# AUSTRALIA'S EXPERIMENT WITH TWO-STEP STUDENT MIGRATION

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## ABSTRACT

The past decade has coincided with extraordinary growth in international student migration to Australia. By mid 2010, over 610,000 students were enrolled, large numbers of whom planned to convert to permanent resident status through "two-step migration". While international students were initially presumed to face minimal employment barriers (having self-funded to meet employer requirements), the reality has proven more complex. While impressive employment and labour market mobility rates are achieved through the study-migration pathway at 6 and 18 months, perverse study-migration incentives have also evolved. Addressing these, the Australian Labor government has introduced radical policy change in the past 3 years, which has markedly reduced students' economic category share (from 62% to 35%). From July 2011, additional changes to selection will favour older native English speakers qualified with bachelor or higher degrees. International student demand for Canada seems certain to grow in consequence, in a context where students have become highly discerning consumers – researching global options to secure the optimal study, migration and employment outcomes.

Australia is a global exemplar of nation-building through government planned and administered skilled, family and humanitarian migration programs. By 2006, it included the world's highest percentage of foreign-born residents (24 percent of the population), followed by New Zealand (23 percent), Canada (20 percent), and the US (11 percent). As in Canada, unprecedented numbers of migrants in the recent decade have been skilled – a process intensified by sustained economic boom. By 2006, 57% of all degree-qualified information technology professionals in Australia were overseas-born, compared to 52% of engineers, 45% of doctors, 41% of accountants and 25% of nurses. Disproportionate numbers had been selected in the previous 5 years (across all categories), at a time when economic migration constituted 60% of total intakes. Women's participation has increased as principal applicants, and the fields of accounting and computing have dominated. Most strikingly however, a growing proportion of recent economic migrants have been sourced in Australia rather than offshore.

Since 1999, the great majority of those selected have been former international students, following the removal of a three year eligibility bar. From 2002, these applicants were permitted to apply onshore - ideally placed to secure the required 115-120 points if they possessed a recognised vocation-related degree (60 points[1]), were aged between 18 and 29 years (30 points), had advanced English language ability (20 points, with testing exempted), and an Australian qualification of 2 years in a field on the Migration Occupation in Demand List. By the time of Australia's 2006 skilled migration review, students applying to migrate had a 99% chance of being selected, unless they failed health or character checks[2]. Scope for skilled migration had fuelled the development of new international student markets, while transforming the sector and discipline of student demand. Within this process, the migration and export education programs had become inextricably linked, representing a potential 'win-win' for Australia.

By 2008, international students were generating $A26.7 billion per year, in a context where the industry had emerged as Australia's third largest, and the first for the state of Victoria[3]. In August that year, 474,389 international students were enrolled in Australian tertiary, vocational education and training (VET), English language or school courses, including substantial numbers located offshore. (See Table 1.) There were 432,678 resident international students in Australia, with China (119,786) and India (72,314) the dominant groups, followed by the Republic of South Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam. By June 2010, international student enrolments stood at 630,000, profoundly influencing Australia's net population growth[4]. As noted by Vertovec, 'The movement of students should be seen as an integral part of transnational migration systems, not least because the networks they forge often lay the tracks of future skilled labour circulation'[5].

**TABLE 1: Total International Student Enrolments in Australia (August 2008)**

| NATIONALITY | ENROLMENTS | PERCENT OF TOTAL | GROWTH SINCE AUGUST 2007 |
|---|---|---|---|
| China | 112,172 | 23.6% | 18.8% |
| India | 80,291 | 16.9% | 47.4% |
| Republic of Korea | 31,667 | 6.7% | 3.6% |
| Malaysia | 20,449 | 4.3% | 6.3% |
| Thailand | 18,564 | 3.9% | 9.8% |
| Hong Kong | 16,827 | 3.5% | -5.0% |
| Nepal | 14,605 | 3.1% | 101.8% |
| Indonesia | 14,071 | 3.0% | 4.1% |
| Vietnam | 13,367 | 2.8% | 62.7% |
| Brazil | 12,493 | 2.6% | 26.4% |
| Other nationalities | 139,883 | 29.5% | 9.2% |
| **Total enrolments** | **474,389** | **100.0%** | **18.5%** |

