UCEA survey on impact of recent immigration rules changes

Executive Summary

The recruitment and retention of international staff is essential to the success of the UK's higher education (HE) sector. International staff recruitment helps to underpin the UK's reputation for world-leading higher education integral to the global research eco-system. Following changes to the immigration rules in February and April 2024, UCEA surveyed members to evaluate the impact on the ability of higher education institutions (HEIs) to recruit and retain international staff.

The key findings of the survey indicate that HEIs have experienced increased difficulties in recruiting international staff in the last 12 months as a result of the changes to the immigration rules, particularly professional services staff. HEIs reported there is a perception that the UK is seen as a costly destination for international staff, and this is a deterrent for recruitment and retention.

The main causes of the difficulties were that vacancies no longer meet the salary thresholds, increased visa and immigration costs for individuals and institutions, and the length of visa processing times.

Similarly, HEIs reported difficulties in retaining international staff in the last 12 months, but to a lesser extent than with recruitment.

Changes to the salary threshold were deemed by a large majority of HEIs to explain the difficulties they had experienced in recruitment, in particular their difficulties with recruiting professional services staff.

Over half of responding HEIs reported that they believed the increase in the immigration health surcharge (IHS) has led to difficulties in recruitment and to a lesser extent retention. However, HEIs had a level of uncertainty about the impact of the IHS on the retention of international staff. For retention, the increase to the IHS in February 2024 was probably still too recent to fully assess the impact.

HEIs reported using other visa routes where possible, for example, the global talent visa route, to mitigate the negative impact of the salary threshold increases.

The majority of HEIs provided some level of financial assistance to appointees to cover immigration costs. They reported an increase in the cost of providing this assistance per appointee since February 2024 (when the IHS increased by 66%).

HEIs reported that the changes had increased the workload of HR/Global mobility departments, mainly due to increased complexity in terms of assessing eligibility for sponsorship of new appointees, the impact of the changes on current staff and risk management.

Given that the changes to immigration law are recent, in relative terms, UCEA will run the survey again in late 2025 to assess the impact over time.

Background and Methodology

Academics and researchers from outside the UK are a vital component of the UK HE workforce, comprising 35% per cent of academic staff alone and significantly higher proportions in a number of subject areas.

HEIs seek to recruit the best talent for their roles from both the UK and overseas, and the ability to recruit high-calibre and suitable staff to academic and professional services roles is essential. The UK's status as a world-renowned research hub depends on our ability to work at scale and to collaborate with, and attract, the most talented people from across the world and at different stages of their careers; to do so, the sector must compete internationally for that talent.

It is essential that the UK remains able to attract the most talented academics and researchers to its HEIs – failure to do so will impact upon the global reputation and ranking of UK HEIs, the UK's research base and staffing levels within strategically important subject areas. Following Brexit and the ending of free movement, HEIs can no longer rely on unrestricted talent from the EU/EEA for this purpose.

In that context therefore UCEA and other sector bodies have concerns about the potential negative impact of the changes to the immigration rules made by the previous, Conservative Government on the ability of HEIs to attract, recruit and retain international staff. The current Government has announced plans to develop an Immigration White Paper, setting out plans to reduce overall net migration while maintaining access to global talent in key industries. The findings of the survey will help to inform HE sector input into any consultation on the Immigration White Paper and about the impact of the immigration rules on HE more generally, given that the sector is an important part of the UK's economy.

A brief glossary of the immigration rules terminology referred to in this report can be found at the end of the report.

Immigration Rules Changes

Recent changes to the immigration rules are as follows:

February 2024

- The IHS increased by 66% to £1,035 per year of the visa, paid in advance. The previous rate was £624 per year. The amount to be paid depends on the length of the visa, for example, it would cost £3,105 for a 3-year visa (with these costs needing to be paid in advance, in full).

April 2024

- The minimum 'general' salary threshold for sponsorship of a Skilled Worker (SW) visa rose from £26,200 to £38,700 per annum.[1]

- Under the changes to the SW route, the job-specific 'going rates' for eligible SW occupations were increased from the 25th percentile to the 50th percentile (median) of eligible SW occupations alongside an update to the latest nominal wage data (Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE)).

- Individuals already in the SW route or who had a Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) assigned to them before 4 April 2024 are not subject to the new £38,700 general

[1] The standard SW visa minimum general salary is £38,700, where no salary discounts are applicable. This means that to be eligible for the SW visa, most applicants will need to earn at least £38,700 per annum and meet or exceed the relevant going rate for their occupation code.

salary threshold when they: (i) submit applications to extend their stay; (ii) change their employment in the UK or (iii) apply to settle in the UK. However, they need to meet the new minimum 'general' salary threshold of £29,000[2] based on the 25th percentile (which is equivalent to the current level of £26,200 adjusted for inflation) or the going rates based on the 25th percentile.

- The minimum income requirement for partners applying under Appendix Family Members of the immigration rules increased from £18,600 to £29,000. Further increases were planned but have been halted by the Labour Government pending a review by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC).

- The Shortage Occupation List (SOL) was removed and replaced by the Immigration Salary List - a list of occupations where a reduced salary threshold applies in the SW route.

UCEA undertook a survey of members to assess and evaluate the impact of the changes in the immigration rules on the recruitment and retention of international staff. The survey was launched on 12 November 2024 and closed on 20 December 2024. 93 HEIs responded to the survey and the results are set out below.

Profile of respondents

We received responses from 93 HEIs, their profiles are as follows:



Pre-1992: 48 HEIs

Post-1992: 42 HEIs

Other: 3 HEIs



London and South East: 30 HEIs

Rest of England: 45 HEIs

Scotland: 11 HEIs

Wales: 6 HEIs

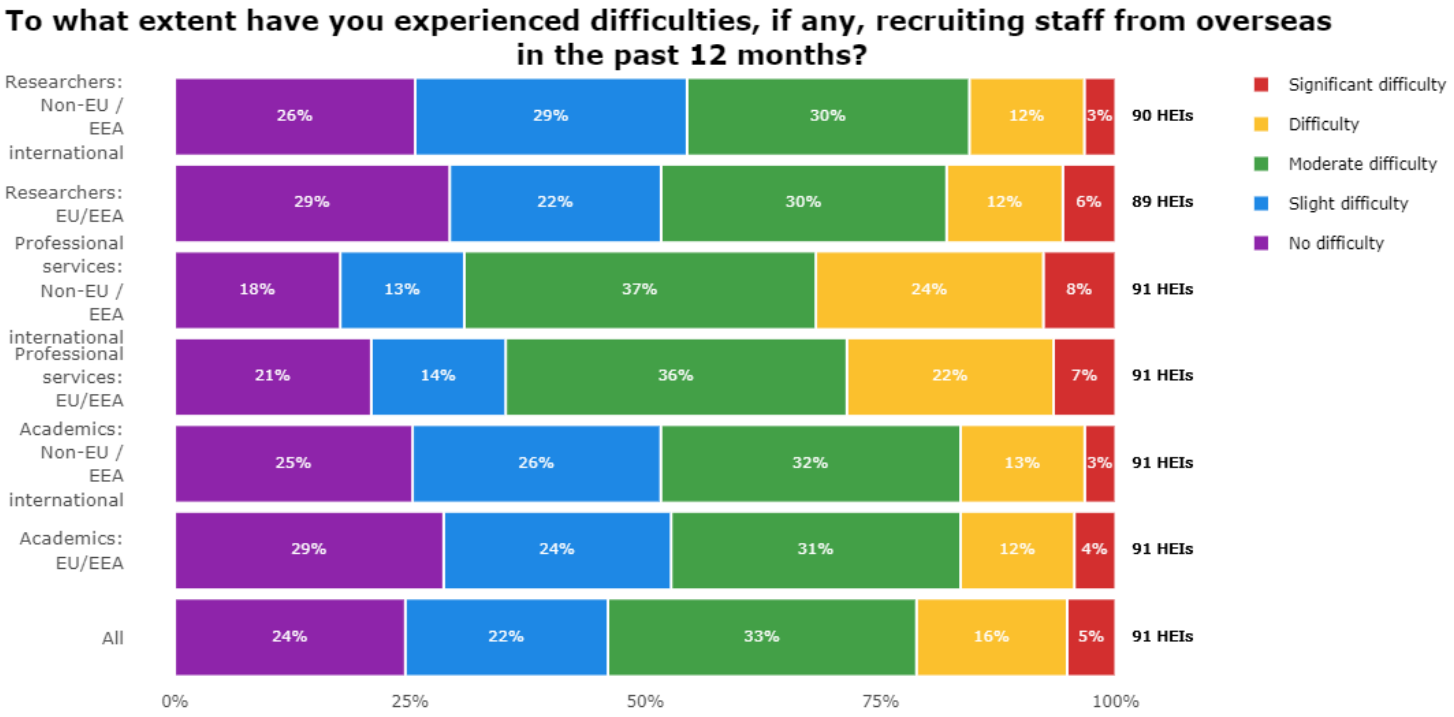
Northern Ireland: 1 HEI

[2] For skilled workers who qualify for the transitional provisions, the general salary requirement is £29,000 or the 'going rate' of the 25th percentile for the occupation code, whichever is higher.

