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International Student Course-Hopping: University Complicity and Government Inaction



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Foreword

Immigration is currently one of the most politically charged and salient issues across the Western world. In almost every country, this debate is strongly linked to **illegal** migration and a perceived or real loss of control over borders.

Australia is unique because we have highly effective control over our borders when it comes to illegal migration.

Australians have generally been more willing to accept higher levels of legal migration when they believe the Government has control of the borders. In recent years, this relationship has broken down, as legal migration surged at the same time as a rising cost of living, high housing costs and a sense of fragmenting social cohesion. Recent polling has consistently shown that a majority of Australians now believe immigration is too high.

One of the key drivers of higher legal net overseas migration is international students. More recently, a new trend has emerged - course hopping by non-genuine students who are exploiting the student visa system as a means to access the Australian labour market. A popular strategy has been to enrol at public universities, which have high visa acceptance rates, then immediately drop out and transition onto a Bridging visa with full work rights while applying for a lower cost VET course and new Student visa. If unsuccessful, this decision can be challenged in the Administrative Review Tribunal (ART), buying more time to work in Australia.

In mid-2025, there were an extraordinary 107,274 temporary migrants in Australia on a Bridging visa who were in the process of applying for a new Student visa, up from 13,034 in 2023. There were a further 42,098 Student visa cancellation and refusal appeals before the ART.

This paper shines a light on this growing trend, using newly released international student attrition data to reveal its rapid growth.

Student attrition data is only available for first-year undergraduates and comes with a significant delay, limiting visibility over more recent cohorts. While attrition alone does not prove intent, the scale, concentration, and timing of these dropouts strongly suggest a growing cohort of non-genuine students. The most recent data shows that the proportion of international undergraduate students who dropped out in their first year of study has increased from less than 10% in pre-Covid years to 17.4% in 2023. It has likely increased since.

The data suggests that non-genuine international students are now a structural problem at some universities, particularly those with both lower course fees and campuses in east coast capital cities (with their greater opportunities for work). The attrition rate has doubled since 2018 at many such universities and even quadrupled or quintupled at others. In 2023, eight universities had an attrition rate above 20% (that is, 1 in 5 international students drop out in the first year), five universities above 25% (1 in 4) and ten above 33% (1 in 3). The highest attrition rate, at Central Queensland University, was 57.2%, meaning well over half of international students dropped out in their first year.

This behaviour goes against the spirit of Australia's international student and migration system and needs to be stopped. This paper proposes two simple but effective reforms to end the practice of non-genuine student visa hopping and restore integrity to Australia's migration system.

Nico Louw, Chief Economist and Policy Director, Menzies Research Centre

Executive summary

While many students come to Australia with the right intentions, official data shows that since 2022 Australia has been inundated with **non-genuine international students** whose true objective is access to the country's labour market. They exploit vulnerabilities in Australia's visa system and the eagerness of Australia's universities to admit them. One popular strategy is to enrol at a public university (which have high visa acceptance rates), commence study onshore, then immediately drop out. There are **11 public universities in Australia where dropout rates exceed 30%** for commencing (first-year) international undergraduate students. Central Queensland University tops the list at 57.2%.

But the non-genuine students who drop out do not just leave. They transition onto Bridging visas while they apply for admission to lower-cost VET programs, a practice called **"course-hopping"**. The median waiting time for approval is **197 days, during which students retain full work rights**. Unsuccessful applicants can appeal to the Administrative Review Tribunal (ART), where the 42,098 pending "course-hopping" cases constitute more than **one-third of the ART's total caseload**. The median waiting time for a decision is **64 weeks, again with full work rights**.

As a result, **non-genuine international students whose course-hopping applications are refused can generally obtain the right to work in Australia for more than two years for less than \$25,000 in tuition and fees**. But the process does not end there. Even if the ART denies an onshore visa renewal, non-genuine students can apply for asylum in Australia. When these applications are denied, the denials can be appealed to the ART. Success rates appear to be very low, but once again the wait times can extend a non-genuine student's right to work in Australia by several additional years. Considering potential reforms to the asylum system is beyond the scope of this paper.

Many outer-metropolitan and **regional universities** have taken advantage of this non-genuine demand for student visas by opening **low-cost capital city campuses**. Many of these campuses are actually operated under contract by **for-profit companies**. International students are required to pay up-front for their first semester's tuition, so the obvious strategy is to target the lowest-cost degree programs to obtain a Confirmation of Enrolment (CoE). By offering capital city campuses, regional universities can profit from the strategic behaviour of non-genuine international students, many of whom never engage meaningfully with the courses they enrol in, while funnelling these students directly to their preferred work locations.