Source: Australian Education International data accessed December 2008

This phenomenon of 'two-step' student migration is one proliferating world-wide. The majority of OECD countries are in the process of:

1. Developing migration categories designed to attract and retain skilled workers;
2. Monitoring and replicating successful competitor models, including mechanisms for selection and control;
3. Expanding temporary entry options, targeting international students and employer-sponsored workers;
4. Facilitating student and worker transition from temporary to extended or permanent resident status, supported by priority processing and uncapped migration categories;
5. Combining government-driven with employer-driven strategies;
6. Creating regional settlement incentives designed to attract skilled migrants, supported by lower entry requirements and policy input from local governments and/or employers; and
7. Supporting the above strategies through sustained and increasingly innovative global promotion strategies[6].

Between 2005 and 2007, Australia secured impressive outcomes from its economic migration program in global terms. At 6 months post-migration, 83% of principal applicants (PAs) were employed or self-employed (around half new graduates seeking their first job, and of Asian rather than English-speaking background origin). Work satisfaction at this time was fairly high, with the fields of computing, accounting, engineering, nursing, and business & management predominating. PAs from English speaking background countries fared particularly well, securing early employment rates of 92-97%, followed by strong integration rates for migrants derived from Europe and India.

Within the early settlement period, birthplace groups at risk of employment disadvantage were found to be highly protected by the study-migration pathway. For example, 74% of onshore PAs from China were working at 6 months compared to 53% of comparable offshore migrants. Very positive effects were also found for North African/ Middle East and Commonwealth-Asian migrants (See Table 2) By 18 months post-migration, 85% of PAs in Australia were employed, with a further 4% conducting businesses. Seventy per cent stated they were working in their preferred occupation (rising from 53% at 6 months). Job mobility was impressive and salary levels had improved markedly (34% of PAs changing positions, typically to seek more highly skilled work and/or better remuneration). Just 18% had been out of work in the previous year (typically for a few months), with welfare dependence negligible.

Challenges as well as benefits, however, were found to be associated with student migration. In 2008-09, former students constituted just 35% of economic intakes compared to 62% a few years before. What caused this change in selection patterns?

As established by Australia's 2006 skilled migration review, former international students achieved inferior early labour market outcomes to offshore PAs. Despite near identical proportions being employed at 6 months (83% compared to 82%), they were characterised by annual

salaries of $A20,000 less and lower job satisfaction. They were also far less likely to use their qualifications in work (46% compared to 63% of offshore principal applicants). A number of contributory factors were identified in relation to this, most notably: students' modest English ability, inadequate quality control of Australia's rapidly emerging private vocational training sector (providing migration-aligned courses), compromised academic entry and progression standards, and the extraordinary level of cultural and linguistic enclosure of international students enrolled in such programs. (By definition early employment outcomes also reflected former students' youth, and recent qualification status.)

Responding to such concerns since 2006, successive Australian governments have taken steps to refine the economic migration program to enhance former students' employment readiness, while removing perverse study-migration incentives. Collectively, the impact of

**TABLE 2: Skilled Migrants' Employment Outcomes 6 Months Post-Migration, LSIA 3 Wave 1 by Birthplace and Visa Category (2006)**