Survey results

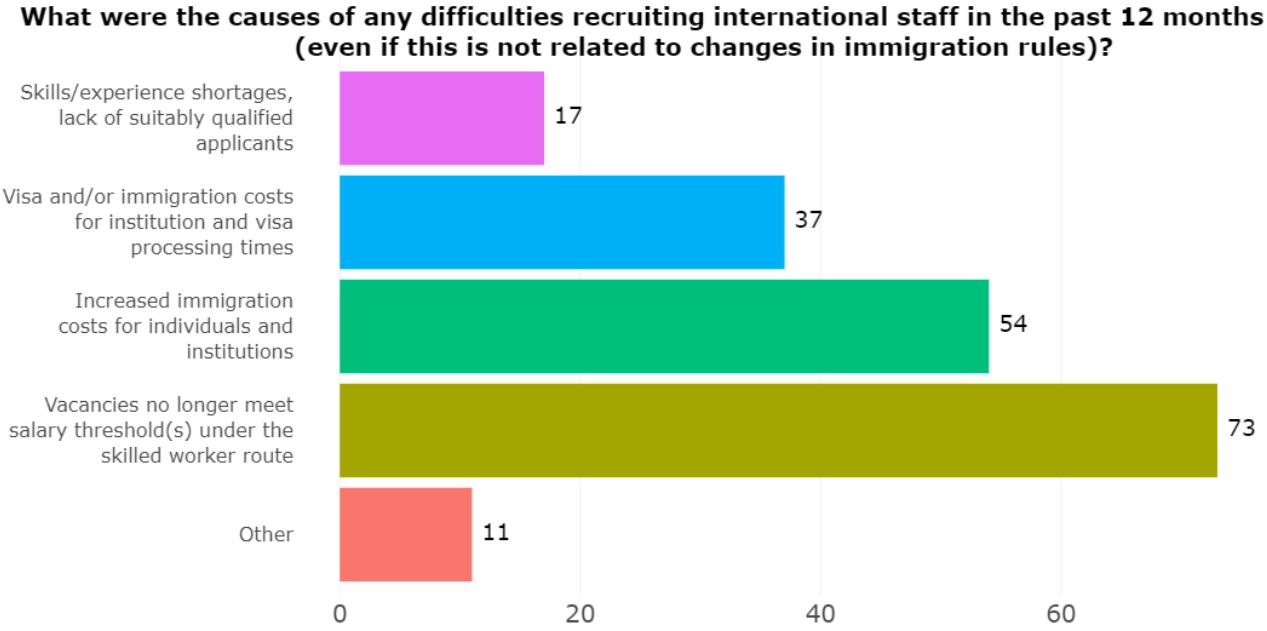
The bar charts below plot the responses from HEIs to the survey questions.

1. Recruitment of international staff



Overall, HEIs reported experiencing difficulties in recruiting international staff in the last 12 months with the most difficulty reported in recruiting professional services staff. Pre-92 and post-92 HEIs reported similar levels of difficulties.

2. Causes of difficulty in recruiting international staff

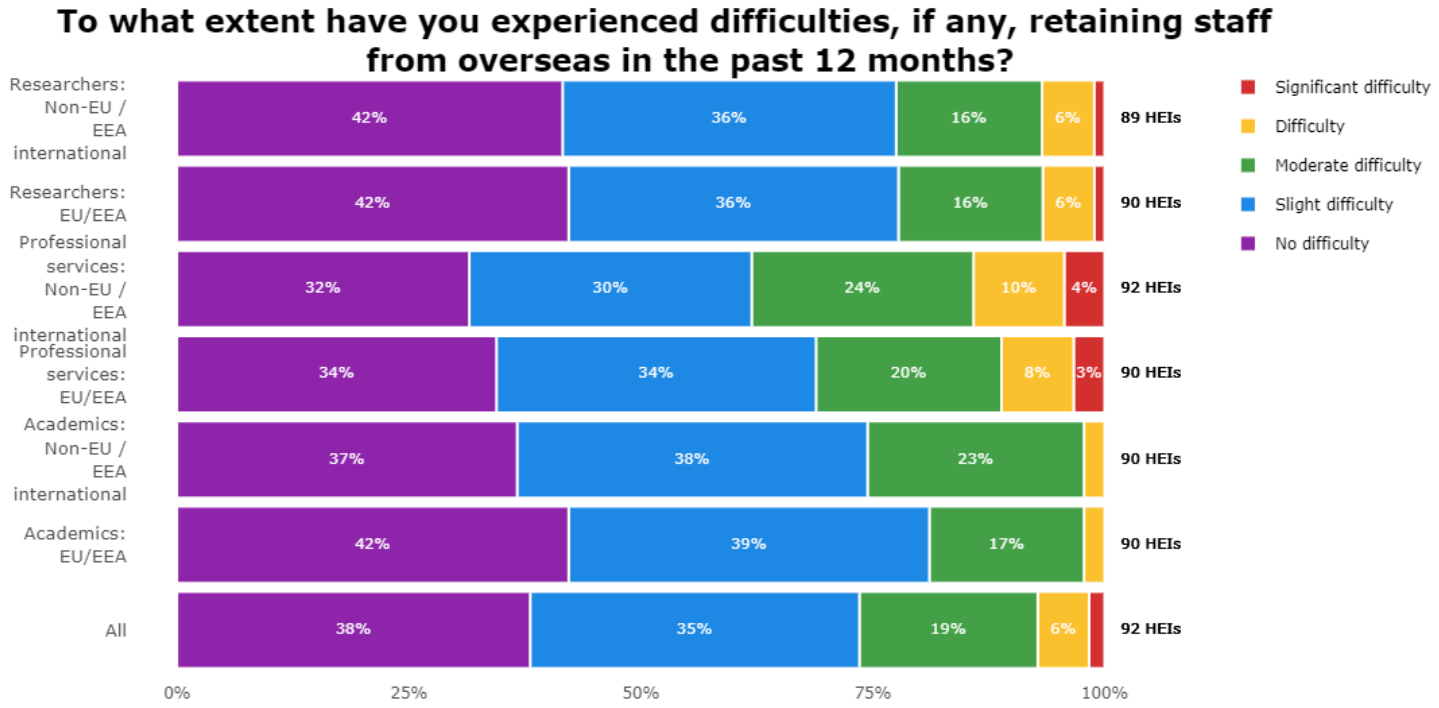


The reasons for difficulties in recruiting are shown in chart 2 above. The responses from HEIs cite the main cause as vacancies no longer meeting the salary threshold under the SW route, 73 HEIs said this. 53 HEIs said increased immigration costs for individuals and institutions were a cause of difficulties and 37 said visa and immigration costs and visa processing times had caused difficulties.