Eight publicly supported universities run their own capital city campuses seven of them with campuses in Sydney:

- Central Queensland University - Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney
- Charles Darwin University - Sydney
- Federation University - Melbourne
- Southern Cross University - Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Sydney
- University of Newcastle - Sydney
- University of New England - Adelaide, Sydney
- University of Notre Dame - Sydney
- University of Wollongong - Sydney

Another eight publicly supported universities have contracts with private firms like Education Centre of Australia, Navitas, and Russo Higher Education to offer capital city degrees in their name, six of them with campuses in Sydney:

- Charles Sturt University - Melbourne, Sydney
- James Cook University - Brisbane
- La Trobe University - Sydney
- University of Canberra - Sydney
- University of Tasmania - Melbourne, Sydney
- University of the Sunshine Coast - Adelaide
- Victoria University - Brisbane, Sydney
- Western Sydney University - Sydney

Two simple administrative reforms would put an end to the worst abuses of the student visa system:

- 1. Prohibit universities from contracting with outside providers to offer courses under the university's name.**
- 2. Require students who wish to change education providers to return home and reapply from offshore.**

1. Introduction: The changing character of international enrolments

Australia is host to a truly extraordinary number of international students. A total of 1,089,103 international students were enrolled at Australian educational institutions at some point in the calendar year 2024.¹ This represented nearly 4% of Australia's resident population or around 1 in 25 people. Slightly less than half of Australia's international students enrol at universities, with the remainder being enrolled in non-university higher education institutions, vocational education, schools, English-language colleges, and non-award foundations programs. In 2024, Australia's 38 publicly supported universities enrolled 481,833 international students, constituting 32.6% of their student headcount.² In terms of equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL), the international student concentration was 34.7% of all student credit-hours earned.³ This breaks down to 24.3% for undergraduate students and an astonishing 60.0% for postgraduate students.

Universities vary widely in their proportions of international student EFTSL, from a low of 8.6% at the University of Notre Dame to a high of 60.1% at Murdoch University. Due to pandemic restrictions, international student EFTSL fell 17.7% between 2019 and 2022. It then rebounded sharply, growing 32.3% in just two years between 2022 and 2024. The net result was that in 2024 international student EFTSL was 8.8% higher than the 2019 pre-pandemic level. The most recently published (2024) Department of Education figures for international student EFTSL for all 38 publicly supported universities are summarised in Table 1, along with growth rates between 2022 and 2024.⁴

Table 1. International EFTSL (2024) for publicly-supported universities, and growth 2022-24

University	Domestic EFTSL 2024	International EFTSL 2024	International (%) 2024	Int'l EFTSL growth 2022-24
Australian Catholic University	21,793	4,383	16.7%	47.2%
Charles Darwin University	5,198	2,907	35.9%	94.6%
Charles Sturt University	17,599	2,483	12.4%	13.2%
CQUniversity	9,572	3,997	29.5%	73.4%
Curtin University	25,960	13,431	34.1%	47.6%
Deakin University	29,552	11,585	28.2%	62.6%
Edith Cowan University	13,996	7,313	34.3%	85.1%
Federation University Australia	5,748	3,005	34.3%	-12.5%
Flinders University	12,858	4,628	26.5%	42.0%
Griffith University	25,213	6,908	21.5%	26.3%
James Cook University	8,085	6,534	44.7%	27.1%
La Trobe University	20,346	6,884	25.3%	49.9%
Macquarie University	24,672	8,555	25.7%	47.7%
Monash University	39,114	33,832	46.4%	21.0%
Murdoch University	7,113	10,722	60.1%	100.0%

1 Department of Education, "International Students, Monthly Summary," August 2025.

2 Department of Education, "Perturbed Student Enrolments Pivot Table 2024" [dataset], September 2025.

3 Department of Education, "Perturbed Student Load Pivot Table 2024" [dataset], September 2025.

4 Department of Education, "Perturbed Student Load Pivot Table 2024" [dataset], September 2025.

University	Domestic EFTSL 2024	International EFTSL 2024	International (%) 2024	Int'l EFTSL growth 2022-24
Queensland University of Technology	29,957	7,212	19.4%	45.7%
RMIT University	28,650	27,539	49.0%	17.1%
Southern Cross University	7,897	3,771	32.3%	68.7%
Swinburne University of Technology	17,679	12,927	42.2%	49.3%
The Australian National University	10,444	7,112	40.5%	11.6%
The University of Adelaide	15,492	8,053	34.2%	20.4%
The University of Melbourne	31,003	27,030	46.6%	22.9%
The University of New England	9,217	908	9.0%	45.6%
The University of Newcastle	20,743	4,606	18.2%	23.4%
The University of Notre Dame Australia	8,284	779	8.6%	175.8%
The University of Queensland	26,938	17,753	39.7%	8.8%
The University of Sydney	29,817	31,383	51.3%	8.7%
The University of Western Australia	15,145	7,677	33.6%	82.1%
University of Canberra	8,581	3,465	28.8%	25.2%
University of New South Wales	31,226	27,852	47.1%	62.3%
University of South Australia	17,847	4,896	21.5%	19.9%
University of Southern Queensland	10,207	1,626	13.7%	38.6%
University of Tasmania	14,368	4,003	21.8%	4.6%
University of Technology Sydney	29,126	9,490	24.6%	18.5%
University of the Sunshine Coast	10,509	1,623	13.4%	48.0%
University of Wollongong	14,164	11,909	45.7%	45.5%
Victoria University	12,908	10,775	45.5%	43.7%
Western Sydney University	25,976	8,767	25.2%	44.0%
All publicly-supported universities	692,994	368,322	34.7%	32.3%

