



Submission to the Australian Government's

Strategic Review of the Student Visa Program

The Australian Academy of Science welcomes the strategic review of the student visa program announced in December 2010, jointly by the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship and the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations. The review is timely, in view of the growing importance of international links for research for the Australian science sector. A component of these links is the provision of post-graduate research student places for students from overseas.

We are aware that undergraduate overseas students bring tuition fees as well as general income to Australia, and therefore help to fund our Universities and our communities. However, the great majority of overseas undergraduates are not committed to or involved in scientific research. They will return home with their Australian qualification, join the work force in their own country, and benefit from their stay here. Therefore, the Academy's submission will not consider undergraduate or vocational education, but focus on issues concerned with research students from overseas, in particular those who come to Australia to study for the research degree of PhD in the areas of science and technology. (We are aware that there are different issues relating to research higher degrees in humanities and social sciences, including those around Masters degrees by research, but we will leave others to comment on these in detail.)

As the Discussion Paper notes, "International higher-degree-by-research students are enormously important to Australia." They are a precious commodity. They are of the highest quality academically, and are sought after by labs throughout the world. There are very few of them: of the 270,000 international students who obtained visas in 2009, approximately 2,000 came to study for research higher degrees in science, engineering and IT. About 1,000 overseas students obtain PhDs each year in these areas.

Every overseas PhD student represents a gain for Australian science, a contributor to the intellectual powerhouse of our country, and a potential collaborative partner with our research organisations on return home. A policy of encouraging higher degree study in Australia fits well with Australia's foreign policy objectives to engage with our region by fostering close research ties, particularly with China and India. In the view of the Academy, everything possible should be done to ensure that we encourage overseas students who are offered research student places in science and technology to come here rather than go to the U.S.A. or Europe. We note that the 2008 report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and

Innovation Inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities, offered support in principle for the specific recommendation dealing with student visa flexibility, *“that international Student visa policies relating to higher degree by research programs be amended to allow greater flexibility for further research and employment.”* (Recommendation 30)

We need, therefore, to address a wide range of issues to ensure that our visa system for this specific group of students is flexible and designed to allow them to come to Australia with the minimum bureaucracy and the maximum flexibility.

We propose the following:

- Students who propose to enter Australia from any other country with the intention of studying for a research higher degree (normally a PhD if in science, engineering, medicine or IT) must be sponsored by a University Department, with a named supervisor and proposed thesis topic. (We see this as a pre-condition for the recommendations that follow. The critical feature of this proposal is that the University takes responsibility for making a commitment to each research student, by name and with a topic and supervisor, that a properly supervised research place will be available.)
- Research students who are proposed to register for a PhD or equivalent degree in science and technology should not come under the overseas student regulations, but come under a separate category. They should not be placed in an assessment level. In general, they are not a “migration risk”, but if they choose to stay in Australia after obtaining a PhD, this should be managed at that time.
- Research students should not be required to provide financial guarantees, and should not be subject to visa delays or high visa fees. If possible, there should be no fee, or a nominal fee, and it should be possible to offer a visa within a few days. (We note that this is a related issue for more senior scientists who come to work in Australian University or CSIRO laboratories for short periods of a few months, as well as for research students; their visas are often delayed and can be very expensive, although they are of great value to our research effort.)
- Research students who are studying for a PhD should have equivalent work rights to Australian research students, particularly with respect to work that is related to their research project.