 is now slightly lower than in the previous fiscal report. This reflects both methodological improvements and improvements in the HMRC-Home Office data match.

Overall, we consider the updated methodology to provide a more complete and robust measure of income and fiscal contribution, particularly for routes where substantial income may be received through self-employment, business ownership or investment activity rather than traditional employment.

C. HMRC data limitations and tax compliance considerations

Although the updated HMRC data substantially improve measurement of migrant incomes, important limitations remain when interpreting outcomes for entrepreneurial routes, particularly Innovator Founder.

The HMRC systems are designed to capture taxable income rather than underlying business activity. For founders, observed personal income may therefore differ substantially from the economic value being created within their businesses. Entrepreneurs commonly reinvest funds into their businesses, retain profits within companies, defer remuneration until later stages of growth, or realise returns through dividends, capital gains, or eventual business sales. Consequently, low observed personal income does not necessarily imply an absence of entrepreneurial activity.

The issue is compounded by differences in tax compliance across income sources. PAYE earnings are generally considered the most comprehensively measured form of income because liabilities are reported and collected through employers. By contrast, HMRC estimates considerably larger tax gaps for income sources commonly associated with self-employment and small business ownership. HMRC's latest tax gap estimates suggest:

- the Self Assessment tax gap is approximately 29% of theoretical liabilities; and
- the small company corporation tax gap is approximately 45% of theoretical liabilities.

These figures are substantially higher than the equivalent tax gaps for PAYE income. As a result, income and tax records for entrepreneurs may be measured with greater uncertainty than those for salaried employees.

Evidence from the wider academic literature also suggests that tax compliance can differ between population groups. However, HMRC does not publish tax gap estimates by nationality or immigration status.

Consequently, it is not possible to determine whether tax compliance differs systematically between migrants and the wider UK population using available administrative data. Consistent with previous MAC fiscal modelling, we therefore assume that any non-compliance is not systematically different across migrant groups. This matters for understanding income and business performance as we may be underreporting their total income and/or their turnover. However, while unreported income or turnover may mean that we underestimate migrants' economic activity, it would not affect our estimates of their fiscal contribution, as tax is not paid on income that goes unreported. This would only change if individuals became more compliant with their tax obligations in the future.

Taken together, these considerations imply that HMRC income records should be interpreted as measures of observed taxable income rather than complete measures of entrepreneurial success or economic contribution. This limitation is particularly important for Innovator Founder migrants, whose future fiscal contribution depends not only on observed earnings but also on business survival, profitability, investment, employment creation and future remuneration decisions. For this reason, we do not consider the current income-based fiscal model to be capable of producing a sufficiently robust central estimate of lifetime fiscal impacts for the Innovator Founder route.

Additionally, as mentioned above, HMRC has identified limitations in the matching of Self Assessment records within the linked dataset, with individuals receiving Self Assessment income only less likely to be identified than those who also receive PAYE income. This is likely to understate the total earnings rate. The impact of the missing data on the income distribution among those with observed earnings is uncertain; however, analysis of a sample of British company directors in HMRC's Survey of Personal Incomes suggests that people with only Self Assessment data tend to have lower earnings than those with either PAYE only or a combination of PAYE and Self Assessment (see Table C1).Therefore it is likely that if the individuals with only Self Assessment income were captured fully, the picture on Innovator Founder performance would not change, or may even become poorer.

Table C1: Breakdown of income distribution for a sample of British company directors

	Mean	10th Percentile	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	90th percentile
PAYE only	£39,000	£7,000	£9,000	£16,000	£50,000	£102,000
Self assessment only	£29,000	£0	£2,000	£14,000	£35,000	£62,000
PAYE and Self Assessment only	£50,000	£14,000	£23,000	£39,000	£54,000	£95,000

Source: HMRC Survey of personal incomes, 2021/22

For our analysis of earnings outcomes, we restrict the sample to individuals with green or amber matches between Home Office visa records and HMRC administrative data, in line with HMRC's recommendation. These match types provide a greater degree of confidence that the HMRC records relate to the correct individuals, reducing the risk of inaccurate employment and earnings estimates.

However, this approach has some limitations. Individuals who are successfully matched to HMRC data may be more likely to have worked in the UK than those who are not matched, particularly as employment increases the likelihood of having a National Insurance number and associated HMRC records. Restricting the analysis to green and amber matches could therefore introduce an upward bias into estimated employment rates. Conversely, including all match types would introduce greater uncertainty around the reliability of the underlying data and could understate employment if individuals without reliable matches were treated as not employed. Those who have unacceptable matches or who were unmatched may never have entered the country, may have already left or just have not been matched. We therefore consider that restricting the analysis to green and amber matches is likely to provide a more accurate estimate for these particular visa routes. Our estimates should therefore be interpreted as employment and earnings outcomes among successfully matched visa holders, rather than necessarily being representative of everyone granted a visa.

