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**Australian Academy of Science submission on the  
*Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors***

The Australian Academy of Science welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's *Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors*.

The Academy submits:

- International doctoral students are a significant part of the scientific research workforce in Australia, and efforts are needed to continue to rebuild Australia's international education sector amongst these cohorts.
- Measures should be implemented to reduce visa processing times for international higher education students, particularly doctoral students.
- Providing high quality international education in STEM fields delivers benefits for skilled migration and diplomacy.

#### [International education sector and STEM postgraduate research students](#)

Science is a global enterprise, and there is a global shortage of a STEM-qualified workforce. Australia has heavily relied on recruiting and developing international scientific talent. International doctoral students make up much of the research workforce in universities, contributing to research productivity, bringing diverse cultural and language skills and experience to Australia and facilitating international collaborations. International doctoral students go on to be a significant source of post-doctoral workforce that undertakes a large part of Australia's research effort.

The pandemic has placed significant financial pressure on Australia's university sector and led to science and research project interruptions. In the period from January to September 2022, Australia had 569,204 international students, and 52% of international student enrolments were in higher education<sup>1</sup>. This is a 21% decrease from the number of international students for the same period in 2019.

There was a 7% decrease in enrolments for overseas postgraduate research students in the natural and physical sciences from 2019 to 2020<sup>2</sup>. Efforts are needed to rebuild Australia's international education sector.

#### [Student visa processing time](#)

The unacceptable length of visa processing times is a significant barrier to international higher-degree research and doctoral students studying in Australia. As at 30 June 2022, the median visa processing times for the higher education sector is 96 days and the postgraduate research sector is 131 days<sup>3</sup>. Reportedly, students from countries such as India are waiting as long as three years, due to a backlog of applications.

Students who are fully funded by their university or have competitive scholarships and grants are waiting for visas, unable to start their PhDs or post-doctoral positions. Universities lose quality applicants and Australia's reputation in the international education market is damaged.

#### [International education, science and diplomacy](#)

As well as contributing to the economy, international education supports Australia's access to skilled workers, with many international students going on to contribute to Australia's workforce when they graduate. There is

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education (2022) '[International student monthly summary and data tables](#)', accessed 6 December 2022

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education (2020) '[Student Enrolments by Field of Study and Field of Education](#)', accessed 6 December 2022

<sup>3</sup> Department of Home Affairs (2022), '[Student visa and Temporary Graduate visa program report](#)', accessed 6 December 2022

a clear need for STEM skills in Australia. Making doctoral study and post-doctoral employment in Australia more accessible and providing clear pathways to keep these skilled workers in the country will help attract international talent to meet this need.

Educating international students also brings benefits to Australia through diplomacy, creating opportunities for information exchange and stronger international relationships. Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper states that "education, training and research exchanges ... build influence, and strengthen people-to-people links and mutual understanding"<sup>4</sup>.

Active and strategic science diplomacy can deliver benefits to Australia, such as influence and visibility on international and regional educational and science programs and geopolitical influence through the provision of education, science and technology aid to developing countries. However, the reduced mobility of international students and the way international students have been treated in response to the pandemic in Australia may undermine the power of education as a soft power and diplomatic tool.

To discuss or clarify any aspect of this submission, please contact Mr Chris Anderson, Director Science Policy at [REDACTED]

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2017) ['2017 Foreign Policy White Paper'](#), accessed 6 December 2022