

High-Income Countries Account for Small Share of UK Skilled Worker Visa Issuances

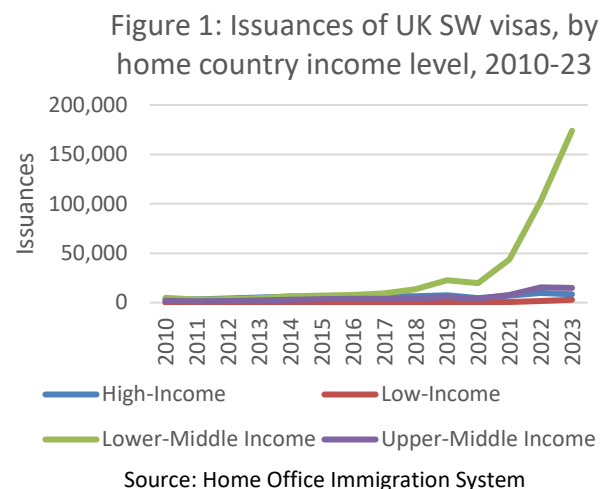
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Following the enactment of new immigration rules in December 2020, UK visa issuances to skilled workers grew substantially. However, trends in issuances to higher-income country workers—including U.S. workers—differed from issuances to workers from other countries. This brief reviews trends in UK visa issuances to skilled workers, an indicator of Mode 4 services trade, focusing on issuances to U.S. and other high-income country nationals.

The UK launched a new visa for skilled workers in December 2020, replacing the previous Tier 2 (General) visa. As with the Tier 2 visa, eligibility for the [Skilled Worker \(SW\) visa](#) depends on meeting certain skill, salary, sponsorship, and language requirements. However, for most workers, some requirements have been eased or removed under the new scheme.¹ Among other differences, the general annual salary minimum for SW visas is £26,200 (as compared to £30,000 under Tier 2),² the Resident Labour Market Test (RLMT)³ requirement and monthly cap have been eliminated, there is no limit on visa extensions, and SW visas are open to applicants filling Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) Level 3 or higher positions (rather than RQF Level 6 or higher positions, as under the Tier 2 scheme). RQF Level 3 positions require a level of education sufficient for admission to an institution of higher learning, while Level 6 positions require the equivalent of a baccalaureate degree.

While total fees and charges for SW visas are reportedly higher than for the Tier 2 visa, this is in line with 2019–21 cost increases for similar visas issued by some other developed countries.⁴ The SW visa system also includes a [Health and Care \(H&C\) visa](#) for individuals filling social or health care positions. Launched in August 2020, the H&C visa has a lower annual salary minimum (£20,960), lower application fees, and shorter processing times than other SW visas, among other benefits.

UK visa data⁵ indicate that visa issuances to skilled workers from outside the EEA and Switzerland⁶ increased



¹ European Economic Area (EEA) and Swiss workers now face a stricter regime, as prior to Brexit they did not need a visa to move to and work in the UK.

² This salary minimum was set at £25,600 in December 2020, and raised to £26,200 in April 2023.

³ Under the RLMT requirement, firms wanting to secure a Tier 2 (General) visa for a prospective foreign employee needed to advertise the open position for 28 days to determine if a settled worker was available to fill the vacancy.

⁴ The Royal Society reports that the total cost of a Tier 2 (General) visa was £8,438 in 2019, while the cost of a SW visa stood at £9,746 in 2021. Other countries also experienced rising visas fees during this period. For example, the cost of the U.S. H-1B visa rose from \$6,650 to \$9,150 from 2019–21, while the cost of France’s EU Blue Card rose from €368 to €4254. At the same time, some countries posted relatively stable (e.g., Japan) or lower (e.g., Germany) visas costs.

⁵ The data presented in this brief reflect UK issuances of Tier 2 (General) and SW visas to main applicants, and do not include issuances to dependents or to applicants filing from within the UK. Data for 2019 are used as a point of comparison due to the significant impact of COVID-19-related measures on international travel. Data on 2023 issuances are provisional.

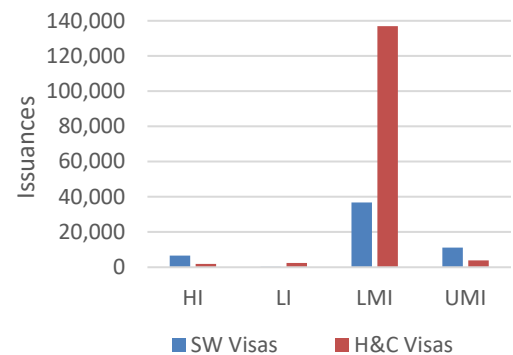
⁶ Data presented here do not include issuances to EEA and Swiss workers—prior to January 2021, nationals from these countries could enter and work in the UK without a visa, and as such, a comparison of pre-and post-2021 trends in issuances to these individuals is not meaningful. Data also exclude issuances in categories that do not have [current or historical World Bank income classifications](#) (e.g., “Stateless”).