D. Innovator vs Innovator Founder income and business outcomes

Table D1 highlights the similar results in terms of income when we compare Innovator and Innovator Founder although Innovator Founder have a slightly higher employment rate (note that we can only observe PAYE in the 2nd year of Innovator Founder as there is no Self Assessment data for them).

Table D1: Income progression for Innovator Founder and Innovator visa holders (not adjusted for inflation)

Year since arrival	Source	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	90th percentile	Mean	Earnings rate
Innovator Founder							
1	Total (PAYE + SA)	£7,100	£15,000	£33,100	£52,500	£23,200	0.56
2	PAYE	£10,000	£15,000	£37,900	£65,500	£28,800	0.55
Innovator							
1	Total (PAYE + SA)	£4,400	£11,900	£27,600	£57,100	£24,400	0.50
2	PAYE	£8,900	£12,600	£30,000	£65,100	£26,600	0.50

Source: HMRC/HO visa data match. Notes: Includes both in and out-of-country visas.

Table D2 below looks at the turnover by firm age for Innovator Founder and Innovator companies and uses a balanced panel. We find that turnover is similar across the distribution for both routes with perhaps Innovator Founder performing slightly better at the top of distribution.

While Innovator Founder may perform marginally better, it is not large enough to make a significant economic difference. Therefore, the conclusions we draw from using the Innovator route in our analysis (to allow us a longer time series) still hold.

Table D2: Turnover by firm age for Innovator Founder and Innovator companies (£)

Firm age	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	90th percentile	Mean
Innovator Founder Companies					
0	71,000	100,000	165,000	214,000	136,000
1	80,000	100,000	160,000	235,000	131,000
2	60,000	90,000	220,000	540,000	277,000
3	32,000	96,000	346,000	1,202,000	376,000
4	47,000	162,000	415,000	1,293,000	405,000
Innovator Companies					
0	72,000	100,000	151,000	446,000	176,000
1	74,000	100,000	160,000	500,000	182,000
2	45,000	91,000	150,000	386,000	161,000
3	31,000	96,000	169,000	492,000	2,132,000
4	57,000	105,000	179,000	455,000	3,022,000

Source: Longitudinal Business Database 2021-2025. Note: The mean for Innovator companies is much higher in year 3 and 4 purely down to one company at the top of the distribution whilst the 90th percentile for Innovator Founder companies is higher in part because there are a smaller number of Innovator Founder Companies.

E. Sector definitions

Below are different definitions we have used for the different industries:

- Tech industries: Based on the Digital & Technologies SIC proxy developed by the former Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), covering activities such as electronics/computer manufacturing, telecommunications, software publishing, computer programming and consultancy, data processing/hosting, web portals, selected R&D, and computer repair.
- Higher education: SIC codes 85421 and 85422, covering first-degree and postgraduate-level higher education.
- Arts, culture and media: covering publishing; film, TV, music and broadcasting; creative arts and entertainment; specialised design; photography; translation/interpretation; jewellery/crafts; cultural education; libraries and museums. It deliberately excludes software, consultancy, PR, architecture and advertising otherwise it is the same as the TSL definition of creative industries.
- Professional and scientific: This is the broad SIC 69–75 grouping after firms already classified as Tech or Arts have been removed. It therefore mainly captures activities such as legal/accounting, management consultancy, architecture/engineering, scientific testing, advertising and other professional services rather than the technology activities separately identified above.
- Other industries: Remaining firms are grouped into broad SIC-based sectors such as manufacturing, construction, finance, health/social care, retail, transport and education. These are mainly based on standard 2-digit SIC groupings for simplicity.

F. Definitions of abuse, misuse and exploitation

This review also explores misuse, abuse and exploitation. The definitions we are using are:

- Unintended use: here we refer to migrants legally abiding by the immigration rules but being involved in activity that does not necessarily align with the purpose of the route. This may be an unintended consequence of policy design;
- Accidental non-compliance: here we refer to any non-compliance from migrants or employers without realising this is an issue;
- Abuse: here we refer to the deliberate non-compliance with the terms of the route; and
- Exploitation: here we refer to a case where a migrant has been taken advantage of, deliberately misled and/or forced or coerced into doing something against their will, for another's benefit.

A large-scale investigation into misuse, abuse and exploitation is out of scope of this review. However, we have noted views and concerns raised by various stakeholders and have received detailed information from the Home Office about patterns of misuse or abuse they have identified. These issues can be explored in two parts, firstly before the migrant enters the UK (during the application process) which could include issues around fraudulent applications, false evidence, the use of AI to entirely make up a business plan or paying for a third-party to draft a business plan. Secondly, there may also be issues once applicants enter the UK, for example working in a sector completely unrelated to their field of endorsement or fabricating settlement evidence. More information on this can be found in Chapters 2 and 3.

