



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

UOW Submission in response to the Joint Standing Committee on Migrations

Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program

March 2021

INTRODUCTION

The University of Wollongong (UOW) welcomes the opportunity to provide input in response to the Joint Standing Committee on Migrations Inquiry into Australia's skilled migration program.

This Submission broadly addresses the Inquiry Terms of Reference, confirming UOW's support for the Federal Government's commitment to the provision of a skilled migration program which supports Australia's ability to attract highly skilled migrants which meet Australia's workplace needs whilst also supporting Australian higher education providers to rebuild their international student numbers from a diverse range of countries following the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Submission also emphasises the need for consistency of government policy relevant to this issue. The need for consistency is particularly important given the climate of uncertainty the COVID-19 pandemic has created globally. This should apply to issues including visas and skilled occupation lists in order to encourage international students to choose to study at Australian higher education providers, and to encourage the attraction of highly skilled migrants who can fill essential gaps, help create more jobs for Australians, and make other positive contributions to Australia's economy. Further, it also suggests that the government develop policy that encourages greater connectivity between industry and higher education providers in order to help achieve skilled migration objectives.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

UOW is a leading global university powered by its people, partnerships and communities. Throughout our global network, UOW works together with industry, research partners, governments, communities and other universities to address society's critical economic, environmental, social and medical challenges.

UOW is a global community of learners, researchers, experts and leaders. A benchmark for Australia's new generation of universities, UOW is recognised internationally for the quality of our education, research impact, and industry and community engagement.

A research-intensive university, UOW is an international network of campuses and regional learning centres. In addition to its Australian metropolitan and regional campuses, UOW delivers world-class teaching to students in the United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia and Singapore. UOW has formal agreements with more than 400 overseas institutions in 46 countries spanning research collaborations, teaching collaborations, credit arrangements, articulation arrangements, study abroad and exchange programs and offshore program delivery.

As the Australasian member of the University Global Partnership Network (UGPN), UOW's strong international outlook is demonstrated by partnerships with peers and industry, government and community-based organisations across the world.

UOW continues to provide solutions that support emerging businesses and transform existing industries by helping them to adopt advanced technologies and innovative systems. The University is committed to creating environments where entrepreneurship and innovation can thrive so research can be rapidly transferred into commercial products and services.

A dynamic university renowned for being innovative and agile, UOW plays a fundamental role in driving social and economic change in communities across NSW and Australia.

Generating over \$2.5 billion in gross output annually, UOW is leading locally by competing globally. Strategic partnerships between the University, entrepreneurs, industry, business and government are accelerating innovation and our transformative projects are reshaping communities, research, education, healthcare and industries for the future. The University continually works closely with its communities to create a positive future from the new opportunities that will arise during the challenging times ahead. UOW inspires a better future through education, research and partnership.

UOW has also developed the Innovation Campus in Wollongong, which is an education, research and technology precinct. This state of the art facility provides strong linkages between business and research, and complements the University's leading research and innovation institutes.

The award-winning research, innovation and commercial precinct contributes enormously to the Illawarra economy each year, helping to activate new economic activity and regional jobs and enhancing the region's competitive edge in the marketplace.

The precinct is home to a number of UOW's multidisciplinary research institutes, along with a well-established community of innovation companies that are strongly engaged with the University.

- Australian Institute for Innovative Materials (AIMM) - a key national laboratory for medical and energy material to help transform multi-functional materials research into commercial reality. The multi-disciplinary focus of AIMM brings together biologists, clinicians, chemists, physicists engineers and materials scientists.
- iAccelerate - an incubator for new business start-ups
- Molecular Horizons – UOW's integrated research precinct dedicated to solving some of the biggest health challenges facing the world. The centrepiece of molecular horizons is the ultra-high resolution Titan Krios cryo-electron microscope, one of only a handful in the world and the second of its kind in Australia.
- The Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS) - Australia's only multidisciplinary university-based centre dedicated to research, education and training on ocean law, maritime security and natural marine resource management
- Sustainable Buildings Research Centre - a 6 Star Green Star- Education Design v1 accredited, multi-disciplinary facility that hosts a wide range of research and industry collaborations to address the challenges of making buildings sustainable
- Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute - a joint venture with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District
- SMART Infrastructure Facility - a key national laboratory for research on infrastructure

In addition UOW, in conjunction with development partner Lendlease, is currently developing the innovative \$500 million Health and Wellbeing Precinct to be built at the Innovation Campus. The Precinct will integrate research and training environments with non-surgical health care and aged-care facilities, delivering significant benefits to the Illawarra community and beyond. Pending final planning approvals, construction of the Precinct is proposed to commence in 2022 and the facilities be fully operational by 2024.

