

A photograph of Keir Starmer, a man with glasses and a dark suit, speaking at a podium. He is pointing his right hand towards the audience. The background is a blue screen with the words "LONDON TECH WEEK" in large white letters. A red horizontal line is drawn across the middle of the image, and a yellow vertical bar is on the left side. The title "Atlantic Crossing" is written in large red letters across the bottom of the image.

Atlantic Crossing

A quiet exodus is gathering pace in America. From elite research universities to fast-growing startups, a growing number of scientists, technologists and academics are reassessing their future in a country that once defined itself as the global home of progress.

The second Trump administration has picked up where the first left off. Immigration policy is tightening. Research funding is under new pressure. Vaccine scepticism and climate denialism are embedded in the political mainstream. And elite universities, long symbols of American soft power, are being recast as ideological enemies.

This briefing maps what that shift could mean for Britain. It tracks the emerging talent race across science, tech and green innovation, and shows how France, Germany and the wider EU are moving fast to capitalise. Until recently, the UK was standing still. But momentum is now building. Keir Starmer's London Tech Week speech marked a turning point - and this week's Industrial Strategy deepens it: with a new Digital Tech Sector Plan, a Global Talent Drive, and a £54 million fund to cover visa and relocation costs for top research teams.¹

His £1 billion package for AI compute, fast-track scholarships and skills reform to "make Britain an AI-maker, not just an AI-taker." is a clear statement of intent: Britain wants to be in the race. The question now is whether we can turn symbolism into strategy, and build a credible offer to the world's best researchers, as a new Atlantic crossing quietly begins.

Tech & AI: A values rift

The US tech sector is entering a period of value divergence. While figures like Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and Mark Zuckerberg have aligned themselves with Trump-era conservatism, the core workforce, engineers, product managers, AI researchers, skews liberal, internationalist, and socially progressive.²

Christine Lagarde, President of the European Central Bank, has explicitly acknowledged this and framed it as an opportunity. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in January 2025, she urged European leaders to act fast, stating: *“We need to keep the talent at home. We need to keep the savings at home. Maybe it is also time to import a few of the talents that would be disenchanting, for one reason or the other, from another side of the sea.”*³

France moved fastest. Within weeks of Lagarde’s call, Macron rolled out Europe’s biggest AI package €109 billion, seeking to position France as a hub for sovereign AI and fast-track visas for international talent.⁴

But the Prime Minister’s speech at London Tech Week marked a real turning point, a credible, confident signal that the UK intends not just to adopt AI, but to help shape it. He pledged a £1 billion investment in sovereign compute, promised a twenty-fold increase in GPU capacity, and announced 100 new AI scholarships to link top UK and international talent with UK universities and industry.⁵ He also committed to building stronger bridges between research, education and business, with a new focus on regional innovation clusters.⁶

Sceptics will note that a speech and 100 scholarships doesn’t build an ecosystem overnight. But in the global contest for brains, symbols matter, and this symbol is unmistakable: Britain is back in the talent game, ready to poach as well as to nurture.

But one piece is still missing: a credible offer to the world’s best researchers. The Global Talent Visa remains too expensive, too disconnected from our AI ambitions, and underpowered compared to rivals like France. If we want to really seize this moment, and attract those rethinking their future in an unstable America, that will have to change.

Climate & Green Tech: A contest of credibility

Trump’s return has already reversed U.S. climate policy. The U.S. has quit the Paris Agreement, frozen billions in clean energy funding, gutted key provisions of the Inflation Reduction Act, and filled regulatory posts with fossil fuel allies.^{7 8 9} Over \$14 billion in clean tech investment has been cancelled or delayed in 2025 alone.¹⁰ The result is a climate of uncertainty.

Europe should, in principle, be poised to benefit, but its footing is less assured than it once was. Germany, long seen as the continent’s green industrial anchor, has faltered. A 2023 court ruling froze the €177 billion Climate and Transformation Fund.¹¹ France has taken a more cautious route, pushing for climate progress but insisting on protections for business.¹² And whilst the EU remains rhetorically committed, within a percentage point of its 2030 emissions targets, behind the headline figures, political fragmentation is growing.¹³

Arguably, the UK, by contrast, is still in the game. It lacks the scale of Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act, or the symbolic heft once attached to Berlin’s now derailed green subsidies,

but Labour's front bench continues to frame climate as an economic opportunity, not a cost.¹⁴ A new carbon budget delivery plan is expected later this year,¹⁵ and the Climate Change Committee's roadmap, focused on electrification, EV adoption, and heat pump rollout, remains technically credible.¹⁶

But credibility alone won't win the wider contest. Without greater investment and clearer incentives, the UK risks hitting net zero while missing out on the race for green innovation, jobs and strategic capital. As the U.S. retreats, no major European country has yet seized it. The UK still could.

The race: Where in Europe to choose for Science

US life sciences and academia are increasingly politicised. Vaccine scepticism, deprioritisation of protections on reproductive health, squeezed research autonomy, and universities drawn into culture wars over diversity and free speech..^{17 18 19}

Foreign scholars, particularly in STEM and from countries like China, face renewed scrutiny under national security measures. Secretary of State Marco Rubio recently pledged to "aggressively revoke" visas for Chinese students.²⁰ In the American defense industry and fields like engineering and computer and life sciences, at least half the workers with doctorates are foreign-born.²¹

At the same time, elite institutions are being forced into compliance: Columbia University is overhauling its governance to lift a \$400 million federal funding freeze. If Trump's proposed budget cuts go through, more than 80,000 researchers could lose their jobs. U.S. science funding would fall behind China and the EU.²²

The result: many scientists are now looking abroad. A *Nature* poll found over 75% of U.S. researchers are considering leaving.²³ Europe is well positioned to respond, nearly one in five top early-career U.S. scientists trained in Europe, and 9.3% of senior researchers have European ties. That network is ready to be reactivated.²⁴

Brussels is moving fast. Ursula von der Leyen has called Trump's assault on U.S. universities a "gigantic miscalculation" and, alongside Emmanuel Macron, launched the €500 million "Choose Europe for Science" programme to attract disillusioned researchers. Thirteen EU countries have urged Brussels to expand infrastructure and funding to receive talent. The European Research Council has doubled relocation budgets to €2 million per researcher, and Germany plans to recruit 1,000 foreign scientists.