G. Companies House numbers matching methodology

The following section describes the methodology used to link companies associated with Innovator and Innovator Founder visa holders to the Longitudinal Business Database (LBD). The aim is to accurately match company names linked to visa holders with their Companies House registration numbers. This linkage provides access to the LBD, enabling us to examine important business characteristics such as turnover and employment levels.

Data used:

- Internal list of Innovator and Innovator Founder visa holders and their associated companies, provided by UK Visas and Immigration
- Lists of company names and Companies House reference numbers on the Companies House register
- The LBD, containing Companies House reference numbers

Following data cleaning, a dataset with all Innovator and Innovator Founder company names was created. Then the Companies House data were matched following different, progressively less stringent, criteria. Once an observation was matched, it was not taken through further matching stages.

The stages are as follows:

- **Stage 1:** An exact match is performed between the UKVI business name and the Companies House company name, while also requiring the quarter identifiers to be identical. For example, if the UKVI record for 2021 Q1 contains "BUSINESS LTD" and the Companies House snapshot for 2021 Q1 also contains "BUSINESS LTD", this constitutes a match. If the same company name is only found in a different quarter, the record remains unmatched at this stage. This strict matching criterion generated an initial match rate of 26.1%.

- **Stage 2:** For records not matched in Stage 1, matching is repeated using cleaned versions of company names while retaining the requirement that quarters must match exactly. The cleaning process standardises naming conventions and removes common company suffixes or formatting differences. For example, if the UKVI data contain “BUSINESS LIMITED” and the Companies House data contain “BUSINESS LTD” in the same quarter, both may be transformed into the cleaned name “BUSINESS”, producing a successful match. Using cleaned company names increased the cumulative match rate to 42.1%.
- **Stage 3:** For records not matched in Stage 2, an exact company name match is attempted while allowing flexibility in the timing of the Companies House record. Companies House entries are considered eligible if they fall within one year before or one year after the UKVI quarter. For example, if a UKVI record exists for 2021 Q2 and an identical company name appears in a Companies House snapshot for 2020 Q3, 2021 Q4, or any quarter in between, this constitutes a match. Allowing for leniency in the quarter used for matching increased the cumulative match rate to 54.7%.
- **Stage 4:** For records not matched in Stage 3, the cleaned company names are matched using the same one-year time window as Stage 3. For example, a UKVI business recorded as “BUSINESS LIMITED” in 2021 Q2 could match a Companies House record recorded as “BUSINESS LTD” in 2020 Q4, provided both clean to the same standardised name. Using cleaned company names and allowing for leniency in the quarter used for matching increased the cumulative match rate to 62.3%
- **Stage 5** For records not matched in Stage 4, the quarter requirement is removed entirely. An exact match is performed using the original company names across all available Companies House snapshots. For example, if a UKVI record for 2021 Q1 contains “BUSINESS LTD” and the same company name only appears in Companies House data for 2023 Q2, this would still constitute a match. Omitting the quarter requirement increased the cumulative match rate to 73.3%.
- **Stage 6:** The final stage applies the least restrictive criteria. For records not matched in Stage 5, businesses are compared using cleaned company names, with no requirement for quarters to align. For example, if the UKVI record contains “BUSINESS LIMITED” and a Companies House record in any quarter contains “BUSINESS LTD”, both may be cleaned to “BUSINESS” and successfully matched. Using cleaned company names and omitting the quarter requirement took the final cumulative match rate to 85.8%.

The output of this matching process is a list of companies associated with Innovator and Innovator Founder visa holders and their respective Companies House reference numbers, with a match rate of 85.8%. This provides access to the LBD, which itself contains Companies House numbers.

To link the Innovator Founder data to the Longitudinal Business Database, the following stages are taken:

- **Stage 7:** The quarterly LBD dataset is read in containing firm identifiers, Companies House variables, employment, turnover, SIC codes, and firm demographic information and is merged with the Innovator and Innovator Founder visa dataset using the Companies House registration number.
- **Stage 8:** An indicator is created identifying firms that successfully matched to at least one visa holder and counts the number of migrants associated with each matched firm.

- **Stage 9:** Duplicate matches are ordered according to match quality scores and only the highest-quality match for each original business record is retained.

The output of this process is a quarterly firm-level dataset linking businesses in the Longitudinal Business Database to Innovator and Innovator Founder visa applicants through Companies House registration numbers. This dataset underpins our business analysis in the report above.

H. Additional Innovator Founder Business Analysis

We explored whether some Innovator Founder visa holders may be using their businesses primarily as vehicles for individual consultancy work, which could help explain the limited growth in employee numbers. Among companies observed in the data for five consecutive years, only 3% of those with zero or one employee operated in SIC codes that explicitly referred to consultancy. This suggests that consultancy is unlikely to explain the low employee numbers for most Innovator Founder businesses. However, this measure is imperfect, as consultancy activity can take place under other SIC codes and may therefore not be fully captured.