Over the two years 2022-2024, Murdoch University doubled its international student EFTSL. (Numbers rose even faster at the University of Notre Dame, but from a very low base.) The extreme proportion of international students at Murdoch University partly reflects the inclusion of offshore campuses in its statistics, but also reflects a massive increase in the number of international students it hosts onshore in Perth. Between 2022 and 2023, Murdoch increased its number of onshore international EFTSL from 1681 to 4927, on its way to an ambitious 2030 target of 11,997.⁵ When the Commonwealth Labor government introduced international student caps in 2024, Murdoch moderated its long-term ambitions, but still managed to increase its international student EFTSL to 7340 in 2024.⁶ That represents a two-year growth of 337%. To put these numbers in perspective, Murdoch's 2024 domestic student EFTSL was only 7460, down 34.4% from 2020.⁷

The boom in international student numbers at Murdoch is representative of a new trend in international enrolments at Australian universities. Historically, Australia's international student enrolments have been concentrated in a small number of major metropolitan universities in Sydney and Melbourne, with an honourable mention for the University of Queensland in Brisbane. Regional and outer metropolitan universities, by contrast, have generally been sidelined. But over the last three years many of these non-city-centre (and often financially-challenged) universities have turned to the international student market to make up for budget shortfalls.

Once again, this is well-illustrated by trends at Murdoch University. In 2022, Murdoch ran a deficit of \$20.8 million.⁸ By 2024, it had turned this around to a surplus of \$53.7 million.⁹ Key to this turnaround was a \$163.7 million increase in onshore international student tuition fees (note that the expenses associated with these increased revenues cannot be specifically identified).¹⁰ It seems clear that opening the taps on international students served as a low-effort budget repair strategy.

Nor was Murdoch University the only Australian university to massively expand international enrollments after the end of the pandemic. Notre Dame, Charles Darwin (CDU), Edith Cowan (ECU), Western Australia, Central Queensland (CQU), and Southern Cross all increased their international EFTSLs by more than two-thirds between 2022 and 2024. But, unlike Murdoch University, most of these universities might be expected to have faced challenges attracting large numbers of international students. After all, with the exception of University of Western Australia, they are all located in outer metropolitan or regional areas that are not typically considered major hubs for international education.

Or are they? Western Australia's University of Notre Dame opened a Sydney campus in 2006, at a time when the university did not receive Commonwealth funding. In 2014 it was joined by the Northern Territory's Charles Darwin University, a public university that now has a campus immediately opposite Central Station in the heart of Sydney's Chinatown. Central Queensland University is a public university in Rockhampton, with multiple regional campuses in other central Queensland locations such as Bundaberg, Cairns, Gladstone, Mackay, and ... Sydney and Melbourne. The public Southern Cross University is located on the Gold Coast and in Lismore and Coffs Harbour, as well as in Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth. Western Australia's public Edith Cowan University is located in Joondalup, 25 km north of Perth -- and in the city centre, where it is expanding rapidly.

None of these regional universities publishes international student numbers by campus (and none were willing to divulge this information when it was requested for this report), but it seems logical that (with the exception of Notre Dame) their Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth campuses have been opened primarily with an eye towards attracting international students. This is all the more true in light of the international enrollment caps that were introduced in 2024. Previously, international students wanting to study in Sydney or Melbourne faced a plethora of choices. Now, if the major metropolitan universities have hit their caps, prospective students can always go (or more accurately: be steered by their agents) to CDU, ECU, CQU, or Southern Cross instead.

This new expansion of regional universities into metropolitan Australia raises two questions. First, are Sydney and Melbourne CBD campuses consistent with the missions of regional public universities to serve their regions? And second, are the students who enrol at these and other metropolitan branch campuses -- many of which are operated on behalf of universities by for-profit companies -- actually legitimate students? The relatively modest 8.8% growth in international EFTSL at Australia's publicly funded universities over the five years 2019-2024 has been accompanied by massive shifts in how international education is administered. There are signs that, having tapped out the legitimate international student market, Australia's public universities are increasingly expanding international enrolments in ways that could undermine their public service missions while facilitating visa abuse.

⁵ Murdoch University, "Annual Report 2023," March 2024, page 157.

⁶ Murdoch University, "Annual Report 2024," March 2025, page 174.

⁷ Department of Education, "Perturbed Student Load Pivot Table 2024," September 2025.

⁸ Murdoch University, "Annual Report 2022," March 2023, page 72.

⁹ Murdoch University, "Annual Report 2024," March 2025, page 117.

¹⁰ Murdoch University, "Annual Report 2022," March 2023, page 83; Murdoch University, "Annual Report 2024," March 2025, page 129.

2. The rise of the capital city campus

Table A of the Higher Education Support Act lists 38 universities that receive public financial support from the Commonwealth. All of these have been established by legislation in their home states or territories, with the exception of the Australian National University (ANU -- chartered by the Commonwealth) and the Australian Catholic University (ACU -- chartered by all three of New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland). The universities are audited and overseen by their home state or territory governments (or in the case of the ANU, by the Commonwealth). In Department of Education statistics, each university is accounted for according to its home state or territory (with the exception of ACU, which appears under a distinctive “multi-state” label).

This apparent clarity in governance, oversight, and reporting masks many complexities.

