



Australian Academy of Science

SUBMISSION TO THE
TRANSFORMATION OF AUSTRALIA'S
VISA SYSTEM PUBLIC CONSULTATION
FROM THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCE / SEPTEMBER 2017

Submission to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection's transformation of Australia's visa system

The Australian Academy of Science welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection's consultation on transforming Australia's visa system.

A clear national visa system that enables Australian and international scientists to engage fully in the international scientific endeavour is a critical component of the knowledge generation and application that supports Australia's national interests and underpins our social wellbeing and economic prosperity. Recent submissions from the Academy to the Australian Government on these issues include representations regarding changes to the temporary visa scheme earlier this year, and a submission to the Australian Government's Strategic Review of the Student Visa Program in 2011.

In broad terms, the Academy favours a visa pathway that facilitates the ability of Australian R&D-intensive businesses, universities and research organisations to compete in an international job market for the best scientists, researchers, lecturers, technical specialists and knowledge workers to participate in Australia's industry, culture and economy. The Academy holds that such a system must not only enable Australian employers and training institutions to engage those high-skilled international professionals looking to work in Australia, it must also reinforce Australia's positioning as an innovative, attractive and exciting employment destination.

In particular, the Australian Academy of Science recommends that any update to Australia's visa system must protect and enhance the following characteristics:

- Clear and/or dedicated visa pathways for scientists, researchers, higher-degree research students and technical research workers to visit and work in Australia for periods up to five years.
- Visa pathways that accommodate individuals at all stages of scientific and research careers from postgraduate study through to world-leading researchers.
- Clear and reasonable pathways to permanent residency, with sufficient flexibility to account for changes in career direction.
- Consistency and compatibility with the priorities of other Government programs, most notably the National Innovation and Science Agenda.
- Cooperation between Departmental and institutional processes to ensure that research institutions' needs are met.

Australia has a diverse scientific workforce, with 35 per cent of our Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) qualified workforce born overseas. In the case of both natural sciences and information technology, Australia is particularly reliant on skilled migrants with 44 per cent and 49 per cent of the respective workforces born overseas. These scientists have played a leading role in many of Australia's most significant breakthroughs such as spray-on skin (Professor Fiona Wood AM) and the cervical cancer vaccine (Professor Ian Frazer AC), and international researchers will without question be instrumental in solving many of the critical challenges facing Australia in the future.

Furthermore, Australia derives enormous benefit from the ability to leverage significant international research programs to focus on Australian priorities, as well as benefiting from Australian scientists' ability to train and work in international research institutions and bring back critical knowledge and skills. In order to protect the benefits that flow from Australian researchers engaging with international research organisations, it is critically important that Australia's own visa system facilitates mobility of international researchers visiting and working in Australia.

At present, there is no dedicated visa pathway for scientists, researchers or technical specialists to work or study in Australia. While the Distinguished Talent Visa subclass does provide an option for eminent, late-career scientists, it does not accommodate the vast majority of international researchers and scientists who play a fundamental role in Australia's research enterprise.

The Academy favours a dedicated, whole-of-career visa pathway for scientists, as well as academics, knowledge workers and technicians more broadly. In principle, the Academy would endorse any efforts by the Australian Government to bring the brightest and best experts and specialists at any level.

The Academy considers that sponsorship of scientists by research institutions would be a key component of such a program. The sponsoring institution would have the responsibility for assessing the potential visa holder against a number of academic criteria, such as academic credentials, research history and publication record. The sponsoring institution would thus identify their own requirement for international expertise, as well as identifying a person who is able to meet that requirement.

Allowing permanent sponsored visas for scientists and researchers at every level would allow them to become an even greater asset to the Australian research landscape and help build an innovative and sustainable economy. The requirement for scientists to be sponsored by their institution or organisation not only provides greater stability for international scientists in formative years, it also streamlines application processes.

Visa pathways for international scientists choosing to study or work in Australia should be adequately flexible to accommodate changes to career or lifestyle, and sufficiently streamlined so as not to dissuade talented and hardworking individuals from applying.

Australia's National Science Statement recognises the international nature of science and stresses the importance of international links. The responsibilities of government are listed in the Statement, including "[Government will] encourage and support collaboration across disciplines, across sectors and across international borders." The Academy supports the principle that the Department's new, simplified visa system should be consistent with government policy more broadly, and should acknowledge and reflect the government's science, innovation and technology policies.