

**Cash Cows or Valuable Immigrants?**  
**The Games of International**  
**Management and Commerce**  
**University Students in Australia.**  
**Can Everyone Win?**

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## Abstract

This study examined the efficiency of the Australian skilled migration policies from 2010 to 2022, to determine what policy changes were favourable for international students studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities to acquire Australian permanent residency or create pathways for them to acquire Australian permanent residence.

The research explored the effects of the general skilled migration policies during this period, which hindered the ability of this identified student cohort for both, procuring employment in the Australian workforce in their area of study and/or acquiring Australian permanent residency.

The research design examined the education migration nexus with the 2 main stakeholders being identified as the international student cohort and the successive Australian governments during the period that the research covered.

The overarching Research Question is: ***What policy reforms to the Australian General Skilled Migration program can improve the Australian permanent residency pathways for international students studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities?*** Four subsequent questions were tested as part of the research design to answer the overarching research question.

The study used the content analysis methodology for data collection from the available academic literature, government sanctioned reviews and reports, government statistics collection and independent reviews and reports.

The prisoner's dilemma concept of the game theory research methodology formed the theoretical framework to disclose the avenues available for the student cohort in this research immediately after the conclusion of their studies and two years post-graduation for Australian permanent residency.

Key findings indicate that international students do not get a return on investment for their tertiary studies based on the lack of relevant industry related content in the work

integrated learning component of the curriculum taught, the misalignment of the past and existing skilled occupation list and the unnecessary and avoidable hurdles for securing employment in the Australian workforce based on the limited duration of the post-graduation visa.

The findings of this research have important implications for the general skilled migration program policy makers, to align the skilled occupation list with the Australian labour market needs and amend the post-study work arrangements for a portion of international graduates from Australian universities as outlined in the 2021 Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2021) and to provide a clear pathway to Australian permanent residency for international students that was a commitment from the Parkinson Review and a recommendation from the Australian Universities Accord (O'Kane, et al., 2023).

This longitudinal study of the general skilled migration policies introduced during the past decade and as covered in this research, based on the recommendations of the various government sanctioned reviews conducted in this period, enhances knowledge by providing an analysis of its impact on international students from Australian universities, post-graduation.

This research challenges the efficacy of the existing general skilled migration policies from the standpoint of international students, by providing recommendations to the issues that emerged from the findings, to maintain Australia as an attractive study destination of choice and for the sustainability of the Australian higher education sector. It argues that international students educated in Australia make excellent migrants and should have a pathway to permanent residence rather than a tortuous maze.

### Statement of Declaration

I, Immanuel Hirendra Kumar Vyas, declare that the Doctor of Business Administration thesis entitled *Cash Cows or Valuable Immigrants? The Games of International Management and Commerce University Students in Australia. Can Everyone Win?* is no more than 65,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the [Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research](#) and [Victoria University's Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures](#).

Signature:



Date: 31/05/2025

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### **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my dear parents, my father, late Mr. Narayan Vyas, my mother Mrs. Janki Narayan and my late aunt, Ms. Roselyn Rukmini.

My parents, who were not able to further their education beyond high school due to their family responsibilities, taught me the value of education and ensured that all four of their children were tertiary educated.

My late aunt, Roselyn Rukmini paid for the tuition fees in my first year at university and without her timely contribution in my hour of need, I would not have progressed so far in my tertiary education journey.

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### List of Abbreviations

APSSL	Acute and Persistent Skills Shortage List
ECTA	Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement
ANZSCO	Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations
ACTEID	Australian Census and Temporary Entrants Integrated Dataset
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
ASCO	Australian Standard Classification of Occupations
BFoE	Broad Field of Education
CoS	Certificate of Sponsorship
CAANZ	Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand
CAE	Colleges of Advanced Education
CoE	Confirmation of Enrolment
CRICOS	Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students
CSP	Commonwealth Supported Student
CSOL	Consolidated Sponsored Occupation List
CSOL	Core Skills Occupations List
CPA	CPA Australia
CSL	Critical Skills List
DHA	Department of Home Affairs
ESOS Act	Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000
GS	Genuine Student
GSM	General Skill Migration
GTE	Genuine Temporary Entrant
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
IT	Information Technology
IPA	Institute of Public Accountants
ISERF	International Student Emergency Relief Fund
ITA	Invitation to Apply
JSA	Jobs and Skills Australia
MPA	Master of Professional Accountancy

MLTSSL	Medium and Long-term Strategic Skills List
NAATI	National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters
National Code 2018	National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students
NOC	National Occupational Classification
NPL	National Planning Level
NSC	National Skills Commission
NOSC	New Overseas Student Commencement
NUHEI	Non-University Higher Education Institution
OSL	Occupation Shortage List
OSCA	Occupation Standard Classification for Australia
OMARA	Office of Migration Agents Registration Authority
OPT	Optional Practical Training
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PSWR	Post Study Work Rights
PGWP	Post-Graduation Work Permit
PMSOL	Priority Migration Skilled Occupation List
PYP	Professional Year Program
PNP	Provincial Nominee Program
QILT	QILT Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
RAI	Regional Australia Institute
ROL	Regional Occupation List
RMA	Registered Migration Agent
ROI	Return on Investment
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
STSOL	Short-Term Skilled Occupation List
SSVF	Simplified Student Visa Framework
SOL	Skilled Occupations List
SOP	Statement of Purpose
SVP	Streamline Visa Processing
TAFE	Technical And Further Education

TEQSA	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
TAS	Tuition Assurance Scheme
TPS	Tuition Protection Service
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
WIL	Work Integrated Learning
WHO	World Health Organisation
VET	Vocational Education and Training

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The thesis consists of 5 chapters, which are summarised as follows:

**Chapter 1** has introduced the study context, research aims, and research objectives. It has also highlighted the theoretical and practical contributions of this research.

**Chapter 2** provides an extensive review of the literature, focusing on the policy landscape and reforms from 2010 to 2022 with the reviews conducted in this period and the ongoing inquiries into the GSM program from 2022.

The chapter also does a comparative model of the global skilled migration of competitor countries with the Australian selective skills model of points-based migration system and of post-graduation visas.

The impact of COVID-19 on migration and higher education is also mentioned as it highlighted the importance of international students and exposed the reliance on their tuition fee revenue, more specifically, regarding the reliance on China, the largest source country of international students to Australia and the emerging shift to India as a replacement.

The chapter ends with emphasising the role of education and migration agents in the education migration nexus and the prevailing ethical dilemma associated with the SOL, exposing the disjoint between the management and commerce discipline related occupations listed on the SOL and how impractical it is for an international student studying this discipline at an Australian university to successfully enter the Australian workforce in their area of study and/or acquire Australian permanent residency at the conclusion of their studies.

**Chapter 3** mentions the research design, the subsequent questions, the data collection methodology employed, and the theoretical framework utilised for the research.

**Chapter 4** reveals the analysis of the findings of the research and the cross-cutting themes which emerged from these research findings.

**Chapter 5** highlights the recommendations and the conclusion from this research. It also states the research limitations due to several factors and any directions for any future research to be taken using the findings of this research.

### **1.1 The Australian Higher Education Ecosystem**

Australia has 43 universities, consisting of 37 public universities and 6 private universities (Study Australia, 2025a). The formation of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2025), an independent national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education was based on recommendations 11, 12 and 19 of the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008).

Based on the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011, TEQSA became operational in early 2012 with the responsibility to perform several regulatory functions under the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (ESOS Act) (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016), which is the legislative framework designed to protect Australia's reputation for providing high-quality education to international students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) (Department of Home Affairs, 2025a).

This visa essentially allows international students to stay in Australia for the duration of the course that they undertake at Australian educational institutions.

Based on the requirements of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011, Australian higher education institutions apply to TEQSA for a course to be registered on the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS) register for these courses to be offered to international students studying on a student visa (subclass 500).

The ESOS Act is the overarching legislation to which educational institutions offering courses to overseas students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) must comply with and it establishes the Tuition Protection Service (TPS) which provides tuition fee protection for overseas students studying a CRICOS registered course (TEQSA, 2022a).



The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is the collection of descriptors that lists how an awarded qualification in the Australian education system for the vocational as well as higher education is administered by the Department of Education, (AQF, 2013).

This research is focused on international students studying courses classified under the broad field of education (BFoE) of management and commerce (0800) (ABS, 2001) from the AQF level 7 (bachelor degree) through to level 9 (masters degree) at an Australian university.

The BFoE field of management and commerce covers discipline areas such as management, administration, human resources, sales, marketing, finance, and human behaviour and remains to have the largest number of undergraduate and postgraduate students (TEQSA, 2019).

