

Reviewing the Detrimental Impact to Australia's Future of the Federal Government's Migration Strategy

*Reported by the Monash Graduate Association
April 2024*



The Monash Graduate Association (MGA) would like to thank all those Monash postgraduate students who shared their personal stories on how the Federal Government's Migration Strategy impacted them. The production of this report was led by members of the MGA Executive Committee, Mr Sahampath Hettiarachchi, Miss Ummatul Siddique, Miss Grace Bennetts, and Mr Calvin Chow with the support of MGA staff, Dr Ashley Finn and Dr Ryan Edwards.

For further information please contact
Dr Ash Finn - ashley.finn@monash.edu
MGA President - MGA-EC-President@monash.edu

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Aims and scope of report	5
Value of international education to Australia.....	5
Undergraduate vs Postgraduate research students: Vastly different cohorts	5
Impacts to Australia’s Research, Industry and International reputation	6
Implications for Australia’s universities/research sector.....	6
Implications for Australian industry.....	7
Implications for international relations	8
Discriminatory on the basis of disability	8
Conclusions and recommendations	9
References.....	10
Appendix 1: Deidentified case demonstrating the proposed changes to the TGV are discriminatory to international postgraduate students experiencing a disability.	11

Executive Summary

This report reviews the Federal Government's recently released Migration Strategy. It suggests that in their current form certain recommendations made will have a detrimental impact on Australia's future as a world leading centre of research and its capacity to develop the knowledge and skills needed to compete in an increasingly interconnected world. It focuses particularly on the impact on students enrolled in Higher Degree by Research programs. By reducing the maximum age for all applicants for a Temporary Graduate Visa to 35 years and shortening the post study work rights to three years, Australia will see fewer of its most skilled graduates remain in the country, fewer enrolments in research degrees in the future, and cause damage to its international reputation by renegeing on its promises made to currently enrolled students. Instead, this report recommends that the government amend its migration strategy as to exempt HDR students from the age limit of 35 and retain the duration of the TGV as it stands.

Aims and scope of report

This report reviews some of the recommendations in the Australian government's Migration Strategy (1). Specifically, it focuses on those recommendations made that will have a negative impact on Australia's ability to attract and retain highly skilled graduates from around the globe. These recommendations are:

1. Reducing the maximum eligible age of the Temporary graduate visa (TGV) to 35 years
2. Shorter post-study work rights for master's by coursework and PhD students

The report suggests several amendments be made to these recommendations to ensure the Australian government's stated objective of addressing skills shortages in a fair and equitable manner is met. By deterring prospective students and by losing highly skilled graduates the current recommendations will negatively impact Australia's future reputation as a centre for world-class research and its capacity to develop the knowledge and skills needed for long term, sustainable growth.

Value of international education to Australia

The Australian Higher Education system is recognised globally for the quality of education, student experience, and for producing highly employable graduates. This is reflected in numerous university ranking tables including the Times Higher Education World University (2) and QS World University Rankings (3) that list Australian universities in the highest echelons of their rankings.

International students are an integral part of this system and collectively make up nearly a third of all students enrolled at Australian universities (4). In addition to boosting Australia's global reputation, international education is Australia's largest services export generating \$41 billion in export revenues (4). At an institutional level, Australian universities rely heavily on international student fees as they provide over a quarter of the total operating revenue (5). These economic factors, coupled with the vibrancy and diversity that this cohort brings to Australian society, make international students an indispensable part of Australia's Higher Education future.

Undergraduate vs Postgraduate research students: Vastly different cohorts

Typically, international students are viewed as one large, homogenous population with aligned values and motivations in terms of migration and desired course outcomes. In 2020, 46% of international students in Australia were pursuing postgraduate education (coursework or research). Importantly, postgraduate students differ from undergraduates in various ways (6-8) and have needs and aspirations that are similarly distinct. Accordingly, a 'one size fits all approach' to international students is misguided and benefits neither students nor Australia.

