

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY AUSTRALIA

POLICY SUBMISSION

15 DECEMBER 2023

AUSTRALIA'S 2024–25 PERMANENT MIGRATION PROGRAM

Science & Technology Australia welcomes the opportunity to offer input to the Australian Department of Home Affairs consultation on Migration Program Planning Levels.

Science & Technology Australia is the peak body for the nation's science and technology sectors, representing 142 member organisations and more than 115,000 scientists and technologists. We connect science and technology with governments, business and the community to advance science's role in solving some of humanity's greatest challenges.

KEY POINTS

- A highly-skilled science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) workforce is critical to Australia's future prosperity – and there are significant workforce shortages in these pivotal fields of expertise across the Australian economy.
- Migrant STEM professionals are essential to fill Australia's workforce gaps. We need to ensure Australia remains an attractive long-term destination for global talent.
- Visa application processes should be as efficient and transparent as possible – while also understanding national security imperatives.
- Targeted support to help migrant STEM professionals and employers navigate the migration system processes is needed to maximise employment and enable critical roles to be filled efficiently.
- Clear, direct and easy-to-navigate pathways to permanent residency for globally in-demand STEM professionals are needed to attract the best global talent.
- The Global Talent visa – as a direct pathway to permanent residency for highly-skilled professionals – is critical for the STEM and research sectors to secure leading global talent for Australia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure Australia's STEM sector's long-term resilience and the nation's economic security, Science & Technology Australia recommends:

1. Australian Government policy should take a long-term, evidence-based approach to deliver crucial workforce for major initiatives crucial to our national prosperity – including AUKUS, cyber, quantum and artificial intelligence capabilities, net zero commitments and infrastructure and technological advancement projects.
2. The Australian Government should support organisations and programs with a proven track record of supporting migrants and people from diverse backgrounds gain work experience and employment in the Australian STEM industry.

3. The Australian Government – potentially through the proposed new Diversity in STEM Council – should work with STEM employers to strengthen best-practice inclusive recruitment practices that focus on applicants’ ability to do the job, including specialised recruitment rounds for under-represented groups.
4. The Australian Government – potentially through Jobs and Skills Australia – should publish a detailed analysis of how overseas STEM qualifications are recognised in Australia.
5. Australia’s migration intake planning should constantly consider the current and future gaps in Australia’s STEM workforce.
6. Australia should ensure all visa processing is as efficient and swift as possible, with maximum transparency for both applicants and supporting employers and institutions.
7. Australia should ensure visa settings include and maintain existing options for clear and easily navigable pathways to permanent residency for STEM professionals and researchers – and their families (including parents coming to Australia to assist with childcare).
8. Australia should ensure all national security regulatory and compliance requirements are reasonable and proportionate, and don’t create barriers for Australia to recruit top global talent.
9. Australia should exempt visa applicants supported by universities and research institutions from the VETASSESS process. Applicants for subclass 485 visas who already hold an Australian qualification should also be exempted.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

What is the ideal size and composition of the 2024–25 permanent Migration Program and why?

The ideal size of the migration intake is a decision for government.

Australia requires a robust and highly skilled STEM-trained workforce to ensure future prosperity. While there are several efforts to expand Australia’s home-grown STEM workforce, the need for more STEM professionals across various STEM areas and the broader economy is acute – and part of that workforce will come from migrant STEM-professionals.

Planning is key to ensuring the benefits are maximised – for both the STEM professionals coming to Australia and the nation. This includes clear pathways to permanent residency, greater transparency and efficiency in visa application processes, and ensuring visa pathways reflect the employment needs of major current and future projects in Australia.

The Australian Government’s newly released [Migration Strategy](#) notes the important link between temporary and permanent migration – the permanent migration intake should include a pathway for temporary migrants to transition to permanent residency. This should include drawing on the STEM-skilled talent already present in Australia on temporary visas, such as international graduates on post-study visas (subclass 485).

The Strategy also notes the role of Jobs and Skills Australia to build an evidence-based rationale for Australia’s skills needs, and calls for a long-term approach to identify skills needs and migration responses.