For example, according to Department of Education statistics, Victoria University generated an international EFTSL of 10,775 students in 2024, all of them listed under the heading for the state of Victoria.¹¹ According to the university’s annual report, however, only 5012 of these students (by EFTSL) study in Melbourne.¹² A further 2556 study at Victoria University’s Sydney and Brisbane campuses, with the remainder studying offshore at partner institutions in China, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. Victoria University’s Sydney and Brisbane “campuses” are actually administered by Education Centre of Australia (ECA), a private, for-profit company. They seem to admit only international students (although this has not been verified). The Victoria University Sydney and Brisbane campuses are not mentioned in the university’s Campus Plan, Strategic Plan 2022-2028, Research and Impact Plan 2023-2028, or Mission-Based Compact with the Department of Education.

In effect, Victoria University licenses out its name and accreditation to a private company that offers Victoria University branded degrees in the Sydney and Brisbane CBDs to international students.

Victoria University is not the only Australian university to sponsor capital city campuses that are operated by ECA. The University of Tasmania notes on its website that in addition to its traditional campuses, it has “study centres close to Melbourne and Sydney that offer international students the chance to study business and ICT right near the CBD heart of these interstate locations”.¹³ These two “study centres,” both run by ECA, are not mentioned in the university’s annual report. In 2024, Southern Queensland’s University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) opened a campus in Adelaide that is managed by ECA. According to USC’s annual report, this campus exclusively serves international students, though domestic students may be admitted “in future years.”¹⁴ The University of Canberra has a “Sydney Hills” campus in north Sydney’s Castle Hill, operated by ECA, that teaches nursing, education, and public health to a mix of domestic and international students. The university’s annual report makes no clear mention of the outsourcing arrangement with ECA.

Many other regional universities have capital city campuses that are managed by a private provider called Navitas. This includes rural NSW’s Charles Sturt University, which offers degrees in North Sydney and Melbourne CBD through Navitas. These campuses are discussed in Charles Sturt’s annual report under the heading “International Students.”¹⁵ Outer Melbourne’s La Trobe University has a Sydney campus fronting Hyde Park that is also administered by Navitas. La Trobe’s annual report says absolutely nothing about this campus beyond noting its existence on the chancellor’s letterhead.¹⁶ Western Sydney University, though based just

11 Department of Education, “Perturbed Student Load Pivot Table 2024” [dataset], September 2025.
 12 Victoria University, “2024 Annual Report,” March 2025, page 25.
 13 University of Tasmania, “Our Campuses,” retrieved November 16, 2025.
 14 University of the Sunshine Coast, “Annual Report 2024,” March 2025, page 18.
 15 Charles Sturt University, “2024 Annual Report,” April 2025, page 18.
 16 La Trobe University, “Annual Report 2024,” March 2025, page 4.

23 km away in Parramatta, has a Navitas campus in the same building. It seems to have hosted 1587 students in 2024, but the university gives no further information about the campus in its annual report.¹⁷ The websites for all of these campuses are targeted exclusively at international students.

Northern Queensland’s James Cook University has a Brisbane city centre campus operated by Russo Higher Education. It admits both domestic and international students. The university mentions this campus in its annual report only in footnotes.

Other capital city campuses are managed in-house by the host university. Central Queensland University operates campuses in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, and Sydney. The University of New England is also in Adelaide and Parramatta, while the University of Newcastle is in Sydney’s CBD. Federation University has a Melbourne CBD campus. Charles Darwin University and the University of Wollongong both have campuses in Sydney’s Chinatown. And Southern Cross University runs a mix of academic and hotel school campuses in Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney through its wholly owned subsidiary SCU Ventures. As with the outsourced campuses, these in-house campuses are all marketed primarily to international students, though they may accept domestic students as well. A list of all the capital city campuses highlighted in this report is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Non-traditional capital city campuses catering to international students

University	Campus	Operator
Central Queensland University	Adelaide	In-house
	Brisbane	In-house
	Melbourne	In-house
	Sydney	In-house
Charles Darwin University	Sydney	In-house
Charles Sturt University	Melbourne	Navitas
	Sydney	Navitas
Federation University	Melbourne	In-house
James Cook University	Brisbane	Russo Higher Education
La Trobe University	Sydney	Navitas
Southern Cross University	Brisbane	Wholly-owned subsidiary
	Melbourne	Wholly-owned subsidiary
	Perth	Wholly-owned subsidiary
	Sydney	Wholly-owned subsidiary
University of Canberra	Sydney	Education Centre of Australia
University of Newcastle	Sydney	In-house
University of New England	Adelaide	In-house
	Parramatta	In-house
University of Notre Dame	Sydney	In-house
University of Tasmania	Melbourne	Education Centre of Australia
	Sydney	Education Centre of Australia

17 Western Sydney University, “The Year in Review, Volume 1,” April 2025, page 65.

University	Campus	Operator
University of the Sunshine Coast	Adelaide	Education Centre of Australia
University of Wollongong	Sydney	In-house
Victoria University	Brisbane	Education Centre of Australia
	Sydney	Education Centre of Australia
Western Sydney University	Sydney	Navitas

It is difficult to see how most of these capital city campuses (whether managed in-house or contracted out) further the missions of these universities as state and territory chartered, publicly supported, not-for-profit institutions. Charles Darwin University, for example, claims to be “making a difference in the Northern Territory (NT), Australia and beyond”; presumably Sydney counts as “beyond”.¹⁸ The University of Canberra is “committed to serving the people of Canberra and the region”, apparently including the Sydney region through the medium of a private, for-profit education provider.¹⁹ The University of Tasmania stresses that “as the only University in the State, we have a place-based mission to serve our State and its regions”, which presumably do not include Sydney and Melbourne.²⁰ None claim to focus on offering international business degrees to international students on capital city campuses where they rarely if ever interact with domestic Australian students.

