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# HR ATAS GUIDANCE: WORKERS, RESEARCHERS AND ACADEMIC VISITORS

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HR Operations

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## Introduction

This Guidance note explains the rules under the Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) which apply to most non-UK/EEA academics and researchers appointed to undertake research in specific subject areas in the UK.

This guidance is to help with HR ATAS queries only. It is not to be used for students.

This applies to all new and existing employees who require ATAS for their visa application and/or visa permission conditions. It outlines information for Hiring Managers, HR Recruitment and Admin Teams, individual employees to whom the new rules are applied, Line Managers and Academic Visitors.

We strongly recommend that you read through this Guidance and, particularly for research staff, visit and take note of the Home Office Guidance. You may address general queries to [HR helpdesk](#) but we are only able to give general advice. HR cannot give personal or immigration advice or support you in making the application.

## What is the ATAS Scheme?

The Academic Technology Approval Scheme ([ATAS](#)) is a security vetting scheme administered by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) – part of the UK Government. Universities have no power over national security/ATAS processing.

The ATAS scheme is aimed at preventing the transfer of information, knowledge or technology which could develop, advance or support an Advanced Conventional Military Technology (ACMT) and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programme or their means of delivery.

It only applies to certain international individuals. Please read the official ATAS guidance at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academic-technology-approval-scheme>

The ATAS Scheme does not apply to those who:

- Hold Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) / settlement / settled status in the UK
- are exempt from UK Immigration Control (Includes British/Irish nationals)
- hold a UK visa with specific visa conditions (that are not subject to ATAS) - where ATAS doesn't apply to 'work' (or research)

## Which workers and visitors will require ATAS?

Please read the ATAS requirement and ATAS conditions for workers/visitors:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academic-technology-approval-scheme#when-you-need-an-atas-certificate>

Workers/Visiting Researchers:

- ATAS will apply if the role is undertaking an element of research at PhD level in one or more of the (ATAS attracting) subject CAH codes as set out [in Appendix 2.](#)
- A list of ATAS exempted nationalities is set out at [Appendix 3.](#) If they hold dual nationality (passport evidence) for one of the exempt nationalities, they will be exempt from ATAS.

If an international individual requires ATAS for the job role/research visit (not an [exempt nationality](#)) they must make an online ATAS application as a 'researcher'.

The ATAS 'researcher' route/form applies to contracted researchers that are:

- employed or
- who have an offer of employment for the UK, or
- visiting academic researchers

A valid ATAS certificate must be obtained:

- before HR Operations can issue a Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) for either of the Skilled Worker or GAE (sponsored work routes).
- before commencing the research visit in the UK for the Standard Visitor route

**A researcher will require a valid ATAS certificate if they are coming on the following five immigration routes:**

- Skilled Worker (*previously named Tier 2*) – Sponsored visa route
- Graduate visa
- Government Authorised Exchange - Temporary Worker visa (*previously named Tier 5*) – sponsored visa route
- High Potential Individual visa
- Standard Visitor route

Further guidance:

Sponsored Workers (who require a CoS): Any individual entering the UK to undertake research at PhD level in one of the listed areas including academics, researchers and visiting researchers with a Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) will need to confirm that an ATAS certificate is required.

Researchers: making a visa application on the above list of five visa routes will need to apply for and be granted ATAS certification before making their visa application.

*\*The only exception to the above visa list is the Standard Visitor route where ATAS is not required for the visa application date. It is required before starting the research visit in the UK – See the visitor point below)*

Individuals already in the UK undertaking research: should apply for a new ATAS certificate when they are preparing for a new visa application (either switching into a new visa or a request to extend current visa – where ATAS is required)

Standard Visitors (including Visiting Academic Researchers): will need to obtain ATAS before beginning any relevant study/research activity in the UK. We would advise on obtaining this before any overseas travel to the UK. Study or research as part of a permitted activity is subject to the Standard Visitor visa conditions (ATAS is required to be able to start the study/research in the UK). *Also applies to overseas nationals who coming as Standard Visitors (visa or entry on arrival – depending on nationality) to visit the UK to undertake some research.* Visiting Researchers can apply for a Standard Visitor visa before they get an ATAS certificate, however, they will need to obtain an ATAS certificate before starting any research activity in the UK. Our advice is to obtain a valid ATAS certificate before travel to the UK.