Higher Degree Research students (HDR) comprised of Master's by research and PhD students, constitute only 5.6% of the total international student population ((5)). Data from the department of

Education states that 48.8% of international postgraduate research students are over the age of 30 (9). As the typical duration for completion of a PhD is 3.5 to 4 years, most of this cohort will be ineligible for the TGV at the time of graduation. Similarly, HDR graduates comprise only 4.29% of Temporary Graduate Visa (TGV) holders (10). Excluding them from proposed changes to the TGV program will have minimal impact on overall migration numbers. The recommendation to reduce the age limit for the TGV to 35 will disproportionately affect Australia's highest skilled students and severely limit their ability to contribute to Australia's future growth, while doing little to lower migration numbers.

A recent Monash Graduate Association survey showed that for 82% of higher degree by research students, post study visa benefits were an important factor in choosing Australia as their study destination (11). Changing the age requirement and length of the TGV will cause prospective research students to look to other countries in which to undertake their degrees. The potential impact of this is obvious. In the United Kingdom, policy changes directly targeting international postgraduate students are estimated to severely reduce the £62.6 billion contribution these students bring to the economy, making certain degree options for domestic students unfeasible to deliver (12).

"I think these negative reforms make students look for other countries apart from Australia. Definitely keeping these talented students can help the economy of Australia, especially R&D companies. I hope they consider the impact of this decision, especially PhD students."¹

Impacts to Australia's Research, Industry and International reputation

Implications for Australia's universities/research sector

Despite making up a relatively low proportion of international students, postgraduate researchers significantly contribute to generating new knowledge, increased research outputs, industry engagement, and the ongoing development of higher education.

Postgraduate research students have 36% of their cohort (5) consisting of international students and represent 55% of the human resources (13) that higher education institutes dedicate to research and development (R & D) meaning that international students contribute significantly to the research impact generated by the institutions. Furthermore, international HDR students have a higher completion rate compared to their domestic counterparts (14) meaning this cohort has a faster transition to from student to a highly skilled graduate and are able to contribute to Australia with.

The Australian government and its universities invest a significant amount of funding into the training and development of HDRs in terms of the research training program (RTP) block funding of \$1.04 billion provided by the government in 2020 (5) and with universities spending \$6.7 billion on labour and scholarship costs for R & D (13).

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all quotes in this survey are from Monash graduate students in March/April 2024 responding to a call out on how the changes to the Federal Government's Migration Strategy impacted them.

By reducing the age limit of the TGV to 35 if graduates cannot stay in Australia post-graduation, Australia's gains no return on the money invested in these students.

Implications for Australian industry

Reiterating the reasons in the report to the Australian government in 2022 (10), most TGV holders are employed as professionals. International postgraduate students are the largest contributors to the labour market where specialised skills are required, as reflected by the fact that this cohort undertake courses which are aligned with Australia's skill shortages, including the health, education, information technology and engineering sectors.

This is particularly important given the data from the National Skills commission (NSC) in 2022 (15), where the national shortage increased by 12% to 31%, from 2021. The consequential effect of reducing the TGV length, is that most international graduate students will take their skills to a competitive country, such as Canada, the United Kingdom or the United States of America to pursue a career.

Ensuring the retention of HDR graduates within the country is vital. By doing so, Australia can maintain its competitive edge in the global market and foster continued growth and innovation. Data on International HDR graduates demonstrate that 85.6% of graduates are employed, have 95% participation rates in the labour force and a median average salary of \$89,500 (16). Additionally 93% of international HDR graduates working full-time are employed in managerial and professional occupations (16). Collectively the data point to international HDRs having commensurate employment outcomes to their domestic counterparts, emphasising their immediate value to the labour market and Australian industry.

If the Australian government proceeds with shortening TGV post-study work rights, it may risk losing its international competitive edge, let alone domestic economic, labour and provided through the contributions made by international postgraduate students.