In other words, they seem to be purely commercial operations that exist to raise money by leveraging the respective universities’ authority to provide a Confirmation of Enrolment (CoE) in support of a Subclass 500 Student visa application. This is not illegal, but it is fair to question whether or not it is appropriate. That is to say, Victoria University Act 2010 states in its preamble that:

Victoria University focuses on the development and provision of educational, cultural, research and related services to build social, cultural and economic capital particularly in the Western Metropolitan region of Melbourne, and in ways which reflect principles of equity and social justice.²¹

Licensing a private, for-profit company to offer Victoria University degrees to international students in Sydney and Brisbane violates the spirit (though not the letter) of the legislation. Similar questions might be raised about all of the capital city campuses listed in Table 1. And the questions go beyond moral handwringing about the social mission of the university. There is evidence that these capital city campuses are increasingly serving as vehicles for the abuse of Australia’s student visa system by non-genuine students seeking entry into Australia for work.

18 Charles Darwin University, “2024 Mission-Based Compact Between the Commonwealth of Australia and Charles Darwin University,” May 2024, page 1.

19 University of Canberra, “2024 Mission-Based Compact Between the Commonwealth of Australia and University of Canberra”, May 2024, page 1.

20 University of Tasmania, “2024 Mission-Based Compact Between the Commonwealth of Australia and University of Tasmania”, May 2024, page 1.

21 University of Tasmania”, May 2024, page 1.State of Victoria, “Victoria University Act 2010,” October 15, 2018, page 2.

3. International student attrition rates

In the runup to the 2025 federal election, the Coalition proposed that a new fee of \$2500 “be introduced for [international] students who wish to change education providers”.²² The Australian followed up with a report on the novel phenomenon of international student “course-hopping,” a practice under which “some foreigners are paying for student visas to gain entry to Australia with work rights, only to drop out of university” and switch to cheaper, less demanding non-university programs.²³ Labor, too, has been concerned about this practice, though this seems more out of a motivation to protect universities from losing revenue. In May 2024 the Labor Commonwealth government proposed banning the payment of commissions to agents for “poaching” onshore international students away from their current institutions.²⁴

Why have both major parties concerned themselves with such a technical issue as international students transferring between institutions after arriving in Australia? Because it has become a huge issue for universities (and their commission-earning international student recruiters). Student attrition data are only available for undergraduate students, only available for their first year of study, and only available with a substantial reporting delay. That leaves much unknown. Nonetheless, what is known is shocking.

The international student attrition (or dropout) rate is the proportion of undergraduate students who commence studies in any given calendar year who leave the institution within their first 12 months of study. Before the coronavirus pandemic, the overall national attrition rate for commencing international students at publicly supported universities was consistently less than 10%. Naturally, it rose slightly during the pandemic, as many international students were forced to return home. But after initially falling back to historic levels in 2021, it started rising in 2022, then reached an all-time high of 17.4% for the 2023 entering cohort (the most recent for which data are available from the Department of Education). International undergraduate student attrition rates for the pre-pandemic baseline year of 2018 and the two most recent years are presented in Table 3.²⁵ Some evidence suggests that postgraduate student attrition rates may be even higher, but these are not published by the Department of Education.

22 Liberal Party of Australia, “Coalition’s Plan to Tackle Labor’s Housing Crisis,” April 6, 2025.

23 Natasha Bita, “Universities Expose Foreign Student ‘Phantoms’ and ‘Course-Hoppers,’” The Australian, April 16, 2025.

24 Jason Clare, “Education Services for Overseas Students Amendment (Quality and Integrity) Bill 2024” [speech], May 16, 2024.

25 Department of Education, “Attrition, Retention and Success Rates for Commencing Bachelor Students” [dataset], September 2025.

Table 3. International undergraduate student attrition rates for selected cohorts

University	2018 cohort	2022 cohort	2023 cohort	Number attriting*
Australian Catholic University	10.0%	20.8%	34.4%	878
Charles Darwin University	17.0%	10.7%	36.5%	195
Charles Sturt University	20.4%	6.8%	8.8%	115
CQUniversity	33.7%	67.0%	57.2%	616
Curtin University	7.5%	7.8%	9.3%	388
Deakin University	11.5%	24.6%	23.9%	644
Edith Cowan University	13.7%	24.1%	26.3%	440
Federation University Australia	36.7%	47.9%	36.1%	238
Flinders University	10.9%	28.3%	44.3%	354
Griffith University	9.8%	20.4%	26.2%	377
James Cook University	12.0%	13.6%	25.0%	459
La Trobe University	14.8%	19.8%	33.5%	712
Macquarie University	8.1%	21.2%	20.0%	425
Monash University	5.7%	5.8%	4.8%	402
Murdoch University	12.8%	10.7%	20.2%	553
Queensland University of Technology	7.1%	12.8%	26.9%	540
RMIT University	4.0%	5.2%	9.9%	828
Southern Cross University	36.8%	36.1%	37.6%	221
Swinburne University of Technology	11.3%	13.2%	20.6%	1,019
The Australian National University	4.3%	6.5%	6.5%	40
The University of Adelaide	4.4%	7.9%	10.9%	148
The University of Melbourne	3.2%	4.2%	3.6%	140
The University of New England	4.9%	18.1%	45.5%	71