In addition to the causes listed in the chart, the other causes included:

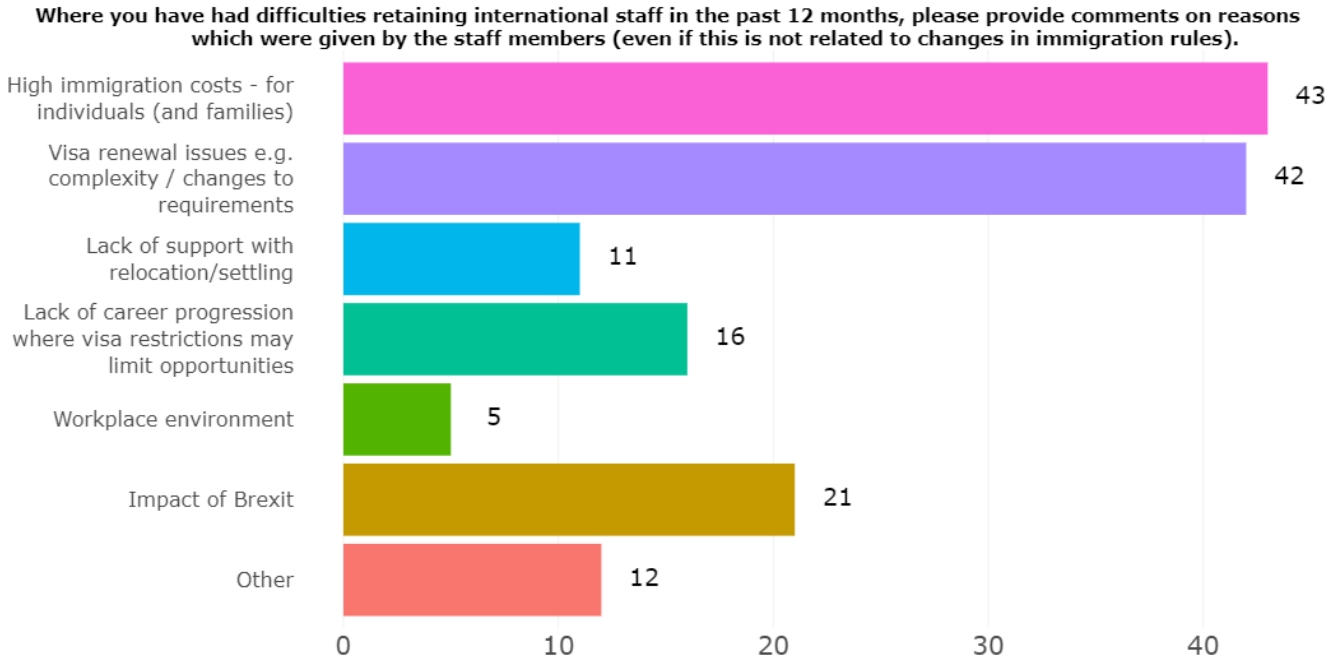
- Delays in processing time for applications under the Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS).
- It no longer being possible to sponsor some professional services roles due to the rise in the general salary threshold and going rates.
- Increased immigration costs for individuals' dependents.
- A reduction in applications - especially from EU/EEA researchers.

3. Retention of international staff



HEIs reported less difficulty in retaining international staff than for recruiting international staff i.e., the rate at which 'no difficulty' is reported is lower for recruitment. Post-92 HEIs reported experiencing 'no difficulty' in retaining international staff at a higher rate than Pre-92 HEIs. The lower level of difficulty may be explained by the increases in salary threshold and the IHS having less impact on international staff in the UK at the time of the survey. In other words, it may be too soon after the increase in the IHS to assess the impact on retention. The IHS is an upfront payment and the amount to be paid depends on the length of the visa. Therefore, international staff in the UK will have already paid the charge whereas international staff being appointed will need to factor the charge into their consideration of vacancies and job offers at UK HEIs.

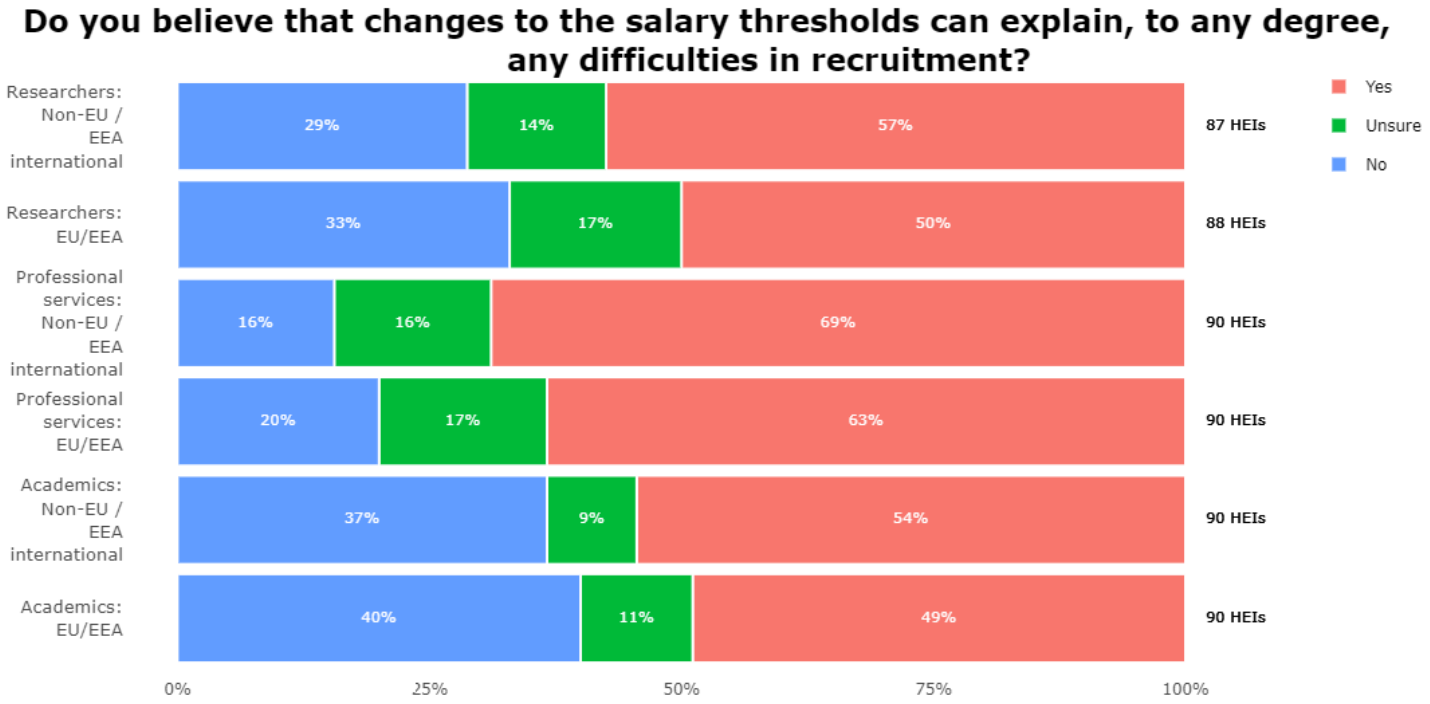
4. Causes of difficulty in retaining international staff



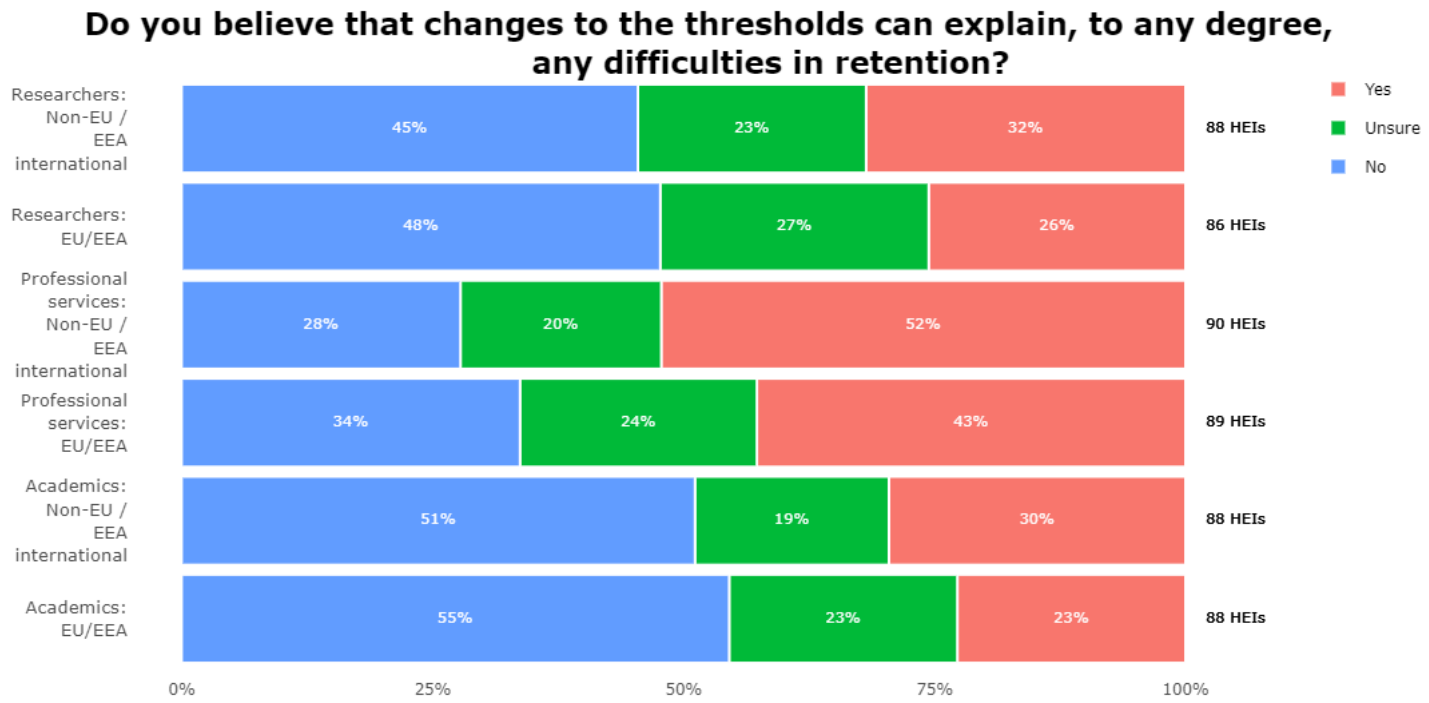
High immigration costs for individuals and families and visa renewal issues were the most common reasons reported by HEIs for difficulties in retaining international staff, with impact of Brexit given as the third most common reason. This pattern is similar for both pre-92 and post-92 HEIs.

