

VISA SIMPLIFICATION: TRANSFORMING AUSTRALIA'S VISA SYSTEM

Response to the Policy Consultation Paper

September 2017

ABOUT RESEARCH AUSTRALIA

Our vision: Research Australia envisions a world where Australia unlocks the full potential of its world-leading health and medical research sector to deliver the best possible healthcare and global leadership in health innovation.

Our mission: To use our unique convening power to position health and medical research as a significant driver of a healthy population and contributor to a healthy economy.

Our goals:

Engage

Australia in a conversation about the health benefits and economic value of its investment in health and medical research.

Connect

researchers, funders and consumers to increase investment in health and medical research from all sources.

Influence

government policies that support effective health and medical research and its routine translation into evidence-based practices and better health outcomes.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS	4
INTRODUCTION	5
FUTURE PROSPERITY AND THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY	6
INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION IS KEY TO RESEARCH EXCELLENCE	6
INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE WORKERS IS A KEY DRIVER OF THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY	7
AUSTRALIA'S PLAN FOR INNOVATION REQUIRES GREATER INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT	8
A NEW AND SIMPLER VISA SYSTEM MUST SUPPORT THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY	10
PHDs: LOW RISK, HIGH OPPORTUNITY	10
OTHER QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE- COMMERCIALISATION.....	11
AGE RESTRICTIONS	11
CONCLUSION	12

Summary of recommendations

Australia must remain open to the permanent and temporary migration of researchers if we are to maximise the advantage available from global talent and enjoy the outcomes.

Any future simplified visa system must be flexible enough to cover circumstances where overseas researchers will be engaging in research in Australia but will not have an Australian employer sponsor. The length of time taken to obtain these types of visas must be improved to ensure that these opportunities are not lost due to administration backlogs for this specialist category. Improving processing times has to be a key objective of simplification.

A future visa system must facilitate the international mobility of knowledge workers.

The Government's 2030 Plan and the Visa system review have a shared objective of improving Australia's economy and society. The 2030 Plan must feature prominently in the future transformation of Australia's visa system if these common objectives are to be achieved.

Subject to normal background checks and integrity measures such as verifying that the PhD has been awarded and is from a reputable institution, there should be a presumption that visa applicants with a PhD will be allowed entry to Australia.

Age limits and restrictions should not be applied to individuals with PhDs and/or with expertise in commercialisation, particularly where they have an employer sponsor and/or the application is for temporary residency.

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RESPONSE TO THE POLICY CONSULTATION PAPER

Introduction

Research Australia welcomes the Government's review of Australia's visa system and is pleased to have this opportunity to respond to the consultation paper.

Research Australia represents the whole pipeline of health and medical research and innovation, from the new ideas that power basic research through to the application of this knowledge to improve human health. It is an important part of the knowledge economy, which is reliant on new ideas, discoveries, new ways of looking at things and doing things to drive economic progress. While health and medical research and innovation is the focus of this submission, much of what we submit is equally applicable to the broader scientific, research and innovation sectors, in other words applicable to the knowledge economy generally.

The changes in April this year to occupation lists for temporary work visas have highlighted the ongoing sensitivities about both temporary and permanent migration and how important both temporary and permanent migration are to Australia's knowledge economy. While our world is becoming increasingly reliant on electronic forms of communication, the capacity of people to travel from one country to another for the exchange of knowledge and expertise remains essential. And this traffic is two way. We need to consider the implications that changes to our visa system have for the capacity of foreign knowledge and expertise to be brought to Australia, but also the implications any restrictions could have in the mid to long term for the reciprocation of opportunities to Australians to travel and work overseas, and to then bring the latest and best knowledge and skills back to Australia with them.

Research Australia agrees with the view expressed in the consultation paper that we need a visa system that is more responsive to our economic, social and security interests, and our submission addresses actions that can be taken to ensure these interests through maintaining Australia's participation in the global knowledge economy.

Our submission has not sought to answer all the questions posed in the Policy Consultation paper. We have sought to address the following questions as they relate to our membership and the sector we represent:

- **What factors should we consider when simplifying the visa system?**
- **What role does the visa system play in ensuring Australia remains attractive to the best and brightest temporary and permanent residents?**

Future prosperity and the knowledge economy

There is an increasing recognition that Australia's future and our ability to maintain and enhance our current living standards are dependent on our ability to participate in the global knowledge economy. This imperative is at the heart of initiatives such as the Australian Government's National Innovation and Science Agenda.