| BIRTHPLACE | INDEPENDENT VISA CATEGORY | EMPLOYED | UNEMPLOYED | NILF* | TOTAL NUMBER | STATISTICS (A) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ESB | Onshore | 86.7 | 7.2 | 6.0 | 83 | |
| | Offshore | 92.9 | 1.8 | 5.3 | 169 | |
| | Other (c) | 83.4 | 4.4 | 12.2 | 1731 | 14.86** |
| Commonwealth-Asia (exc. India) | Onshore | 84.5 | 8.2 | 7.3 | 452 | |
| | Offshore | 77.6 | 14.1 | 8.2 | 85 | |
| | Other | 56.8 | 20.8 | 22.5 | 525 | 93.54*** |
| China (d) | Onshore | 74.8 | 10.9 | 14.3 | 357 | |
| | Offshore | 54.7 | 27.4 | 17.9 | 95 | |
| | Other | 47.6 | 20.7 | 31.7 | 801 | 81.71*** |
| India | Onshore | 92.2 | 7.3 | 0.6 | 179 | |
| | Offshore | 91.1 | 5.9 | 3.0 | 101 | |
| | Other | 64.4 | 20.1 | 15.4 | 402 | 70.3*** |
| Other Asia (e) | Onshore | 87.6 | 6.9 | 5.6 | 540 | |
| | Offshore | 80.0 | 12.2 | 7.8 | 90 | |
| | Other | 51.4 | 18.4 | 30.1 | 1829 | 247.8*** |
| Europe (f) | Onshore | 91.2 | 5.3 | 3.5 | 57 | |
| | Offshore | 91.7 | 5.6 | 2.8 | 36 | |
| | Other | 65.3 | 13.2 | 21.5 | 939 | 26.9*** |
| North Africa/ Middle East | Onshore | 89.5 | 10.5 | | 19 | |
| | Offshore | 71.4 | | 28.6 | 7 | |
| | Other | 40.0 | 25.5 | 34.5 | 592 | 22.4*** (g) |
| Other | Onshore | 89.8 | 3.4 | 6.8 | 86 | |
| | Offshore | 90.0 | 6.7 | 3.3 | 60 | |
| | Other | 63.7 | 15.5 | 20.9 | 575 | 38.39*** |
| **Total** | Onshore | 84.9 | 7.9 | 7.2 | 1776 | |
| | Offshore | 82.6 | 10.0 | 7.5 | 643 | |
| | Other | 61.4 | 15.3 | 23.3 | 7395 | 449.91*** |

Source: Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia 3 Wave 1, Department of Immigration and Citizenship data (provided to the author 2008)

(a) Chi-square unless otherwise stated df=6, *<0.05 ** <0.01 *** <0.001;

(b) ESB = Australia/ New Zealand/ Eire/ UK/ Canada/ USA/ South Africa

(c) Other = Other skill migration categories, including employer sponsored, state/ territory sponsored and business categories (with lower qualifications required)

(d) Excludes Hong Kong/ Macau

(e) Indonesia/ Philippines/ Japan/ South Korea/ South-Central Asia

(f) Excludes Eire/ UK

(g) Fisher's exact test * <0.05 ** <0.01 *** <0.001

*Not in labour force

these measures is now profound. From September 2007, exemptions from English testing were no longer automatically allowed, given the impossibility of policing education provider standards[7]. International English Language Testing (IELTS) 6 became the threshold economic category 'competence' score across all 4 skills (increased from IELTS 5). Significant bonus points were introduced for 'proficient' English (25 points for candidates rated at IELTS 7 or above), with English rather than a Migration Occupation in Demand (MODL) becoming the key determinant of points-based selection. Higher points were awarded to graduates with advanced qualifications: most notably those possessing doctoral degrees (25 points) or 3 year qualifications (15 points). Liberalised access to post-course visas was introduced, allowing students an additional 18 months to upgrade their skills for economic selection ('gain skilled work experience; improve their English language skills; or undertake a Professional Year' related to field of study[8]).

Following 11 years of conservative rule, the Rudd Labor government was elected in November 2007. Refinement of the study-migration pathway became an early priority. International student enrolments in Australia's vocational education and training sector had grown 51% that year, while tertiary sector growth had slowed to 8%. (See Table 3.) The problem of institutional quality control was intensifying – an unanticipated consequence of Australia allocating up to 20 bonus points to skilled applicants with qualifications on the MODL, in the context of sustained economic boom. Diploma and certificate level trades had been added to this list in unprecedented numbers: 47 by 2007, compared to just 3 in 2002. Private training colleges had responded rapidly to this opportunity, including registered training organizations described in the course of the skilled migration review as 'wily entrepreneurial players who exist solely to funnel international students into skilled migration'. Indian students had proven the most immediately responsive - 36,045 enrolled in vocational courses by June 2008, compared to just 1,827 six years earlier[9]. Lack of quality assurance could risk such students being 'treated as commodities in a marketplace that charges top dollar for low-grade education and training', in what appeared to some critics as a 'government-sanctioned racket'.[10]