Meanwhile, U.S. distrust in science is rising, but so is investment. Firms like AstraZeneca and Eli Lilly are pouring billions into U.S. manufacturing, not out of confidence, but to avoid Trump-era tariffs. Science is under political pressure, but industrial pull remains strong. That makes full-scale relocation harder, but individual researchers more mobile.

The UK risks missing this moment. Russell Group universities remain respected, but there's no coordinated push to bring in U.S. talent. Visa costs are sky-high, and political rhetoric around academia is increasingly hostile. Earlier this year, AstraZeneca cancelled a £450 million expansion in Liverpool, citing policy drift and lack of support.

That may be starting to change. In addition to Starmer's AI pledges, the government is preparing a new £50 million scheme to recruit international research teams, offering grants

and relocation support. The plan will initially target around ten labs, with potential to expand. It's a strong signal, but still smaller in scale than efforts seen in France, Germany or the EU overall. And until visa costs come down, the UK's offer will remain incomplete.²⁵

We have world-class universities, a science-friendly culture - and we speak English. What are we waiting for?

Where the UK stands - and what still needs to happen

The Prime Minister's Tech Week speech was a breakthrough. But how do we now measure up in the global talent race? Here's how the UK compares to the US, wider EU, and Franco-German efforts across the three arenas of tech, green and science:

Theme	United States	Wider EU	France / Germany	UK
Tech & AI	Deep values rift. Rising political hostility to elite institutions. Visa uncertainty, esp. for foreign STEM talent.	Seizing moment as US fragments. Christine Lagarde urged EU to act fast to retain and attract disillusioned tech talent.	France leading: €109bn AI plan, fast-track tech visas. Germany backing research clusters, but slower on talent policy.	Clear shift in tone: £1bn for compute, GPU boost, 100 scholarships. Now joined by a new Digital Tech Sector Plan and Global Talent Drive, with a £54m relocation fund and a Talent Taskforce reporting to No. 10. But Global Talent Visa remains expensive and disconnected.
Green Tech	Paris Agreement exit, IRA rollback, climate denial in mainstream. \$14bn investment delays. Industrial decarbonisation stalled.	Political commitment remains but implementation fractured. Internal disputes over climate ambition vs economic impact.	Germany's €177bn fund frozen; green strategy in flux. France cautious: supporting transition, but protecting industry.	Technically credible roadmap, but lacking scale or investment clarity. Opportunity to lead if more ambitious capital is committed.

Science & Academia	Vaccine scepticism rising. Reproductive rights and DEI protections reversed. Academic autonomy under pressure.	"Choose Europe for Science" initiative (€500m), streamlined visas, coordinated university push.	Macron/von der Leyen leading push. ERC doubled relocation budgets. Germany planning to bring in 1,000 scientists.	New £50m scheme to attract global research teams, now bolstered by an additional £54m for visa and relocation support. But still no clear science diplomacy strategy; visa costs remain high; Global Talent visa underpowered relative to EU rivals. Russell Group strong, but no national coordination.
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This isn't just a brain drain from the US it's a once-in-a-generation realignment of global scientific and technical energy. Europe is moving fast to seize it. Britain has the edge, world-class universities, a science-friendly culture, and now, at last, a government that wants to lead. But unless we make it easier for the right people to come, we will miss the moment.

This is not about throwing open the doors. It's about being strategic, targeting the researchers, technologists and entrepreneurs who will build the next industries. In a political climate calling for lower migration overall, that argument has to be made carefully. But it must be made. Looking the other way is no longer an option.

A visa system that matches our ambition

The UK is starting to act. In addition to the Prime Minister's AI package, the new Digital Tech Sector Plan and Global Talent Drive offer real infrastructure - including a £54 million fund to cover visa and relocation costs for world-class teams.²⁶ But to make them count, the visa system needs to work better for the people we want to attract.

Both the Clifford Review on AI governance and the government's immigration white paper acknowledge that change is needed.²⁷ Plans to streamline the system are welcome, but so far, the question of cost has been left untouched.²⁸

A skilled worker with a family can face visa costs of up to £30,000 to move to the UK, almost ten times more than in other leading science nations.²⁹ The Global Talent Visa, while helpful in principle, remains expensive and disconnected from the UK's strategic ambitions in science and technology.

There are better models. Australia's new National Innovation Visa is invitation-only, targeted at priority sectors, and exempt from health surcharges. It is fast, focused, and built to compete.³⁰

If the UK wants to turn ambition into delivery, it needs a system that does the same: lower cost, faster process, and a clear offer to top global talent. The UK is back in the race. But without visa reform, we'll struggle to keep up.

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- 2 <https://www.ft.com/content/6bada663-f220-4d87-825a-3d770ce3af79>
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- 5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/top-talent-backed-with-masters-funding-as-britains-tech-experts-called-into-government>
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²⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/4ec7a942-97c0-4e0f-9c9a-9fbec1506bbf>

²⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/d1ce6077-fabc-4fc0-b6a4-53bd9fbccbaa>

²⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/280a070c-e708-4885-89c6-d213eaebd5b1>

³⁰ <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/working-in-australia/visas-for-innovation/national-innovation-visa>