“The Australian government's migration strategy negatively shapes my future opportunities and community dynamics. The policy's impact on job markets, social integration, and overall societal growth directly have detrimental effects on my life path.”

“Regarding myself, I am not fond of certain alterations. Take, for instance, upon completing my PhD, I will be 35 years and 4 months old. Under these circumstances, I would be ineligible for a temporary visa. Nonetheless, I will possess expertise as a PhD graduate. Therefore, the funds invested in these international students would be squandered if they are compelled to return to their home countries. From a scientific perspective, it is inconsequential whether graduates relocate to their home countries or elsewhere.”

“At the time of my PhD completion, my age will be 35 years and nine days, so I can't apply for post-doctoral PhD. The age limit will really affect my dream of advancing my research career in Australia.”

“The proposed changes, particularly the reduction in the age limit for the Temporary Graduate Visa (TGV) from 50 to 35, seem unjust given the unpredictable challenges posed by the global pandemic. These changes do not account for the disruptions caused by factors beyond individual students’ abilities and control.”

Implications for international relations

Targeting international students to manage migration for Australia should be collaborative and an inclusive effort rather than emphasising exclusion. This principle is essential to build trust, cohesion and understanding amongst international students. As such, the new migration strategies should take existing enrolled students into consideration rather than having a one-size-fits all model.

Enrolled students present on Australian soil should not be penalised by this new policy. Given the high numbers of currently enrolled international students that chose Australia as a study destination due to post-study visa options (11), removing this pathway would represent a serious breach of trust on the part of the Federal Government. As international education plays a crucial role in Australia’s soft diplomacy, any changes to the TGV must ensure promises are kept. This enables international students with existing student visas and enrolled in respective universities to have the opportunity to apply for new residency pathways (17) and upskill as intended to through use of the TGV.

It must also be highlighted that a substantial number of HDR students, who will be affected by the age limit, were also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students, who previously have fallen below the proposed maximum age, have had to endure delaying their research by up to two years. Implementation of the new migration strategies will again deny these individuals the benefits that they would have had if they had been able to come to Australia when they originally enrolled.

“I waited for my student visa for my Ph.D. study in 2019, enduring a lengthy process that took 6.5 months. Unfortunately, by the time I was granted the visa in early 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of Australia's borders and a halt to the entry of students with temporary visas. This situation forced me to put my Ph.D. studies on hold, resulting in a 2-year gap due to circumstances beyond my control. It wasn't until mid-2021 that I received an exception to enter Australia and commence my studies.”

Discriminatory on the basis of disability

This report also purports that the recommendations outlined in the scope of the report are discriminatory to students that have experienced a disability. Appendix 1 details the plight of a postgraduate student who through no fault of their own has experienced significant barriers to accessing quality education and has compelling views on what these recommendations mean to them.

Conclusions and recommendations

As highlighted in our report international postgraduate research students play a key role in the research impact generated by universities and in the Australian industry. The In light of this, the report makes the following recommendations.

1. Exclude postgraduate research / HDR students from the age limit for the TGV.
2. Retain the post-study work rights length for postgraduate students.

Retaining the duration of TGV to allow for 3 - 4 years post-study work rights allow an appropriate amount of time for international graduates to secure the right role which matches their specific qualifications, especially in industries where highly skilled workers or specialised skills are required. This will not only be beneficial to the prospective postgraduate students as they enter Australia's labour market, but it forms a symbiotic relationship, in that it will benefit the economy. We ask for the government to reconsider consider the recommendations made by this report and thereby allow Australia to maintain its reputation as a world leading destination for education and research excellence.