Students who are switching visas: who held an ATAS certificate for a course of study undertaken in the UK and who are making an application to “switch” into a Skilled Worker\*, Inter-company transfer, International Agreement, or Government Authorised Exchange (GAE)\* visa will need to obtain a new ATAS certificate before submitting their visa application. *\*A valid ATAS is required before a new CoS can be issued these two sponsored work routes.*

### How long will it take to obtain ATAS?

Worker (Researcher) ATAS applications take at least 30 working days (6 weeks) or longer to be processed.

In terms of the ATAS guidance:

- Student: refers to those studying on a taught/research programme receiving a postgraduate exit qualification (for e.g. Masters or PhD/doctorate). This ATAS ‘student’ route should only be used for registered ‘students’.
- Contracted Researcher: refers to individuals who are contractually employed by a Higher Education Institution (HEI) or Research Institution

You must add a minimum of 6 weeks for the ATAS process if you are preparing for a visa application. The processing time can take longer between April and September (peak time) and/or if it is complex.

An ATAS clearance certificate needs to be obtained before being able to meet the requirements of a visa application.

Please do not resubmit/duplicate any ATAS application unless you are specifically asked to do so by either UKVI/FCDO. There are **no** fast-track services and we have no control over the ATAS processing scheme.

***It is very important that Hiring Managers and Line Managers build this into their recruitment and selection process or contract extension process as the work cannot start until both the ATAS certificate and the visa have been obtained.***

### Definition of a ‘researcher’

‘An individual conducting investigation into a problem or situation, where the intention is to identify facts and/or opinions that will assist in solving the problem or dealing with the situation. A researcher may be working independently or as part of team.’

### What do I need to do as a Hiring Manager or PI when creating a new position, extending a contract or appointing a supernumerary researcher?

1. Check [Appendix 1](#) to see if the research subject areas (CAH codes) you are recruiting or appointing to are on the ATAS attracting list.
2. If the research will fall into one or more of the CAH Codes, please note this as part of your vacancy request, or your contract extension request, or your proposal to offer paid research work
3. Ensure you have an appropriate research statement that can either be included in the Job

Description where appropriate and/or provided to HR; this statement will be used by the researcher when making the ATAS application and it needs to match information held by the University about the research being undertaken.

4. Carry out your selection process as usual and do not make any decisions based on whether or not a candidate may need a visa or an ATAS.
5. Once you have completed your selection process and put the offer through ERP, HR will advise you:
  - a. If the candidate needs a visa
  - b. If the candidate needs an ATAS
6. HR will also liaise with you to ensure
  - a. The appropriate research statement has been provided in a format enabling the new appointee to use it as part of their online ATAS application
  - b. You are aware of the timeline set out by the Home Office for approving ATAS applications and approving visas
  - c. Any start date agreed takes this time into account and can be flexed. Work CANNOT start until both the ATAS certificate and Visa have been approved.

\*If a sponsored work visa route is required, ATAS guidance can be checked at [Appendix 2](#)

### How does a researcher apply for ATAS?

If they are a new researcher, they will need to have an agreed research statement with Heriot-Watt University. This should adequately reflect the research they will undertake throughout the entire stay. They should be able to obtain this either from the Job Description (where appropriate) or from the Hiring Manager or PI (as explained in the above section)

### ATAS Guidance:

- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academic-technology-approval-scheme#atas-immigration-rules>
- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academic-technology-approval-scheme#contracted-researchers-additional-application-form-guidance>
- <https://www.academic-technology-approval.service.gov.uk/>