Other reasons include cultural fit, salary and benefits, leadership, work/life balance, understaffing, lack of research time, location, and personal circumstances e.g., family illness, the impact of issues with a main applicant visa renewal with another employer which impacts dependant visa holders.

Salary thresholds

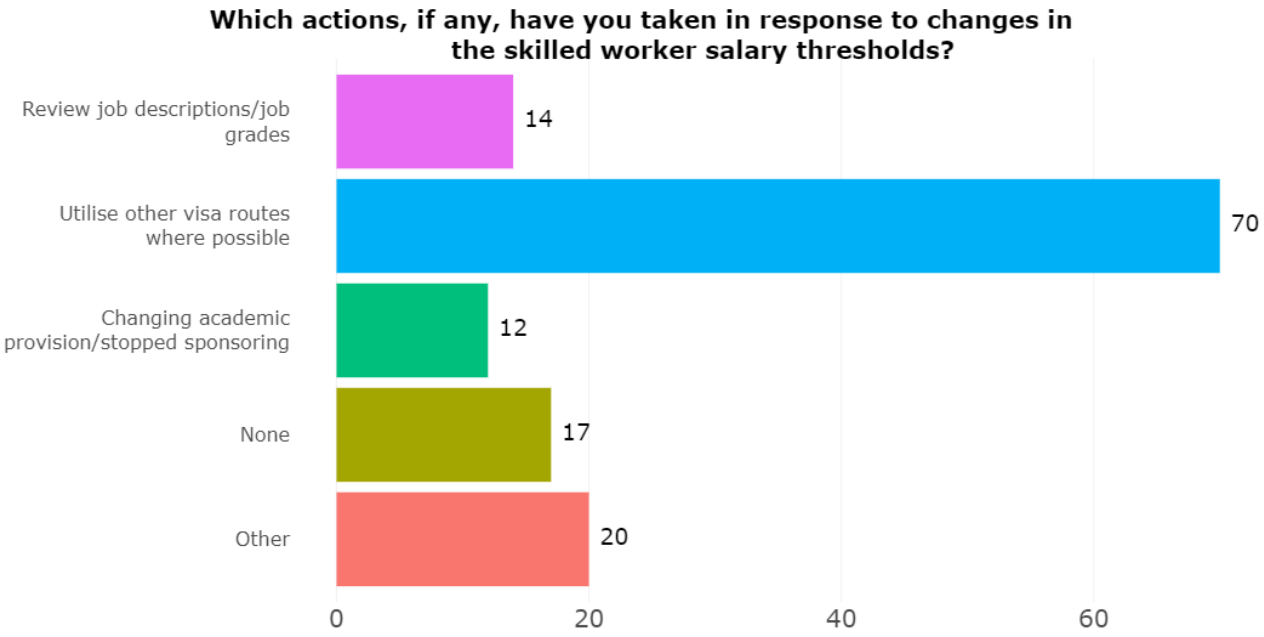


Changes to the salary threshold were deemed by a large majority of HEIs to explain the differences in recruitment they had experienced in the last 12 months for every staff category. In particular, HEIs felt that changes to salary thresholds explained the difficulties that they had experienced in recruiting professional services staff (over 60% of responding HEIs believed this).



In the academic and research staff categories, around half of all HEIs considered that the changes to the salary thresholds did not explain the difficulties in retention highlighted in section 3. However, HEIs had a level of uncertainty about the impact of the salary threshold changes on retention. The responses from HEIs indicate that the recruitment and retention difficulties are at the highest level for professional services staff.

5. Action by HEIs in response to the changes



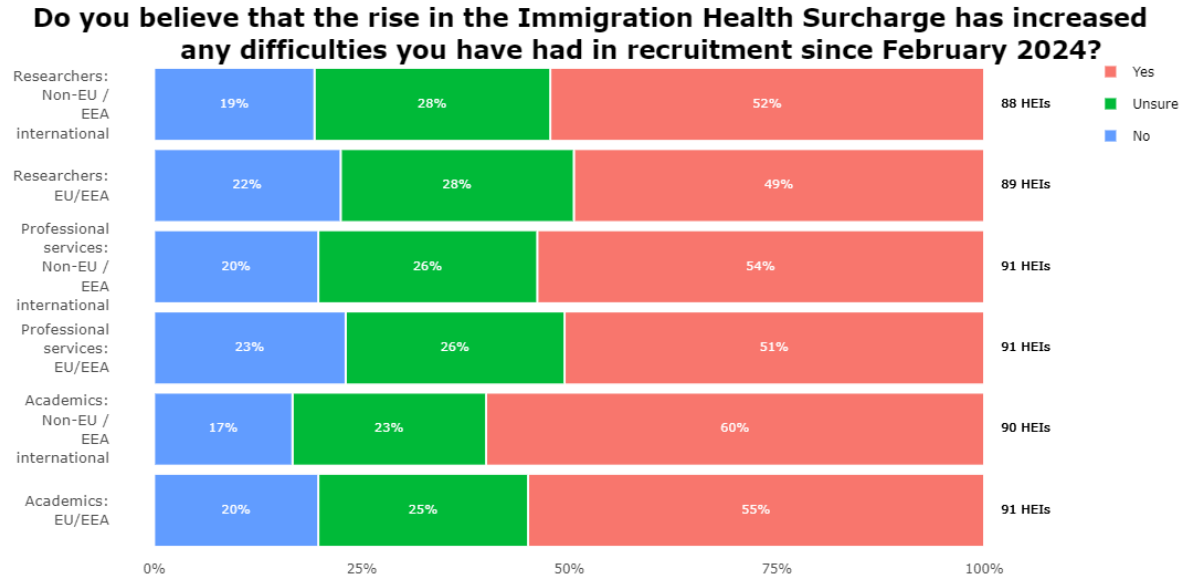
70 HEIs reported that they had utilised other visa routes in response to the SW salary threshold changes. Before the changes became effective, it was anticipated the global talent

visa route would to an extent potentially mitigate the negative impact of the salary threshold increases because it avoids issues with the minimum salary threshold. Some HEIs reported using the global talent visa as their default option and noted a high level of successful applications under that route, as well as saving time on supporting new staff. However, there are clear eligibility criteria limitations on the use of this type of visa for many staff categories.

