More UK visas routes on the way as Innovation Strategy flags

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Over the last two years, we’ve seen the Home Office try its best to re-boot Tier 1 of the Points Based System. It has introduced the Start-Up visa for those wanting to set up an innovative business in the UK, the Innovator visa (similar to the Start-Up visa but with the possibility of applying for settlement after 5 years), and the Global Talent visa for leaders or potential leaders in academia or research, arts and culture or digital technology. We also have the long-standing Entrepreneur and Investor visas. It seems a lot of work has been put into setting up these routes, so it may come as a surprise that two more (and again very similar) routes are on the horizon.

In the latest issue of the ‘UK Innovation Strategy’ document issued by the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, key future actions were noted as further steps towards the government’s avowed aim of making the UK a
global hub for innovation by 2035. One action point in particular is to “Introduce new High Potential Individual and Scale-up visa routes, and revitalise the Innovator route to attract and retain high skilled, globally mobile innovation talent.”

I think it’s safe to assume that based on the BEIS intention to “revitalise” it, the Innovator visa hasn’t had the desired impact since its introduction in March 2019. Home Office figures show that only 159 Innovator visas were granted in the 12 months to the end of March 2020. With all due deference to the Home Office, becoming a “global innovation hub” is obviously going to take quite a while at that rate.

In a nutshell, the new High Potential Individual visa will provide an easier route for internationally mobile individuals with high potential to come to the UK. One of the key criteria is that the applicant must have graduated from one of the top universities across the world. Crucially, no job offer in the UK is required.

The Scale-up route is for “talented individuals with a high skilled job offer from a qualifying scale-up”, where “high skilled” presumably means having a degree/masters/PhD and a “scale-up” is yet to be defined but must logically refer to a business with distinct potential for growth in the UK. Businesses will be eligible to apply for verification as scale-ups when they meet certain criteria based on annual average revenue or employment growth and number of employees over a 3-year period. The Home Office is still undecided as to whether scale-ups will be eligible if they do not meet the criteria at the point of application but can show that they will do so in the near future. Otherwise it risks denying businesses the overseas talent they need to grow until after they have already grown, which all seems a little self-defeating.

So what does a “revitalised” Innovator route look like? For a start, there will be much wider use of management consultancy-speak, in particular:

- “Simplifying and streamlining the business eligibility criteria” – pretty self-explanatory in principle but it will be interesting to see what this means in practice and whether it is anything it would not just have been easier to get right first time around;

- “Fast-tracking applications” – this is mainly in relation to the endorsement process, which involves the applicant applying for “backing” from a Home Office approved organisation. They’re looking at a faster, “lighter touch” process for advanced business ideas; and

- “Building flexibility” – a dramatic change to the qualifying criteria means that applicants will no longer need £50,000 in investment funds to apply.

Any changes to make the process easier will be welcomed, no doubt. In particular, no longer needing to invest £50,000 will open up opportunities for far more people.

The Tier 1 route has long been a sticky point for the Home Office as it has struggled to make it reach the “brightest and the best” it’s intended for and not those it isn’t. It is clear in the light of its promises over Brexit that the government has no option either financially or politically but to try to fix it. Access to visas such as these is
critical to the UK remaining a competitor in global business, and hence to the success of our economy. It remains to be seen whether these changes will do the trick.

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