References

1. Department of Home Affairs. Migration Strategy. Getting migration working for the nation. In: Affairs DoH, editor. Australian Government Website 2023. p. 1-99.
2. Times Higher Education. World University Rankings 2024: Times Higher Education 2024 [Available from: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2024/world-ranking>.
3. QS Top Universities. QS World University Rankings 2024 2024 [Available from: <https://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings?tab=indicators®ion=Oceania&countries=au>.
4. Universities Australia. Data Snapshot July 2022. Universities Australia; 2022.
5. Universities Australia. 2022 Higher Education Facts and Figures. 2022 06/05/2022.
6. Melinda J, Ickes., Joanne, Brown., Brandy, Reeves., Pierre, Martin, Dominique, Zephyr. . Differences between Undergraduate and Graduate Students in Stress and Coping Strategies. Californian Journal of Health Promotion. 2015;13(1):13-25.
7. Bova A. A study of undergraduate and graduate students' argumentation in learning contexts of higher education 2014.
8. Horri A, Amanpour S, Jalali F, Masoumi M, Fardisi S. The Use of Different Study Skills by Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students of Kerman Dental School. Strides in Development of Medical Education. 2020;17(1):1-5.
9. Department of Education. Higher Education Analysis. In: Division MAaDBR, editor. 2024.
10. Commonwealth of Australia. Post-Study Work Rights Working Group: Report to the ministers for education and home affairs. 2022 Accessed 05/04/2024.
11. Edwards R, Galanopoulos D. Monash HDRs: Motivation for study and experience in practice. Monash Graduate Association; 2022.
12. ICEF. UK: Post-study work rights worth billions but current policies leading to weaker enrolments this year 2024 [Available from: <https://monitor.icef.com/2024/03/uk-post-study-work-rights-a-major-growth-driver-but-current-policies-leading-to-weaker-enrolments-this-year/>.
13. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Higher education resources devoted to R&D, summary statistics, 2020 2020 [cited 2024 04/04/2024]. Available from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/technology-and-innovation/research-and-experimental-development-higher-education-organisations-australia/latest-release#data-downloads>.
14. Education Do. Completions Rates of Higher Degree by Research Students - Cohort Analysis, 2007-2017. Departmental document. 2020.
15. Relations DoEaW. Australia's current, emerging and future workforce skills needs 2022. National Skills Commission (NSC); 2022.
16. The Social Research Centre. Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching. 2023.
17. Burgess A. Report calls for International Graduate Visa Overhaul, With Claims Students Given False Hope for Permanent Residency: ABC News; 2023 [Available from: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-04/international-student-graduate-visa-permanent-residency-pathways/102923628>.

Appendix 1: Deidentified case demonstrating the proposed changes to the TGV are discriminatory to international postgraduate students experiencing a disability.

To build empathy and understanding between international postgraduate students with different experiences, we share their anonymised submissions to our committee. In their stories we hear how these students feel trapped in a cycle of hopelessness, anxiety and discrimination. Life for them has become precarious and uncertain, having to constantly adapt to unfair government policies regarding migration and the changes to the Temporary Graduate Visa Policy (TGV). This has had detrimental effects on students' mental health, financial stability and more broadly, fosters a loss of trust and faith in the Australian Government and community.

A. The proposed TGV policy is not only discriminatory against international students, but also those who are part of other minority groups in society.

Lily is an international PhD student, who has cerebral palsy. With the assistance of medication and therapy, they are mobile to the extent that they can walk independently without aid. However, Lily still needs assistance and support with day-to-day tasks. Having been ostracised and excluded from social circles in their home country, they came to Australia to pursue a better life of study, following being granted a scholarship in 2022.

When Lily applied for the requisite visa to come with their family to Australia to study, they found it to be a very stressful and discriminatory process. When Lily disclosed their disability and provided the appropriate documentation in their application to prove this, a Medical Officer of the Commonwealth persisted in requesting further proof of Lily's condition. Lily found this process lengthy and costly, let alone prejudicial and unethical.