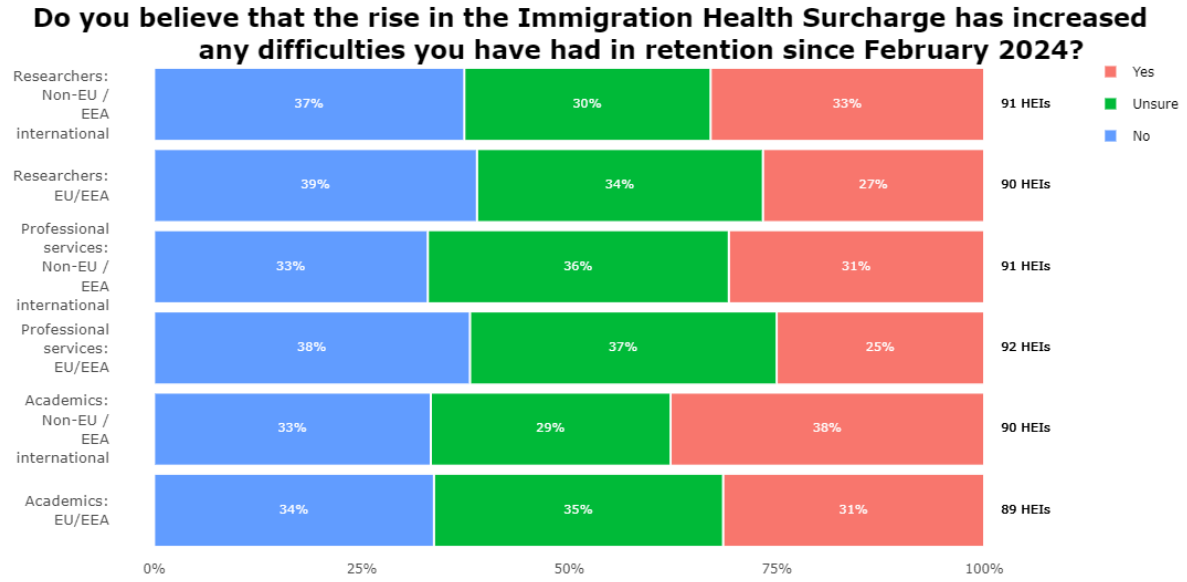
Other actions taken by HEIs included:

- Ensuring job adverts include clear statements regarding sponsorship eligibility to prevent issues later in the recruitment process.
- Ensure job specifications clearly identify higher levels skills and experience requirements for advertised roles.
- For candidates on a Graduate visa, it is clearly communicated whether the job meets the SW salary/skill requirements.
- Encouraging funders to cover some of the visa costs and building knowledge of alternative immigration routes.

6. Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS)

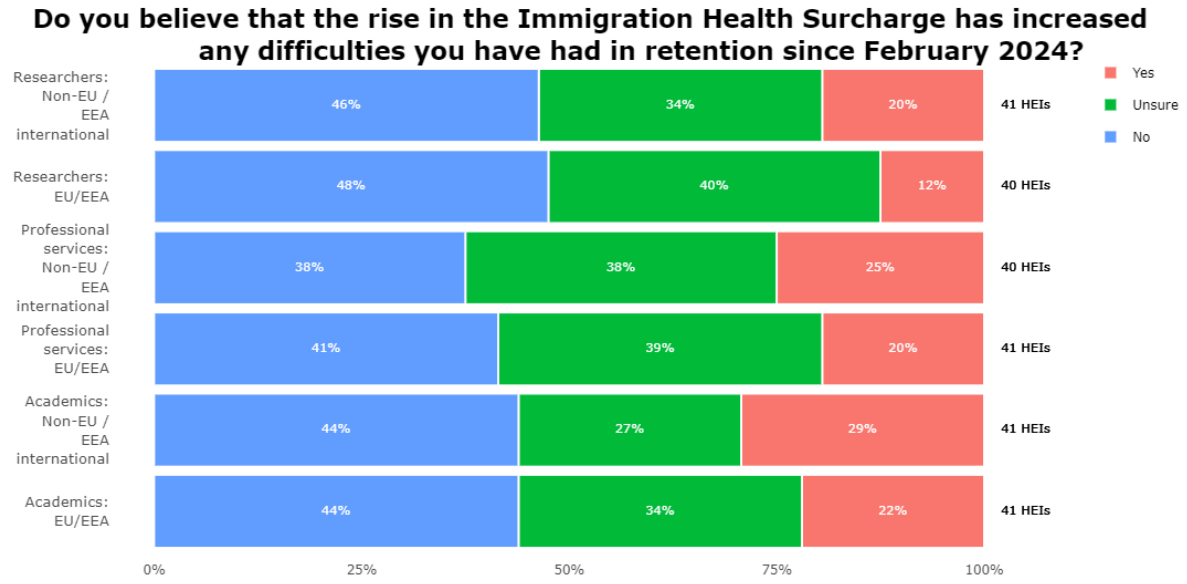


Over half of HEIs reported that they believed the increase to the IHS had led to difficulties in recruitment since February 2024. For the six categories of staff circa 20% of respondents said difficulties in recruitment had not increased because of the IHS charge increase. Around 60% reported that the increased IHS made a difference when recruiting academics. Pre-92 HEIs reported that the increase in the IHS has created difficulties in recruiting at a higher rate than post-92 HEIs. More post-92 HEIs were unsure as to whether the increase to the IHS had created recruitment difficulties.

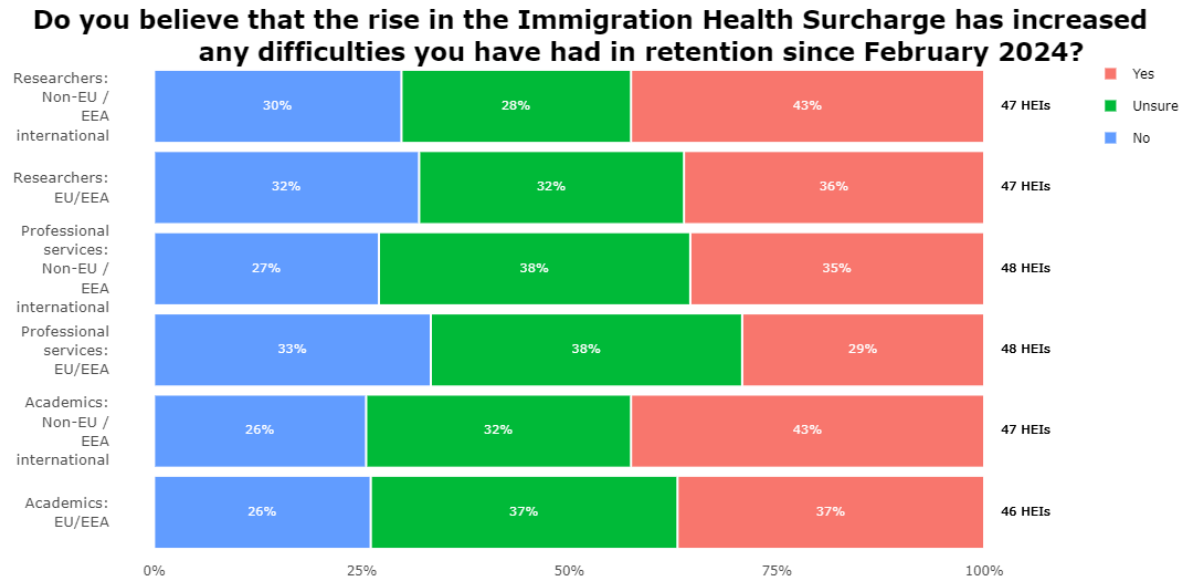


There are roughly equal percentages of yes, no, and uncertain responses from HEIs regarding the impact of the increase in the IHS on retention difficulties. The breakdown of the responses from pre-92 and post-92 HEIs (see charts below) indicates that post-92 HEIs tended to believe that the increased IHS had not changed the level of difficulty in retention whereas pre-92 HEIs tended more to believing that it had.