This is a sensible approach. Government policy should consider Australia’s long-term needs for major projects either underway or to be shortly implemented. This includes building the workforce required to fulfil Australia’s commitments under the AUKUS agreement, our net zero commitments and major infrastructure and development projects.



Science & Technology Australia recommendations:

1. **Australian Government policy should take a long-term, evidence-based approach to deliver crucial workforce for major initiatives crucial to our national prosperity – including AUKUS, cyber, quantum and artificial intelligence capabilities, net zero commitments and infrastructure and technological advancement projects.**

How can migration policy settings better support social cohesion in Australia?

Despite the acute need for more STEM professionals to fulfil Australia’s immediate and long-term goals in critical STEM areas, some STEM-skilled migrants face barriers to employment in Australia. Enhancing migration policies to support social cohesion should include improved support for migrant professionals after immigrating to Australia – particularly in navigating the Australian labour market.

Barriers that STEM-skilled migrants face include Australian employers not recognising non-Australian certifications and qualifications, or requiring specifically Australian work experience. Migrant STEM professionals also require support to understand and navigate recruitment processes in Australia.

Addressing these challenges is not the responsibility of government alone. Employers should also work to ensure they have robust inclusion policies that support both recruitment and retention of migrant professionals. This could include cultural competence training for staff, particularly recruitment and human resources managers.

The government could consider supporting organisations such as [iSTEMCo](#), which seeks to give migrant STEM workers valuable experience in Australian workplaces through internship and mentoring programs.

A draft recommendation from the Australian Government’s current [Diversity in STEM review](#) (due to report by the end of 2023) was to establish an Diversity in STEM Council. Such a Council could play a pivotal role in developing best practice guidance for STEM employers to support diverse STEM professionals, including migrants.

Another draft recommendation was for the government to conduct detailed analysis of how overseas qualifications are recognised in Australia. Whether led by a newly formed Diversity in STEM Council, Jobs and Skills Australia, the Department of Home Affairs, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations or the Department of Industry, Science and Resources, this would be an important piece of work that could greatly support Australia’s migrant STEM professionals and improve employment.

Science & Technology Australia recommendations:

2. **The Australian Government should support organisations and programs with a proven track record of supporting migrants and people from diverse backgrounds gain work experience and employment in the Australian STEM industry.**
3. **The Australian Government – potentially through the proposed new Diversity in STEM Council – should work with STEM employers to strengthen best-practice inclusive recruitment practices that focus on applicants’ ability to do the job, including specialised recruitment rounds for under-represented groups.**
4. **The Australian Government – potentially through Jobs and Skills Australia – should publish a detailed analysis of how overseas STEM qualifications are recognised in Australia.**

How can migration policy settings support Australia’s ongoing economic prosperity and fairness?

Australia’s STEM workforce is critical to prosperity



The new [Migration Strategy](#) explicitly sets out a clear role for permanent migration in supporting national prosperity.

A highly-skilled STEM workforce is essential to deliver current and future major projects that are pivotal to Australia's economic future. Australia urgently needs more STEM-qualified professionals and must continue to look overseas to fill gaps in the workforce required to deliver major projects including the AUKUS agreement, infrastructure development, climate change and renewables, quantum computing and artificial intelligence. STEM is the key to economic complexity – and Australia's future economic prosperity.

An [Australian Academy of Science 2015 report](#) found the advanced physical and mathematical science sector (physics, chemistry, maths and earth sciences), directly contributed 11% of the Australian economy. With additional flow-on benefits, the overall contribution totalled 22.5% or \$292 billion in 2015.

Data released in September 2023 from the National Skills Commission highlighted a [rise in vacancies across the labour market](#), following a sharp rise in 2022. Several of the top 20 occupations with significant skills shortage are in the STEM sector and rely on either university or VET trained STEM professionals. Other work indicates potentially critical shortages in [cybersecurity](#) and [engineering](#).

