

THE NEW YORK TIMES

October 3, 2011

Australia Sets Out Plan to Liberalize Visas for Foreign Students

By ELLA DELANY

The government of [Australia](#) has announced plans for a sweeping liberalization of the country's visa program for international students after a major decline in university enrollment from overseas.

The new rules will include streamlined visa processing, less burdensome financial guarantees and the introduction of a post-study work visa.

"Our international education sector is world-class, and the reforms announced today will help entrench Australia as a preferred destination for international students," Senator Christopher Evans, the minister for tertiary education, skills, jobs and workplace relations, said in a statement in Canberra on Sept. 22.

Australia's competitiveness in the international education marketplace has been threatened by tough visa requirements, the strong Australian dollar, the global financial crisis, increased international competition and perceptions of an unsafe atmosphere after attacks on Indian students in Victoria two years ago.

Educators have said that those combined factors have driven down international student numbers. An [Immigration](#) and Citizenship Department report said in August that international student visa applications fell almost 20 percent in the last fiscal year.

According to Simon Marginson, a professor of higher education at Melbourne University, applications from India are down most sharply, falling by almost 63 percent. Australia's markets in Southeast Asia are also affected, with Vietnam dropping more than 30 percent and China not far behind. Another government-commissioned report predicted a 23 percent drop in university commencements by the end of 2011.

In December 2010, because of growing concern among Australian universities and vocational schools, the government appointed Michael Knight, a former state government minister, to review the student visa program. With his recommendations, the government will begin the new student visa system by mid-2012.

In the statement, Mr. Evans said, “The university and vocational education sector have been concerned for some time that the visa system was making them uncompetitive.”

Education is Australia’s third-largest export industry, after iron ore and coal, and Australia’s universities and other postsecondary institutions have become heavily dependent on international students for enrollment and revenue.

The Group of Eight, a coalition of leading Australian universities, welcomed the government’s announcement. Professor Paul Greenfield, the coalition’s chairman and vice chancellor of the University of Queensland, said, “In addition to bolstering an important export industry, these changes will improve the supply of high quality skills to the Australian labor market.”

The government’s changes will reduce the visa program’s proof of finance requirements, which require applicants to show access to funds of more than 100,000 Australian dollars, or about \$97,000. In some cases, that amount will be lowered to 64,000 dollars, and there will also be a reduction in the period of time the funds must be held.

To streamline processing, the government will treat international students wishing to study at bachelor level or higher as low-risk applicants, regardless of their country of origin. Student visa applicants from countries including India and China previously underwent a longer and more rigorous visa assessment process based on statistical analysis of their higher level of immigration risk.

A post-study work visa will also be available for graduates depending on the level of study completed: two years for bachelor-degree students and as long as four years for doctoral students.

“Students are increasingly looking to augment their studies with graduate work experience, and this further post-study work visa option will offer university students a more complete study experience in Australia,” Mr. Evans said in the statement.

The government does not propose changing the visa program for international students seeking vocational education. Mr. Marginson, the Melbourne University professor, said in an e-mail that

the strict student visa program was intended to stop student visas from being used to circumvent immigration controls in the vocational sector. He said the visa system had had the unwanted side effect of decreasing international student numbers in Australian universities.

In a speech at the University of Canberra last year, Mr. Evans said: “The integrity of our education system and our migration system relies on each one being able to stand alone. The migration tail can’t be allowed to wag the education dog or vice versa. That’s a sure way to dilute quality for both.”

The government’s announcement demonstrates the difficulty of juggling a higher education sector heavily dependent on international student revenue and the desire to regulate migration.

“It’s between trying to find a balance for the economic benefits and a balance of protecting the integrity of the migration controls,” Mr. Evans said in the statement.

“If you let everybody in that wants to come, you get more economic benefit and more fees coming into the sector, but you blow your migration controls. If you have enormously stringent migration controls, then you never let anybody in and you don’t get any of the benefits. It’s about trying to find the balance. I think we’ve done that.”

The effect of the government’s changes will not be known immediately. Mr. Marginson said the changes “do all that can reasonably be done.” He predicted that the decline in international student numbers would stop once education agents and the global market understood the changes.