Health and medical research and innovation is at the centre of the global knowledge economy. It embraces a range of different disciplines including biology, physiology, pharmacology, chemistry, engineering, biotechnology, epidemiology, medicine, psychology, nursing, allied health, population studies, IT, mathematics, economics and health services research.

It draws on our knowledge of the human body and the world around us to find ways to cure and prevent disease, reduce injury and disability, improve the delivery of health services and help us to lead longer, healthier lives. It is innovation that takes this new knowledge and applies it to the development of new drugs, procedures and therapies; to influencing behaviour to improve health; and to making our health services more effective and efficient.

International collaboration is key to research excellence

In many areas of health and medical research, as in scientific research more generally, collaboration is becoming increasingly important. In part this reflects the increasing complexity of the research being undertaken and the convergence of different disciplines. No one individual, discipline or indeed nation, possesses all the knowledge, skills and expertise that are required; collaboration is essential.

Furthermore, scientific research and the knowledge and skills possessed by top scientists and researchers are increasingly specialised, with relatively few people worldwide at the forefront of knowledge in any particular field. For an Australian scientist at the forefront in their field, the other scientists he or she needs to engage with to advance their work are likely to be based overseas. This is borne out by OECD data, which shows that scientific institutions with high levels of international collaboration produce research with the most impact.¹

While Australian institutions fare reasonably well in the OECD data in terms of the impact of our research and the percentage of international collaborations, our performance on both measures still lags that of institutions in countries such as Great Britain, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

Canada has a population half as large again as Australia. The Netherlands has a population approximately 5 million fewer than Australia, while Sweden, Denmark and Belgium are all less than half our size. This suggests that international collaborations are important for relatively small countries. (The USA achieves a high level of impact with a relatively lower level of international collaborations, potentially attributable to the significant scope for intranational collaborations within the USA because of the size of its research sector.)

International collaboration is especially important to countries with smaller populations like Australia because our size prevents us from undertaking research in every possible field in health and medical research or any other field of science.

International collaboration also enables local expertise in particular areas to combine with other, complementary areas of expertise that exist internationally to undertake research that cannot be undertaken solely in Australia. For example, developing a treatment for Multiple Sclerosis is the objective of a collaboration between Australian and Greek researchers. It uses a unique biochemical delivery system developed by Australian researchers to deliver specific peptides developed by Greek researchers into the T

¹ OECD, 2015, *Science Technology and Industry Scoreboard 2015*, pp.130-131, Stat Link <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933273878>

cells of MS patients. The aim is to stop the T cells attacking the myelin sheaths surrounding the central nervous system.²

Promoting collaboration between institutions both nationally and internationally is an important means of raising the quality and impact of Australian health and medical research.

While the growth in international collaboration has undoubtedly been facilitated by improvements in technology, a degree of face to face interaction is essential to fostering an environment of trust and facilitating the communication. There is also the practical requirement of researchers collaborating on site to conduct experiments. On site collaboration also expands the opportunities for interaction with other researchers and the widening of research networks. **Research Australia submits that Australia must remain open to the permanent and temporary migration of researchers if we are to maximise the advantage available from global talent and enjoy the outcomes.** Put simply, we cannot achieve innovation in a global vacuum. The ability of international researchers to visit and work at Australian research institutions for periods of time is vital to further developing as well as maintaining Australian international collaboration. Again, there is the reciprocity principle here. And there is plenty of scope to improve Australia's performance in this regard. In 2012, Australia was ranked 23rd out of 40 nations for the percentage of international collaborations in scientific publications.³

International collaboration and specialist research facilities

In 2016, the Australian Government commissioned an expert panel led by Australia's Chief Scientist Dr Alan Finkel to develop a Roadmap for the future development and funding of national research infrastructure. Handed to Government in early 2017, the Roadmap emphasises the importance of developing world-leading infrastructure in Australia and of participating in international research infrastructure projects such as the Square Kilometre Array.⁴ One of the key benefits is the opportunities that participation in these projects provide for Australian scientists to use overseas facilities and for overseas scientists, in turn to utilise Australian facilities, such as the Australian Synchrotron. This type of reciprocity also invites the potential for investment in these significant pieces of equipment as is seen by international investment in the Australian Synchrotron.