Post-92 HEIs

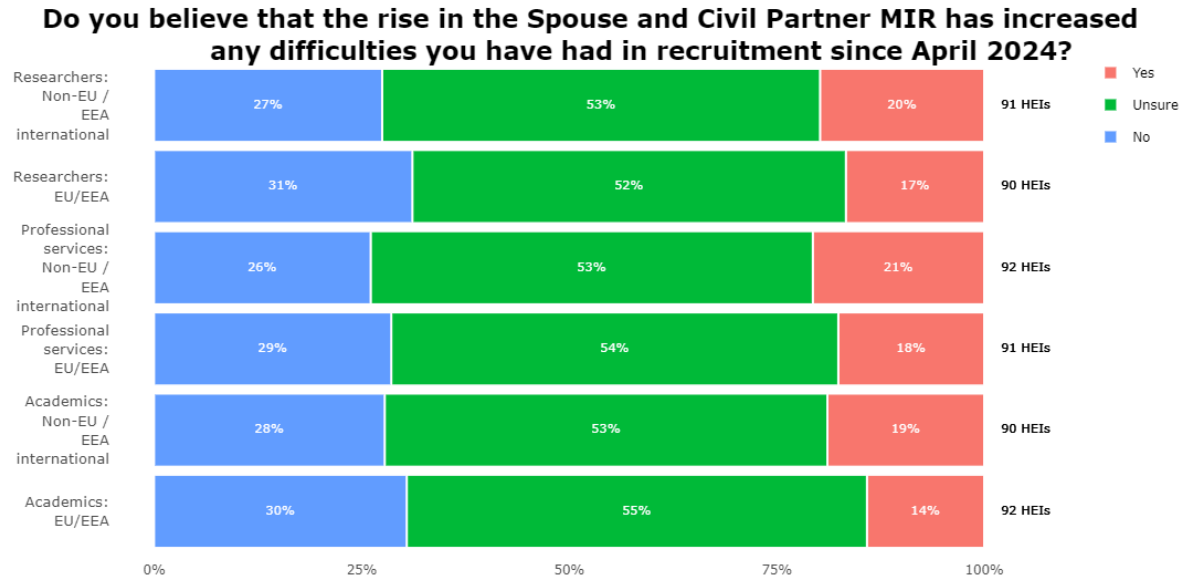


Pre-92 HEIs

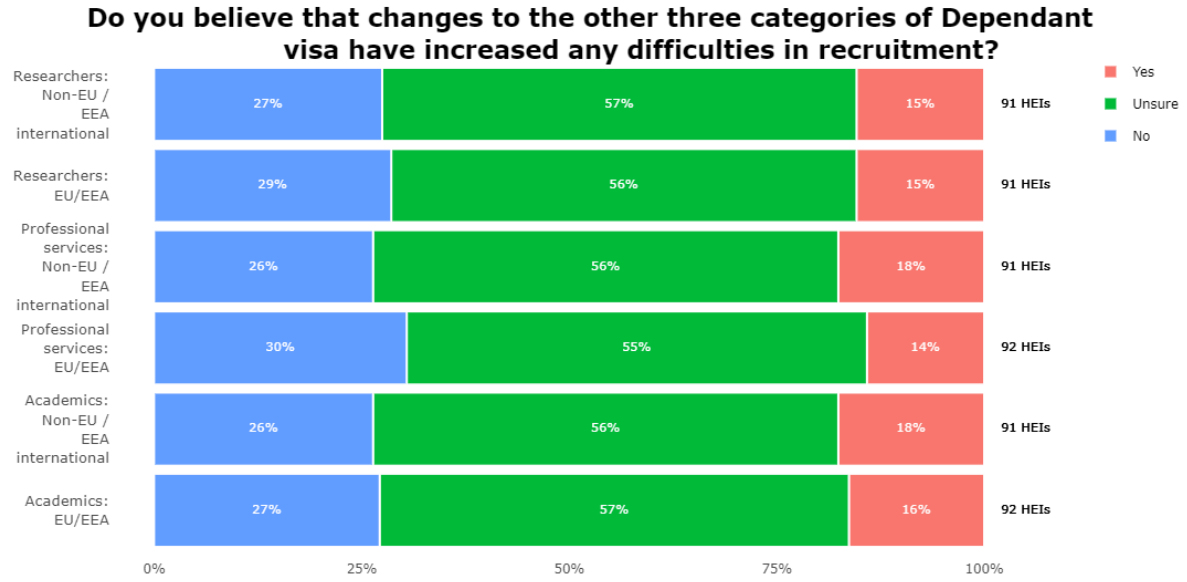


7. Changes to minimum income requirement

For all staff groups, circa 50% of responding HEIs indicated uncertainty as to the effect of the increase in the spouse and civil partner minimum income requirement (MIR), from April 2024 – see chart below. This is likely to be because it is too soon after the increase to comment with certainty on the impact.

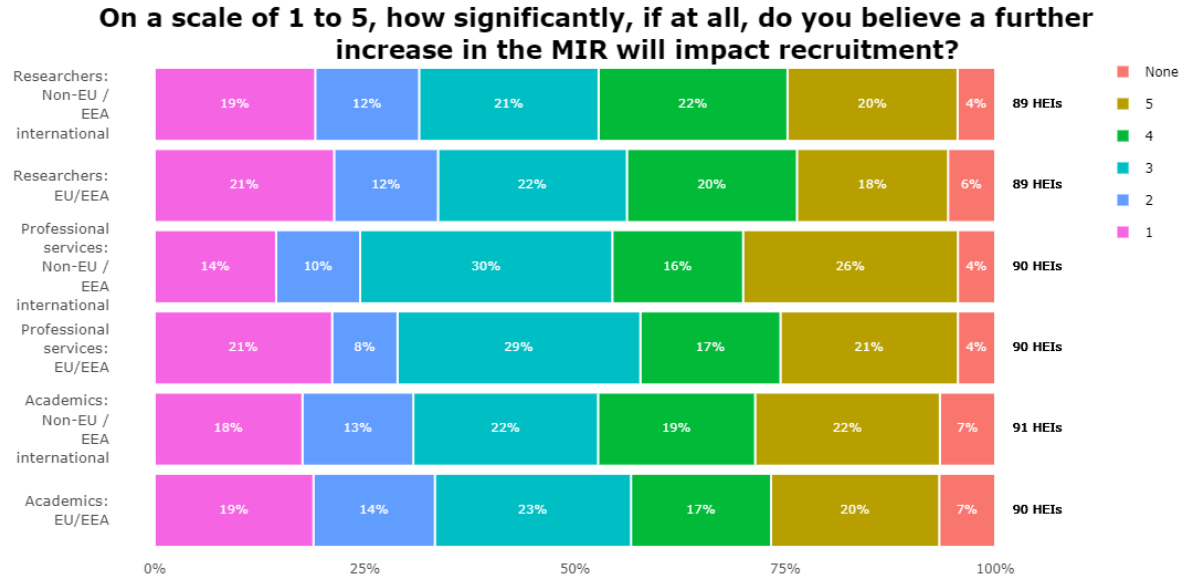


Similarly, for all categories of staff, HEIs indicated a high degree of uncertainty as to the effect of the changes to the other three categories of Dependent visa - see chart below.



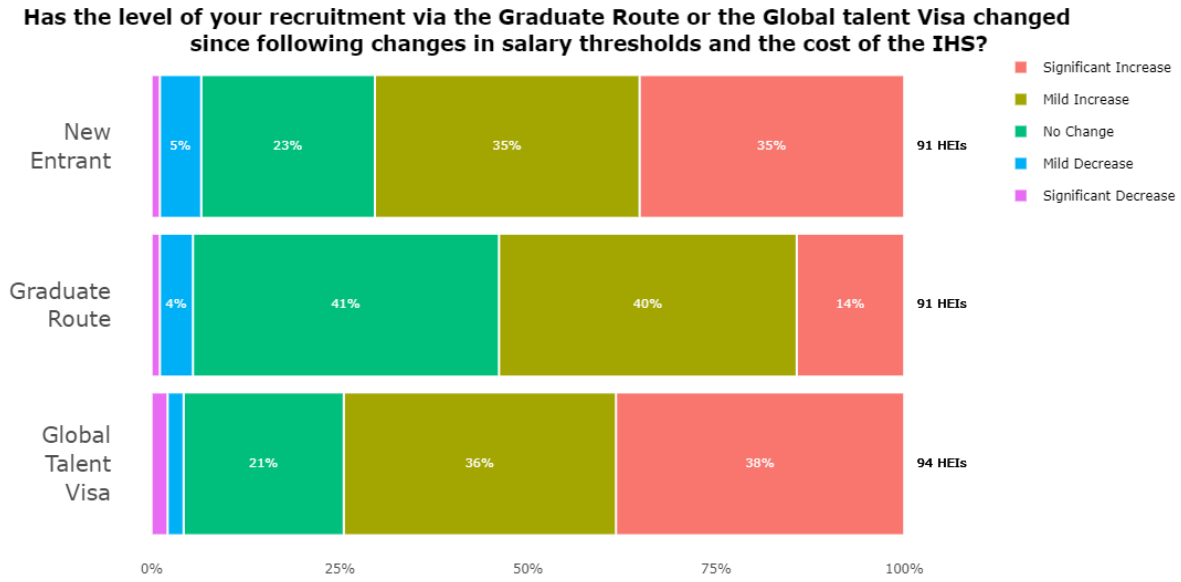
Regarding the planned increases to MIR requirement, only circa 5% of respondents believed that a further increase **would not** impact on recruitment across all six staff categories – see chart below. The majority of responding HEIs believed that a further increase would have a moderate to significant impact on recruitment.

