

24 September 2024

Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee
Department of the Senate
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Monash Graduate Association (MGA) Submission to Senate Inquiry into the Education Services for Overseas Students Amendment (Quality and Integrity) Bill 2024

About the MGA

The Monash Graduate Association (MGA) is a not-for-profit, independent, incorporated student association, representing the diverse and extensive graduate student body at Monash University, including a significant number of international students. The MGA is recognised by Monash University Council as the official representative body in advocating for the interests and well-being of graduate students and is committed to ensuring that their voices are heard in university and governmental policies. We are deeply invested in the quality of education and the overall experience of all students, including those from overseas, who face unique challenges while studying in Australia.

Support for Improved Quality & Integrity

The MGA supports the government's commitment to enhancing the quality and integrity of Australia's international education sector. The MGA agrees that robust measures are necessary to protect the reputation of Australian education and to ensure that students receive a high standard of education. However, while the MGA commends the intention behind the Education Services for Overseas Students Amendment (Quality and Integrity) Bill 2024, we believe that certain provisions, as currently drafted, may have unintended consequences that could undermine these very goals.

Concerns Regarding Ministerial Powers and Enrolment Caps

The MGA is particularly concerned about the proposed ministerial powers to impose enrolment caps on universities. These powers could severely restrict universities' autonomy in managing their student intake and could disrupt the financial and operational stability of institutions that have come to rely heavily on international students in the absence of dedicated Commonwealth funding for capital projects and shortfalls in government support for the cost of undertaking world-class research.

The introduction of enrolment caps without sufficient evidence or consultation could lead to a reduction in the number of genuine and high achieving international students choosing Australia as their study destination. This would not only affect our sector's revenue streams but could also diminish Australia's global standing in higher education. With many of our graduate students aspiring to be employed in the higher education sector, their future in research and/or education is at risk. A disruption to the university's operational stability could also affect the quality of the professional development and student enrichment programs and diminish the student experience. We urge that any such powers be exercised with caution and that universities be exempt from these enrolment limits, focusing instead on more targeted interventions in sectors where issues of quality and integrity are more prevalent, as demonstrated by data in the public realm.

Concerns Regarding Proposed Timeframe

The MGA also expresses concern over the proposed timeframe for the implementation of these provisions. The proposed changes, if implemented as proposed, could have destabilising effects on university operations, particularly in areas like planning and budgeting, which require long-term stability. We recommend that the government consider delaying the implementation of these measures to allow for a more thorough analysis and consultation process.

Concerns Regarding Discourse about International Students

The MGA is troubled by the negative discourse surrounding international students in recent public commentary and policy discussions, particularly regarding their supposed impact on housing markets. The link between international student numbers and housing shortages is not well-substantiated by data. Moreover, such rhetoric risks alienating current and prospective international students, who may often face significant financial hardship and additional hurdles as they contribute to the broader Australian economy and cultural landscape. The lowered rate of student visa applications lodged foreshadows this fact. We recommend that the government carefully consider the messaging around these issues to avoid sending a negative signal to international students.

Recommendations

- *Exempt Universities from Enrolment Caps:* Universities should be exempt from the proposed enrolment caps. The focus should instead be on regulating providers in the higher education sector where issues of quality and integrity are most prevalent, as demonstrated by data.
- *Delay Implementation:* The MGA recommends deferring the implementation of enrolment caps to allow for thorough consultation and to mitigate potential negative impacts on the higher education sector.
- *Targeted Quality Measures:* We support the introduction of measures that specifically target low-quality providers, rather than imposing broad restrictions across the entire higher education sector.
- *Positive Discourse on International Students:* The government should ensure that public discourse around international students remains positive and welcoming, reflecting their valuable contribution to Australia's education system and broader society.

Sincerely,



Jonathan Robberts
President, Monash Graduate Association
Monash University