



Science & Technology AUSTRALIA

**Submission: The effectiveness of
the current temporary skilled visa
system in targeting genuine skills
shortages.**

13 December 18

To the Senate Standing Committees on Legal and Constitutional Affairs,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the effectiveness of the current temporary skilled visa system in targeting genuine skills shortages.

Science & Technology Australia (STA) is the peak representative body for more than 70,000+ scientists and technologists in Australia through our member organisations, including associations and societies, research institutes, and research strategy bodies such as councils of deans. Our mission is to connect science and technology with governments, business, and the community, to enhance the role, reputation and impact of science.

The pursuit of scientific and technological research is an international endeavour that requires cross-nation collaboration. Science and research involve highly specialised skillsets, and if Australia is to remain internationally competitive it is important that we remain capable of attracting the best and brightest minds to collaborate and conduct research here in Australia.

In the past few years however, sudden changes to the skilled shortages lists combined with changing requirements for relevant visas has resulted in uncertainty within the science sector.

To ensure Australian researchers can properly engage on an international level and give Australia the best chance to attract the greatest minds to live and work here, it is important to have a visa system that is clear, consistent and takes specialist skills in niche fields into consideration.

The current skilled visa system does not accurately cater for the needs of the science and research sectors for the following reasons:

1. The methodology used to establish a skills shortage does not accurately account for the precision skills required by researchers; and
2. The current assessment regime is taking too long and resulting in world-class researchers going elsewhere.

To address this, STA recommends that:

1. A new science and research class visa be established;
2. That a PhD from a reputable institution and confirmation of need from an Australian research institute be used as definitive of the skill shortage requirement for the science and research class visa; and
3. That a special effort be made to reduce processing times for a science and research class visa to a maximum of six weeks.

Kind regards,



Professor Emma Johnston AO
President, STA



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Introduction

The STEM sector in Australia is heavily reliant on its capacity to attract international students, effectively engage in international research collaboration, and attract the most skilled people in STEM fields to ensure our research institutions and institutes compete on a global scale. The importance of this international engagement means that changes to the visa system in Australia can have long term, often unanticipated effects on the sector.

In 2017 the education and research sector experienced these negative effects when changes to the 457 were announced, and key STEM sector jobs were removed from the skills shortage list¹. While this issue was rectified, some negative consequences have remained including long processing times and uncertainty of approvals².

STA encourages international collaborations wherever possible, ensuring that the immigration and visa system in Australia is transparent, efficient, and stable. While the class 400 visas currently available may provide the skills needed to address certain skills shortages, changes to occupations listed on the skills shortage list may have an unintended negative effect on international collaboration, as has been the case in the past.

STA recommends: that a specific research visa is created to attract the best and brightest to undertake research and training in Australia, building capacity and enhancing our competitiveness on a global scale. This visa class be a long-term commitment of the Australian government and not subject to rapid or frequent revisions or changes that damage our capacity to recruit the best scientists and technologists.

Determination of skills shortages

The methodology used to evaluate the presence of a skills shortage has been effective when examining professions in which a clear and uniform skill set is required³, and in which accrediting bodies are able to evaluate these uniform skillsets as well as individual candidates' abilities⁴.

This methodology relies on measuring the success of employment advertisements. While this approach may capture skills shortages in larger fields, it does not apply to the needs of a sector where niche, and often scarce, skills are the norm. This approach lacks the specificity required to detect the needs of these specialist groups.

Skills shortages are also measured on an annual basis. This provides a limited and one-dimensional view of the workforce and cannot accurately capture the

¹¹ [“Universities fear 457 visa changes will harm ability to attract academic talent”](#) The Guardian, 2017

² [“Government listens and acts on 457 visa concerns for universities”](#) Universities Australia, 2017

³ [“Migration occupation lists – update and methodology”](#) Department of Jobs and Small Business, Accessed November 2018

⁴ [“Working in Australia”](#) Department of Home Affairs, Accessed November 2018

number of skilled researchers that may be required for specialised work at different times of the year, at different stages of the research cycle.

Finally, this method of measuring skill shortages should not apply to scientific research because it inhibits organic collaborations that can form at an international level between researchers. Collaborative research ideas are formed through international engagement, and they can be hampered if researchers are not provided with relatively easy and efficient visa application processes. Science is known for identifying or creating new opportunities or even new sectors, pushing the boundaries of existing fields, and taking old ideas in new directions. In a system that has finite definitions of skills shortage, this type of collaboration will be hindered by Australia's current visa system.

STA Recommends: That a PhD from a reputable institution and confirmation of need from an Australian research institute be set as the requirement for the science and research class visa instead of relying on the current "skills shortage" measure.

Assessment times

Some visa assessments can take up to 70 days to process, according to the Department of Home Affairs⁵. This delay is unacceptable given that countries like Japan have a four to six-week delay for specialised research visas⁶.

Strong international competition for the brightest minds in under-served or highly specialist disciplines means that any time delay in visa processing, particularly up to 70 days delay, places Australian scientific employers at a significant disadvantage against international competitors and puts Australia's competitiveness at risk. This has occurred most acutely in the provision of visas for students, particularly from China, and is an issue that applies to the skilled shortage visa also⁷.

The delay in visa assessments also has a negative effect on researchers coming to Australia on international scholarship programs. On international programs that mimic Australia's Endeavour Scholarships⁸ (in which we send scientists on international exchange), delays in processing times can cause significant difficulty. Scholarship winners may spend a significant portion of their allotted travel time waiting for their visa to process, curtailing their capacity to actually do the work for which they are travelling to Australia. These programs are often used as a testing ground to build new collaborations. If we want the best international minds to come to Australia to collaborate, bringing with them international investment, then visa processing times must be improved.

In 2017-18 almost 35,000 skill shortage visas were granted by the Department of Home Affairs⁹. This does not include the number of applicants that apply

⁵ "[Temporary Skill Shortage Visa](#)" Department of Home Affairs, Accessed November 2018

⁶ "[The Japan Research Visa](#)" Japan Visa Services, Accessed December 2018

⁷ "[457 visa changes hit international students](#)" The Australian, 2017

⁸ "[Endeavour Frequently Asked Questions](#)" Department of Education and Training 2018

⁹ "[Temporary resident \(skilled\) visas granted pivot table](#)" Department of Home Affairs, 2018

without success. By introducing a special science and research visa these long wait times can be prevented, giving priority to international science and research collaboration.

STA Recommends: That a special effort be made to reduce processing times for a science and research class visa to four to six weeks.

The challenges of inconsistency

Class 400 visas have been the subject of public and political scrutiny in recent years. This scrutiny has resulted in rapid changes in policy, and given recent developments, the sudden nature of these changes looks unlikely to be rectified.

A lack of consultation and forewarning before changes occur has a negative ripple effect across many industries, but this is particularly true for the science and technology sector. Empowering business and academia to make long-term plans and investments in research is critical to success and is hampered by sudden and unexpected policy shifts.

By introducing a visa class that specifically supports international scientists and technologists to work in Australia, it will be possible to avoid the turmoil caused by these decisions – allowing for long-term funding and planning to take place.