From 2008 the Rudd government took sustained steps to address these issues, its aim being to restore integrity to the study-migration pathway. A review was commissioned of the work outcomes achieved by former international students across eight professions and trades, including assessment of the attributes employers sought. Released late 2009, this study affirmed English to be the critical determinant of early employment, supported by a high degree of acculturation – native English speakers or PAs speaking English very well being 4 times more likely to be employed at 18 months than those with poor English[11].

A review of quality assurance in Australia's export education industry was undertaken, in a context where the industry was defined as 'at a crossroad', with global damage perceived to have been done to both 'reputation and brand'. The report's recommendations (released February 2010) affirmed the need for enhanced quality, accountability, and governance across all education sectors. Perverse study-migration incentives were to be removed, including 'cheap courses delivered to allow students to work more', supported by 'vertical integration of agents, providers, employers and landlords exploiting international students'[12].

**TABLE 3: New International Student Commencements by Australian Education Sector (August 2006 and 2007)**

| EDUCATION SECTOR | AUGUST 2006 | AUGUST 2007 | CHANGE % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Higher education | 64,230 | 69,238 | 7.8% |
| Vocation and Technical Education (VET) | 38,023 | 57,328 | 50.8% |
| ELICOS | 38,190 | 53,446 | 39.9% |
| Schools | 9,790 | 12,241 | 25.0% |
| Non-award and other | 20,608 | 21,224 | 3.0% |
| **Total** | **170,841** | **213,477** | **25.0%** |

Source: 'Monthly Summary of International Student Enrolment Data—Australia', Australian Education International, Department of Education Science and Training, September 2007 (Media Release)

Substantial change to Australia's economic migration policy direction was foreshadowed as early as December 2008. First, a two-stage review of the Migration Occupations in Demand List was undertaken (2009), commenced with the release of two issues papers. The first proposed the MODL should 'target skills of high economic value' designed to 'complement domestic skills supply'. The second placed as its centerpiece 'a proposal to develop a Future Skills List (which) would advantage applicants with high value skills in areas of future need for the Australian economy', through the acquisition of additional points under the economic category points test or by according processing priority. This latter measure heralded a seismic policy shift[13].

By May 2009, just three trade occupations featured on Australia's interim Critical Skills List – one now dominated by university-qualified health, engineering and IT professions. The study-migration pipeline was utterly transformed, at a time when tens of thousands of international students were enrolled in low grade vocational courses they had assumed (frequently on the basis of private agent advice) to guarantee

permanent resident status. (For example 66% of recent Indian students had migrated, compared to 38% of those from China.) From January 2010, skilled onshore applicants were required to sit a 'jobs ready' test to check that they had the skills being claimed[14]. The economic program was downsized from a 2009-2010 target of 133,500 to 108,100, in response to the global financial crisis[15]. International student distress became pronounced, intensified by a spate of physical attacks, and the sudden collapse of a range of low-grade financially marginal private colleges.

In May 2010, a new Skilled Occupation List (SOL) was announced. Virtually all health professions were featured, along with the engineering, IT and accounting fields (despite the problem of accountancy over-supply in recent years). Multiple trades were reinstated to the list – the majority, it is important to note, favouring offshore migrants qualified through classic apprenticeship training. Rank order for processing became the new economic category paradigm, a process bypassing points-based assessment. Employer and State/Territory nomination offered the best and fastest options (ranked 1 to 3 in priority)[16]. Places for Independent migrants shrank – processed fourth if they had an occupation on the Skilled Occupation List. Unsponsored applicants, or those not qualified in priority fields, were advised they could expect processing delays of 3 or more years, many now having no future prospect of selection.

