

Australia's skilled migration program

IRU Submission

Recommendations

The Innovative Research Universities recommends that the Joint Standing Committee on Migration should:

- endorse the link between attracting international students and attracting skilled migrants. The two sets of policies have significant natural overlap and should align rather than operate independently;
- highlight the fact that the vast majority (84%) of international students leave Australia after their studies to help counter the misperception that international study is being used as an easy pathway to permanent immigration; and
- explore the dynamics of the university academic and professional staff workforce to consider how Australia can ensure universities can select the best candidates from a world market and support Australians compete in the world market.

Overview

The review of Australia's skilled migration program in the era of Covid-19 is a major opportunity to consider the place of national migration policies, when seemingly unstoppable globalisation forces clash with the impact of a global pandemic and closed national borders.

Australia's immigration policies tend to focus on immigrants who remain in the country, with less focus on people who choose to leave Australia again and the growing number of people who move across multiple nation-states through their lives for career and family reasons.

Australia's universities are greatly impacted by the ability and willingness of people to move across international borders:

- 23% of IRU students in 2019 were international students, whether studying in Australia, online from home or attending university campuses outside of Australia. These students are mobile in person or mind, seeking the best education they can achieve before pursuing a life and career in Australia, their home country or elsewhere.
- The university academic workforce has always been part of a global market. Academics follow their research interests around the world, with experiences in multiple countries considered a natural part of an academic career. This is particularly true for the research workforce: 38% of doctoral research students are international and 28% of Australia's PhD qualified workforce obtained their PhD overseas.

Within the confines of a national migration policy, IRU urges the Joint Standing Committee to recognise the natural links between education policies that encourage education providers to seek students from around the world and migration policies that seek the best-qualified people to migrate

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to Australia. Attracting high-quality international students to the country is an effective way of reducing future skill gaps in the Australian workforce.

IRU also urges the Committee to explore the dynamics of the international academic workforce as part of its inquiry, exploring what policies and incentives can be used to achieve the research and education outcomes Australia needs.

International students: a migration opportunity

Having a better understanding of what students do in Australia and subsequently is fundamental to a constructive discussion about international students.

Unlike countries such as New Zealand and Canada, Australia keeps a rigorous separation between its international education policy and its migration policy. The issue has been fraught in Australia, with international education mostly operating distinctly from other policies aimed at meeting Australia's longer-term economic and social needs.

The lack of explicit linking of the two policy areas feeds the distrust about international education, which has become evident in many public comments about the program and its perceived impact on universities. It is common to read assertions that international education is simply a route to easier immigration.

Being a student in Australia is a good basis to become a citizen if the person so wishes, following the correct and due pathways such as obtaining a post-study work visa or as a skilled migrant able to work in a relevant area.

In reference to international students, the Treasury and Home Affairs report [*Shaping a Nation: Population growth and immigration over time*](#) states that: "Of the 1.6 million individuals examined between 2000-01 and 2013-14, 16% eventually transitioned to permanent residence". This is a very important number that should be better known. It confirms the vast majority of students do indeed leave Australia and pursue their lives in their home country or elsewhere. It also validates the primarily educational value that universities and other education providers offer to international students.

The migration pathways recognise the value of an Australian qualification.

It was positive to hear the Minister for Education and Youth, Alan Tudge, set out as one objective of the international student program to "ensure that Australia has the supply of workforce skills that we need to power our economic growth" on 31 March 2021.

What is needed is for the Australian Government to articulate that there is a valuable link between an education service for many thousands of students from other countries and a proportion of them subsequently being accepted to stay in Australia as migrants. It is to be hoped that this is reflected in the planned Australian Strategy for International Education with matching endorsement in the Government migration policy.

Covid-19: the potential from recent graduates, still resident in Australia

The Committee should consider whether there is scope to target recent graduates, still resident in Australia due to Covid-19 disruptions, to maintain an effective migration program while there are Covid-19-driven limits to entry to Australia.

The skilled migration program for 2021 should pay particular attention to applicants who are already resident in Australia, including one-time students who have completed their degrees and remain in Australia.

They could be using post-study work visas or otherwise be able to remain in Australia. Some of these graduates face an uncertain option for returning to their home countries due to limited options to leave Australia and the potential risk of Covid-19 in their home countries.

The academic and university professional workforce

This inquiry is well-placed to discuss how best to support the flow of capable people to and from Australia and the value of skilled migration.

Academics have long been among the most mobile of professional groups. They participate in a world wide system of knowledge where many people will study and work across several countries during their career. More than one quarter (28%) of Australia's PhD qualified workforce obtained their PhD overseas. Many Australian scholars have international experiences that greatly deepen their capability.

The professional staff of universities are also part of a world wide market where senior roles are advertised widely and candidates sought from around the world. The process is rigorous to identify the leading person, whether someone within Australia or outside. These processes ensure high quality candidates win through, enhancing the workforce of Australia's universities.

Aspects to the attempt to list occupations in demand and the processes for market testing positions in Australia are not well suited to an internationally driven sector that brings considerable value to Australia. The Universities Australia submission sets this out in more detail.

The Committee's conversation must be about more than a simple pathway into the country. It should also include people potentially leaving and returning as part of a global academic system.

About the IRU

Innovative Research Universities (IRU) is a coalition of seven comprehensive universities committed to innovation and inclusive excellence in teaching, learning and research in Australia.

The members' impact is local and global, focusing on advancing communities through education, resources, opportunities, translational research and enterprise.

Through its members working collectively, the IRU seeks to be at the constructive centre of Australian university policymaking.

Our membership is Charles Darwin University, Flinders University, Griffith University, James Cook University, La Trobe University, Murdoch University and Western Sydney University.

31 March 2021