A [Jobs and Skills Australia 2023 report](#) outlined shortages in 54% of Design, Engineering, Science and Transport Professional jobs. Further, the need for more STEM professionals is tipped to increase significantly in the next decade – the same report predicts Australia will have 233,600 more Professional, Scientific and Technical Services jobs by 2033. The projected growth reflects not only the need for professionals to support major projects in Australia but also increased demand for digital and data service qualified STEM professionals as the economy continues to evolve.

A [2023 Infrastructure Australia report](#) reports a 229,000 full-time infrastructure worker shortfall as of October 2023, implying significant loss of productivity and construction capacity.

This data shows a compelling need for immediate, focused responses to sustain Australia's STEM sector. Addressing these workforce gaps requires immediate and long-term planning, with a significant and continued portion of this workforce tipped to come from migrant STEM professionals.

Migrants already make up a significant portion of our STEM workforce. [Data published in 2020](#) by the Office of the Chief Scientist notes 56% of Australia's university STEM workforce and 26% of our VET STEM workforce were born overseas. In some fields, this percentage is even higher – [60% of Australia's engineering workforce](#) was born overseas.

As the STEM sector strives to work towards gender equity – and fully realise the benefits of a diverse workforce – it should also be noted that [female migrants](#) make up 31% and 56% of our female VET and university qualified STEM workforce respectively. Given the low proportion of female STEM workers – [just 15%](#) – across the entire STEM workforce in Australia, female migrants make a major contribution to gender equity in this sector. Achieving gender and diversity goals should be another consideration for long-term migration planning.

Science & Technology Australia recommendation:

- 5. Australia's migration intake planning should constantly consider the current and future gaps in Australia's STEM workforce.**

Pathways to permanent residency

To attract the world's best and brightest, and build the workforce Australia needs to meet the technological, environmental and economic challenges of the coming decades, we need to have clear and easy-to-navigate pathways to permanent residency. World-class research and industry talent can choose to work anywhere in the world, and Australia must make it as easy as possible for



them to choose to bring their talents and drive here. This is particularly the case for early- or mid-career researchers who want stability and a long-term commitment to advance their career.

Not every scientist coming to work in Australia will necessarily opt to stay here, but Australia should create a clear and easily navigated path to permanent residency to make this an attractive option.

The university sector commonly uses the Employer Nominated visa (subclass 186) and Global Talent visa (subclass 858) to provide a clear path to permanent residence for world-class researchers.

The [priority areas](#) for the Global Talent visa are strongly STEM-focused, and 14,066 Global Talent visas¹ were granted in the two years of latest [available data](#) (the 2021–22 and 2022–23 financial years). Streamlined two-stage processing, such as the Global Talent visa, creates clarity and certainty for STEM professionals to plan careers.

The university sector recruited more than 700 skilled workers using the Employer Nominated and Global Talent visas in the same two-year period. While these numbers may seem small compared to the total number of visas granted in Australia, **the fast-processing time and consistency of the Global Talent visa makes this visa category particularly valuable when recruiting top STEM talent for employers in technical services, research, development, and commercialisation.**

The Migration Strategy notes the intent of the Global Talent visa to attract migrants who ‘can make an outsized contribution to Australia’. It flags a potential future reform to more ‘sharply target’ Global Talent visa recipients, and indicates that the creation of the Specialist Skills Pathway in the temporary visa context would provide an alternative pathway for other migrants with specialist skills. However, this temporary visa option does not provide the clear and direct pathway to permanent residency that is so important to many STEM professionals who come to Australia to build their career – any changes must be carefully considered to preserve the value of Global Talent visa to the STEM sector.

The Strategy also flags the potential development of a new Talent and Innovation visa – this could be highly valuable to the sector, and STA would welcome the opportunity to engage in a comprehensive consultation process to ensure this visa is designed to deliver maximum benefit.