University	2018 cohort	2022 cohort	2023 cohort	Number attriting*
The University of Newcastle	9.2%	13.2%	24.8%	359
The University of Notre Dame Australia	27.6%	15.7%	17.4%	85
The University of Queensland	4.9%	5.7%	6.4%	163
The University of Sydney	4.9%	6.1%	4.7%	213
The University of Western Australia	3.6%	6.6%	9.1%	154
University of Canberra	8.0%	15.4%	19.3%	156
University of New South Wales	6.7%	5.5%	4.1%	233
University of South Australia	10.7%	34.4%	35.7%	470
University of Southern Queensland	14.9%	23.8%	34.2%	93
University of Tasmania	6.6%	20.5%	32.3%	446
University of Technology Sydney	7.9%	6.3%	12.2%	263
University of the Sunshine Coast	26.4%	15.0%	10.4%	85
University of Wollongong	9.9%	8.7%	20.7%	775
Victoria University	9.9%	12.2%	22.9%	857
Western Sydney University	13.3%	19.3%	23.9%	718
All publicly-supported universities	9.7%	12.6%	17.4%	14,873

* Calculated from 2023 commencement data.

The unprecedented rise in international student first-year attrition did not affect all universities equally. The big capital city universities that enrol the largest number of international students saw little change. The University of Sydney, UNSW, Melbourne, and Monash all recorded international student attrition rates under 5%. Charles Sturt University successfully reduced its attrition rate from over 20% before the pandemic to under 10% while keeping its international student commencements roughly constant at pandemic-era lows. At the other end of the scale, Central Queensland University recorded an attrition rate of 57.2% in 2023 amidst a fivefold increase in commencements. Another six of the universities featured in Table 2 had attrition rates above 30%. Murdoch University's international student attrition figures are clouded by the inclusion of its offshore campuses, but its attrition rate nearly doubled from 10.7% for its 2022 entering cohort (which was in line with its pre-pandemic average) to 20.2% for its 2023 cohort.

In general, the most expensive universities have the lowest attrition rates, while the least expensive universities have the highest attrition. At first glance this might seem counter-intuitive: one might assume that attrition would be caused by the financial stress of paying tuition at Australia's most expensive universities. But an alternative, and much more likely, explanation is that most students who drop out immediately on finishing their minimum period of study are non-genuine students who are primarily interested in obtaining a student visa to access the Australian labour market. A student with this objective will clearly be incentivised to choose a cheaper degree, knowing that the content and quality is irrelevant. This behaviour is reflected in a comment in Queensland University of Technology's 2024 annual report noting that its international student attrition rate had risen to 46.4% for the 2023 cohort "because of an unusually high number of students who did not meaningfully engage from the outset".²⁶ This figure is higher than the QUT attrition rate reported in Table 3 because it includes postgraduate as well as undergraduate students.

The relationship between the cost of study and a university's undergraduate international student attrition rate is relatively strong. The correlation between tuition fees and attrition rates of 0.603 (measured on a scale from 0 to 1) is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).²⁷ One obvious interpretation of this relationship is that non-genuine students are targeting low-cost universities to help them obtain a Confirmation of Enrolment (CoE). Once in Australia, they can then drop out and seek admission to a low-cost vocational or English-language school. For example, the first-year tuition cost of enrolling in a typical Bachelor of Business degree at the University of Sydney is advertised at \$58,000, while the equivalent Sydney-based degree at CQU is \$35,250, and Southern Cross comes in at just \$26,000. Admissions standards may also be higher at more prestigious universities, but the financial incentives for non-genuine students to attend low-cost universities are obvious.

Australian visa regulations require students to enrol for (and crucially, pay for) the first six months of their university degrees, but after that initial enrolment period they can drop out and apply to change providers. On dropping out, they are immediately moved onto a Subclass 010 Bridging visa A (BVA), which generally includes full working rights. Students seeking to transfer between providers can remain on BVAs until they receive their new Subclass 500 Student visas. And this process can be repeated an indefinite number of times, because there is no formal limit on the number of qualifications that international students can accumulate while remaining (and working) in Australia on a succession of student visas.

26 Queensland University of Technology, "Annual Report 2024," February 2025, page 22.

27 Indicative costs of study were taken from each university's CRICOS registration for its Bachelor of Business or Bachelor of Commerce degree; attrition rates were as reported in Figure 3.

4. The visa waiting game

What happened to the nearly 15,000 international students who dropped out in their first year of undergraduate university study in 2023 -- and the presumably similar (or even larger) number who dropped out in 2024? Most of them likely remained in Australia on Bridging visas while they applied for admission to new, less-demanding, lower-cost VET programs. Nor are these undergraduates the only ones who did so; postgraduate students can also drop out of their degree programs. Between June 2023 and June 2025 the number of temporary migrants in Australia on a Bridging visa while in the process of applying for a new Student visa exploded from 13,034 to 107,274.²⁸ Obviously, there are too many Bridging visa holders to be accounted for solely by university dropouts. But university attrition is only the first step in a chain of behaviours that can result in international students holding multiple Bridging visas during their stays in Australia.