The staff group where the greatest impact was anticipated was the two professional services categories, with around 70% of respondents selecting options 3 or more. It is interesting to note that whilst post-92s had experienced difficulties in recruiting international staff at a lower rate than pre-92s (see sections 1 and 2), they anticipated that further increases in the MIR would significantly impact the recruitment of professional services staff more noticeably than pre-92s did. This implies a high level of concern for future increases to MIR.



A higher number of HEIs believed that professional services (non-EU/EEA international) and researchers (non-EU/EEA international) will be most affected by an increase in the MIR.

8. Other visa routes

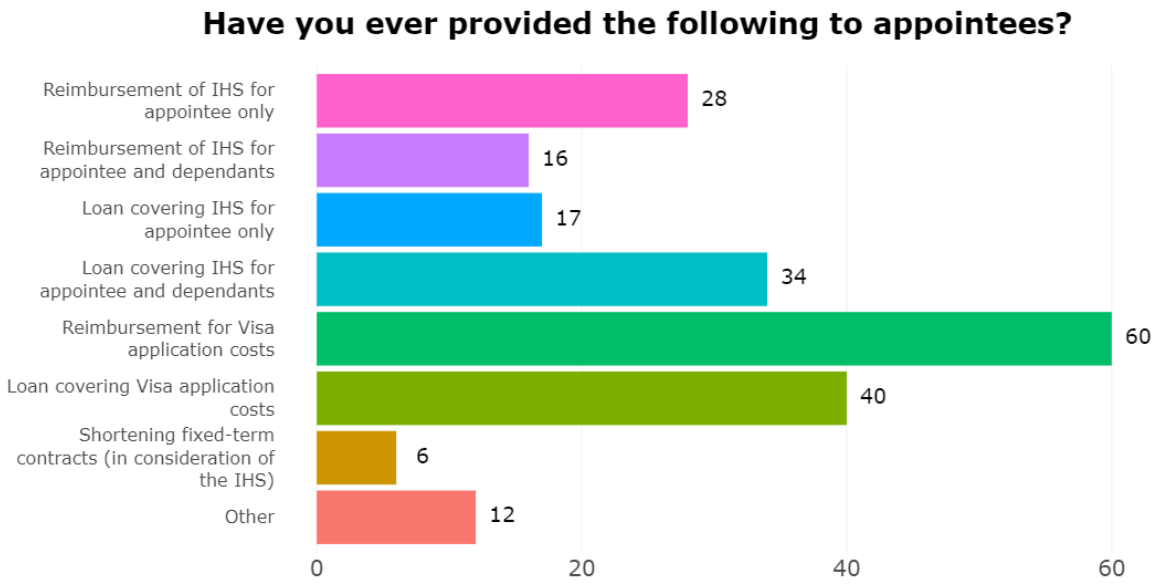


Whilst only a small percentage of respondents expected a decrease in the use of other visa routes, a significantly larger number reported that their level of recruitment via the new entrant, graduate and global talent visa routes had increased in response to the changes in the salary threshold and the cost of the IHS. 70% of respondents reported an increase in the use of salary discounts under the new entrant route and 76% of respondents reported an increase in the global talent visa route. A majority of pre-92 institutions have increased their usage of each of the three routes, a trend that can also be broadly observed among post-92s. However, a higher proportion of post-92s have not increased their usage of other routes compared to pre-92s.

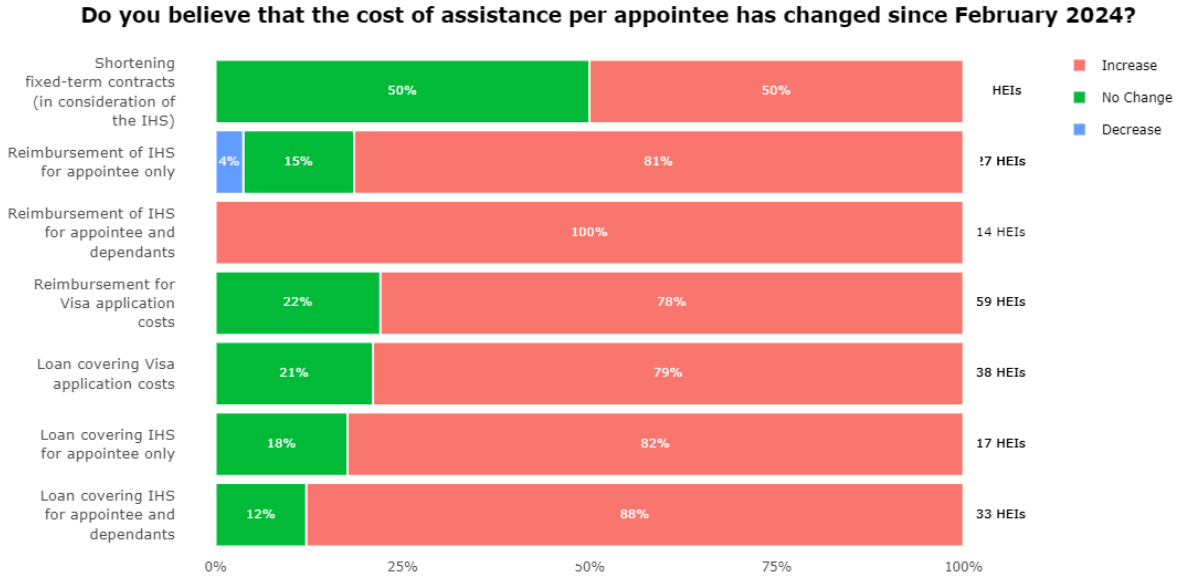
Financial Assistance

Do you provide, or have you ever provided, any financial assistance to appointees to cover appointees' immigration costs?

Yes	73
No	20



HEIs offer a mixture of reimbursement and loans to appointees for immigration costs. The most popular benefits offered to appointees by HEIs are reimbursement for visa application costs (60 HEIs), loans covering visa application costs (40 HEIs) and loans covering the IHS for appointees and dependants (34). 28 HEIs offered reimbursement of the IHS for appointees only.



The chart above clearly shows that in all but one category of the assistance/benefits, a large majority of HEIs reported an increase in the cost of assistance per appointee since February 2024. Significant increases in visa fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) have been observed, notably a 66% increase in IHS costs in February 2024. This has led to higher reimbursement costs and more requests for financial assistance.

Note – the reason the number of respondents differs in the above chart depends on the options selected in previous question.

Financial Assistance for Visa/IHS Costs – HEI comments

HEIs provided comments on the financial assistance offered to appointees and international staff. These included:

- Offering a relocation grant, including coverage for immigration costs for staff and dependents up to a maximum or cap, one HEI set the cap at £3,000 and another at £6,000.
- Offering an interest-free international staff loan (up to £10,000) for visa-related expenses, repaid directly from salary.
- The changes have prompted policy reviews such as no longer reimbursing IHS costs for new appointees and/or only covering IHS for employees due to its impact on retention, only covering initial visa costs for a fixed period for staff in certain grades under new schemes.
- One HEI reported reimbursing Indefinite Leave to Remain fees because they are cheaper than the combined costs of visa extensions and IHS.
- There has been an increase in requests for salary advances and loan applications particularly for IHS costs.
- The impact of the changes on HEIs' budgetary and strategic considerations was of concern and departments/schools/faculties have raised concerns about the financial burden of increased visa reimbursement costs.
- An HEI expressed concern that it was not possible to cover partial or full immigration costs because they could not afford to do so, and another HEI was currently reviewing the level of financial support offered to international staff.

General comments on the impact of the immigration rules changes

In addition to the above, HEIs made the following general comments:

- An HEI noted that individuals who, prior to the changes in April, would have been eligible to switch to a SW visa, had not been able to switch because of the timing of the changes. This HEI had therefore lost employees who had not been able to obtain another type of visa.
- There has been a significant increase in applicant costs in the last few years, especially where applicants have family members accompanying them. There has been a significant increase in requests for help with visa costs from staff members who are renewing visas or starting work.
- One HEI stated that it was not unusual for those applying with a family under the SW or global talent routes to have fees of more than £10,000.
- An HEI noted that whilst the volume of recruitment had generally decreased over 2024 due to financial constraints, there was still no doubt that the immigration rules could impact negatively on talent attraction.
- HEIs noted that new hires, particularly recent graduates, struggle with the high visa costs.
- The changes had resulted in candidate losses during the visa process due to high immigration costs, requiring additional recruitment campaigns.
- Applicants are electing to apply for a shorter visa to allow for IHS cost.
- An HEI noted that due to financial constraints and having to pause awards, discretionary increments and promotions, retaining professional services staff had become more challenging, highlighting the need for a comprehensive visa policy review.
- HEIs commented that the overall image of the UK as difficult and costly to move to, partly due to visa fees and what feels like a hostile environment for those coming from overseas. This has the potential to dissuade applicants from applying in the first place, even though costs may be covered.
- The UK is seen as a costly destination for international staff, which is a recruitment deterrent.
- That visas and the IHS were having a negative impact on UK HEIs being able to attract and afford the best academics and researchers in the world, which is a serious issue.