Another related consideration is fast-tracking family visas for those talented professionals who have chosen to make their lives here, but have family members in their home countries who wish to join them in Australia. If we are attracting STEM professionals at the peak of their ability to contribute to society, there is a high probability they have young families and require an extended family support network to maximise their ability to contribute their deep expertise in the Australian workforce. This often includes parents or other family members who would provide invaluable support, or may require increased care themselves – but [wait times on a new visa application](#) for a ‘contributory parent’ is up to 12 years and for ‘parent or aged parent’ 29 years. These extraordinary wait times essentially preclude many migrants who have gained permanent residence from bringing their family members to Australia, risking the ultimate loss of that talent from Australia.

As a potential alternative to offering permanent visas for family members, the government could also consider long-term temporary visas to enable family members to come to Australia, similar to the 10-year [B-2 visa](#) offered in the US.

Science & Technology Australia recommendation:

- 6. Australia should ensure all visa processing is as efficient and swift as possible, with maximum transparency for both applicants and supporting employers and institutions.**

¹ data.gov.au/data/dataset/permanent-migration-program-skilled-family



- 7. Australia should ensure visa settings include and maintain existing options for clear and easily navigable pathways to permanent residency for STEM professionals and researchers – and their families (including parents coming to Australia to assist with childcare).**

National security

Science & Technology Australia appreciates the importance of national security and ensuring Australia's universities and research institutions take their national security responsibilities seriously.

At the same time, the world's best research is a global enterprise – and often relies on international collaboration and movement of researchers across borders.

Protecting Australia's capabilities in areas such as critical technologies, cybersecurity, AI, robotics, and defence-oriented research is of paramount importance, but this can only be built by maintaining an open and globally collaborative and competitive research workforce.

New layers of regulation add to an already-heavy compliance burden on universities and research institutes. The [Migration Amendment \(Protecting Australia's Critical Technology\) Regulations 2022](#) (PACT Regulations) came into force in the second half of 2022. These regulations introduced an additional layer of visa screening for applicants deemed to be working in a critical technology area, as well imposing additional conditions on postgraduate student visa holders whose research is in a critical technology area.

More recently, the Australian Government introduced the [Defence Trade Controls Amendment Bill 2023](#) into the Parliament, which seeks to streamline arrangements between Australia's AUKUS partners – the US and the UK – but also introduces some new regulations on information sharing in university research contexts.

It is critical to ensure that national security regulatory and compliance requirements are reasonable and proportionate to reduce unnecessary barriers to recruiting global STEM talent to Australia.

Science & Technology Australia recommendation:

- 8. Australia should ensure all national security regulatory and compliance requirements are reasonable and proportionate, and don't create barriers for Australia to recruit top global talent.**

VETASSESS skills assessments

In addition, many STEM-based professions on the Skilled Occupation List undergo a skills assessment as part of their visa application called VETASSESS. In cases where applicants are being supported by a university, applicants have already undergone a rigorous university recruitment selection process – and the additional VETASSESS skills assessment is an unnecessary bureaucratic burden. Removing the VETASSESS requirement for these professionals would streamline the vetting process and create a better prospect of attracting the best talent available.

To this end, exemptions for visa applicants supported by universities and research institutions from the VETASSESS process would reduce overall bureaucratic burden and support Australia's aim to attract global talent.

Science & Technology Australia recommendation:

- 9. Australia should exempt visa applicants supported by universities and research institutions from the VETASSESS process. Applicants for subclass 485 visas who already hold an Australian qualification should also be exempted.**



How should we factor in the impact and opportunities of migration on Australian communities, including in terms of access to services such as health, education, housing and infrastructure?

The contribution of migrant STEM professionals to the Australian community leads to innovation, growth and greater economic prosperity. To ensure Australians can continue to enjoy a high standard of living, including access to high quality health and education services, the nation requires a strong and robust STEM-skilled workforce that enables Australia to innovate and keep pace with global developments.

Australia's skilled STEM workforce currently draws – and must continue to draw – on the best STEM talent globally. Our migration program must value STEM professionals who choose to come to Australia and help bolster our R&D effort and enrich our STEM communities.

Please do not hesitate to be in contact if Science & Technology Australia can provide any further information or advice.

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