



MEDIA BRIEFING · JULY 2026

NET MIGRATION HAS HALVED. THE RULES THAT DID IT ARE **STILL ARRIVING**

The UK's post-2024 immigration reset is now measurable. Net migration fell to 171,000 in 2025, work visas are down 59% from their peak, and the care-worker route has all but closed. Yet the demand side tells a different story: a record 127,000 employers hold sponsor licences, IT sponsorship has barely moved, and international applications to UK universities hit an all-time high this January. This briefing separates what is in force, what is legislated but not yet live, and what remains only a proposal — the distinction most coverage gets wrong.

Updated
10 July 2026

Next update
August 2026

Data & interviews
info@ep-advisory.com

Data table
[CSV at ep-advisory.com/press/](https://ep-advisory.com/press/)

[THE HEADLINE]

171,000

net migration, year to Dec 2025 – nearly halved from 331,000 in 2024;
lowest since early 2021

ONS, 21 May 2026

The UK hasn't closed; it has repriced. And half the rules being cited in coverage are not actually in force yet.

-59%

total work visas from the Dec 2023 peak (613,627) to 252,775 in the year to Mar 2026

Home Office, 21 May 2026

£41,700

Skilled Worker salary threshold since 22 Jul 2025, with degree-level (RQF6) skills required again

HC 997

~127,000

organisations on the sponsor register (10 Jul 2026) – a record, and still growing

gov.uk register, EP Advisory count

[THE STATUS BOARD]

IN FORCE. LEGISLATED. PROPOSED. THREE DIFFERENT LISTS.

Most errors in current coverage come from blending them. Status as of 10 July 2026.

IN FORCE NOW**22 JUL 2025**

Salary threshold £41,700; degree-level (RQF6) skills return; care route closed to new overseas recruitment

HC 997

16 DEC 2025

Immigration Skills Charge +32%: £1,320 per sponsored year (large sponsors)

SI 2025/1324

8 JAN 2026

English requirement rises from B1 to B2 for first-time Skilled Worker applicants

HC 1333

8 APR 2026

Salary must be met in every pay period – the averaging loophole closes

HC 1691

LEGISLATED, NOT YET LIVE**31 DEC 2026**

Immigration Salary List expires; the Temporary Shortage List becomes the only sub-degree gateway

HC 1333

1 JAN 2027

Graduate route falls from 2 years to 18 months for new applications (PhDs keep 3 years)

HC 1333

Anyone applying through 31 December 2026 still gets the current 2-year Graduate visa. Expect an application spike in Q4 2026.

PROPOSAL ONLY**NO DATE**

“Earned settlement”: extending the standard route to settlement from 5 to 10 years, plus B2 English for settlement

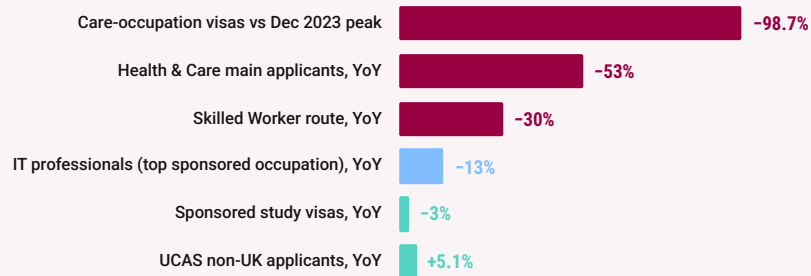
gov.uk consultation

The consultation closed 12 February 2026 with ~130,000 responses; no rules have been laid. The 5-year settlement rules remain fully in force today.

[THE TWO-SPEED SYSTEM]

“WORK VISAS FELL 59%” HIDES TWO OPPOSITE STORIES

// THE TWO-SPEED VISA CORRECTION (YEAR TO MARCH 2026)



Source: Home Office immigration statistics, year ending March 2026 (21 May 2026); UCAS January 2026 deadline via British Council. Care-occupation figure: 107,772 → 1,397.