Once onshore, international students can remain in Australia on a succession of Student and Bridging visas almost indefinitely. It is rational to enter at first instance on a higher education sponsorship for study at a public university because the offshore processing times for these visas are very short (a median of 8 days, compared to 36 days for the VET sector) and the grant rates are much higher (92.2% for higher education visas in 2024-25, compared to 53.5% for VET).²⁹ Once inside Australia, the VET grant rate rises only marginally, but that is beside the point: even if an application is unsuccessful, the applicant will usually be given another Bridging visa while applying for another program. With the median onshore processing time for a VET sector Student visa standing at 197 days, the wait for a decision is (from the non-genuine student's perspective) a feature of the system, not a bug.³⁰

A student who enters Australia on a university-sponsored Subclass 500 visa, drops out at the end of one semester, and applies to study for a lower-cost VET qualification can expect to stay (and work) in Australia for a little over one year for the cost of a single semester's tuition (around \$14,000 at Australia's lowest-cost universities), two visa applications (\$4000 total), and health insurance (under \$1000) -- even if the subsequent VET application is unsuccessful. That's less than \$19,000 to access Australia's labour market for the first year, with more years to come (at a lower average annual cost) if the student's onshore VET visa application is successful. One popular VET course is the Certificate III in Commercial Cookery. An astounding 220 different institutions are registered to offer this course to international students, at a typical cost of around \$15,000 for one year of study. Upon completing this course, students can apply for another visa to undertake a two-year Certificate IV, or switch fields entirely.

If the chain of Student visas is broken due to a final denial, the student can always appeal to the Administrative Review Tribunal (ART) -- and receive another Bridging visa while the case is heard. As of August 31, 2025 there were 42,098 onshore Student visa cancellation and refusal appeals pending before the ART, with a median time to finalisation of 64 weeks and a success rate of 40%.³¹ The fee is \$3,580, with 50% off in cases of financial hardship, which are always likely to apply for international students. And of course any denial of the financial hardship reduction can always be appealed. The net result is that the non-genuine student whose application to change education providers is denied can expect a second year of working legally in Australia for an additional \$2500 (including health insurance), whether or not the appeal is successful. It should come as no surprise that the student visa appeals caseload sitting before the ART and its institutional predecessor the Administrative Appeals Tribunal has increased "more than 1,500 per cent between 2023 and 2025".³²

28 Department of Home Affairs, "The Administration of the Immigration and Citizenship Programs," October 2025, page 22.

29 Department of Home Affairs, "Student Visa and Temporary Graduate Visa Program Report at 31 December 2024," page 51; Department of Home Affairs, "Student Visas Grant rates at 2025-09-30" [dataset], October 30, 2025.

30 Department of Home Affairs, "Student Visa and Temporary Graduate Visa Program Report at 31 December 2024," page 51.

31 Administrative Review Tribunal, "Migration Jurisdictional Area Caseload Summary," as at July-August 2025, page 4; Administrative Review Tribunal, "ART Caseload Report," as at July-August 2025, page 4.

32 Keane Bourke, "Administrative Review Tribunal Swamped by Surging Demand," ABC News, October 18, 2025.

Finally, once all other options have closed, non-genuine international students can apply for asylum in Australia. Anyone can apply for asylum, and all applications must receive a fair hearing. The Department of Home Affairs does not publish processing times for onshore Subclass 866 Protection visas, but various legal advice sites suggest that times have recently been brought down to four months. It appears that more than 90% of applicants from the top 5 international student source countries are rejected, though firm data are only available for China (91.6% rejected in 2023-24).³³ But a rejection is not the end of the process. Rejections can be appealed to the ART, a process that can take several years to reach a resolution. People (who may or may not have been students) from the top five international student source countries account for over 50% of all ART onshore asylum appeal cases.³⁴ The data for these and for the next five international student source countries are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Asylum claims and ART caseloads for the 5 top international student source countries

Country of citizenship	New asylum applications (2023-24)	Appeals pending at ART (Aug. 2025)	Median time to ART decision	Success rate (most recent)
China	2760	7510	175 weeks	3.9%
India	2060	6115	172 weeks	7.2%
Nepal	n.a.*	857	66 weeks	10.5%
Vietnam	3389	4484	184 weeks	6.1%
Philippines	1078	2317	143 weeks	1.3%
Colombia	756	283	174 weeks	0.0%
Bangladesh	n.a.*	320	271 weeks	20.7%
Indonesia	938	2806	164 weeks	6.3%
Pakistan	754	256	212 weeks	3.4%
Sri Lanka	n.a.*	860	132 weeks	29.8%

* The Department of Home Affairs did not publish data for these countries in 2023-24.

Not all onshore Protection visa applicants are lodged by former international students, but the parallels between international student numbers and Protection visa applications suggest that many are: seven of the top 10 countries for international students are among the top 10 countries for Protection visa applications. Also noteworthy is the fact that so many apply despite being warned by the Department of Home Affairs that success rates are very low. The obvious implication is that the purpose of the application is not to actually receive asylum; it is to receive a Bridging visa while waiting for the asylum application to be rejected. All told, a determined non-genuine student can anticipate being allowed to stay (and work) in Australia for at least 4-5 years for an annual cost of under \$20,000 in tuition, visa, and health insurance fees.