INTERNATIONAL DIVERSITY

The current COVID-19 pandemic has certainly highlighted the need for diversity. Within this context, UOW has pursued a deliberate strategy of diversification in onshore international student enrolments and offshore growth to avoid over exposure to any single market, ie China.

The University has increasingly deepened its connection with Central Asian countries, particularly India, Sri Lanka and Nepal via research agreements, transformative projects, education exchanges and academic

partnerships. Some 115 nations are represented in UOW's onshore student community, with India now providing the largest cohort of international students.

This diversification has occurred alongside a steady expansion in UOW's offshore presence in recent years. In 2015 UOW Global Enterprises took custodianship of the community college of Hong Kong's City University, which became UOW College Hong Kong in 2017, and in November 2019 launched UOW Malaysia KDU, having acquired the four campuses of KDU University College from Malaysian private education provider Paramount Corporation Berhad (PCB) in 2018. There are now approximately 18,000 UOW and UOW College students studying across these campuses and at UOW in Dubai, which has been operating for 28 years and moved into a new purpose-built campus in 2020. Our growth internationally has been strong and UOW is one of only four Australian universities with more offshore than onshore international students.

UOW attracts a large number of international onshore students who contribute significant export earnings to the economy at the regional, state and national levels. In 2019, UOW had close to 11,000 international onshore students of which almost half (48%) originated from Central South Asia including India, Nepal, Pakistan, bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Impact of COVID-19 on Australia's international student enrolments

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant decline in the number of international onshore student enrolments at Australian universities. At UOW, the impact of COVID-19 on commencing international student numbers can be seen more evidently than with re-enrolling international students, however it continues to impact both groups.

Commencing international student numbers for UOW peaked in 2019, but fell by 36.6 per cent in 2020. As at March 2021, year on year enrolment numbers are tracking to finish down a further 36.9 per cent or a two year drop of -60 per cent in commencer numbers. It is anticipated that this may continue to worsen for Semester Two 2021 as international borders currently remain closed.¹

More broadly, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment's international student data released on 8 March 2021² for the full calendar year (December 2020) show the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australia's higher education international student enrolment numbers. Compared to 2019, key results include:

- Total enrolments decreased by 7.3 per cent, while commencements decreased by 21.9 per cent.
- All sectors experienced declines in commencements and VET was the only sector that experienced growth in enrolments (up 9.2 per cent).

Whilst border closures and travel restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to remain, preventing the movement of to international students at Australian campuses, it is vital that effective government policy be implemented which will help support the rebuilding of Australia's important international education sector as soon as opportunity re-emerges. Clear, timely and effective messaging to attract prospective students and skilled staff to Australia will also be critical.

It is also noted that the ongoing closure of international borders has impacted Australia's overall migration numbers, and that rebuilding of this will also be important to ensure Australia have as strong skilled migration policy which attracts high quality, skilled migrants who can contribute to Australia's workforce. Targeted and purposeful migration will be essential to help support Australia recover from the impact of the pandemic.

¹ UOW data at March 2021 - some of the 2020 and 2021 student enrolment data includes a number of international students located offshore doing courses remotely.

² Full Year 2020 international student data, Australian Trade and Investment Commission, 8 March 2021, <https://www.austrade.gov.au/australian/education/news/data/full-year-2020-international-student-data-available?msdyntrid=SQ4jyqjd8LRDDMDRYdnpa0pJHLGFNIqZiUsQY2jJ70#>

SKILLED MIGRATION POLICY WHICH SUPPORTS AUSTRALIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

A clear and consistent visa system

Universities operate in a highly competitive international environment. UOW operations are impacted by its ability to attract both international undergraduate and postgraduate students from across the globe to our Australian campuses, as well as the ongoing provision of quality, specialised staff. Its ability to do this effectively can be impacted positively or negatively by the Australian government's visa system.

