

Productivity Commission Review of Australia's Migrant Intake: IRU comment

The IRU supports the Government's wish to outline a transparent and multi-faceted approach to its migrant intake through the announced review of Australia's migration intake. Important in this process is a clear strategy that encapsulates a whole of government approach and intrinsic transparency about intent within the immigration framework. Currently the migration process into Australia is unnecessarily complicated, hard to navigate and mired in unnecessary bureaucracy.

Inherent in our current approach to student visas is the inbuilt belief that every student wanting to study in Australia will want to migrate to Australia permanently at the end of their degree. Some students may wish to permanently move to Australia, but if they operate within immigration requirements this should be possible. The burden the current system places on students to prove they are a "genuine student" rather than a proxy migrant is unnecessary and highlights a bias in our current immigration framework. An effective Australian immigration framework should be clear that international students are a legitimate source of applicants for skilled migration places consistent with Government immigration targets year by year.

There are three areas the IRU is targeting in our submission:

1. Firstly, the need for a comprehensive Government strategy to immigration;
2. Secondly, looking at the immigration process for international students, and the notion that of a genuine student.
3. Countering ill-informed public assumptions in immigration policy debates

Major areas for improvement

1. A comprehensive Government Strategy to immigration

There are numerous reviews currently underway that may influence Australia's migrant intake. The Productivity Commission issues paper highlights:

- Joint Review of Border Fees, Charges and Taxes currently being undertaken by the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) and the Department of Agriculture
- Review of Skilled Migration and Temporary Activity Visa Programmes conducted by DIBP. A discussion paper was released for review in September 2014.

Since the Issues paper was released, the Government has announced the following consultations:

- The Draft Strategy for International Education
- The Simplified Student Visa Framework

The purpose for highlighting these is to comment, that a whole of government approach to Australia's migrant intake is highly desirable. The sharing of information, data-sets and aligning of frameworks is desirable across these reviews to ensure best possible outcomes for the sectors impacted.

International education is vital for the Australian economy. It is our largest services export, contributing \$16.3 billion to the Australian economy in 2013–14.¹ In this context it would make sense that any action taken, in implementing entry charges or assessing the movement between temporary migration to permanent migration needs to be comprehensively assessed from all vantage points so that the impact on Australia's education sector and service delivery is minimised.

A hallmark policy programme of the current Federal Government is the New Colombo Plan, in which students from Australia are encouraged to study within Asia for short to medium periods of time. Given this emphasis on international student mobility, attention must be given to ensuring that any action taken in temporary or permanent migration is weighed against the need for flexibility in the immigration system by Australia's education sector, whilst maintaining necessary checks and balances.

2. Australia's immigration process for international students – the notion of a genuine student

The draft national Strategy for International Education referenced the comparable international strategies for New Zealand² and Canada³. Both these international strategies address the relationship of international education with the country's immigration policies, reaching beyond the question of student visas and post-graduation work entitlements to consider the implications of international students for immigration and related policies. For example the Canadian international education Strategy addresses the potential for some international students to assist with skilled labour shortages and ageing population challenges.

Within Australia and its immigration policy environment, the issue has been fraught with the tendency to not discuss it. International education policy and meeting Australia's longer term economic and social needs are allowed to operate distinctly.

There have been extensive discussions about ensuring that international students adhere to visa requirements to ensure that there are few notional students using the student visa to gain a minimal qualification and then ongoing rights to work. The actions to address these have largely worked which now permits us to consider strategically the longer term opportunities.

The approach should be that those who breach visa requirements should be identified and action taken; those who do not, but operate within legal parameters, should be permitted to aim at longer term residence.

Currently the test of being a legitimate student can err in rejecting a potential student who indicates longer term residence aspirations. An effective Australian immigration framework should be clear that international students are a legitimate source of applicants for skilled migration places consistent with Government immigration targets year by year.

We should affirm that attaining a qualification from an Australian university or other provider is a positive outcome for a person in demonstrating their relative standing for skilled immigration visas. These students have shown a capacity to live in Australia for the period of study and understand well the country they are applying to live in.

¹ Australian Government, *Export income to Australia from international education activity in 2013–14*, 2014.

² The Business Growth Agenda, Leadership Statement for International Education, Progress Update, New Zealand Government 2014, see page 5 in particular

³ Canada's International Education Strategy – "Harnessing our knowledge advantage to drive innovation and prosperity" 2014, p9 in particular

Hence there should be a pathway that allows international students to apply for residence and citizenship, with decisions based on national policy and the relative standing of applicants at the time. This would not create the right for places but the legitimate potential to apply.

3. Countering ill-formed public assumptions in immigration policy debates

Within Australian international education specifically, but immigration as a whole, public perception can be prejudiced by the political landscapes of the home country as well as any issues generated within Australia. This was evidenced by the recent furore generated by the release of an ill-considered NSW ICAC report and the related Four Corners program which highlighted the ignorance and fear which international students generate, with concerns about:

- reducing opportunities for Australian students to enrol. This should be lessened since universities were subject to demand driven funding for local students;
- the impact on the education for Australian students. Outlining the benefits of greater numbers to maintaining study options and broadening the education experience; and
- student status turning into residency status. This requires addressing the benefits for immigrants to be taken from those who have experience of Australia and a desire to stay balanced with the evidence that most international student act consistent with their visas and that the large majority do not seek residence.

To underpin the Government's clear commitment to a transparent immigration system there should be a clear strategy across the whole of Government, highlighting the benefits of international students short to long term to Australia, economically and socially.

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