The National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students (National Code 2018) is the legal instrument made under the ESOS Act which outlines the nationally consistent standards for these institutions (Department of Education, 2023a).

## **1.2 International Students and the General Skilled Migration Program**

### **1.2.1 The Higher Education and Ageing Population Dilemma**

International students are the largest category of temporary migrants to Australia (Spinks, 2016) and this claim is still valid (ABS, 2024a; Hurley & Nguyen, 2024) as Australia facilitates the transition of international students to permanent resident status through skill-based admission categories (Aydemir, 2020).

The importance of higher education in driving economic prosperity (Montague, 2013), underscores the valuable contribution of international students, noting their possession of skills that benefit a country's workforce, especially in addressing the challenges posed by an ageing population (Hawthorne, 2008a; Wright et al., 2016).

These insights align with the idea that higher education not only enhances individual skills but also contributes significantly to a nation's economic growth, as international students bring diverse perspectives and expertise that can positively impact the workforce of a host nation and address its skill shortages (Ziguras & Law, 2006).

The observations made by (Hawthorne, 2008b), emphasised a global trend where various countries, including Australia, US, UK and Canada, recognised the value of the skills acquired through the attainment of higher education in the immigration process. These nations actively sought to attract and retain skilled individuals, often drawing from the pool of international students who brought valuable expertise and qualifications (Boucher & Cerna, 2014).

(Cohen et al., 2015) point out that countries worldwide have developed policies and programs to encourage the retention of skilled graduates, viewing them as assets for economic growth and innovation, leveraging the skill sets of higher education students for immigration purposes, reflecting the recognition of the contributions these individuals can make to a host country's workforce and broader societal development.

Globalisation plays a significant role in facilitating international migration, particularly in the movement of skilled migrants who have acquired their skills through higher education and countries like Australia attract and retain these talented students (Hamilton, 2017).

The importance of skilled migration as being underscored by targeting the brightest students who possess these skills that align with the needs of the Australian economy (Hawthorne, 2008a) is similar to other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations who also attract individuals with high levels of education and expertise that directly contribute to their economic development and innovation (Papademetriou & Heuser, 2009; Facchini & Lodigiani, 2014; Cohen et al., 2015).

Some OECD nations tweaked their immigration policies to allow foreign students to apply for permanent residency onshore (Hawthorne, 2008a; Facchini & Lodigiani, 2014), linking education with immigration pathways and these tailored immigration policies aimed at attracting and retaining skilled graduates, recognising their potential to fill specific gaps in their labour markets and drive economic growth, a deliberate strategy effort entertained by the successive Australian governments.

As highlighted by (Marginson & Considine, 2000), the significant influence and the emergence of the knowledge economy and global competition for scarce skills, accentuates the internationalisation of education. This phenomenon has prompted OECD countries to actively recruit international students as a strategic response to address the need for skilled immigrants in their labour markets, in light of their ageing populations and depleted labour markets (Boucher & Cerna, 2014; Faggian et al., 2016).

Immigration has a role in the transition of Australia towards a more knowledge-based economy (Wright et al., 2016).

The creation of a knowledge-based economy, with the increasing importance of knowledge, skills, and innovation in driving economic growth has intensified the competition among nations to secure and retain skilled international students and as (Cohen et al., 2015) mention, in response to this recruitment, countries have turned to international students, recognising their potential to contribute valuable skills and expertise to fill gaps in the labour force.

Moreover, these countries, faced with an ageing population crisis, favourably viewed the recruitment of skilled immigrants as a means to replenish their workforce (Ziguras & Law, 2006; Faggian et al., 2016), as international students represented a skilled immigrant pool of talent that aligned with the skills required for economic growth and innovation, making them an attractive resource for nations seeking to bolster their labour markets.

This approach reflected a broader trend wherein education had become an integral component of strategies aimed at addressing skill shortages and sustaining economic growth in the face of demographic shifts (Hawthorne, 2008a).

International students are categorised as a reserve for future high-skill immigrants by host countries like Australia and Canada, where skill requirement admissions is a predominant attribute for immigrants as opposed to the UK and the US, where skill-based admissions is much lower in comparison (Aydemir, 2020).

Post-graduation work rights, refer to the opportunities granted to international students to work in their host countries for a certain duration after completing their studies and (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012) points out that this policy is often viewed as an attractive incentive for prospective international students, offering them the chance to gain practical post-graduation work experience and potentially transitioning into the Australian workforce.

International work experience plays an increasing role in differentiating graduates in a competitive market and for international students who stay on as permanent residents in Australia, work experience is seen to complement their Australian degrees and give them the positional advantage in the Australian labour market (Tran & Soejatminah, 2016)

Post-graduation work rights policy for international students also exists in Canada, New Zealand, UK and the US and by providing post-graduation work rights, Australia has strategically positioned itself as not just as a country for the provision of quality education but also as a hub that facilitates a smooth transition from education to employment (Tran et al., 2019). Thus, the implementation of post-graduation work rights can be viewed as a strategic policy, aimed to enhance Australia's appeal as a desirable study destination for international students, by showcasing Australian universities for both academic advancement and career development.

According to (Koleth, 2010) immigration has been viewed as a means of shaping and developing a nation, often through policies that encourage permanent settlement of

migrants and based on the rise of knowledge economies worldwide and the recognition of skilled migrants as agents of economic growth by contributing to the workforce (Florida, 2014).

The Australian GSM is designed to pervade fundamental skills into the Australian labour market to meet the skills shortages which is not possible to be sourced domestically to alleviate the workforce shortage (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2024).

### **1.2.2 Evolution of the Australian Higher Education Export Market**

In the Australian context, this included, the Australian government's policies aimed to address skill shortages by leveraging international graduates with a twofold benefit. The first being the acknowledgment of the value that international graduates bring to the Australian workforce, particularly in filling in the skill gaps (Facchini & Lodigiani, 2014), and secondly, to align immigration strategies with the needs of a knowledge-based economy (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

By attracting and retaining skilled international graduates, Australia aims to bolster its workforce with individuals possessing sought-after skills and qualifications, reflecting an evolving approach to immigration, emphasising the role of skilled migrants in contributing to economic growth by addressing specific skill shortages within the country (Thomson, 2023).

The Colombo Plan (The Colombo Plan Secretariat, 2014) started in 1951 with the initial participation of 7 countries who were part of the commonwealth, and 8 Australian institutions initially participated in the scheme which marked an early stage in Australia's efforts to engage with international students and contribute to the development of human capital in neighbouring regions.

The Colombo Plan was designed as a strategy to against communism (Crock & Parsons, 2023), importantly with the aim of the initiative, being that upon the conclusion of their studies, these international graduates would return to their home

countries to utilise their newly acquired skills and knowledge for the betterment of their nations (Robertson, 2011).

This arrangement, rooted in the principles of cooperation and educational exchange, aimed at facilitating the development of human capital in these participating countries. The Colombo Plan sought not only to provide quality education but also to foster goodwill and capacity-building among nations by training future leaders and professionals who would apply in their home countries, the expertise obtained through international education.

The Colombo Plan was not part of Australia's education export, instead a collaborative effort by member countries in the Asia-Pacific region. According to (De Wit, 2011), it was Australia's involvement in higher education whereby the government was committed for regional development of countries by allowing international students to study in Australia.

It is important to note that while the Colombo Plan wasn't specifically formulated as part of what is now Australia's education export strategy today, it significantly contributed to Australia's engagement with international students and the development of educational ties with participating nations. This initiative aimed to provide educational opportunities in Australia for students from the commonwealth countries of the Asian and African region, fostering educational and cultural exchange.

In the last 3 decades however, there has been a shift from aid as stipulated in the Colombo Plan to trade (Robertson, 2011) or the internationalisation of tertiary education in Australia as we know now, to compensate for the decline in the pre 1990s government funding for Australian universities, creating a commercialised and successful service export industry (Harman, 2005; Tran & Gomes, 2017).

The internationalisation of the Australian higher education is an incremental process over several years and the educational trade as global but the policies relating to it is national according to (Hamilton, 2017).

From the mid-1980s and in the 1990s, there were significant changes in the Australian higher education landscape, as (Burke & Reuling, 2002) mention, many Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE), which primarily offered vocational and technical education, underwent transformations to become universities e.g. Central Queensland University and Charles Darwin University (formerly Northern Territory University).

This change can be attributed to the Dawkins reforms which aimed to restructure and modernise the higher education sector, particularly focusing on universities (Education and Employment Legislation Committee, 2014).

The emergence of higher education export as a significant strategy was triggered by the funding cuts to Australian universities from the federal government (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) and this financial constraint imposed between 1996 and 2000 significantly impacted the tertiary sector (Hawthorne, 2010).