In addition to Lily's aforementioned disability, the process of obtaining a TGV to study as a postgraduate student in Australia was further complicated by the fact that they are excluded from the eligible age group for a TGV, under the new policy (which is 35 years old, compared to 50 years old previously). They applied at a later age, because Lily's education was drawn out over a long period of time in their home country, thus it is out of their control. Lily believes that the new TGV policy is ageist and ableist in the very least and impinges on fundamental human and disabled persons rights, founded in the UNHR and the UNCRPD, at most.

Not only does making the TGV a difficult process for students like Lily, remove the opportunity for a better life for them however, but it also sends a broader message to the world that Australia does not prioritise equality of opportunity and diversity, nor does it value the contributions that international students make to Australian culture and society. In addition, this policy perpetuates division and exclusion in society, by reducing accessibility for international students to higher education and the labour market.

Lily shouldn't have to justify why they deserve a TGV, where an able bodied and younger international student, may not have to. Lily believes that giving students from diverse backgrounds an opportunity to contribute to society, is fundamental to a thriving, multicultural and diverse society and is a pathway to the evolution of knowledge and the advancement of human civilization.

B. Students are relying on representative bodies from Go8 universities of Australia, to represent them in opposing the TGV policy reforms.

Lily is a postgraduate student at Monash University. They are deeply concerned about the changes to the TGV policy. This will not only affect themselves, but also their family. Reading online about the proposed changes has caused them to feel anxious, to the point that they avoid reading about it all. Therefore Lily, like many other international students, are relying on the MGA and other Australia Go8 University's student representative bodies to lobby the government on these proposed TGV changes, on behalf of them and other students who are negatively affected.

C. Years of professional development and saving the requisite funds by students to pursue postgraduate study in Australia, becomes futile under the government's proposed Migration Policy.

Many mature age students, like Lily, have been fixated on pursuing higher-education and a career in Australia due to its proximity to their home country in Asia. This is also despite the fact that the cost of an Australian education for international students, is far more expensive as compared to domestic students in Australia, but also compared to studies in other countries. Therefore, students sacrifice not only other, less expensive education and career opportunities, but also time (years) moving through their home country's education system, working on professional development and then preparing to move to Australia. Thus, by the time they have successfully enrolled in an Australian course, it is not uncommon for their predicted graduation date to be by the time they are aged 34 years old. Whilst this is still an eligible age under the new, proposed TGV settings, to grant this student a visa, it does not allow any room for modification or changes to life circumstances, which may result in this person graduating at a later date. Let alone the fact that they will only have 2 years of post-study work rights in Australia, under the proposed TGV policy.

Thus, this has caused helplessness, insecurity, stress and overall deflation at the retrospective lack of other opportunities, including scholarships, since Lily was relying on the assumptions and representations made by the Australian government under the existing TGV settings (which allow for a maximum eligible age for the TGV visa to be 50 years of age). Lily is thus relying on hope and is financially dependent on their elderly parents to support them during the current cost-of-living crisis and the cost of graduate degrees, including beyond completion of their study, given the fact international graduate students have less post-study work rights under the proposed TGV settings and receive a lower wage, compared to domestic students.

Students like Lily have also reported feeling 'scammed' by the Australian government, which leads to distrust and resentment towards the government, but also conjures a negative reputation for future international students wishing to study in Australia (who may in the future, choose to study in another country).

In addition, the alternative Skills in Demand visa perpetuates struggle and a vicious cycle of international graduates being unable to attain a job, without the requisite visa, which requires you to meet the income threshold. Many students feel this is inequitable, unjust and a trap. Overall, the changes the TGV has disrupted and negatively affected the lives of many international graduate students who dreamt of a better future, and who gave up opportunities and sacrificed a lot, on the assumption they would be given the rights promised to them under Australia's TGV policy.

For further information,
please contact

Dr Ash Finn:

ashley.finn@monash.edu

MGA President:

MGA-EC-President@monash.edu

*Reported by the
Monash Graduate Association
April 2024*