107,772 → 1,397

care-occupation visas, Dec 2023 peak vs year to Mar 2026 – the collapse was policy, and it worked

Home Office, 21 May 2026

-13%

IT professionals – still the single most sponsored occupation, barely moved in a year that removed whole occupations

Home Office, 21 May 2026

~127,000

organisations on the sponsor register – a record, and still growing. Usage fell; capacity didn't

gov.uk register, 10 Jul 2026

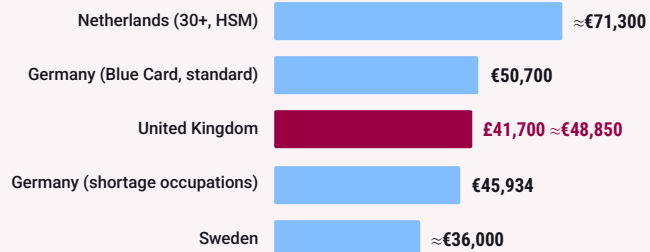
124,830

non-UK applicants to UK undergraduate courses in January – an all-time record, up 5.1%

UCAS, Jan 2026

THE COMPETITION IS CERTAINTY, NOT THRESHOLDS

// SALARY THRESHOLDS HAVE CONVERGED (2026, GENERAL RATES)



Sources: official rates, EP Advisory 16-country threshold index, Jul 2026. NL figure: €5,942/month excl. holiday pay, annualised. Reduced tiers exist in most countries.

21–27 months

to permanent residence for Blue Card holders in Germany (B1 / A1 German)

10 years?

the UK's proposed "earned settlement" road – still only a proposal, but hanging over every decision

The UK's real differentiators are non-salary: degree-level skills, B2 English, a 32%-higher Skills Charge, per-pay-period compliance – and settlement uncertainty. For a professional weighing London against Berlin, the question is no longer "which threshold can I meet?" but "which country tells me when I can stop worrying?"

Full comparison: EP Advisory's 16-country threshold index, ep-advisory.com.

[THE QUOTE – LIFT IT]



The UK hasn't closed. It has repriced – and the competition for talent is now about certainty, not thresholds.



EP Advisory analysis: the UK's £41,700 bar now sits below Germany's standard Blue Card – but Germany offers permanent residence in ~2 years, against a possible UK 10.

Net migration fell to 171,000 in 2025 and work visas are down 59% from their peak. Yet a record 127,000 employers hold sponsor licences, IT sponsorship barely moved, and international applications to UK universities just set an all-time record.

[CHECK BEFORE YOU PUBLISH]

NOT IN FORCE YET — THREE RULE CHECKS

[01]

WHAT'S CIRCULATING

“The Graduate route has been cut to 18 months”

WHAT'S CORRECT

Not yet. It applies to applications from 1 Jan 2027. Anyone applying through 31 Dec 2026 gets 2 years (3 for PhDs)

HC 1333, Oct 2025

[02]

WHAT'S CIRCULATING

“Settlement now takes 10 years”

WHAT'S CORRECT

Proposal only. ~130,000 consultation responses are being analysed; the 5-year rules still apply today

gov.uk consultation

[03]

WHAT'S CIRCULATING

“Skilled worker visas have collapsed 80–90%”

WHAT'S CORRECT

That is the care route (107,772 → 1,397). The Skilled Worker route proper fell 30%

Home Office, YE Mar 2026

The full corrections table — 8 claims, each with its likely origin — is in Appendix B, page 10.

[HOW TO USE THIS BRIEFING]

USEFUL IF YOU'RE WRITING ABOUT...

- [**The halving of net migration** – 171,000 is the lowest since early 2021, and it happened before the settlement reforms even exist.
- [**The two-speed visa system** – care and hospitality were switched off by design; IT and professional sponsorship barely flinched. "Work visas fell 59%" hides two opposite stories.
- [**The student paradox** – record UCAS demand meets a shrinking post-study offer. Watch for a Graduate-route application spike in Q4 2026.
- [**The real cost of a sponsored hire in 2026** – £41,700 salary + £1,320/year Skills Charge + B2 English + per-pay-period compliance. A worked example beats a rules list; we can build one.
- [**UK vs Europe for talent** – thresholds have converged; the divergence is settlement certainty (Germany ~2 years vs a possible UK 10).
- [**A million lives in limbo** – people on the 5-year route don't know if the 10-year proposal will apply to them; the autumn response is the next hard news moment.

// QUOTE FREELY

Every figure carries its primary source and date. Attribute the compilation to EP Advisory; no permission needed.

// TAKE THE DATA

The reference table ships as CSV with this briefing at ep-advisory.com/press/. Updated monthly and whenever official figures change.

// TALK TO A HUMAN

Per-country data cuts, plain-English explanation of any rule, interviews and background.

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[APPENDIX A – THE FULL PICTURE]

The narrative behind the headline pages, in full. Everything here is quotable; every figure is dated.

// THE RULE CHANGES, PRECISELY DATED

Three categories matter, and coverage routinely confuses them: in force, legislated, and proposed.