The government funding for higher education declined from 1996 to 2004 (Welch, 2022) and Australia was the only OECD country where the public contribution to higher education remained at the same level in 2005 as it had been a decade ago (Bradley et al., 2008).

These funding cuts prompted universities and educational institutions to seek alternative revenue sources and strategies to sustain their operations and overcome this financial challenge thus the alteration towards actively recruiting international students and marketing higher education services to international markets as a means of generating additional income and offsetting the reduced government funding eventuated ((Marginson & Eijkman, 2007; Wright & Clibborn, 2020). This period marked a pivotal juncture in Australia's higher education landscape, where the necessity to diversify income streams led to a deliberate focus on attracting international students as a key component to maintain the sector's financial sustainability (Birrell et al., 2006).

The transformation within the higher education sector during the 1990s, due to the funding cuts imposed by the Australian government led to the shift toward seeking

additional revenue streams outside the traditional government funding, with a period of growth of what got termed as 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), in reference to universities adopting strategies and behaviours that are the attributes of corporate enterprises, to generate revenue and sustain their operations by exploring various avenues to compensate for the loss of government revenue that was previously a primary source of funding (Marginson & Considine, 2000). Universities had now become corporate entities and focused on revenue generation instead of fulfilling its primary purpose of being an educational institution.

To counteract financial shortfalls, universities initiated a more market-oriented approach by introducing new fee-paying programs, particularly targeting international students who were willing to pay higher tuition fees and though these strategies reduced dependence on government funding it raised questions about the balance between academic pursuits and financial imperatives (Marginson & Eijkman, 2007).

The evolution towards academic capitalism reflected the changing landscape of higher education governance and financing models as universities grappled with the shifting dynamics of funding sources, since this strategy not only provided a means to cover the funding gap but also contributed to the internationalisation of Australian higher education as universities had now expanded their course offerings and marketing efforts to attract international students (Gribble et al., 2015).

According to (Birrell et al., 2006), there was a surge in demand, estimated at around 30%, indicating a substantial increase in interest among international students who were sought education in Australia during that period. The heightened demand for Australian tertiary courses, particularly from international students, became a catalyst for universities to reevaluate their revenue models, recognising the stability and potential of income generated from international student fees, universities strategically positioned themselves to capitalise on this trend (Cohen et al., 2015).

This shift marked Australia's foray into the international higher education market as a major commercial player, ranking alongside established players like the UK and the US, prior to which Australia did not have such a high international student number



(Birrell et al., 2006). The active participation and success in attracting a substantial number of international students, positioned Australia as a competitive and lucrative destination for higher education on a global scale.

The emergence of Australia as a significant player in the international higher education sector not only contributed to the financial stability of universities but also played a role in diversifying the country's economy as the revenue generated from international student fees became a stable income source, influencing strategic planning and investment within the higher education sector (Deloitte Access Economics, 2020).

An attractive new source of income was now at the disposal of Australian universities with the influx of international students, presenting a dual advantage in terms of offering a financial boost to universities and also as a strategic investment for the government to replenish the labour market with much needed manpower due to an Australian ageing population (Ziguras & Law, 2006; Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

According to (Marginson & Eijkman, 2007), between the period 1996 to 2003, international students' contribution to Australian university budgets increased from 6.6% to 13.8%, and international students fee revenue now makes up some 27% of total Australian university funding (Birrell & Healy, 2022).

This highlights the substantial growth in the contribution of international students to Australian university budgets within a relatively short period. However, it is important to note that this reliance on international student tuition fees for revenue has raised concerns, revolving around the over-reliance on this income source (Jayasuriya, 2021), which might made universities vulnerable to fluctuations in the international student enrolments due to geopolitical factors, economic changes, or global health crises as evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, there have been discussions about ensuring the quality of education for both international and domestic students, avoiding a scenario where universities prioritise financial gains over academic standards (Marginson & Considine, 2000).

Overall, while international students have been a significant financial asset to Australian universities and have addressed certain labour market needs, careful management and balance are crucial to ensure the sustained benefit for both the universities and the broader Australian society.

Based on the decrease in traditional exports in the early 1980s, the development of service industries such as the higher education sector was the aim of policy makers because prior to 1990, subsidised places for international students existed and full fee-paying places to international students was introduced only in 1986 and surprisingly, even with the sudden increase in tuition fee costs, there was an increase of 129% in international students from 1987 to 1992 (Department of Education and Training, 2015; Department of Home Affairs, 2022).

### **1.2.3 Evolution of the Australian Skilled Migration Program**

The introduction of the points-based systems for skilled migration in the 1990s played a crucial role in the rapid expansion of education as an export industry in Australia.

These points systems were designed to attract skilled migrants which included international students who completed their studies in Australia, facilitating their transition to Australian permanent residency or skilled employment and as a consequence of these policies and the emphasis placed on skilled migration, the education sector experienced exponential growth, transforming it into a significant export industry for Australia (Cohen et al., 2015; Harrap et al., 2021).

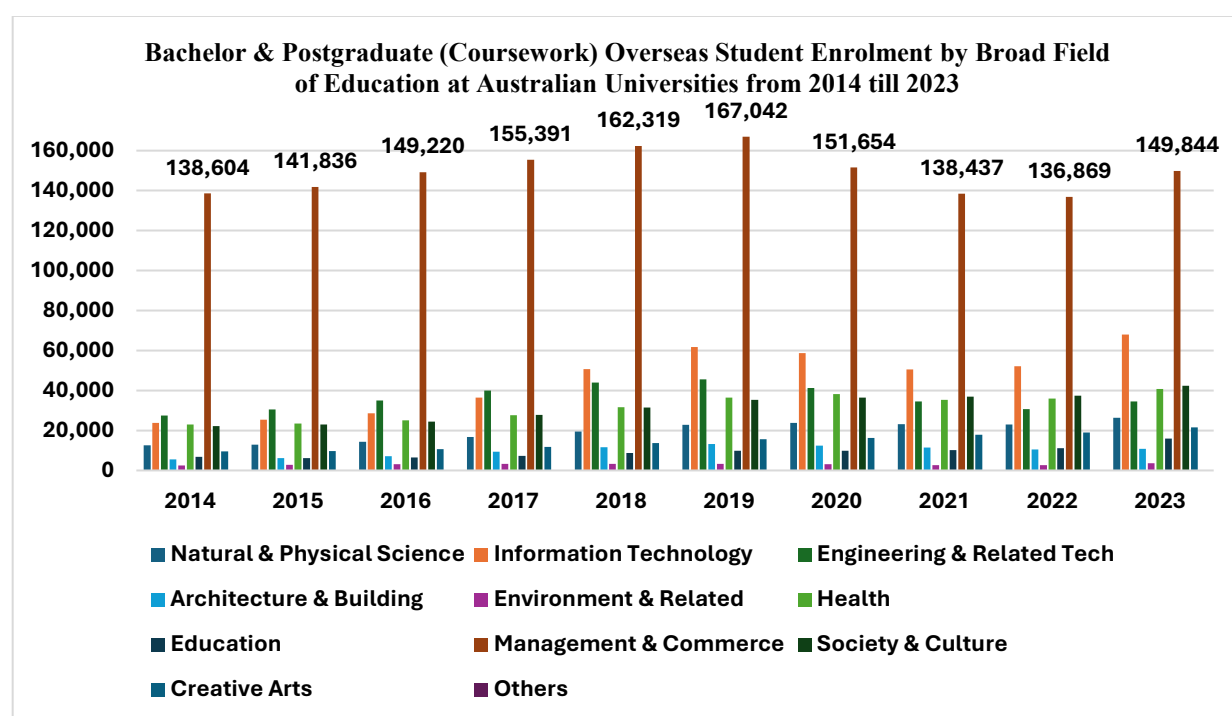
International education is Australia's fourth largest export, valued at \$48 billion in 2023 (Mandala, 2024) and higher education is Australia's largest service-sector export (Welch, 2022).

For the past two decades, higher education has become a significant export industry for Australia, and this observation echoes the sustained growth and importance of higher education as a significant export industry for Australia over the past two decades evolving into a major export contributor which underscores its economic significance and the country's success in attracting international students. The export

of higher education services encompasses various facets, including tuition fees paid by international students, expenditure on accommodation, living expenses, and other related expenses, contributing substantially to the Australian economy (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016).

