



A migration system for Australia's future

The University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC) welcomes a comprehensive review of Australia's migration system and is pleased to provide a brief submission. In addition to our points below, UniSC also endorses the submissions made by Universities Australia and the Regional Universities Network.

With five campuses from Moreton Bay to the Fraser Coast in Queensland, UniSC is a rapidly growing, comprehensive university focused on excellent teaching, ground-breaking research, championing sustainability, and producing award-winning alumni. We're one of Australia's highest-rated public universities in key areas of overall experience, skills development, student support, teaching quality, social equity, first generation, learner resources (undergraduate and postgraduate) and learner engagement (postgraduate). Our research explores the timeliest topics of our era, those with the most significance for the future, with a focus on environmental impact, mental and medical health, technology, and human behaviour.

UniSC would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on any aspect of our submission. If this is of interest to the review panel, please contact Alex Elibank Murray, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Global and Engagement), UniSC at PVCGE-Office@usc.edu.au.

General comments

UniSC understands the critical and multifaceted contribution that migration makes to Australia, particularly by facilitating international student access to our nation's world leading higher education sector.

At a local level, we see every day the value that skilled migrants make to the UniSC workforce and businesses in our regions. Obviously, we also witness the important benefits that international students deliver from an economic and social perspective. Our international students not only support a more diverse and culturally interesting student body, but they also pay rent, purchase goods and services and are a key temporary workforce to a myriad of businesses and community groups. When international students choose to stay and work in Australia after they graduate, they of course help meet our workforce needs, importantly in many occupations experiencing skills shortages.

International higher education students post study work rights

UniSC welcomes the Government's recent policy decision to extend the duration of post study work rights for international students at all Australian universities in areas of verified skill shortages. We recognise that if implemented appropriately, this policy could increase the number of international students who stay and work in Australia after they graduate and help address some of the labour and skills shortages our country is experiencing.

However, additional years of post-study work rights is currently only available to international students who study at a regional university. To ensure this policy change does not adversely impact regional communities by drawing international students away to the cities, UniSC believes it is important that regional universities continue to be able to offer unique and attractive post study work right opportunities for international students. If an appropriate 'regional differential' is not maintained, many international students who would have chosen to study in the regions due to the existing incentive, will instead undertake their studies in the city. This would obviously further challenge the ability of regions to attract and retain skilled labour which they so desperately need.

UniSC therefore proposes the following options for consideration to ensure that regional universities retain a unique and attractive post-study work rights differential:

- Fast tracked visa processing for international students who have enrolled at a regional university.
- Fast tracked migration and residency pathways for international students graduating from a regional university who also go on to stay and work in a regional location, e.g. increase points (e.g. from 5 to 15) for the Skilled Visa application.
- An income tax deduction for international students:
 - Studying at a regional university and undertaking paid employment in that region.
 - Graduating from a regional university and undertaking paid employment in an area of verified skill shortage in any regional location.
- Either directly, or via agreement with state and territory governments, provide regional employers with a wage subsidy for employing international students graduating from a regional university who work in an area of verified skill shortage.
- Either directly, or via agreement with state and territory governments, provide international students studying at regional universities with a rebate on student accommodation / private rental costs.
- Retain the additional time differential for post study works rights for international students who study at regional universities, noting that a collective increase across the sector proportionally disadvantages regional universities, with metropolitan universities receiving a doubling of post-study work right years, compared to a lesser increase for regional universities.

Barriers to international student retention

UniSC recommends further streamlining the student visa requirements, including by abolishing or amending the Genuine Temporary Entry (GTE) requirement where a student visa application can be refused if the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) suspects the applicant displays an interest in permanent migration. The DHA states that “The Genuine Temporary Entrant requirement is not intended to exclude students who, after studying in Australia, develop skills Australia needs and who then go on to apply for permanent residence”, but also states that applicants need to show they have significant incentives to return home and further that “The student visa program is not a way for international students to maintain ongoing residency in Australia.”

In addition, the continued backlog of bridging visa approvals delays many students’ ability to transfer from a student visa after graduating, with some giving up and going home. Students and temporary graduates are often between visas while either applying for a further onshore student visa or temporary graduate visa while pursuing permanent residence pathways. More timely and transparent updates and advice from the Government about the status of visa processing would not only support decision-making by applicants but also offer reassurances to potential employers.

UniSC believes that it makes economic sense to encourage suitable onshore students (e.g. those who graduate from a regional university and could work in an area of verified skill shortage) to begin a pathway to permanent residency. In most cases, their Australian education will have included work integrated learning opportunities relevant to their community and while Australia has not borne the cost of their education, it will reap the rewards as they join the workforce and contribute to the economy.

Finally, UniSC notes many employers, particularly small and medium businesses remain unsure or uncertain of the visa processes and likelihood of success when seeking to hire international students both during and after graduation. Federal and state governments should consider a comprehensive and ongoing campaign to employer groups around the process for hiring migrants and international student graduates, to address the disconnect between skilled graduates and employer hiring practices, including demystifying and reassuring prospective employers about visa options and available support.