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Association of Australian
Medical Research Institutes

SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S SKILLED MIGRATION PROGRAM

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Inquiry into Australia's skilled migration program

Submission summary

1. Australia's migration program should continue to prioritise job opportunities for Australians but should also be flexible enough to provide migratory pathways for outstanding international medical research talent.
2. Appropriate employer sponsored pathways should continue to allow medical research institutes to recruit highly specialised and skilled medical researchers.
3. In line with the age exemptions provided to the universities and government agencies for certain visas, consideration should be given to extending age exemptions to medical research institutes.
4. Visa prioritisation for accredited employer sponsors should be extended to the Employer Nomination Scheme (subclass 186) visa.
5. Continue the Global Talent Visa Program and highlight its benefits to employers.
6. Medical research institutes should be exempt from the Skilling Australia Fund Levy and instead use this funding to help directly train the next generation of medical researchers.
7. As and when the public health situation allows find ways to allow the migration of overseas medical researchers and the recruitment of international research students.

Medical research in Australia

Australia has a world-class medical research sector delivering high economic returns and life changing discoveries. It ranks eighth in the OECD in terms of knowledge creation, and sixth in terms of citations per publication (a key metric of quality).[i] It delivers impressive economic returns of around $4 for every $1 invested in health and medical research[ii], and is the bedrock on which Australia's $170 billion[iii] life science industry in Australia is built.

Medical research has underpinned Australia's successful response to the COVID-19 pandemic. World-class epidemiological research and public health advice has been central to successfully navigating a safe route through a global pandemic that has ravaged most other countries. Our outstanding COVID-19 testing capabilities have been made possible through Australian medical research which has helped develop faster and more accurate diagnostic techniques. Our researchers are now working on new treatments and vaccines to help ensure we remain well prepared to respond to emerging threats well into the future.

Medical Research Institutes have a distinct and vital role in the health and medical research sector, providing a direct interface between laboratory-based research, public health research and clinical practice. They have deep links with hospitals, health services, governments, universities and business, and work with partners to improve health outcomes through research. Each year they expend nearly $2 billion on health and medical research, receive nearly 45% of NHMRC funding, and comprise nearly 20,000 staff and research students.[iv]

Part of Australia's success in medical research has been its willingness to engage and build enduring international collaborations with partners overseas. This has been greatly helped by the many Australian researchers who spend time working in medical research overseas

before returning to Australia, as well as by the many international scientists who spend time working in Australia. This two-way exchange of people leads to new collaborations, the sharing of new knowledge, and helps ensure Australia's medical research gains global recognition.

Australia's medical research sector needs access to outstanding international talent (TOR 2 & TOR 4)

A critical part of Australia's medical research success has been its openness to engaging world-class international talent. This has included attracting the world's best scientists from overseas including Australians of the Year, Professor Ian Frazer (Gardisil vaccine) and Professor Fiona Wood (Spray-on-skin). The future success of the Australian medical research sector, and the life sciences sector it underpins, is dependent on having access to the world's best talent.

Just as critical to accessing international talent is the ongoing training and recruitment of new Australian scientists each year. The medical research institute sector trains thousands of new scientists each year, and always looks locally first when making new appointments. It is only when there are specific and niche skill shortages that international recruitment is considered.

Occasionally selective recruitment of world-class talent from overseas is needed. This is because there are some highly specialised roles that cannot always be filled through the local workforce, and sometimes expertise from overseas is also needed to train the next generation of Australian scientists. When these roles cannot be filled research projects can be delayed by years and training in new skills and techniques is interrupted. This leads to delays in research projects commencing, and ultimately leads to delays in the development of new drugs, medical devices, and other therapeutics.

The medical research sector is globally competitive and outstanding scientists are in high demand. Australia is competing with other nations to attract such talent because of the clear economic and health benefits their work produces, and the contributions they make to training scientists. Therefore, it is important that Australia's migration program enables the medical research sector to remain competitive by providing appropriate migration pathways that can be accessed in a timely fashion.

Australia's migration program should continue to prioritise job opportunities for Australians but should be flexible enough to provide migratory pathways for outstanding international medical research talent.

Ensuring skills and employment opportunities are linked (TOR 3)

The skilled occupation lists have proven to be a reasonable way to identify where skill shortages exist. Most of the medical research occupations where there are occasional skill shortages are currently specified on the relevant lists.[v] Of critical importance is engagement between the government and industry to ensure the lists remain relevant and up to date, and where changes are planned to consult with those affected. The current use of traffic light bulletins to highlight potential changes to the list has been helpful.