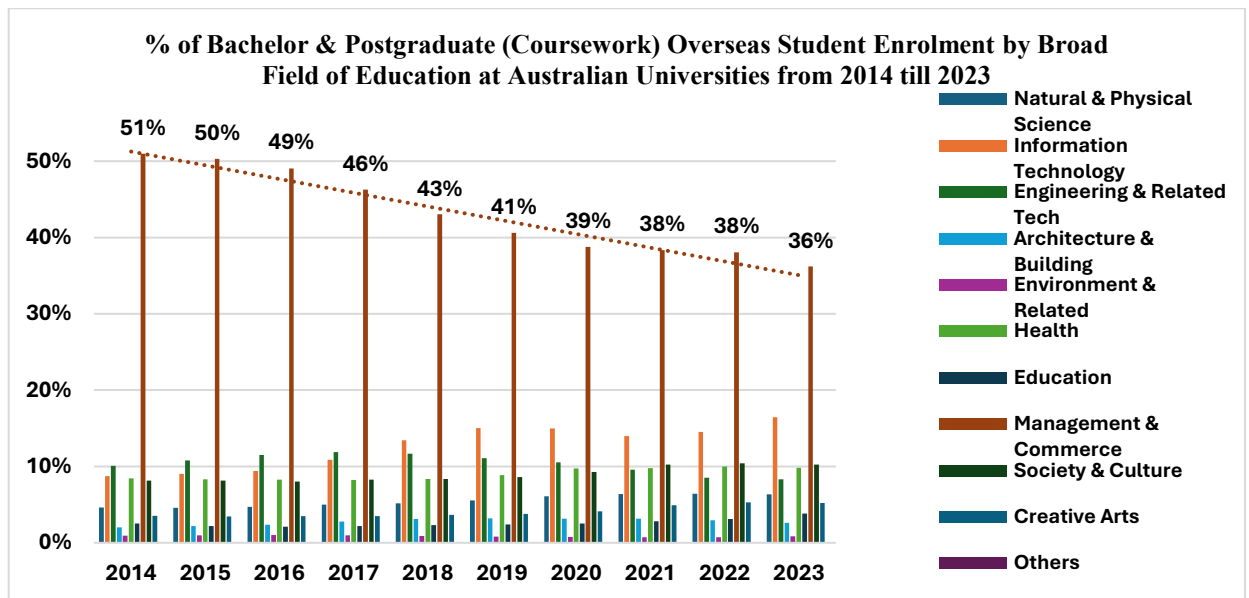
Figure 1 reflects the increased growth in the international bachelor and postgraduate (coursework) student enrolments at Australian universities from 2014 - 2023 by the BFoE at Australian universities. As evident, the largest enrolments by the BFoE are in management and commerce courses. Though the enrolments in management and commerce courses are still the largest, it also highlights a declining trend, comparing the both the pre and post COVID-19 pandemic periods.

Enrolments in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields such as information technology, engineering and related technology and health exhibit a steady growth both in the pre and post COVID-19 pandemic periods, exhibiting the market demand of occupations related to these disciplines.



**Figure 1: Bachelor & Postgraduate (Coursework) Overseas Student Enrolment by Broad Field of Education at Australian Universities from 2014 till 2023**

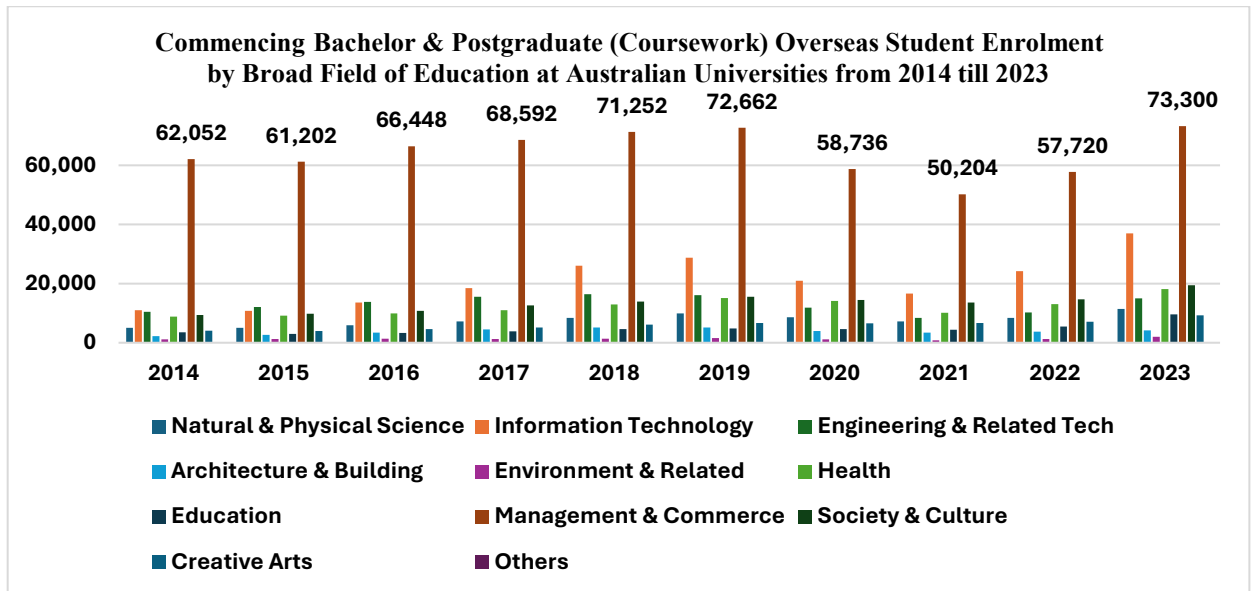
Source: Department of Education, 2025



**Figure 2: % of Bachelor & Postgraduate (Coursework) Overseas Student Enrolment by Broad Field of Education at Australian Universities from 2014 till 2023**

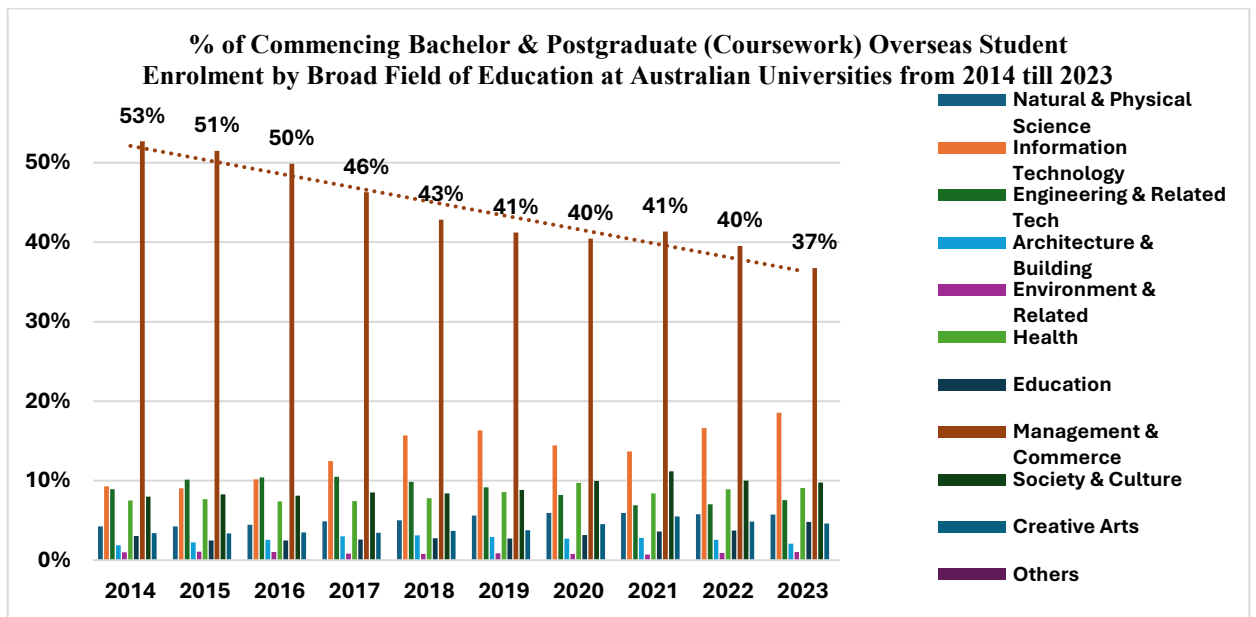
Source: Department of Education, 2025

Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution of the international bachelor and postgraduate (coursework) student enrolments at Australian universities from 2014 - 2023 by BFoE, clearly reflecting the spiral down trend in management and commerce courses with a clear indication for concern. This is one of the reasons that the researcher chose the management and commerce cohort BFoE to answer the research questions in this thesis.