33 Department of Home Affairs, "Onshore Humanitarian Program 2023-24," as at June 30, 2024.

34 Administrative Review Tribunal, "Protection Jurisdictional Area Caseload Summary by List Country of Reference," as at July-August 2025.

5. International student debt and the risk of pursuing the Australian dream

Australia's immigration debates focus heavily on the country's supposed skills shortages. But the case is rarely made that Australia needs unskilled labour, except in the special case of seasonal agricultural work. Yet the 699,600 people who were in Australia on June 30, 2025 either on Student visas or on Bridging visas while applying for (new) Student visas form a vast pool of unskilled immigrant labour.³⁵ When Australia's 217,624 working holidaymaker temporary immigrants are added in, Australia has 917,224 temporary migrant workers in a population of just over 27 million. These unskilled migrant workers outnumber people on Subclass 482 Skills in Demand visas by a factor of 4:1. Student and working holiday visas have given Australia a Singapore-style dual labour market. While not on the scale of Singapore's low-skill Work Permit system (which employs 1,182,500 migrant workers in a population of just over 6 million), Australia's student work system is arguably similar in its effects.³⁶

Much like Singapore's large unskilled migrant labour force, the conditions under which international students are recruited to Australia is ripe for and rife with exploitation.

This is particularly the case for students from India, Nepal, and other very poor countries who seem to dominate enrolments at lower-cost universities. For most of these students, paid employment is an absolutely necessary part of the university experience. Genuine and non-genuine students alike must pay for their tuition out of money earned in Australia. Of course, in the purely pro forma world of visa rules, it's not supposed to be like that. The Subclass 500 Student visa website explicitly states: "You must have enough money to pay for your stay in Australia. You should not rely on work to support yourself or your family while in Australia."³⁷ But when then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison denied international students access to government financial support at the start of the pandemic, reminding them that if "they're not in a position to be able to support themselves, then there is the alternative for them to return to their home countries," he was treated as a monster.³⁸ Whatever disclaimers the government might make on its website, everyone knows that many international students are in Australia to work.

There are no reliable statistics on exactly how international students pay for their initial enrolments and travel to Australia, but there is substantial anecdotal evidence showing that Indian students routinely take out education loans to pay their first year's tuition in Australia on the expectation that they will be able to repay the loans (and following years' tuition) out of income earned in Australia. Even the most reputable international education agency, IDP Education (which is part owned by Australia's public universities), advertises education loans on its Indian website. Less-reputable agents tout their ability to arrange financing as part of their overall service packages. These loans come with risks. South Asian students who take out loans to pay for their first years of study in Australia cannot afford to get sick or suffer serious accidents. Were they to return to their home countries without earning enough money in Australia to repay their debts, they could bankrupt their families -- or worse. Even for many genuine students, the need to work in Australia to earn money to pay for tuition and living expenses is clear. For non-genuine students, of course, working in Australia is a goal in itself.

35 Department of Home Affairs, "Temporary Visa Holders in Australia" [dataset], October 30, 2025.

36 Department of Home Affairs, "Temporary Visa Holders in Australia" [dataset], October 30, 2025.

37 Department of Home Affairs, "Subclass 500 Student Visa," accessed November 18, 2025.

38 Scott Morrison, "Press Conference -- Australian Parliament House," April 3, 2020.

6. Conclusion and policy recommendations

Regional universities' capital city branch campuses, international student first-year attrition, and the massive rise in the number of students on Bridging visas are all moving pieces in a complicated game masking Australia's exploitation of unskilled labour from poor countries. Were Australia to move to a US-style system in which international students could only work on-campus in jobs related to their studies, the international student market would immediately collapse. Few international students would remain in Australia on Bridging visas without work rights. International students would not clog the ART with frivolous appeals for asylum that stand little chance of success if they could not work during the years in which they wait for decisions.

The idea of ending work rights for international students is more a thought experiment than a practical policy solution; when it comes to work rights, the United States is the international outlier, not Australia. But there are several things that Australia could do to retain its large international student workforce while disincentivising perverse behaviours and reducing abuses. Two reforms in particular would solve the most pressing problems before they spiral out of control:

1. Prohibit universities from contracting with outside providers to offer courses under the university's name.
2. Require students who wish to change education providers to return home and reapply from offshore.

The first policy reform would restore basic "truth in advertising" principles to university study. It is unrealistic to expect teenage students from poor countries to understand the difference between a course taught by a university and a course taught by a private company that is overseen by a university. This has the "smell" of a deceptive business practice, and it is inappropriate for publicly supported universities to engage in this kind of behaviour.

The second policy reform would instantly end the practice of "course-hopping" without imposing arbitrary regulatory burdens like additional fees or agency restrictions. International students might reasonably be expected to change courses within a university, but leaving a university should mean ending the educational journey that was the basis for the student's visa grant. Few genuine students would be harmed by a policy like this, assuming that appropriate safeguards are put in place to allow for rare situations like discontinued courses and university insolvencies.

In addition to these two reforms, it might be wise to make universities register in the states in which they operate, since the entire university system is based on state (not Commonwealth) oversight. This would ensure that out-of-state branch campuses do not fall through the cracks of routine auditing and oversight. A major reform of the asylum system to prevent abuses from applicants resident onshore is also required, but that is a more difficult challenge that is beyond the scope of this paper.



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