When considering what occupations should be part of Australia's future migration program it is important to not just look at the number of visas granted in determining which sectors are most important. For example, when investigating the skilled occupation lists it might appear

at first sight that medical research occupations only makes up a relatively small number of visas granted within the context of the overall migration program. AAMRI's own surveys of members has shown that the number of scientists at medical research institutes on temporary skilled visas is less than four percent. However, it would be a mistake to assume that because these numbers are relatively small that international recruitment does not play a hugely important role in the future success of the sector.

Figure 1 below shows the total number of temporary skilled visas granted to medical research occupations over the last 14 years. The number of visas granted each year is small in the context of Australia's migration program, but while the numbers are small the world-class international talent it allows Australia to access is of huge significance to the medical research sector.

Instead of seeing relatively small migratory numbers as evidence of a lack of importance of international recruitment to the sector, it is evidence of the sector behaving appropriately. The medical research institute sector is continually investing in new training opportunities, recruiting locally first, and only occasionally recruiting from overseas to ensure vital skills gaps can be filled.

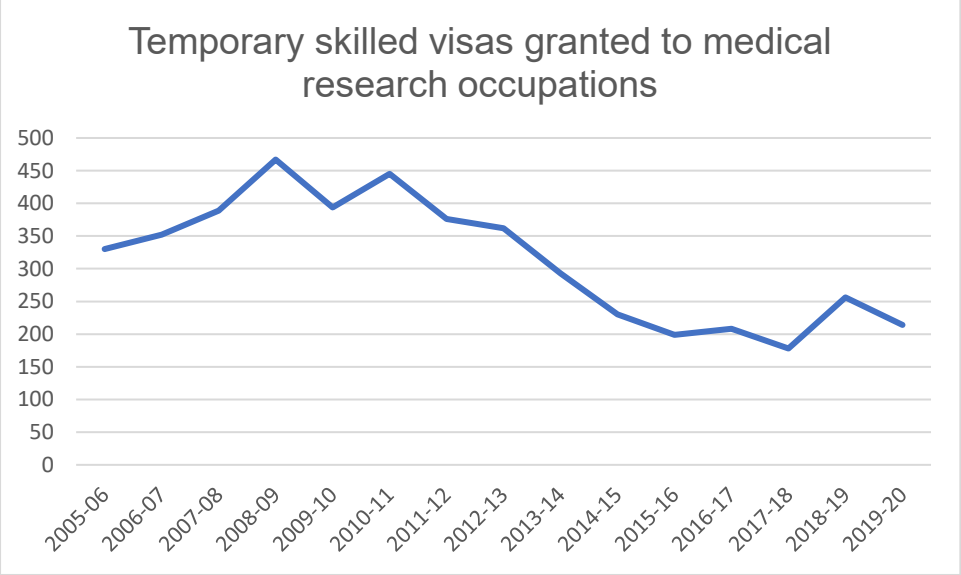

Figure 1. Temporary skilled visas granted to medical research occupations (Source: Department of Home Affairs – subclass 482 visas granted each year)

Employer sponsored migration is the preferred pathway for medical research institutes (TOR1)

Medical research institutes occasionally need to make select appointments of highly skilled international scientists. These are individuals who have not just gained a qualification but are recognised as having a particular set of skills in a niche area. They are known for being among the best and brightest in their field at their stage of career. The employer sponsored visa pathways generally work best for the medical research institute sector. These pathways allow the sector to respond to skill shortages that cannot be filled locally by directly matching skills and appropriate employment opportunities. This helps to avoid the unintended consequence of highly skilled migrants being granted visas and then being unable to find appropriate employment suitable to their skills.

Appropriate employer sponsored pathways should continue to allow medical research institutes to recruit highly specialised and skilled medical researchers.

Visa opportunities available across the full employment age range (TOR 1 & TOR 2)

It is understandable why age limits for certain visas are in place given that previous research has shown that the net long-term economic contribution a migrant can make to the economy reduces with age.[vi] However, such analysis does not necessarily differentiate by sector, and it could be that migrants in some occupations continue to be net contributors at a later age. Within medical research, in addition to the net economic contribution made by migrants, there are also the broader intellectual contributions and the health benefits their research brings that should be considered when determining age limits for certain visas and occupations.