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substantially after the implementation of the new visa rules, growing from 36,083 in 2019 to 200,210 in 2023. Issuances of SW visas to nationals of lower-middle income (LMI) economies accounted for most of this growth, increasing from 22,764 to 173,909 during the period (figure 1). Issuances to low income (LI) and upper-middle income (UMI) economy nationals were also much higher in 2023, having increased at Compound Average Growth Rates (CAGRs) of 59.3 percent and 28.8 percent, respectively, from 2019. By contrast, issuances of SW visas to high-income (HI) country nationals grew at a CAGR of 3.2 percent, from 7,410 to 8,412 in 2019–23, slower than the 10.6 percent growth during 2010–19. Issuances to U.S. nationals—with the highest share (3,440 or 40.9 percent) of issuances to HI countries in 2023⁷—exhibited a somewhat different trend, with issuances growing at similar rates during 2019–23 (7.4 percent) and 2010–19 (7.6 percent).⁸

Data also reveal a sharp distinction in the issuance of H&C worker visas by country of origin. H&C accounted for 78.8 percent and 88.2 percent of SW visa issuances to LMI and LI countries, respectively, in 2023, with LMI countries India (39,105), Nigeria (26,283), and Zimbabwe (18,814), ranking as the largest recipients among all countries of origin (figure 2). This pattern reflects a larger trend of health care workers from low- and middle-income countries migrating to higher income countries, often facilitated by liberalized rules on immigration and the recognition of foreign professionals. These visas comprised a much lower share of issuances to nationals of HI and UMI countries (21.7 percent and 25.8 percent, respectively) and a particularly low share of SW visa issuances to U.S. nationals (5.9 percent, or 204 issuances).

Figure 2: Issuances of UK SW and H&C Visas, 2023



Source: Home Office Immigration System

UK officials issued plans in December 2023 aimed at limiting immigration. Among other changes, minimum salary thresholds will rise to £38,700 for SW visa holders (excepting H&C visa holders and certain workers in the education sector) and dependents will no longer be able to accompany care workers. One observer anticipates that a surge in SW visa applications will precede the salary threshold increase, scheduled for Spring 2024. Overall, the UK government expects that the changes will lower the number of eligible migrants by 300,000.

Sources: Aristone Solicitors, “[7 Key Differences](#),” accessed Apr. 5, 2023; BBC, “[Growth in NHS recruits](#),” Aug. 5, 2022; Chambers and Partners, “[An update](#),” Jan. 15, 2024; DavidsonMorris, “[Skilled Worker Visa](#),” accessed May 12, 2023; DWF, “[New Skilled Worker visa](#),” Dec. 1, 2020; Financial Times, “[Britain after Brexit](#),” March 13, 2023; GOV.UK, “[Find a regulated qualification](#),” “[Health and Care Worker visa](#),” “[Migration Advisory Committee \(MAC\) annual report](#),” “[Net migration measures – further detail](#),” “[Skilled Worker visa](#),” and “[What qualification levels mean](#),” accessed May 2023 - Jan. 2024; Henehan, “Under New Management,” The Economy 2030 Inquiry,” Feb. 2022; Home Office Immigration System, “[Entry Clearance Visas](#),” Feb. 29, 2024; Lewis Silken, “[Home Office confirms Spring updates](#),” Mar. 21, 2023; Nolan, “[Rich Countries Lure Health Workers](#),” Jan. 24, 2022. The Royal Society, “[Summary of Visa Cost Analysis \(2021\)](#),” Jan. 23, 2023; UK Visas & Immigration, “[Health and Care Visa Guidance](#),” Feb. 2022.

⁷ When EEA countries and Switzerland are included in this group, the United States remains the highest single country recipient of skilled worker visas in 2023, followed by France (2,022) and Italy (1,942).

⁸ By comparison, issuances to Canadian nationals grew at a much slower rate after 2019 (1.1 percent) than during 2010–19 (9.2 percent), while issuances to Australians declined at a 6.3 percent rate from 2019–23 following 13.3 percent growth during 2010–19.

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