**Figure 3: Bachelor & Postgraduate (Coursework) Overseas Commencing Student Enrolment by Broad Field of Education at Australian Universities from 2014 till 2023**

Source: Department of Education, 2025



**Figure 4: % of Bachelor & Postgraduate (Coursework) Overseas Commencing Student Enrolment by Broad Field of Education at Australian Universities from 2014 till 2023**

Source: Department of Education, 2025

Figure 3 shows the course enrolment in management and commerce courses in 2023 back to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic numbers, but it is lucidly evident from Figure 4 that the percentage distribution of the international bachelor and postgraduate (coursework) commencing student enrolments at Australian universities from 2014 - 2023 by BFoE is in a spiral down trend.

Even though the enrolment in management and commerce courses of the international bachelor and postgraduate (coursework) students is steadily increasing post COVID-19 pandemic as seen in Figure 3, the percentage of the total enrolments, it is steadily decreasing, a pattern that existed from the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period.

Also, in terms of the percentage of enrolments in the management and commerce courses of the international bachelor and postgraduate (coursework) students, holistically, there is a steady decrease over a 10-year period.

Even though management and commerce courses top the list of new courses accredited by TEQSA by BFoE from 2015 – 2017, it declined by 58.33% in 2017, compared to 2015 (Department of Education and Training, 2015). Students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) are required to study a full-time load (Department of Education, 2022e) as opposed to domestic Australian students who can study on a part time basis.

Almost 1 in 2 permanent migrants in Australia is working below their potential, which makes up 44% of permanent migrants in Australia, of which 60% gained their Australian permanent residency through the GSM program, and 25% of this cohort is from the management / commerce field of study (Deloitte Access Economics, 2024).

This type of a skilled migrant group may very well comprise former Australian graduates from Australian universities (Boucher & Davidson, 2019), leading to a loss of \$9 billion of additional economic activity annually (Jiang & Nguyen, 2024).

The Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) started in 1989 based on the recommendation from the Wran Committee (Wran, 1988); a committee constructed

by the government to review higher education funding policy and make recommendations regarding its future direction. HECS was a good fit for the government to introduce a student loan system (Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill, 2014) and this abolished subsidised places for international students to ease off the financial pressure on the government whereby domestic students accessed higher education without upfront costs, having the option to defer the payment of their tuition fees until they reached an allocated income threshold, a system that is still in existence today.

The Dawkins white paper was a series of reforms introduced with one of the aims to increase Australian educated skilled professionals in meeting Australia's social and economic needs and fostering cultural diversity and this led to the introduction of full fees for international students in 1990 (Clibborn & Wright, 2020a) and to position the Australian higher education system as an export industry with an image as an attractive destination for international students seeking a high-quality education with revenue generation based on the high tuition fees paid by international students (Department of Education and Training, 2015).

In the decades to follow, the recommendations of the Wran Committee and the Dawkins white paper transformed Australian universities to be more financially independent (Birrell & Healy, 2022) and globally competitive, based on the international rankings enjoyed by Australian universities (Study Australia, 2025b).

While the Australian Government did not place any restrictions on the maximum fees to charge international students, it left the decision at the provider's discretion, as long as the fees charged was not less than that of the Commonwealth Supported Student (CSP)s, available only to domestic Australian students and that the tuition fees paid by international students was not less than that of the CSP (Department of Education and Training, 2015).

The Australian Government does not enforce a cap on fees paid by international students studying at Australian universities, but this gives universities a free hand in setting the tuition fees for international students in an unregulated market where

universities can hike the international student fees based on market conditions or any other justification.

The early 1980s had reforms made to the immigration policies by replacing subjective measures of eligibility with ‘quantifiable indicators of human capital’, assigning points based on specific criteria considered vital for the country's economic needs and these points were awarded for factors identified as important such as skill, age and linguistic ability as pointed out by (Walsh, 2011).

The points-based system was instrumental in addressing workforce scarcity by attracting migrants with the required skills (Freeman, 1995) and these factors were deemed essential in evaluating an individual's potential to contribute to the Australian workforce and society. The system aimed to prioritise immigrants who possessed the skills and qualifications in demand within the Australian labour market and this points-based migration system facilitated the selection of migrants who could make immediate and valuable contributions to the economy, filling skill gaps and supporting economic growth. It allowed Australia to strategically manage immigration by aligning it with the country's workforce needs and broader economic goals.

According to (Cohen et al., 2015), the Australian government changed its immigration policies in 1988 in line with the public concern to select migrants who could meet Australia’s immediate and longer-term economic needs and (Markus et al., 2009) highlights that this policy contributed to the exponential growth of the international student industry, since international students now had access to the Australian labour market based on a migration pathway that was points based and a range of visas which allowed them to legally stay and work in Australia.

This led to the unintentional coupling of migration and higher education policies in an attempt to fill in the scarcity of skills in the Australian workforce and this created a new multi-billion-dollar industry. This unintentional coupling existed from the early days of the introduction of the General Skill Migration (GSM) policies, but other stakeholders exploited this by adding a pathway to permanent residency to the equation, capitalising on this, as an incentive to attract international students. This



unintentional coupling led to the dramatic overhaul of the GSM policies and changes to the Australian student visa system.

The expectation of studying in an Australian university meant obtaining Australian permanent residency at the conclusion of studies for international students (Baas, 2019), hence pursuing education in Australia was not only an opportunity for a quality education but also became a pathway to Australian permanent residency (Hamilton, 2017).

International students are eligible to apply for permanent residency as part of the GSM program based on occupations listed on the Skilled Occupations List (SOL). The SOL is an Australian list of occupations in demand based on the identified scarcity in the Australian workforce and this list is used for the GSM program (IDP, 2025). This list is created and maintained by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA).

The overarching SOL consists of the Medium and Long-term Strategic Skills List (MLTSSL), the Short-term Skilled Occupation List (STSOL) and the Regional Occupation List (ROL) (Boucher & Davidson, 2019). Throughout the thesis, these lists would be generally referred to as SOL unless a specific mention is made.

Previously this list was based on the informed research and analysis of the National Skills Commission (NSC) which conducted labour market research to identify the skill shortage in the Australian labour market. From 16<sup>th</sup> November 2022, the role of the NSC in the creation of the SOL was replaced by Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) (Job and Skills Australia, 2023; Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2024).

The JSA with its expert knowledge of the Australian labour market shortage, provide advice to the Australian Government on the SOL. This list is comparable to the National Occupational Classification (NOC) list in Canada, which is a standardised framework for classifying jobs based on their duties, responsibilities, and the skills required for occupations in the Canadian labour market. The NOC is used by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to determine occupational eligibility for immigration programs based on labour market assessments.

The GSM program leads to Australian permanent residency whereby applicants must nominate an occupation on the SOL and courses are aligned to occupations with migration pathways that are the most in demand (Hurley & Nguyen, 2024).

For the purpose of this research, the 3 most common permanent residency visas or pathway to permanent residency visas are taken into consideration and these are the ones available to international students studying management and commerce courses at an Australian university, namely:

- Skilled Independent Visa (subclass 189) (Department of Home Affairs, 2024a): Applicants of this visa are not sponsored by an employer, a state, or a family member and must meet the points test and have an occupation on the relevant SOL.
- Skilled Nominated Visa (subclass 190) (Department of Home Affairs, 2024b): Applicants of this visa must be nominated by an Australian state or territory government and must meet the points test and have an occupation on the relevant SOL.
- Skilled Regional (Provisional) Visa (subclass 491) (Department of Home Affairs, 2024c): Applicants of this visa must be nominated by a state or territory government or sponsored by an eligible family member residing in a designated area and must meet the points test and have an occupation on the relevant SOL. This visa was introduced in 2019 and replaced the Skilled Regional (Provisional) Visa (subclass 489), allowing skilled workers to live and work in specified regional areas for a duration of up to 5 years.

The first two are permanent visas, while the third one is a temporary visa with a validity of 5 years, and which can later be converted to a permanent resident visa, Permanent Residence (Skilled Regional) visa (subclass 191) (Department of Home Affairs, 2024d).

Apart from these 3 common visas that international students studying management and commerce courses at an Australian university are eligible for, another permanent residency visa available to them is the:

- Employer Nomination Scheme (subclass 186): Applicants of this visa must be nominated by an approved Australian employer. However, the minimal possibility of international students studying management and commerce courses at an Australian university to be able to obtain this visa is discussed further, in detail in Chapter 4.

An interesting observation from the CRICOS register is that almost all courses listed under the BFoE of management and commerce (0800) can be mapped to occupations on the SOL for migration.

It is important to note however that while studying at an Australian university might provide a pathway to Australian permanent residency through the GSM program, obtaining Australian permanent residency is not guaranteed by a student visa (Koleth, 2010). Even though it was always made clear from the policy makers that a student visa does not guarantee permanent residency, this is not how it was promoted by other relevant stakeholders e.g. by education agents, who worked with universities to promote their courses and facilitate international student recruitments as revealed in the Nixon Review (Nixon, 2023).

