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Skilled Migration Program Damaging to Australia's Third Largest Export Sector

Students Choosing Other Countries for Education, Work and Residency

The nation's new Points Test for General Skilled Visas is certain to have a devastating impact upon international students once it goes into effect on 1 July 2011. Students, who once viewed Australia's Skilled Migration Program as a pathway to education, work and residency will find almost no advantage in attaining an Australian qualification. Generating more than \$14 billion dollars annually to Australia's economy, international education – the nation's third largest export industry – could be decimated.

Under the current system, students who study for two years or more in Australia have a good chance of qualifying for permanent residence through General Skilled Migration if they have good English language skills and qualifications in an occupation on the Skilled Occupations List.

The students pay for their own education and contribute to the economy by paying for support services and working in jobs that Australians don't want to do. Consequently, a skilled and much needed labour force is developed without any cost to the Australian public and income is generated through educational and other expenses.

But now, for the first time in over 10 years, the terms of migration are about to change. According to Mark Webster, Director of Acacia Immigration Australia, a Sydney firm specialising in immigration, the implications of these impending revisions are already being felt, with student numbers down by 20 per cent.

"Constant changes to the General Skilled Migration program and significant processing delays over the last 12 months have disrupted plans for students currently studying in Australia as well as for those who saw Australia's Skilled Migration Program as a tremendous opportunity," Mr Webster says. "As a result, many are going home or seeking opportunities in other countries.

"These changes are set to continue as under the new points test it will be very difficult for international students to qualify for General Skilled Migration on completion of their courses unless they have a level of English that even many Australians would find difficult to meet," he says. (Applicants must achieve a minimum test score of eight under the International English Language Testing System).

According to Mr Webster, there will be less advantage in having an Australian qualification as points will also be awarded for recognised overseas qualifications.

"I believe that politicians are being remarkably short-sighted," says Webster. "I think this is a case of the proverbial tail-wagging-the-dog. In its attempt to appease the public over their concern for population increase, the government is determined to break the connection between studying in Australia and obtaining permanent residence. We're killing the golden goose."

At risk, says Webster, is our third biggest export industry, as well as a source of highly skilled workers who spend their formative years in Australia and face few issues in settling permanently in Australia.

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