A points test review was initiated in 2010, following the MODL review, the goal being to assess selection factors likely to deliver high level outcomes. According to the discussion paper, future points-based selection '… should contribute to the selection of applicants who offer the most human capital and will therefore make the optimal contribution to Australia's demographic and economic outcomes[17]'. The government was confident in meeting these objectives early in 2010. Economic category applications had far exceeded available places for years, by then standing at 'record high levels'. Demand had grown, 'despite increasingly tighter targeting of the program and changes to policy settings such as higher English language requirements and more stringent requirements for study in Australia'[18]. While trade migration would be maintained, the aim of points-based selection was to secure 'well qualified and experienced' tradespeople qualified overseas 'with good English'. The paper signalled the potential consequences of this for students:

> *The current weighting of the Points Test factors leads to perverse outcomes such as the situation where a Harvard qualified environmental scientist with three years relevant work experience would fail the Points Test, while an overseas student who completes a 92 week course in a 60 point occupation would, with one year's experience, pass[19].*

Australia's study-migration pathway was thus being transformed, at a time when few international students had factored policy shifts into planning. Moreover, Rudd's replacement as Prime Minister in June 2010 was followed by an election campaign in which the interim Prime Minister (Julia Gillard) and the Leader of the Opposition (Tony Abbott) signalled their interest in a 'smaller' rather than a rapidly growing Australia. Fraud scrutiny of students was tightened at this time (as in the UK). New financial compliance requirements were introduced for select countries, including for the major Australian student sources - India and China[20]. Combined, such measures exacerbated student distress at a time when the affordability of Australian courses was jeopardised by the growing strength of the dollar. (In October 2010, it reached parity with US currency when the US and the UK were intensifying their competition for Asian markets.)

In August 2010, offshore visas for international students were reported to have fallen by a third, while demand for vocational sector courses had plummeted (-59%). New Indian student enrolments were in rapid decline (-77%)[21]. According to one prominent academic, 'International student numbers could halve over the next four years unless the incoming government changes the immigration settings', in a context where the toughening of student visa processing was viewed as 'the greatest single operating cause… Applications face longer delays, and the conditions under which you get a visa are harder to meet'[22]. The latest available Australian Bureau of Statistics data confirm the significance of these policy impacts. According to a 30 September 2010 analysis, following years of exceptionally high growth:

> *Australia's population growth is in free fall, with net immigration slumping 37 per cent year on year in the March quarter to its lowest level in years … Most of that fall was in the last six months, after the Rudd government closed the back door allowing foreign students in low-level courses to stay on as permanent migrants[23].*

Despite these trends, it is clear international students were responding immediately to Australia's new skilled migration requirements (as had been the case from 1999). Application trends for the year to July 2010 showed 10% growth in demand for university courses, compared to just 1% for vocational sector fields - a sharp reversal of patterns a few years earlier[24].

In November 2010, Australia released the outcomes of its skilled migration points test review[25]. Major policy changes will be implemented from July 2011. In the future 65 points (rather than 120) will be required. Key measures are as follows:

- *Occupation*: In marked contrast to recent practice, no points will be allocated to applicants with an occupation in demand (a qualification on the Skilled Occupation List introduced in July 2010 representing a hurdle rather than a points-rewarded requirement).
- *English*: No points will be allocated for either meeting the threshold English language requirement of IELTS 6 or equivalent. By contrast, 20 points will be allocated to applicants with IELTS 8 (near native speaker level) and 10 points to PAs with IELTS 7 – English becoming the key determinant of selection.
- *Place and level of qualification*: Minimal advantage will flow from possession of Australian qualifications (just 5 bonus points). Instead, level of qualification will be rewarded - 20 points for a PhD, 15 for a Bachelor or Masters degree, and 10 for a vocational qualification (regardless of study location).
- *Age*: Eligibility for economic migration will be extended to PAs up to 49 years, with the greatest points allocated to young experienced workers (25-32 years) rather than new graduates (as had previously been the case) or older applicants.
- *Experience*: Bonus points will be provided for both Australian and overseas experience, with only a slight premium for recent Australian employment.