There is a strong connection between education and migration (Koleth, 2010), highlighting how this coupling has significantly contributed to promoting Australia as a top study destination and how the GSM policies have played a pivotal role in fostering the ongoing success of Australia's international education sector.

The alignment of education and migration policies in Australia has created an attractive proposition for international students. With the possibility of leveraging an Australian university qualification for potential migration or skilled employment, making Australia an appealing destination for international students with future career prospects by transitioning into the Australian workforce in areas of identified skill shortages as part of the GSM program.

As part of the skilled migration process, an applicant's character requirement is a mandatory criterion which the applicant needs to meet thus it can be safely assumed

that those international students who obtain Australian permanent residency do not have a criminal record from their home country or from during their stay in Australia and can be deemed to be good citizens.

In 2019, income derived from international education in Australia was over \$37 billion dollars (UNSW, 2021) and for many universities, this was a critical income, sourced in an industry based with increase in annual demand e.g., 40% of the student population at the University of New South Wales consisted of international students and the fee revenue contributed from their total course was 54.5% greater than that of domestic students (UNSW, 2019). International students comprised 38% of total Victorian universities in 2023 and 43% of the total university revenue. International education accounts for 19% of the total Australian exports and 48% of the services exports in Victoria (SPP Analysis, 2024).

This showcases the scale of international student enrolments at certain institutions with such high percentages, underscoring the reliance of these universities on international student tuition fees (Clibborn & Wright, 2020a), contributing to their financial stability to sustain their operations.

As (Florida, 2014) points out, based on the global trend to compete for the talent required for a skilled workforce, the different Australian government has strategically developed the GSM program, which has gone through many policy changes with different governments over the years but with the same aim to addressing skills shortages in the Australian workforce (Faggian et al., 2016).

The international education export in 2023 was worth \$47.8 billion for the Australian economy out of which, \$17.1 billion was from tuition fees (Department of Education, 2024a). Over 80% of the tuition fees paid by international students goes to the 37 Australian public universities and this accounts for 25% to 33% of their total fee revenue. The current 3 largest source countries for Australian universities are China, India and Nepal, however, the international student tuition fees contribution to an Australian university budget differs from one university to another e.g., in 2021, this contribution at the University of Sydney was \$1.3 billion, almost 38% of the

university's total budget but only \$5 million or 2% of the university budget for the University of Notre Dame (Ziguras & Croucher, 2023).

### **1.3 Why do this study?**

Interest for the topic of this research study is the result of the researcher's accumulated experience in the higher education industry in Australia, working for Australian universities and dealing with international students. Based on his work experience, the researcher had the opportunity to come in contact with international students in the bachelor and masters programs, whom he noticed had become victims of the GSM policy changes brought on by the successive Australian governments during the period covered in this research, leading to the inability of these students to achieve both their desired career and migration outcomes.

The overwhelming majority of these international students were studying in courses with occupations related to these courses, listed on the SOL. Being an immigrant to Australia, the researcher had taken a similar route from his home country of Fiji by studying Information Technology (IT), with related occupations on the Skill Occupation List, something which still exists on the SOL thus the education-migration nexus, which forms the very crux of this research was not a new phenomenon to him.

In 2010, the Australian Government announced a major overhaul of the GSM program and the changes to these policies were reflected through the disciplines that international students deliberately chose to study at Australian universities with the motivation of obtaining pathway to permanent residency in Australia (Australian High Commission, New Delhi, 2010a).

Anecdotally, international students expressed their disappointment and uncertainty of these policies and the impact it had on their career or migration outcomes and complained about not getting a return on investment (ROI) on the cost of their studies post-graduation.

The researcher's impetus for this research stemmed from the dissatisfaction of these students to authenticate the genuineness of this dissatisfaction.

#### **1.4 Research Objective and Question**

The primary purpose of this thesis is to investigate through evidence-based research, as to why despite numerous policy reforms to Australia's GSM program, there remains a significant gap in the pathways to Australian permanent residency for international students studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities.

Even though it could be debated, as to why investigate international students studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities only, their enrolment contribution to the Australian post-secondary sector cannot be ignored.

The distribution of overseas enrolments in the Australian educational institutions in 2024 comprised of 53% of enrolments in the higher education sector, while the VET sector accounted for 30% only, with the remaining enrolments in schools, ELICOS and non-award courses (Crowe & Ey, 2024).

The indubitable contribution to the Australian higher education from international studying at Australian universities is displayed in Figure 1, with the largest cohort of 43% of these international students studying business and management courses by BFoE (TEQSA, 2019).

During this research, it was discovered that there have been some research conducted that investigated the education migration nexus and which may be comparable to this research in terms of its theme of scrutinising the Australian higher education and the GSM policies, which were conducted by (Chiou, 2017; Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014; Hamilton, 2017) who utilised Considine's policy system, comparative hypothetical case studies and Bourdieu's discourses and fields respectively as the theoretical framework.

This research, however, makes a significant original academic contribution by specifically analysing the effectiveness of the GSM policies between 2010 and 2022, from the view point of international students enrolled in the BFoE of management and commerce courses at Australian universities by focusing on evaluating the post-

graduation employment opportunities that is available to these students and the feasibility of them obtaining Australian permanent residency by employing the prisoner's dilemma concept of game theory.

Using this theoretical framework, the main research question, supported by 4 subsequent questions is answered. The overarching research question that underpins this research project is:

**What policy reforms to the Australian General Skilled Migration program can improve the Australian permanent residency pathways for international students studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities?**

Other scholars have researched on:

- the education migration nexus (Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014; Tran et al., 2025; Chan, 2020),
- the limitation in international student post-graduation opportunities (Han et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c),
- study of the homogeneous group of international students in Australia and their transition to post-graduation working opportunities either in Australia or in their home countries (Zhai et al., 2019; Pham, 2021; Tran et al., 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Singh & Fan, 2021; Nguyen, 2015; Wei, 2021)
- Bourdieu's theory of different capital to view the international student post-graduation opportunities (Tran et al., 2021b; Hamilton, 2017; Robertson, 2011; Nguyen & Hartz, 2020)
- International students and the Professional Year Program (PYP) (Jones, 2018)

None of this research, however, has dealt with the topic of the possibility of international students from Australian universities transitioning to obtain Australian permanent residency.

This research fills this gap by investigating to what extent an international student studying at an Australian university is able to obtain Australian permanent residency

post-graduation, using the historical trend of the largest cohort of enrolled international students at Australian universities.

The answer to the following subsequent questions answers the research question:

RQ2: Are the existing post-graduation work rights and visa condition(s) sufficient for graduates?

RQ3: Is the SOL a correct representation of the Australian labour market?

RQ4: Is the work integrated learning in the existing curriculum sufficient to enter the Australian workforce?

RQ5: Are the students getting a return on investment from their tertiary studies?

The research question and the subsequent questions are fully explained in Chapter 3.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The research has significance for the Australian tertiary education sector and for the government policy for international students in relation to the GSM program.

This research has both theoretical and practical implications for other stakeholders as well, such as Australian employers and education/migration agents who are associated with international students at Australian universities, though they have not been extensively covered in this research as they are catalysts in the process and beyond the scope of this research.

#### **1.5.1 Theoretical Contribution**

This research will aid the GSM program policy makers and universities to understand the sentiments of their largest international student group and put in perspective for these stakeholders to ensure that these international graduates obtain an optimal Australian education experience, an aim of the ESOS 2022 Review (Department of Education, 2022a) with the potential of making them future ambassadors (Hong et al., 2022) or future Australian citizens (Welch, 2022).



### **1.5.2 Practical Contribution**

This research, through the chosen theoretical research framework, exhibits the different options available to international graduates based on the most common scenarios they find themselves in post-graduation, to obtain Australian permanent residency through the existing GSM policies and to secure post-graduation employment opportunities.

The hypothetical case studies, highlighted these scenarios, revealing the limited options at the disposal of these international graduates, using management and commerce graduates from Australian Universities as the sample cohort for this research.

The practical contribution of this research lies in its evidence-based recommendations. While these recommendations may not fully resolve the longstanding complexities of the higher education and migration nexus that predate the period investigated in this research, they offer pragmatic solutions that warrant consideration by the relevant stakeholders for the future sustainability of the Australian higher education sector.

### **1.6 Chapter Summary**

The chapter has introduced the Australian higher education ecosystem, the international students and its relationship with the GSM program, the rationale behind conducting the research project and the focus of the research, introducing the overarching research question and the significance of the study with the theoretical and practical contribution made.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The chapter is a literature review which introduces the GSM policy reforms from 2010–2022 and does a comparison of the Australian GSM program and the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) with comparable skilled migration models and post-graduation visas of other higher education competitor countries by comparing and contrasting them.