These programs necessarily involve overseas scientists visiting Australia on short term and other types of visas to utilise Australian based facilities. **Any future simplified visa system must be flexible enough to cover these circumstances and other situations where overseas researchers will be engaging in research in Australia but will not have an Australian employer sponsor. The length of time taken to obtain these types of visas must be improved to ensure that these opportunities are not lost due to administration backlogs for this specialist category. Improving processing times has to be a key objective of simplification.**

International mobility of knowledge workers is a key driver of the knowledge economy

Collaboration across borders is not the only characteristic of research excellence. Having invested heavily in studying the drivers of science and innovation globally, the OECD has concluded that *'International mobility among highly educated individuals at different stages of their personal development and professional careers constitutes a key driver of knowledge circulation worldwide.'*

This international mobility is particularly important to Australia; our science, and our knowledge economy more broadly are more reliant on immigration than most countries. For many Australian researchers, the best

² <http://stories.scienceinpublic.com.au/2017/t-cells-ms-trial/#more-9653>

³ OECD, 2015, *Science Technology and Industry Scoreboard 2015*, p.130 Stat Link <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933273861>

⁴ Australian Government, 2016 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap.

opportunities in their field for collaboration and advancement lie overseas. Similarly, many overseas researchers find their best opportunities to advance their research lie in Australia. OECD data shows that in 2011, 48.3% of all Australian resident doctorate holders were foreign born, placing us fourth out of 28 countries, behind Luxembourg, New Zealand and Canada.⁵ **In a sector that is so heavily dependent on international mobility this is a good thing, and any future visa system must facilitate this movement.**

The OECD has investigated the movement of scientists around the world by looking at scientific publications and the changes in institutions with which the author is affiliated. The top 40 largest movements include from the USA to Australia (8th) and from Great Britain to Australia (11th). And while the exchange is weighted in Australia's favour, it is not all one way; there are smaller but still significant numbers of Australians moving to institutions in the USA and Britain over the same period.⁶

International bilateral flows of scientific authors 1996-2013

USA to Australia	7166
Australia to USA	6193
Great Britain to Australia	5859
Australia to Great Britain	3862

These numbers include both permanent and temporary residence. The most striking thing about these statistics is that in the context of Australia's overall migration, the absolute numbers, spanning a 17-year period, are relatively small. The net gain to Australia over the entire period is a little less than 3000.

Australia's plan for innovation requires greater international engagement

In 2016, the Commonwealth Government tasked Innovation and Science Australia with developing a strategic plan to position Australia as a leading innovation nation by 2030. The vision outlined for this Plan has significant national implications for Australia's economy and society:

We want an Australia counted within the top tier of innovation nations, known and respected for its excellence in science, research and commercialisation. Innovation, which can underpin a diversity of internationally competitive industries, will enable today's and future generations to have meaningful work, and a great quality of life, in a fair and inclusive society.⁷

One of the six challenges outlined in the Issues Paper is particularly relevant to consideration of the Australian Visa system of the future.

'Challenge 5, Maximising advantage from international knowledge, talent and capital'

To nurture and enhance our innovation, science and research system Australia must seek to gain maximum advantage from international talent, knowledge and capital flows and global value chain engagement.

⁵ OECD Science Technology and Industry Scoreboard 2015, p.126 and Stat Link <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933273813>

⁶ OECD Science Technology and Industry Scoreboard 2015, p.128 and Stat Link <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933273839>

⁷ Innovation and Science Australia 2017, 2030 Issues paper, page 3

The Issues Paper envisages that by 2030 Australia is a preferred destination of choice for international talent, including researchers, entrepreneurs and start-up founders.

*'How we position Australia as an attractive and welcoming destination; the actions we take to ensure this positioning is authentic; and the practical measures we have in place to facilitate these flows will be critical for our ongoing success in the global competition for capital and talent... To help us build on national strengths and fill capability gaps, we may choose to focus our talent and capital attraction activity on specific sectors, capabilities or system infrastructure and enablers... Australia can add value to its knowledge through more widespread international partnerships in research and business. Creating and taking opportunities for Australian researchers to collaborate internationally, including through taking advantage of our links in Asian growth markets, will stimulate the flow of ideas and innovation.'*⁸

As part of our submission in response to the 2030 Plan Issues paper, Research Australia noted the increasing research collaborations between Australia's universities and research institutes and their Chinese and Indian counterparts.