**ATAS APPLICATION FORM:** <https://www.academic-technology-approval.service.gov.uk>

### How long is an ATAS Certificate valid for?

- Visa applicants (Workers): The ATAS certificate is issued with 6 months' validity for use. The ATAS certificate must be valid by the 'visa application date' (this is the online visa submission and payment date).
- Once a visa has been granted, the ATAS clearance remains valid as it is linked to the duration of the visa.
- However, a new ATAS application will be required if they:
  - change job within Heriot-Watt
  - change employer
  - change the area or areas of research
  - need to make a visa extension

- need to apply for a new visa route (which requires ATAS)
- *Example: You wish to apply for a 3-year skilled worker visa with your valid ATAS certificate. Your ATAS certificate should be valid by your date of visa application. If the visa decision is successful, the ATAS clearance would remain valid for the duration of your granted visa permission. You will not need to reapply unless one of the circumstances listed above applies.*
- For the Standard Visitor route, the ATAS certificate should be valid for the start of their research visit in the UK.

### **University/HR responsibilities**

As a Licensed Sponsor for international staff, it is our responsibility to check whether the worker is subject to the ATAS requirement and, if so, to ensure that the worker obtains an ATAS certificate. UK immigration law does not allow universities to permit international researchers to undertake research in an ATAS applicable discipline until an ATAS certificate has been supplied.

### **What happens if we don't notify the Home Office, or the individual does not apply for the certificate?**

The worker's application is likely to be refused which means they will not be able to be employed in the UK nor visit the UK for work.

We may lose our sponsor licences if we do not meet these responsibilities. This would mean we are unable to appoint any non-UK Nationals into positions in the UK and at worst, our Student Licence would also be removed. It is a criminal offence to carry out research in these restricted areas without an ATAS Certificate.

## Appendix 1 - Relevant Academic Subject Areas that require ATAS

<a href="#">Appendix ATAS – Immigration Rules</a>
CAH codes that apply to workers/visiting researchers:
<b>Subjects allied to Medicine:</b>
CAH codes:
CAH02-02-01 - Pharmacology
CAH02-02-02 - Toxicology
CAH02-02-03 - Pharmacy
CAH10-01-06 - Bioengineering, Medical and Biomedical Engineering
<b>Biological Sciences:</b>
CAH codes:
CAH03-01-02 - Biology (non-specific)
CAH03-01-03 - Ecology and Environmental Biology
CAH03-01-06 - Zoology
CAH03-01-04 - Microbiology and Cell Science
CAH03-01-05 - Plant Sciences
CAH10-03-05 - Biotechnology
CAH03-01-07 - Genetics
CAH02-05-03 - Biomedical Sciences (non-specific)
CAH03-01-08 - Molecular Biology, Biophysics and Biochemistry
CAH03-01-01 - Biosciences (non-specific)
CAH03-01-10 - Others in Biological Sciences
<b>Veterinary Sciences, Agriculture and related subjects:</b>
CAH codes:
CAH05-01-02 - Others in Veterinary Sciences
CAH06-01-02 - Agricultural sciences
<b>Physical Sciences:</b>
CAH codes:
CAH07-02-01 - Chemistry
CAH10-03-07 - Materials Science
CAH07-01-01 - Physics
CAH07-01-02 - Astronomy
CAH26-01-05 - Others in Geographical Studies
CAH07-04-01 - Physical Sciences (non-specific)
CAH07-04-03 - Sciences (non-specific)
CAH07-04-04 - Natural Sciences (non-specific)
<b>Mathematical and Computer Sciences:</b>
CAH codes:

CAH09-01-01 - Mathematics
CAH09-01-02 - Operational Research
CAH11-01-01 - Computer Science
CAH11-01-02 - Information Technology
CAH11-01-03 - Information Systems
CAH11-01-04 - Software Engineering
CAH11-01-05 - Artificial Intelligence
<b>Engineering:</b>
CAH codes:
CAH10-01-01 - Engineering (non-specific)
CAH10-01-07 - Civil Engineering
CAH10-01-02 - Mechanical Engineering
CAH10-01-04 - Aeronautical and Aerospace Engineering
CAH10-01-05 - Naval Architecture
CAH10-01-08 - Electrical and Electronic Engineering
CAH10-01-09 - Chemical, Process and Energy Engineering
<b>Technologies:</b>
CAH codes:
CAH10-03-03 - Polymers and Textiles
CAH10-03-01 - Minerals Technology
CAH10-03-02 - Materials Technology
CAH10-03-04 - Maritime Technology