The intention is for a comparison of the migration models that exist in these countries to compare with the Australian model and not to research on the complex and often conflicting policy considerations that go into shaping migration policy in relation to international student migration as these policies are different for each country.

The chapter probes into the Government sanctioned reviews taken between 2008 till 2022, covering the pre and post COVID-19 pandemic periods regarding Australia's higher education sector and the resulting key recommendations, especially regarding international students.

The chapter further outlines the contribution of education and migration agents in the education migration nexus as a cog in the wheel is explained, as well as the criticism stemming from the various reviews and research, based on their unethical behaviour and unscrupulous practise. The inaccurate reflection of the Australian job market in the SOL is also explained.

The chapter concludes with exposing the heavy reliance on China for international students and the new, intended pivot towards India as an alternative source country to China.

### **2.2 Policy Landscape and Reforms (2010–2022)**

Australia's immigration program is administered by the DHA, based on the Migration Act 1958 (Commonwealth Consolidated Acts) and the GSM program is also governed by this act.

The Migration Act of 1958 is the legislation in Australia that governs immigration and visas and has been amended several times through the acts of parliament since it came into being operational based on the changing immigration policies and societal needs.

New visa categories and any changes for the eligibility of these visas are via amendments to the Migration Regulations 1994 and other legislative instruments. (Department of Parliamentary Services, 2019).

The following 2 sections of the Migration Act 1958 are of noteworthy mention based on its relationship with the GSM program:

- Under section 85 of the Migration Act 1958, the Minister for Home Affairs has the powers to impose quota limits or capping on the number of visas that can be granted for a particular subclass each year.
- Under Section 93 of the Migration Act 1958, the Minister for Home Affairs has the powers to allocate points for a range of factors which currently are:
  - State Nomination (Applicable to the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190))
  - Age
  - English Language Ability
  - Australian Educational Qualification
  - Professional Year
  - Qualifications
  - Overseas Work Experience/Australian Work Experience
  - Partner Skill Qualifications
  - Competency in a Designated Language

Under Section 93 of the Migration Act 1958, the Minister for Home Affairs has the powers to set the pass mark for points-tested visas such as the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) and Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) for which the current pass mark is 65 since July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. Any changes to the visa regulation occurs via amendments to the Migration Regulations 1994 (the Regulations) and other legislative instruments (Department of Parliamentary Services, 2019).

### **2.3 Australia's Points-Based Migration System**

Canada started the skilled migration program based on a points system with the criteria based on skills, education, work experience, language proficiency, and other factors to enable a successful integration into the Canadian society and contribution to the economy based on the Immigration Act of 1967 (Cohen et al., 2015; Picot, et al., 2016; Tani, 2018; Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019; Abu-Laban, 2024; Triadafilopoulos & Taylor, 2024) and this points system was adopted and refined by Australia in 1989 and New Zealand in 1991 as fit for purpose based on their policies to attract an immense pool of professional skilled migrants as skilled workers (Czaika & Parsons, 2016; Aydemir, 2020).

A noteworthy mention is that these professional skilled migrants have historically consisted of offshore skilled workers with several years of experience from overseas as well as international graduates from Australian tertiary institutions.

There is an expectation for Australia to retain the majority of international students, post-graduation, only to be absorbed into the Australian workforce, instead of returning to their home countries (Department of Education, 2024c).

According to (Cameron et al., 2019), the term “two-step migration process”, coined by Professor Lesleyanne Hawthorne (Hawthorne, 2010) refers to when an immigrant first obtaining temporary residence in a host country, before transitioning to permanent residency. This model is applicable with the transition from a temporary visa e.g. the student visa (subclass 500) to a permanent resident visa such as the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) or the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190).

The two-step migration process is an essential component of the selective migration model which is employed by countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Harrap et al., 2021) and fits in their respective GSM programs in which international students move to a host country for education and then leverage their work experience or qualification attained to transition from a student visa to the permanent residency of the host country (Aydemir, 2020; Triadafilopoulos & Taylor, 2024).

The two-step migration process can be viewed as a stable model whereby applicants who in the context of this research are students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) are exposed to the Australian workforce by gaining the necessary required skills from their course, and based on their work experience, then can make an informed decision to gain permanent residency in Australia, fulfilling the aim of the GSM program.

The vast majority of migrant workers enter Australia on a temporary visa such as a student visa (subclass 500) to increase their odds of obtaining permanent residency through acquiring local qualifications and gaining Australian work experience thereafter on a Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) (Department of Home Affairs, 2024p) to gain more points and meet the points test for either the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) or the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023a).

Almost 50% of all permanent visas are granted to applicants who are already onshore, in Australia on a temporary visa, indicating the strong transition interdependency between policy settings for temporary and permanent visas (Department of Parliamentary Services, 2019).

Based on the report from (Papademetriou & Heuser, 2009), the Australian GSM program can be termed as a 'hybrid system' operating on a points-based and 'supply-driven' migration system.

Under the points-based system as part of the GSM program, applicants need to meet a minimum points threshold of 65 points to be eligible for the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) or the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190). This system allows the Australian government to prioritise applicants with higher skills, qualifications, and attributes that align with Australia's strategic economic needs.

Under the supply-driven migration, Australia's migration program is dictated by supply-driven factors, responding to Australia's labour market demands and shortages both at the national as well as state level (Wright & Clibborn, 2019; Duncan, 2021).

The Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) deals with this shortage at the national level while the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) with state nomination at the state level (Australian Parliament, 2024), e.g. management and commerce related occupations maybe in demand nationally but its level of demand may differ from one state to another.

In the Australian migration system, skilled visas are given a higher priority due to their economic value based on their contribution to the country's workforce and economy (Department of Home Affairs, 2025b). The 2 permanent visas mentioned can be classified as 'economic visas' based on the contribution to the Australian workforce in terms of replenishing the scarce skills in demand.

An interesting observation noted is that out of the 212 occupations listed on the MLTSSL and 215 occupations on the STSOL, there are only 10 occupations on the MLTSSL and 30 occupations on the STSOL respectively with management and commerce related occupations.

In the Australian migration context, an occupation is classified as a skilled occupation if it appears on the SOL (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023a) and the research is in alignment with this statement, compelling one to debate whether the existing GSM program fully aligns with Australian labour market needs as was the intended purpose of the program or if there are factors in play such as deliberately listing occupations on the SOL for the sole purpose of enticing international students to study these disciplines at Australian universities and only to later find out of the limited employment prospects, post-graduation and the slim chance of obtaining Australian permanent residency through the GSM pathway.

## **2.4 Comparative Global Models of Skilled Migration**

According to (Boucher & Cerna, 2014), even though skilled migration has the attention of both international and domestic government agencies, there were no comparative studies of skilled immigration policies of different host nations.

This claim is no longer valid as a comparison of the GSM models of 3 other countries who have competing higher education markets for international students with Australia followed by the results of the reviews held regarding the GSM program involving international students studying in Australia is mentioned in this chapter.

The research by (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018; Koslowski & Ding, 2024; Chand & Tung, 2019; Hawthorne, 2008a; Zhang et al., 2023; Hari & Wang-Dufil, 2023; Picot et al., 2016; Koslowski, 2018; Abu-Laban, 2024; Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019; Wright & Clibborn, 2019; Duncan, 2021; Mckinney et al., 2022; Portes, 2022; Sumption, 2022; Aydemir, 2020; Sumption & Walsh, 2023) provided a substantial comparative analysis, examining the selective immigration policies employed by the UK, US, Australia and Canada to attract skilled immigrants to address their labour market needs and fill talent gaps.

The research analysed how higher education systems, economic considerations, and national interests shaped recruitment efforts of universities and provided insights into the political dimensions of education policy towards immigration.

The purpose of the comparison of these policies, is to evaluate the different skilled migration pathway visas available to international students, for migration in Canada, UK and the US in comparison to the Australian model.

Based on this comprehensive research, summarised below is a comparison of the policy approach taken by the four host countries and their political and economic implications:

### **Australia**

- **Economic Dependency:** Australia's higher education sector is significantly reliant on international student enrolment for revenue based on their contribution to the Australian economy (Department of Education and Home Affairs, 2025)
- **Visa and Work Policy Shifts:** Major policy changes were made to the GSM program to uncouple the intricate link between education and migration (Karmel et al., 2017) and led to the streamlined student visa processing and international

graduates who have qualifications in high-demand fields such as healthcare, engineering, and IT are in high demand, compared to graduates in fields with lower demand (Han et al., 2022) e.g. in the context of this research, graduates from the management and commerce courses.