In force. The core reset arrived on 22 July 2025 (HC 997): the general Skilled Worker threshold rose to £41,700, skill requirements returned to degree level (RQF6), sub-degree roles became sponsorable only via the shortage lists — without dependants — and the Health & Care route closed to new overseas care-worker recruitment. On 16 December 2025 the Immigration Skills Charge rose 32%, its first increase since 2017: £1,320 per sponsored year for medium and large sponsors, £480 for small ones (SI 2025/1324). From 8 January 2026, first-time Skilled Worker applicants must show B2 English, up from B1. And from 8 April 2026, sponsors must meet salary thresholds in **every pay period**, closing the averaging loophole (HC 1691).

Legislated, not yet live. The Graduate route falls from 2 years to 18 months for applications made on or after 1 January 2027 (PhD graduates keep 3 years). Anyone applying today still gets 2 years. The Immigration Salary List expires on 31 December 2026, with the Temporary Shortage List replacing it.

Proposed only. The headline “earned settlement” plan — extending the standard route to settlement from 5 to 10 years — remains a proposal. The consultation closed on 12 February 2026 with roughly 130,000 responses; as of 10 July 2026 the Home Office is still analysing feedback. No rules have been laid. The 5-year settlement rules remain fully in force today.

// THE NUMBERS: HOW THE FLOWS ACTUALLY MOVED

The latest quarterly data (year ending March 2026, published 21 May 2026) shows a system that has contracted fast — but unevenly. Total work visas fell to 252,775,

down 17% in a year and 59% below the December 2023 peak. The composition matters: the Health & Care route collapsed by design — visas for caring occupations fell from 107,772 (year to Dec 2023) to 1,397 — while the Skilled Worker route proper fell 30%, to 29,745 main applicants. Dependants (38,322) now outnumber workers on the route.

Students look different. Sponsored study visas were broadly stable at 409,954, down just 3% year on year, though 37% below the 2023 peak. India (90,425) and China (88,776) each supplied 23% of main applicants; Nigeria rebounded 33%. Graduate-route grants fell 36% to 167,214 — driven by a 75% fall in *dependant* grants, not by the route shrinking (its cut arrives in 2027).

The macro result: the ONS puts net migration at **171,000 for 2025** (immigration 813,000, emigration 642,000), nearly half the revised 331,000 of 2024, with the 47% fall in non-EU work arrivals the main driver. Settlement grants fell 11% and citizenship grants fell 12% — no rush-to-settle surge is visible in the data yet.

// WHO STILL SPONSORS: THE DEMAND REALITY

The most under-reported fact of 2026: employer sponsorship infrastructure has not shrunk — it has grown. The register of licensed sponsors stood at roughly 123,900 organisations at the end of 2025 and about **127,000 on 10 July 2026**, around 122,000 of them licensed for the Skilled Worker route. Grants fell; licences did not. Employers are keeping the option open even as they use it more selectively.

Where sponsorship persists is equally telling. IT professionals remain the single most common Skilled Worker occupation, with 4,935 main-applicant visas in the year to March 2026 — down only 13% in a year that removed whole occupations from eligibility. The steep falls are concentrated where the rules were aimed: food preparation and hospitality trades dropped 82% to 939; nursing recruitment fell to

1,373 from 22,858 at its peak as the NHS pivoted away from overseas hiring. In social care, international recruits halved from 105,000 (2023/24) to about 50,000 (2024/25) before the route closed.

Demand pressure has not gone away: CIPD’s spring 2026 survey reports about one in three employers still has hard-to-fill vacancies, and the Migration Advisory Committee recommended holding the £41,700 threshold rather than raising it. The open question is the middle of the labour market: the MAC shortlisted 82 sub-degree occupations for possible Temporary Shortage List access, with final recommendations due this month.

// THE UK VS EUROPE CHOICE — AND WHAT TO WATCH

For an international professional weighing destinations in 2026, the UK’s £41,700 threshold (≈€48,500) is no longer the outlier it briefly seemed. It sits below Germany’s standard Blue Card threshold of €50,700 but above Germany’s shortage-occupation rate of €45,934. The Netherlands demands more from over-30s (€5,942 a month excluding holiday pay, roughly €71,300 a year); Sweden remains far cheaper at SEK 34,470 a month (≈€36,000). The UK’s real differentiators are non-salary: degree-level skills, B2 English, the higher Skills Charge, per-pay-period compliance — and, hanging over everything, the possibility of a 10-year settlement road, against Germany’s permanent residence in as little as 21–27 months for Blue Card holders. The competition is now about certainty, not just thresholds. (Full comparison: EP Advisory’s 16-country threshold index.)

What to watch: July 2026 — the MAC’s final Temporary Shortage List recommendations. 27 August 2026 — next Home Office quarterly statistics, the first full view of the per-pay-period rule. Autumn 2026 — the expected government response on earned settlement; until then, 5-year rules apply. 31 December 2026 — Immigration Salary List expires. 1 January 2027 — the Graduate route drops to 18 months; expect an application spike in Q4 2026.