## Appendix 2 - Check if a Sponsored Worker will require ATAS (relevant occupation codes)

### A Sponsored Worker will need an ATAS certificate if all three points are true:

1. the University is sponsoring the worker in a [relevant 4 digit occupation code](#)
2. the Sponsored worker will be carrying out research at PhD level or above in a 'relevant subject' (See above subject CAH code list on page 7/8 OR [check the relevant subject areas list in the worker sponsor guidance](#))
3. the sponsored worker does NOT hold an exempt nationality (nationality is not exempt from ATAS - check the [exempt nationalities list](#) below)

If the sponsored worker does NOT meet all three points above, they will NOT require ATAS. If they meet point 1 and 3 but won't be doing research at PhD level or above in a relevant subject, HR Immigration have to explain this by adding an explanation note on the CoS – with either:

- adding a note to the 'job description' field on the certificate of sponsorship
- adding a university sponsor note after we have assigned the certificate of sponsorship

### **Relevant [occupation codes](#) (Sponsored Worker):**

The relevant occupation codes below apply to the Skilled Worker, and Government Authorised Exchange – Temporary Worker visa routes.

Relevant Occupation codes	Occupation code type
2111	Chemical scientists
2112	Biological scientists
2113	Biochemists and biomedical scientists
2114	Physical scientists
2115	Social and humanities scientists
2119	Natural and social science professionals not elsewhere classified
2122	Mechanical engineers
2123	Electrical engineers
2124	Electronics engineers
2125	Production and process engineers
2126	Aerospace engineers
2127	Engineering project managers and project engineers

2129	Engineering professionals not elsewhere classified
2161	Research and development (R&D) managers
2162	Other researchers, unspecified discipline
2311	Higher education teaching professionals
3111	Laboratory technicians
3112	Electrical and electronics technicians
3113	Engineering technicians
3114	Building and civil engineering technicians
5234	Aircraft maintenance and related trades

**UKVI SPONSOR GUIDANCE FOR WORK VISAS:**

- [UK visa sponsorship for employers: Check whether your worker needs an ATAS certificate - GOV.UK](#)
- [UKVI guidance about the ATAS 'sponsored worker' requirements](#)

### Appendix 3: Exempt Nationalities

<b>Nationals or citizens of the following countries are exempt from the ATAS scheme:</b>	
Australia	Latvia
Austria	Liechtenstein
Belgium	Lithuania
Bulgaria	Luxembourg
Canada	Malta
Croatia	Netherlands
Republic of Cyprus	New Zealand
Czech Republic	Norway
Denmark	Poland
Estonia	Portugal
Finland	Romania
France	Singapore
Germany	Slovakia
Greece	Slovenia
Hungary	South Korea
Iceland	Spain
<i>Ireland (Irish nationals do not require a UK visa/ATAS)</i>	Sweden
Italy	Switzerland
Japan	United States of America

#### Appendix 4 – How to complete the online ATAS application form

The information set out below is a summary based on the online official ATAS Guidance. Please make sure you read through the official Home Office Guidance to ensure you provide everything required in your application.

Please follow the below weblink for ATAS guidance as it will always be up to date:

- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-on-how-to-apply-for-an-atas-certificate>

The application portal is the same for both researchers and students. Workers and academic visitors must apply for ATAS by selecting ‘**researcher**’. Follow the above weblink.

The online application form has 10 sections, which should be completed in full, with as much detail as possible provided for each section. Everything provided on the online form is used to assess your application; please therefore check all the information you provide very carefully as ATAS applications with incorrect information will either lead to a long delay in processing or rejection of your application.