These points test changes have profound significance for international students as well as for offshore applicants. They seem certain to disadvantage current and recent international students in economic selection – in particular those who tailored course choice to the redundant Migration Occupations in Demand List (completing low-grade qualifications through the private vocational sector). Australia's General Skilled Migration program will, in future, markedly favour the selection of older native English speakers, qualified with Bachelor or higher degrees. The government's aims in such changes are clear – to 'deliver the best and brightest skilled migrants by emphasising high level qualifications, better English language levels and extensive skilled work experience'[26]. Demand for the Canadian Experience Class is likely to grow, in a context where international students have become highly discerning education and migration consumers – researching global options to maximize their study-migration choices.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This paper draws on the following publications, in addition to a wide range of Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship policy documents: Hawthorne, L (2010), 'How Valuable is "Two-Step Migration"? Labour Market Outcomes for International Student Migrants to Australia', Special Edition, *Asia-Pacific Migration Journal*, Vol 19 No 1: 5-36; Hawthorne, L (2010), 'Demography, Migration and Demand for International Students', Chapter Five in *Globalization and Tertiary Education in the Asia-Pacific – The Changing Nature of a Dynamic Market*, ed C Findlay and W Tierney, World Scientific Press, Singapore, pp 91-120; and Hawthorne, L (forthcoming 2011), *Competitors and Collaborators – Skilled Migration to New Zealand and Australia: Policy Trends and Outcomes 2004-2010*, Department of Labour, Wellington.

**FOOTNOTES**

[1] In the context of Australia's economic and mining boom, these points were later extended to include diploma and certificate level qualifications, including a wide range of trades.

[2] Birrell, B, Hawthorne, L & Richardson, S (2006), *Evaluation of the General Skilled Migration Categories*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2006, 306pp, http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/research/gsm-report/index.htm.

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[7] See eg Birrell, B (2006), 'Implications of Low English Standards Among Overseas Students at Australian Universities', *People and Place*, Vol 14 n° 4; Watty, K (2007), 'Quality in Accounting Education and Low English Language Standards Among Overseas Students: Is There A Link?', *People & Place*, Vol 15 n° 1; Hawthorne, L (2007), *Language, Employment and Further Study*, Commissioned Discussion Paper for Australian Education International, Department of Education, Science and Training, www.aei.dest.gov.au, Commonwealth of Australia; Arkoudis, S, Hawthorne, L, Baik, C, Hawthorne, G, O'Loughlin, K, Bexley, E & Leach, D (2009),

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[13] Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2009), *Future Skills: Targeting High Value Skills Through the General Skilled Migration Program – Review of the Migration Occupations in Demand List'*, Issues Paper N° 2, September, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Canberra, p. 4.

[14] Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2010), 'Review of the General Skilled Migration Points Test – Discussion Paper', 15 February, Canberra.

[15] Evans, C (2009), *Government Announces Changes to 457 Visa Program*, Media Release - Department of Immigration and Citizenship Website, Australian Government, Canberra; Khoo, S-E, McDonald, P, Voigt-Graf, C. & Hugo, G (2007), 'A Global Labour Market: Factors Motivating the Sponsorship and Temporary Migration of Skilled Workers to Australia', *International Migration Review*, Vol 41(2):480-510.

[16] According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (February 2010), first priority in processing would be given to employer sponsored GSM applicants (including under the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme). Second priority would be given to applicants 'nominated by a state/territory government agency under a state migration plan agreed to by the minister', while third priority would be for 'applications from people who are nominated by a state/territory government agency and whose nominated occupation is on the Critical Skills List' – since July 2010 the Skilled Occupations List. See Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2010), 'Changes to Priority Processing', 8 February, http://www.immi.gov.au/skilled/general-skilled-migration/pdf/faq-gsmchanges.pdf.

[17] Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2010), 'Review of the General Skilled Migration Points Test – Discussion Paper', 15 February, Canberra, p. 3.

[18] Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2010), 'Review of the General Skilled Migration Points Test – Discussion Paper', 15 February, Canberra, p. 6-7.

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