[APPENDIX B – CORRECTIONS IN FULL]

Every claim we have seen circulating on this topic, against the primary sources. The three most consequential are on page 7.

COMMON CLAIM	THE REALITY	SOURCE
"The Graduate route has been cut to 18 months"	Not yet. It applies to applications from 1 Jan 2027. Anyone applying through 31 Dec 2026 gets 2 years (3 for PhDs)	HC 1333, Oct 2025
"Settlement now takes 10 years"	Proposal only. ~130,000 consultation responses are being analysed; the 5-year rules still apply today	gov.uk consultation
"Skilled worker visas have collapsed 80–90%"	That is the care route (107,772 → 1,397). The Skilled Worker route proper fell 30%	Home Office, YE Mar 2026
"The salary threshold is £38,700"	Out of date since 22 July 2025: it is £41,700, met in every pay period from 8 April 2026	HC 997; HC 1691
"International students are abandoning the UK"	Mixed: enrolment fell 6.1% in 2024/25, but UCAS applications for 2026 entry hit a record 124,830 (+5.1%), and visas fell only 3%	HESA; UCAS
"Employers have stopped sponsoring"	Licences are at a record ~127,000 organisations and still rising. Usage fell; capacity didn't	Sponsor register, 10 Jul 2026
"Care workers are banned from the UK"	New overseas recruitment closed, but workers already in the UK can still switch employer in-country during a transition period	HC 997
"Net migration is still near a million"	171,000 in 2025 – down from a revised 331,000 in 2024 and a 2023 peak of roughly 900,000	ONS, 21 May 2026

[APPENDIX C – THE REFERENCE TABLE]

TIMELINE: WHAT CHANGED AND WHEN (STATUS AS OF 10 JULY 2026)

DATE	CHANGE	STATUS
22 Jul 2025	Threshold £41,700; degree-level (RQF6) skills return; sub-degree only via shortage lists, no dependants; care route closed to new overseas recruitment (HC 997)	In force
16 Dec 2025	Immigration Skills Charge +32%: £1,320/yr large sponsors, £480 small (SI 2025/1324)	In force
8 Jan 2026	English requirement B1 → B2 for first-time Skilled Worker applicants	In force
8 Apr 2026	Salary must be met in every pay period – no annual averaging (HC 1691)	In force
31 Dec 2026	Immigration Salary List expires; Temporary Shortage List becomes the only sub-degree gateway	Announced
1 Jan 2027	Graduate route: 2 years → 18 months for new applications (PhDs keep 3 years)	Legislated, not yet in force
No date	Settlement 5 → 10 years (“earned settlement”) + B2 English for settlement	Proposal only – consultation closed Feb 2026

This table ships as CSV with the briefing at ep-advisory.com/press/. Updated monthly and when official figures change; next scheduled update August 2026.

TALK TO A HUMAN

Per-country data cuts, plain-English explanation of any European visa rule, and anonymised, aggregated observations from our casework with international professionals.

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About EP Advisory. A London-based career consultancy for international professionals moving to and within the UK, Europe and the Gulf. 50+ consultants; 5,000+ professionals supported across 29 countries; publisher of a 16-country index of official work-visa salary thresholds and of these monthly media briefings.

SOURCES IN THIS BRIEFING

Home Office, Immigration system statistics, year ending March 2026 (21 May 2026) · ONS long-term international migration, YE Dec 2025 (21 May 2026) · gov.uk register of licensed sponsors, CSV of 10 Jul 2026 (EP Advisory count) · HC 997 (laid 1 Jul 2025) · SI 2025/1324 (legislation.gov.uk) · HC 1333 (14 Oct 2025) · HC 1691 (5 Mar 2026) · HC 259 (9 Jul 2026, technical) · MAC Temporary Shortage List Stage 1 (9 Oct 2025) and salary review (18 Dec 2025) · Earned Settlement consultation (Nov 2025–Feb 2026) · UCAS January 2026 deadline + HESA 2024/25 via British Council · Skills for Care (15 Oct 2025) · HESA Graduate Outcomes 2022/23 via UKCISA (16 Sep 2025) · EP Advisory 16-country threshold index (Jul 2026). Next data: Home Office quarterly, 27 Aug 2026.

THE SERIES

Five briefings, updated monthly: AI & entry-level jobs · the application arms race · Gen Z, label vs data · international professionals in the UK · youth unemployment, UK vs Europe. All at ep-advisory.com/press/ — with a threshold-change alert list for journalists on request.