Within the medical research sector, along with the broader science sector, researchers can be at the pinnacle of their career at around 45-50 years of age. This is the same age bracket that some of the age restrictions are applied to certain visas. This can leave some people on the wrong side of the fence, and either prevent their migration or discourage it. This issue is recognised by the special exemption given to universities and government agencies. Unfortunately, the exemption does not currently apply to medical research institutes.

In line with the age exemptions provided to the universities and government agencies for certain visas, consideration should be given to extending age exemptions to medical research institutes.

Employers and industries that continuously demonstrate high visa integrity standards should be rewarded with greater flexibility (TOR 6)

Visa processing times have been improved through the recognition of accredited employer sponsors. This allows those sponsors that have demonstrated high visa integrity standards priority visa processing. This process should be continued in the migration program as it allows employers to more quickly respond to skills gaps. This prioritisation does not yet apply to the Employer Nomination Scheme (subclass 186)[vii], and therefore for medical research institutes it is only useful for Temporary Skill Shortage (subclass 482) visas.

Visa prioritisation for accredited employer sponsors should be extended to the Employer Nomination Scheme (subclass 186) visa.

Global Talent Visa Program (TOR 7)

Some of the issues outlined in this submission have been partly addressed by the introduction of the Global Talent Visa Program, which provides a new visa pathway for outstanding talent. The pathway is not restricted to the skilled occupation list, which is particularly important for newly emerging occupations which have not yet been categorised. The visa also provides a clear pathway to permanent residency, has some flexibility around age requirements, and has priority processing.

However, the take-up of this visa pathway has been relatively limited as employers have continued to work with the visa pathways they are most familiar with. Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the halt in international migration, medical research institutes had

started to make use of this program. After international migration resumes the program should be continued and allowed more time before it is evaluated.

Continue the Global Talent Visa Program and highlight its benefits to employers.

Skilling Australia Fund levy (TOR 5)

There is a requirement for employers to pay a Skilling Australia Fund Levy of between $1,200 to $1,800 per year for Temporary Skills Shortage visas, and a one-off $3,000 to $5,000 for Employer Nomination Scheme visas. This additional cost is difficult for not-for-profit medical research institutes to absorb. Every dollar that is spent on a generic government fund is a dollar diverted away from medical research and the training of medical research students. Each year MRIs invest in the training of over 2,000 of the next generation of highly talented medical researchers. It makes much more sense for MRIs to invest funding directly into the training of these skilled medical researchers, rather than divert such funding away into a generic government training fund.

Medical research institutes should be exempt from the Skilling Australia Fund Levy and instead use this funding to help directly train the next generation of medical researchers.

Impact of the limitations on international travel (TOR 7)

The closure of the international border and the limitation on international travel continues to remain a critical part of Australia's successful response to managing the COVID-19 pandemic. This closure has impacted on medical research as it has meant that medical research institutes have been unable to make any new appointments from overseas and has limited their ability to engage with overseas colleagues. It has also meant that it has not been possible to recruit any international research students, which is problematic as these students contribute a significant proportion of Australia's medical research effort. It is hoped that as the public health situation improves that ways can be found to reopen the border to these critical cohorts of researchers.

As and when the public health situation allows find ways to allow the migration of overseas medical researchers and the recruitment of international research students.

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[i] Australian Government (2016) *Performance Review of the Australian Innovation, Science and Research System*. Available at: https://www.industry.gov.au/data-and-publications/performance-review-of-the-australian-innovation-science-and-research-system-2016

[ii] KPMG (2018) *The Economic Impact of Medical Research in Australia*. Available at: https://aamri.org.au/resources/reports/kpmg-medical-research-delivers-roi/

[iii] AusBiotech (2019) *Australia's Life Sciences Sector: Snapshot 2019*. Available at: https://www.ausbiotech.org/documents/item/589

[iv] AAMRI (2020) *Australian Medical Research Institutes – The AAMRI Report 2020*. Available at: https://aamri.org.au/resources/reports/australian-medical-research-institutes-the-aamri-report-2020/

[v] The medical research occupations most commonly sponsored by medical research institutes include medical lab scientist, life scientist general, life scientist nec, biotechnologist, statistician

[vi] Productivity Commission (2016) *Migrant Intake into Australia.* Available at: https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/migrant-intake/report

[vii] Department of Home Affairs (2021) *Accredited* Sponsor. Available at: https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/employing-and-sponsoring-someone/sponsoring-workers/becoming-a-sponsor/accredited-sponsor