*'The (2030 Plan) Issues Paper notes the rise of China and India as a megatrend. This megatrend has been evident for a decade or more in higher education in the increasing numbers of international students from these and other countries in the Asia Pacific region. More recently it is becoming evident in increasing research collaborations between Australia's universities and research institutes and their Chinese and Indian counterparts. When it comes to research and innovation, this is a megatrend from which Australia can benefit. As part of the 2030 Strategic Plan we need to further and rapidly develop Australia's existing ties with research programs in India, China and the Asia Pacific more broadly, and build on programs such as the Australia- India Strategic Research Fund, the Australia-China Science and Research Fund and The New Colombo Plan.'*⁹

*We also need to investigate how we can do more to develop links within our region in respect of innovation, including making better use of regional supply chains and the opportunities for two-way investment in emerging technologies. In this way, we can build on our increasing research ties to meet the needs of Asia Pacific populations in response to merging challenges such as climate change, energy and food security and ageing populations, as well as emerging markets being driven by increased prosperity.'*¹⁰

The Government's 2030 Plan and the Visa system review have a shared objective of improving Australia's economy and society. The 2030 Plan must feature prominently in the future transformation of Australia's visa system if these common objectives are to be achieved.

⁸ Innovation and Science Australia 2017, 2030 Issues paper, page 10

⁹ <http://www.science.gov.au/international/CollaborativeOpportunities/Pages/default.aspx>

¹⁰ Research Australia 2017, <http://researchaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/RA-Submission-FINAL.pdf>

A new and simpler visa system must support the knowledge economy

If we are to succeed in an increasingly global knowledge economy we need a visa system that facilitates the entry to Australia of the key workers in the global knowledge economy on both a temporary and permanent basis in an efficient and timely way with due deference to process and related matters, but without the burden of unnecessary red tape.

PhDs: low risk, high opportunity

The elite levels of the knowledge economy are dominated by individuals with a profound and deep knowledge in a particular field coupled with the skills needed to explore, analyse and explain the world around us and to adapt it to meet our needs. These capabilities are typically reflected in the attainment of an academic qualification: a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). While the numbers of individuals with a PhD is growing, they remain a tiny minority of the world's population. In economic terms they are a valuable and scarce resource and are highly attractive to both developed and developing economies.

As either temporary or permanent migrants, individuals with a PhD are a low risk, high opportunity proposition for Australia. Individuals with PhDs have highly prized skills and the absolute numbers of people with PhDs worldwide are relatively low. Consequently, they have low levels of unemployment and good international employment prospects; there is little prospect of Australia being 'inundated' with PhD qualified migrants. Any redesign of the Australian visa system should give a very high weighting to the PhD qualification and should provide a streamlined process for both temporary and permanent entry to Australia by applicants with a PhD, particularly where there is an employer sponsor or equivalent, e.g. a sponsor organising a speaking engagement or a provider of an Australian research facility.

If the emphasis in the redesign of the visa system is on simplicity, focus should simply be on the existent PhD qualification without worrying about what discipline the applicant is trained in or how much work experience they have (particularly if they have a sponsor). While not all individuals with PhDs will bring the same economic and social benefits, they are a relatively small cohort. Differentiating between individuals with PhDs based on their discipline or work experience will add a level of complexity that may not be justified by the small number of individuals that would be excluded by such a process and the delay in processing of applications it would entail. It should be possible to model different screening processes for particular types of PhDs to determine the overall effect of such measures on the numbers of PhD applicants granted entry and whether further screening would be justified on a cost/benefit basis.

Research Australia submits that subject to normal background checks and integrity measures such as verifying that the PhD has been awarded and is from a reputable institution, there should be a presumption that visa applicants with a PhD will be allowed entry to Australia.

Other qualifications and experience- commercialisation

In 2016, Innovation and Science Australia published the 'Performance Review of the Australian Science, Innovation and Research System'. It concluded that Australia was above the world's average in knowledge creation but below world average in the transfer and application of knowledge.¹¹

Addressing this deficiency in the transfer and application of knowledge is the target of Australian Government policy in the National Innovation and Science Agenda and a range of programs including the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science's Commercialisation Program, the Biomedical Translation Fund, and the CSIRO's On Innovation Program.