- Proposed area of research: Heriot-Watt University will provide you with all the relevant details for this section e.g. in your statement of research. We will advise you of the appropriate CAH3 code and give you the correct form of words for the ‘What Will you be Studying/Research Statement’ box.

You will be able to add to this description in the next box: ‘Personnel Statement of Intent’.

Add your Head of Department if you are still waiting for a research supervisor allocation

Personal details: Details from this section will be included in your ATAS certificate. Complete this carefully and in full, and review at least once before submitting.

If you have served in the armed forces or trained in Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear (CBRN) please provide details including courses undertaken, relevant roles and, if applicable, years of service.

If you have undertaken government funded research, include the funding agency and details of the project.

*Typos and transposed numbers are regular mistakes in this area and if the details provided do not match the details in your passport exactly, you will have trouble securing a visa.*

- Spouse: state if you are married and planning to bring your spouse into the UK. If your spouse chooses to study or research an ATAS relevant subject while in the UK accompanying you, they will need to apply for their own ATAS certificate separately.  
Contact details: Make sure your contact details are accurate. The ATAS certificate will be sent to the preferred email address you enter in this section.
- Undergraduate/Postgraduate studies: provide as much detail as you are able on all previously completed undergraduate and postgraduate studies you have undertaken.
- Other studies: state if you have undertaken any other studies you think may be relevant to your application.
- Published papers: state if you have had any academic or professional papers published, either on your own, or with co-publishers.
- Employment history: give as much detail as possible, of any jobs you have held. Jobs that relate to your proposed course of study or research area are particularly relevant.

- Referees: provide details of 2 referees who have known you for a minimum of 3 years. At least one of the referees must be from the academic sector. If you have any work experience, a referee from your employment would also be useful. A referee from your home country would be preferable, but it is not essential if you have studied and/or worked in another country. Family members are not acceptable.

### **If your ATAS application has been refused**

Without an ATAS certificate, you will not be granted permission to research in the UK. If you think your application has been treated unfairly you can ask for a review with the FCDO (UK Government). The review process is outlined in the ATAS refusal email. However, please note that you are unlikely to be provided with a reason for the refusal and neither the Home Office nor the FCDO will advise Heriot-Watt University of any reason for refusal.

We have no control over the ATAS Scheme (FCDO) security vetting procedures.

### **When you get your ATAS certificate**

ATAS Application Process Guidance: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academic-technology-approval-scheme#the-application-process>

If your ATAS application is successful, you will receive a certificate by email to the address that you used to register. You should check your Junk folders regularly to ensure the email has not been filtered out.

Once you receive your certificate, you should:

- check the details on it are correct and match your offer/research documentation from Heriot-Watt University
- print out the certificate if everything is correct and include it in your visa application documentation
- contact the ATAS unit at [ATAS@fcdo.gov.uk](mailto:ATAS@fcdo.gov.uk) if there are any mistakes

### **If your visa has expired and you haven't received your ATAS certificate**

It is important that you know the expiry date of your current period of permission to stay in the UK and have a clear understanding of what documentation you need to support a new application for extending that permission.

You must ensure you have submitted an ATAS application to support your visa application under the relevant route in plenty of time (at least 3 calendar months before you need to apply for a visa application or extension inside the UK), if you are

- already carrying out research in an area for which an ATAS certificate is required, but you need to apply for permission to stay to complete your research, or
- switching from studying to a research position and a decision on your subsequent ATAS application has not been made, then you can submit your application for permission to stay to the Home Office and include a letter indicating you will send your ATAS certificate on when you have it. You should not re-submit your ATAS application unless the Home Office or FCDO specifically request you to do so.

**Applying for an ATAS certificate does not guarantee it will be issued by the FCDO. Failure to produce a valid ATAS certificate could result in your application for permission to stay being refused.**

#### Contact the ATAS team

- Read the official ATAS guidance before contacting the team:  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academic-technology-approval-scheme#contacting-the-atasteam>
- [ATAS@fcdo.gov.uk](mailto:ATAS@fcdo.gov.uk)