Immigration and HR/Global Mobility Departments

HEIs face several challenges due to the changes in the immigration rules, not least of which is the significant long-term impact on HR/Global Mobility departments. The introduction of the new rules has significantly increased the workload of HR departments due to the complexity of the rules and the need to manage risk to avoid errors and non-compliance issues which could ultimately impact on sponsorship status. The impact has been more significant because of the changes that have taken place in the context of a continuing challenging immigration environment, in addition to a change of government. There is an increase in workload to support international candidates and current international staff, and a significant amount of time needed to digest and understand the new rules.

The challenges highlight the need for strategic policy updates, efficient communication, training, and support for HR teams to navigate the evolving immigration landscape. Key challenges include:

- **Increase in queries:** More queries from international applicants (including speculative applicants) and internal employees about sponsorship due to complex eligibility assessments and transitional arrangements. More time and resources are required for case-by-case evaluations to ensure sponsorship requirements are met. Essentially it takes longer to assess eligibility.

- **Skilled Worker visa:** The assessment of eligibility for SW visas has become more complex and challenging due to the new salary thresholds and point-based requirements. Additional effort is needed to gather evidence for tradeable points where salary thresholds are not met, particularly for academic and researcher posts.

- **Increased complexity:** The overall complexity demands extensive resource allocation and deeper knowledge of the rules. Increased complexities and misunderstandings regarding sponsorship eligibility, lead to higher workloads for staff HR/immigration teams.

- **Alternative visa routes:** HR departments are increasingly having to explore alternative routes like the global talent visa, and there has been an increase in queries about eligibility criteria and endorsement requirements for the global talent route.

- **New immigration systems:** The roll-out of eVisas and the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) system during 2024 has created additional communication and administrative burdens for employers.

- **Policy and Communication:** HR departments have spent more time updating immigration policies and procedures and working to improve internal communications about immigration via HEI intranets and other communication channels. For example, reviewing and adjusting recruitment materials and processes to manage expectations regarding sponsorship and ongoing visa permissions.

- **Staff Training:** There is an increased need for internal training sessions to upskill managers and staff on immigration challenges and solutions, particularly to manage expectations regarding salary thresholds.

- **Financial Burdens:** Rising salary threshold, visa and IHS costs impact recruitment strategies and budget allocations, deter long-term employment, and put pressure on individuals and families. HEIs noted other costs including using solicitors for specific immigrations queries

- **Remote work:** There has been a growth in the number of requests from candidates preferring to work from their overseas home countries.

- **HR Impact:** Small HR departments are particularly strained by the increased administrative demands related to overseas recruitment.

Impact on recruitment

- There is a reluctance on the part of international candidates to consider employment in the UK.
- It takes longer to hire staff and delays in start dates impacting business continuity.
- It is increasingly difficult to recruit the best candidates for the role, for example, an HEI has to re-advertise positions several times and candidates reject their offers as they do not cover visa costs.
- Some international staff have expressed the growing financial burden may deter them from considering long-term employment in the UK.

Conclusion

- UCEA will use the information to feed into the Immigration White Paper to be introduced by the Westminster Government in 2025 and will use appropriate opportunities to raise the impact with relevant government officials.
- Undertake a further survey in a year's time to identify trends about the impact of changes to immigration over a full academic year and seek granular feedback about costs increases over a full academic year.
- HEIs may wish to use the information in this report to flag the impact of recently changed immigration policy on the HE sector.

UCEA
February 2025

Glossary

Global Talent visa (GTV) route
The GTV route is a specialist visa for researchers and specialists seeking to carry out research in the UK. Under a GTV individuals can work in the UK in academia or research if they are a leader or potential leader in one of the following fields:

- Science
- Medicine
- Engineering
- Humanities
- Social science

There are different ways to apply depending on the circumstances in which individuals intend to carry out their research. There are no language or minimum salary eligibility requirements under the GTV.

Please see further information on the GTV route.

Going rate
The current going rates for those occupations and workers on the Skilled Worker (SW) route are set out in Skilled Worker visa: going rates for eligible occupation codes. The going rate is determined by a minimum salary associated with the occupation code that aligns with the sponsored role. The annual salaries for these occupations are based on a 37.5 hour working week. Going rates are based on the 50th percentile.

Under the transitional arrangements for qualifying individuals, the going rate is lower and is calculated as the higher of the rate shown in the 25th percentile.

Individuals qualify for the lower rate if they:

- Gained their Certificate of Sponsorship for their first SW visa before 4 April 2024 and have continually held one or more SW visas since then.
- Are applying for a Health and Care Worker Visa in certain occupations.

Example:
Senior Lecturer on SOC code 2311, assigned CoS on 10.10.23 going rate is £47,700

Senior Lecturer on SOC code 2311, assigned CoS on 25.07.24 going rate is £38,100

Minimum salary threshold
The standard Skilled Worker (SW) visa minimum salary is now £38,700, where no salary discounts are applicable. This threshold was increased for applications submitted on or after 4 April 2024.

For skilled workers who qualify for the transitional provisions, the general salary requirement is £29,000 or the ‘going rate’ of the 25th percentile for the occupation code, whichever is higher.

Skilled Worker (SW) route
The SW route encompasses the majority of UK jobs eligible for overseas recruitment and for employers to access the global talent pool. Under the SW route, individuals that employers want to hire from outside the UK will need to demonstrate that:

- They have a job offer from a Home Office licensed sponsor.
- The job offer is at the required skill level – RQF 3 or above (A Level and equivalent).
- They speak English to the required standard.

In addition to this, the job must meet the applicable minimum salary threshold. This is the higher of either:

- The general salary threshold of **£37,800** (under the new rules),
- Or the specific salary requirement for their occupation, known as the 'going rate'.

A visa applicant must gain 70 points to be eligible for sponsorship under the SW route.

Employers can find out which jobs are eligible for a skilled worker visa via government guidance on skilled worker visas: eligible occupations and codes and Appendix Skilled Occupations.

Standard Occupation Classification (SOC)
When sponsoring an individual under the SW route, employers must assign a SOC code to the job that they are being sponsored for. Each SOC code has a **'going rate'**, which determines the salary for any job under that SOC code. Occupation codes changed in April 2024.

Tradeable points under the points-based immigration system (PBS)
Under the PBS, applicants will need to demonstrate that they have a job offer at the required level from a sponsored employer, that they speak English and meet the required minimum salary thresholds. Applicants will need 70 points to enter the UK.

If applicants do not meet the minimum salary threshold, they may still be able to come to the UK as they will be able to trade characteristics or points such as their specific job offer and qualifications against a salary lower than the minimum salary or 'going rate' in their field. In other words, a lower SW visa minimum salary threshold than the standard salary requirement of £38,700 or the job's standard going rate may be available under the 'tradeable points' rules.

Qualifying workers can be paid between 70% and 90% of the usual going rate for their role, if the salary is at least £30,960 per year and meets one of the following criteria:

- The worker is a new entrant, i.e., under 26 years old, studying, a recent graduate, or in professional training.
- The worker has a technology, science, maths, or engineering (STEM) PhD level qualification that is relevant to the role (a lower threshold of £26,100 applies if the worker has a relevant PhD level qualification in any other subject).
- The worker has a postdoctoral position in higher education or science.

PhDs are awarded 20 points, for example, if applicants have a PhD in a STEM subject relevant to their job, they will be able to trade that qualification against a salary rate 20% lower than the 'going rate' or against a salary rate 10% lower than the 'going rate' if they have a PhD in a subject relevant to their job.

Further information is available in the guidance on jobs that qualify for a PhD salary discount and the points summary table in the eligibility section of Appendix Skilled Worker.

Transitional provisions
Under the transitional provisions for qualifying individuals, the going rate is lower and is calculated as the higher of the rate shown in the 25th percentile.

Individuals qualify for the lower rate if they:

- Gained their Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) for their first SW visa before 4 April 2024 and have continually held one or more SW visas since then.
- Are applying for a Health and Care Worker Visa in certain occupations.