The University accepts that proficiency of English language, skills and qualifications, and the health of individuals should generally underpin a potential immigrant's eligibility for permanent residence in most circumstances. However, it is acknowledged that there will at times be a need to make exemptions, such as for humanitarian reasons or addressing some specific elements of Australia's workforce needs. This would provide opportunity for universities to attract and retain highly qualified staff, particularly in specialised research areas.

UOW also encourages the careful consideration of other student visa related issues as part of the Inquiry, including the right of temporary visa holders to undertake work in Australia during and after the completion of their study in Australia. Providing clear communication about individuals' and their families' expectations to permanent residency after the completion of their studies in Australia would be extremely beneficial and address questions existing temporary visa holders have related to their future.

Incentivising international students to study at Australian higher education providers

According to Australia's Migration Trends 2019-20 Highlights³ around three-quarters of permanent residence places went to people who transitioned from a temporary visa, with 18.3 percent previously holding a student visa, and 18.1 percent a student graduate visa. This highlights the value of these temporary pathways to support Australia's permanent migration.

It is critical that Australia's skilled migration policy be underpinned by a simple, consistent visa system which helps ensure Australia remain competitive in the attraction of international students, and provide a simpler process by which to attract and retain key staff.

It is also important that there is greater consistency regarding Australia's skills shortages lists in order to help inform and give confidence to potential international students considering study in Australia, with the view to gaining post-study work rights. Currently, some occupation lists change too frequently, not giving prospective international student's confidence when making choices about which degree would enhance their chance of obtaining employment on the skilled shortages list at the completion of their study.

It is suggested that the Federal Government should explore linking migration policy with incentives to help Australian universities rebuild its international students market across a diverse country base by targeting our visa system more favourably to international student graduates who have completed their study at Australian universities. This would be a key component of Australia's post COVID recovery in terms of rebuilding Australia's skilled migration program. Equally, this would provide a more diverse international student sector.

Our University sector is world class and there is potential for our graduates, wherever they are from, to contribute to Australia's economic growth. Giving highly skilled and qualified international student graduates of Australian universities priority to skilled migration opportunities would be a powerful tool to attract the best talent to Australia. Students who have undertaken their study at an Australian university have already demonstrated a commitment to Australia and are well acquainted with Australian society and culture.

³ Australia's Migration Trends 2019-20 Highlights, Department of Home Affairs, Commonwealth of Australia, 2020, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/migration-trends-highlights-2019-20.PDF>

It is important that our migration policy supports the needs of existing and emerging, innovative industries and business to support Australia's job landscape post COVID-19. Skilled jobs lists must reflect employer and industry needs. To help achieve this, greater industry involvement in the identification of skill shortages and talent identification to fill these gaps is recommended. It is suggested that employers could work directly with universities to employ skilled migrants which meet their needs. Domestic students would continue to be given first preference for suitable employment opportunities, however this closer alignment between industry and education providers should help to match industry needs, as well as forge stronger relationships between industry and universities.

SUMMARY

UOW strongly supports a consistent and clear skilled migration policy to help enable the attraction of skilled migrants who can make a vital contribution to Australia's economy. Key points emphasised in this Submission include:

- UOW urges government to capitalise on the current opportunity which exists to refresh our migration policy and seize opportunity to develop policy which appeals to a wide country base as the global economy recovers from the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.
- Ensure consistency of government policy which supports and encourages an effective skilled migration program in Australia.
- Ensure the skills shortage list is kept consistent and reflects the needs of existing and emerging industries and business to support Australia's job landscape. This will help attract high quality skilled migrants.
- Ensure a simple, streamlined visa system with efficient processing, transparent, consistent and simplified processes and advice which appeals to potential students and other skilled migrants.
- Capitalise on Australia's higher education international student population to help deliver upon the government's skilled migration objectives post COVID-19 and provide incentives to help attract high quality students to study onshore at Australian universities.
- Government policy should encourage greater connectivity between industry and higher education providers to help achieve skilled migration objectives.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The University would welcome further opportunities to elaborate upon, or further clarify, the matters raised within this submission. To do so, please do not hesitate to contact the UOW Director, Government Relations (Mr Canio Fierravanti) on Ph - 42215931 or via Email - caniof@uow.edu.au.