Australia has a well recognised shortage of people with the specialised commercialisation experience and connections needed to take research discoveries to market.¹² To date, this has meant that Australian discoveries are not fully exploited, or that they leave our shores at an early stage of development, licensed to overseas companies. We have the potential to turn this around so that more of the economic value is captured in Australia. More investments are being made domestically to bring innovations to market but we continue to be hampered by a shortage of senior business and innovation leaders with the necessary skills.

To some extent we can meet this need by enticing Australians back from overseas. Recent examples include Dr Larry Marshall who has returned to lead CSIRO after extensive commercial and entrepreneurial experience in the USA, and Dr Glenn C Begley, the new CEO at Melbourne-based BioCurate, who has had an extensive career in research and commercialisation, including working at Amgen and other biopharmaceutical companies in the USA.

However, demand for these skills currently exceed the domestic supply, and we need to ensure that we can attract non-Australians who are highly skilled and experienced innovation professionals to Australia to drive desired levels of innovation and share their expertise with Australians, both formally and by way of example.

Commercialisation expertise is not so readily evidenced by an academic qualification; it is more dependent on a range of knowledge and skills that is acquired through experience, working at senior levels within companies and organisations that bring new products to market. Many of these are management and business skills, but with a particular focus on commercialisation or high impact translation.

This requires a visa application process that can identify the required attributes and experience and cannot be as reliant on academic qualifications. In the commercialisation of science based discoveries and innovation, commercialisation expertise is often but not always coupled with a PhD, reflecting a career path that has started with research practice and moved to the commercialisation of discoveries.

Such a visa assessment process will necessarily be more difficult and Research Australia is willing to participate in the further development of appropriate selection and eligibility criteria.

Age restrictions

The age restrictions and limitations in the current visa system assume that an individual who is older has less to offer Australia, and is at greater risk of being a net economic drain on the Australian health and welfare systems.

While this is potentially true of the migrant population as a whole, it is not as applicable to workers in the knowledge economy. The economic contribution to Australia of knowledge workers is less dependent on the wages they earn and the tax they pay, and is determined more by the new knowledge and products they create, as reflected in the revenues of the companies they establish and/or lead. Within teams and

¹¹ Innovation and Science Australia 2016, 'Performance Review of the Australian Science, Innovation and Research System' pp. xii-xiv

¹² Australian Government, Boosting the commercial returns from research, November 2014

workplaces their contribution is frequently disproportionately great, particularly where it leads to the creation of new knowledge which otherwise would not exist, or to the commercial success of new products which would otherwise not be developed. The economic value of the individual's contribution increases with age, and comes from:

- their involvement at the most senior levels in innovative companies and research organisations, in the public and private sectors, across different settings;
- their ability to bridge the gaps between research and innovation; and
- the international networks and connections they bring and share.

This can be especially true of knowledge workers seeking to come to Australia from overseas. They can bring skills, knowledge and experience that cannot be acquired here, because that science is not undertaken here, or because we do not have successful companies in that market segment. Their networks are also unique and can be used to expand the networks of, and opportunities for the Australians they work with.

Research Australia submits that age limits and restrictions should not be applied to individuals with PhDs and/or with expertise in commercialisation, particularly where they have an employer sponsor and/or the application is for temporary residency.

Conclusion

An effective visa system that serves Australia's interests is critical to our future prosperity and security. Research Australia represents Australia's health and medical research and innovation sector; a sector that is part of a global endeavour and a potential source of great national advantage. Realising the potential of Australian health and medical research and innovation requires us to be open to the world, to collaborate with the world's best and utilise their expertise to ensure that Australian research discoveries lead to new medicines, devices and therapies that improve health outcomes around the world. Reform of Australia's visa system can make a significant contribution to realising this potential.

A visa system that best serves Australia's national interests evaluates the risk of permitting an individual to enter Australia **and** the opportunities for Australia their entry provides, and views each appropriately through a broad lens rather than a narrow focus.

It is a visa system that facilitates scientific collaboration and enables Australia to draw on the world's best innovators to both drive and skill our own desired highly successful knowledge economy. Such a visa system would be a significant advantage in a highly competitive global skills marketplace with high impact individuals who are willing to participate and contribute to our domestic environment.

Research Australia recognises that this is only the preliminary stage of transforming Australia's visa system and looks forward to providing more substantive responses to specific proposals and directions as they emerge over the course of the review.

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