

20 December 2022

Australian Academy of Science submission on *A Migration System for Australia's Future*

The Australian Academy of Science (the Academy) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department of Home Affairs review of Australia's migration system to inform the strategy: *A Migration System for Australia's Future*.

The Academy's interest in Australia's migration system is twofold – how do we attract and retain talented people from overseas to attend our universities for higher degree by research (HDR) study, and how competitive Australia is in attracting and retaining STEM skills for the research enterprise and Australian industry more generally?

The Academy recommends that:

- The review removes unnecessary barriers that deter and delay Australian universities, research agencies and industry efforts to support the high demand for STEM-skills and attract talented scientists.
- Barriers in Australia's current system, including unclear pathways to migration, visa backlogs and unnecessarily broad visa screening, are making Australia's system uncompetitive.

Barriers to attracting international STEM talent

A thriving science sector is an important driver of enhanced productivity and innovation, economic growth, high-wage jobs and high-value industries.

Australia has built up a heavy reliance on recruiting and developing international scientific talent. Fifty-seven per cent of Australia's university STEM-qualified labour force were born overseas¹. A migration strategy for Australia must promote STEM-skilled migration and support Australia's international education sector to deliver a more skilled and productive workforce.

Much of the research workforce in universities are made up of international PhD students, who are part of the pipeline for skilled migration to Australia. There was a 7 per cent decrease in enrolments for overseas postgraduate research students in the natural and physical sciences from 2019 to 2020².

Long visa processing times are one of the barriers to international students coming to 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 days³. Reportedly, students from countries such as India are waiting up to three years, due to a backlog of applications.

Barriers to retaining STEM talent in Australia

While the recently announced extension to 6 years for the 485 post-study work visa for PhD graduates is welcome, pathways remain opaque to ongoing or permanent residency for these highly sought-after and talented scientists.

Backlogs for visas and unnecessarily broad screening of visas have created delays for research projects across the country. These delays are impacting the ability to meet milestones for existing funding and the completion of projects needed for publication, grant applications and graduation of research students. In this context, the

¹ Office of the Chief Scientist, '[Australia's STEM workforce report](#)', accessed 7 December 2022

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

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

Academy remains concerned about plans announced by the Department of Home Affairs to introduce visa screening for critical technology risks.

These blockages in the system make Australia's migration system uncompetitive compared to clearer pathways in peer competitor jurisdictions such the UK, Canada, Europe and the United States.

To discuss or clarify any aspect of this submission, please contact Mr Chris Anderson, Director Science Policy at Chris.Anderson@science.org.au.