

Migration and construction

A study by the CITB (Construction Industry Training Board)

Summary

This new research shows that the currently suggested post-Brexit visa process is unsuitable for the construction industry due to the need for direct employment, a demand for qualified skills and pay requirements. Currently a lot of employment in the construction industry would fall under the “low-skill” umbrella, limiting tenure to 12 months.

The report also reveals a role for the wider industry as non-UK workers are keen to “train to remain”, suggesting that over 43% of migrant workers are just one qualification level away from transitioning to a ‘high’ skill visa.

The CITB suggest three recommendations:

- 1) The post-Brexit immigration white paper proposal for a ‘low-skilled’ visa of 12 months should be extended to 24 months.
- 2) That non-UK born workers entering the UK on a ‘low skilled’ visa be allowed to transition to a ‘high skilled’ visa while remaining in the UK.
- 3) An ‘Umbrella Sponsorship’ scheme is needed to allow self-employed non-UK workers to obtain sponsorship, so that their skills are not lost.

The current status of migrant employment in UK construction

- In **London more than half** (54%) of construction workers are migrant workers. Overall, the figure is 14% (a reduction on the 15% recorded in 2017).
- Of the total number of migrant workers, 94% were **EU passport holders**.
- 49% of migrant workers are **self-employed** which gives them the opportunity to move between projects, flex hours and earn more. In the UK-born population, the figure is lower at 39%.
- The **migrant workforce is generally younger**, masking a potential UK retirement issue.
- 37% of migrant workers were in **skilled occupations** (41% in 2015).
- Generally, the industry is **unfamiliar with processing visas** with only 3% of employers supporting one in the last two years, and those same employers reporting concerns over the admin burden and time draw of the process.

Brexit implications

With no clear direction on how the Brexit talks will progress, the only piece of guidance we can look to is the Migration Advisory Commission’s report published at the end of 2018 which suggested that free movement will be replaced by a system favouring high-skilled workers and makes certain trades ineligible for a Tier 2 visa. Qualification levels may also be required for a visa, as well as salary thresholds of £30,000 and the need for direct employment. It has also been proposed that low skilled workers are able to enter the UK to live and work for 12 months followed by a “cooling-off” period of 12 months.

Recognition of qualifications

The survey by CITB revealed that employment agencies said that qualifications gained overseas are rarely recognised or accepted by UK employers and often rely on post employment training.

Salary threshold

Of the employment agencies surveyed by the CITB, only one fifth of workers placed earned more than £30,000, but in current employees, 55% of employers said most workers earned over the threshold.

Many of the respondents to the survey reported a large amount of overtime on top of their basic wage, typically working over 40 hours per week, which when removed, left their pay at £25,000.

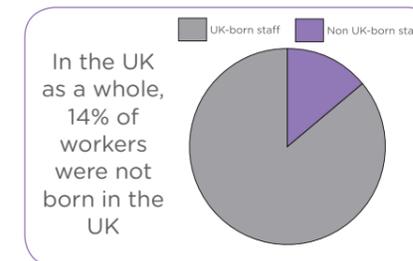
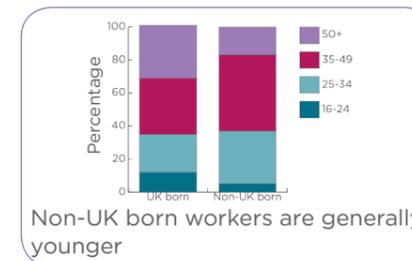
Length of stay

The survey found that non-UK born workers had a tendency to build careers in the UK and for less skilled workers to upskill and train whilst working in the UK. It also revealed that it was not typical for EU workers to have breaks in employment but that EU workers look to build long-term careers, rather than year-long, ad hoc placements.

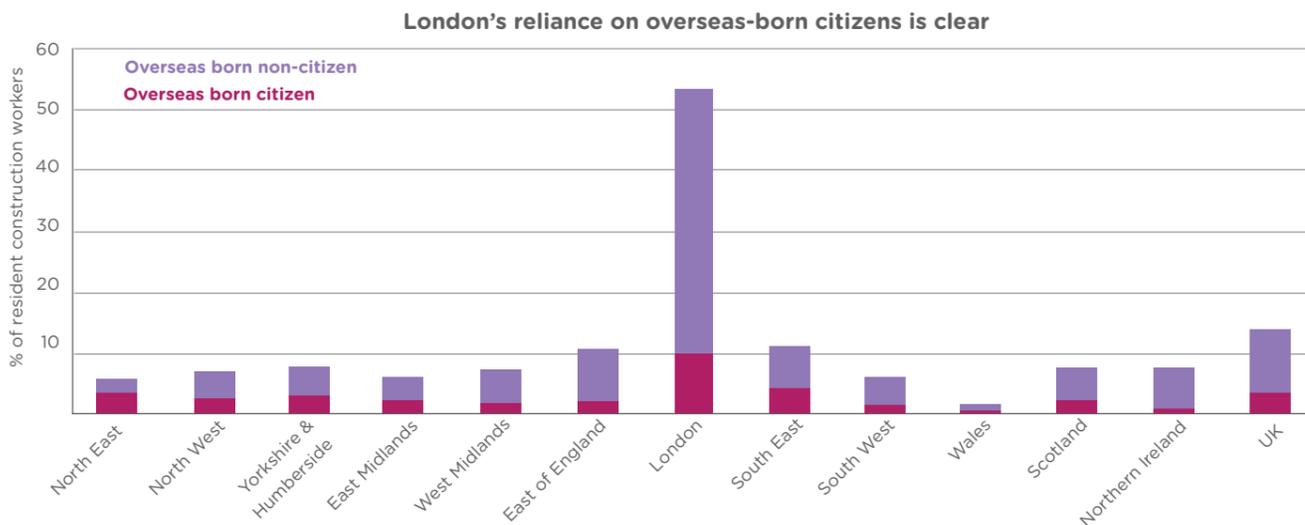
Direct employment

Nearly half of the employees surveyed were self-employed, this is a higher proportion than in the UK population. Migrants often enter the UK to find work through informal networks.

Selected quotes and figures from the report



“I personally wouldn't come to the UK if it was that difficult, unless there was a really good deal...I wouldn't come over at my age now for a short period of time”
Professional services worker, aged 20-29, Italy



41%
of workers have lived in the UK for between 3 and 6 years.

73%
of workers have worked for their employer for more than a year, reflecting long-term working relationships.

Half of agencies surveyed said that only 20% of *placed* workers earned over the visa threshold of £30,000.

“If it's up to me I would like to stay, but it depends on a few things: if my girlfriend is allowed to stay, if my wages will stay the same, and if I'm allowed to travel and see my family”
Construction worker, aged 20-29, Romania

Over half of employment agencies said that overseas qualifications were rarely recognised or accepted by UK employers.

Over half of employers said most of their *employees* earned over the threshold.