## **Canada**

- **Pathways to Residency:** Canada offers clear immigration pathways, including the Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) program (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2025a) and the Express Entry system (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2025b). The Express Entry system, introduced in 2015, allows skilled workers to apply for Canadian permanent residency based on their qualifications without employer sponsorship.
- **Population Growth:** International students are part of a broader strategy to address demographic challenges and labour market needs. Emphasis is placed on a multicultural and inclusive society through policies (Zhang, et al., 2023; Picot, et al., 2016).

## **UK**

- **Post-Brexit Adjustments:** The UK's departure from the EU has introduced uncertainties and necessitated policy adjustments with the introduction of new visa policies, such as the Graduate Route Visa (UK Home Office, 2025a) to support international students, though the shortage occupation list (SOL) is an inaccurate reflection of the UK labour market (Sumption, 2022).
- **Visa and Work Policy Shifts :** The UK introduced a points-based system in 2021 (Portes, 2022), known as the Skilled Worker route, which is similar to the Australian model in terms of the points-based system, but it is employer driven like the US model as an applicant must have a job offer from a sponsor, approved by the Home Office (Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019; Mckinney et al., 2022; Sumption & Walsh, 2023).

## **USA**

- **Student visa Options:** 2 major student visa categories F and M (U.S. Department of State, 2025) exist for different types of students. International students contribute billions of dollars to the US economy, supporting jobs and innovation.
- **Skilled Visa Options:** The US skilled immigration system is largely employer driven, with the H-1B program introduced in 1990 (Koslowski, 2018;



Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019), whereby an employer must sponsor a foreign worker and prove that there is no suitable U.S. candidate available for the role (US Department of Labor, 2025).

The US universities attract international students with programs like the F-1 Optional Practical Training (OPT) (U.S. Homeland Security) which provides them employment prospects, post-graduation. The US demand-driven migration policy is underpinned by employment-based admissions, as many international students studying from higher education institutions in the US; transition to become permanent residents via sponsorship from employers, highlighting the crucial collaboration between higher education institutions and employers (Aydemir, 2020).

The observation of the synonymy of the policies of the 4 host countries is, that all 4 host countries recognise the economic and cultural value of international students and have policies in place to attract them through a combination of visa policies and work opportunities.

The Canadian model is a human capital model (Zhang et al., 2023; Hari & Wang-Dufil, 2023; Picot et al., 2016; Koslowski, 2018; Aydemir, 2020; Abu-Laban, 2024; Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019; Triadafilopoulos & Taylor, 2024), the Australian model is a neo-corporatist model (Wright & Clibborn, 2019; Duncan, 2021; Koslowski, 2018; Aydemir, 2020), the US model is a market-based, demand-driven model (Koslowski, 2018; Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019; Aydemir, 2020) and the UK model is a hybrid model which is a combination of the points-based Australian and Canadian model and the market-based, demand-driven US model (Mckinney et al., 2022; Portes, 2022; Sumption, 2022; Aydemir, 2020; Sumption & Walsh, 2023).

The Australian model is classified as a neo-corporatist model because it encompasses a coordinated tripartite structure in the migration policy making process, fashioned through institutionalised consultation and inclusive of businesses, unions and state agencies who are the recognised institutional groups in the process (Boucher & Cerna, 2014; Koslowski, 2014; Wright, 2014). This structured coordination leads to the development of the SOL (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018).

This neo-corporatist model have subtle neo-liberal elements (van de Ven, 2015; Boucher & Wright, 2023), based on the expansion into the state based and provisional visa categories (Koslowski, 2018) as evidenced with the introduction of the Skilled Nominated Visa (subclass 190), the Skilled Regional (Provisional) Visa (subclass 491) and the Skills in Demand (Subclass 482) visa which are based on market demand and the nomination and responsibility for these visas lie on the states and approved employers.

The policy approach differences between the 4 host countries can be broadly categorised as:

- **Immigration Pathways:** Canada and Australia offer clear pathways to permanent residency for skilled immigrants, and the US has a more complex and uncertain process thus making Canada and Australia more attractive destinations for international students and other immigrants. The UK has a hybrid model which includes a points-based system but with a mandatory requirement of an employment sponsor, thus it cannot be strictly grouped together with Australia and Canada or with the US.
- **Post-Study Work Rights:** The Australian post-graduation visa is the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) (Department of Home Affairs, 2024p), the Canadian post-graduation visa is the Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) program (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2025a), the UK post-graduation visa is the Graduate Route Visa (UK Home Office, 2025a) and the US post-graduation visa is the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2024).

Except for the US Optional Practical Training (OPT) program visa which is for 1 year, the other 3 post-graduation visas of Australia, Canada and the UK, are uniformly, have a typical duration of 2 years.

These post-graduation visas entitle international graduates, fresh from their tertiary educational institutions to legally work in these countries and pursue migration pathways based on their educational and work experience acquired

- **Policy Stability:** Canada's and Australia's policies are perceived as more stable compared to the US and UK, where political changes can quickly impact immigration policies.

However, both Australia and Canada have recently made some swift changes to their GSM programs in 2024.

In 2024, Canada capped the number of student permits issued at 360,000, with new financial requirements and work-hour limitations (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2024c).

In 2024, Australia proposed the capping of the student visa (subclass 500) commencements to 270,000 (Study Australia, 2024; Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2024) through Ministerial Direction 107, a failed government directive introduced on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2023 and revoked on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2024 (Department of Home Affairs, 2024i).

- **Regional Focus:** Australia places a strong emphasis on regional migration as the regional areas have acute skills shortage due to the existence of a mismatch between the Australian workforce and employer requirements (Jiang & Nguyen, 2024), using visa programs that encourage skilled workers to settle in less populated areas. There is less of a focus in the US and Canada, although Canada has regional immigration programs like the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2025c) that aim to distribute immigrants across the country.

The conclusion from a systematic review of the impacts of the integration of international student graduates into the workforce of host countries like Australia, Canada, and US was that key factors like visa policies and post-study work opportunities are critical in determining whether international graduates can successfully transition from education to employment in their host countries (Han et al., 2022).

The research further highlighted the strategic importance of international student recruitment and the need for clear and stable policies. The strategic importance of international student recruitment globally and the various approaches to enhance the attractiveness as study destinations taken by Australia, Canada, UK and the US is investigated.

Comparison of the skilled migration policies and the student visa conditions revealed, that with aging populations and shrinking workforces, all 4 countries exhibit an inclination towards skilled immigration to solve this interconnected problem and the country with more favourable immigration policies for international students, will prevail with a competitive advantage to attract the required skills but currently, all 4 countries have introduced restrictive and detrimental student visa conditions e.g. Canada and Australia, both have capped the student visas being issued (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2024c; Department of Education, 2024b; Crowe & Ey, 2024), President Trump has reinstated arduous restrictions on the H-1B visa and the F-1 visas issued are declining (Sherfinski, 2025; Fernandez, 2025), and the UK skilled worker and student visas are already showing a declining enrolment pattern (UK Home Office, 2025b).

<b>Canadian Model</b>	<b>Australian Model</b>	<b>US Model</b>	<b>UK Model</b>
<p>The Canadian human capital model selects immigrants based on their anticipated potential to contribute to the Canadian economy through a points-based system which assesses applicants on factors such as education, work experience, language proficiency, and adaptability factors by aligning human capital with the goal of filling skill gaps.</p> <p>The Canadian Express Entry system uses occupations listed under the NOC, a system used to classify and organise occupations in the Canadian labour market.</p>	<p>The Australian neo-corporatist model employs a points-based system adopted from Canada with an emphasis on skills and qualifications as part of the selection criteria of highly skilled individuals with occupations listed on the MLTSSL or STSOL.</p> <p>These occupations are based on labour market shortages and were classified under the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) (ABS, 2022), a classification detailing descriptions of job duties, tasks, and qualifications required for each occupation used by the ABS in their</p>	<p>The US model is employer-driven, based on the employer sponsorship for the employment-based visas thus those graduates issued the visas are employed based on the existing market demand.</p> <p>The focus is on meeting specific employer need instead of recruitment based on a broader national strategy for attracting skilled individuals.</p> <p>The approach aims for a balance to meet market demands for skilled labour by</p>	<p>The UK introduced a points-based immigration system that covers the Skilled Worker Visa.</p> <p>This route is for skilled workers with a job offer from a UK employer with a valid sponsor license. Applicants need to meet specific requirements related to a job offer. The employer needs to provide a Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) for the applicant to apply (UK Home Office, 2025c).</p> <p>The system assigns points based on different criteria such as a job offer, skill level, English</p>

	<p>statistical collections which replaced the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) in September 2006 (ABS, 2009). The Occupation Standard Classification for Australia (OSCA) replaced the ANZSCO from December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024 (ABS, 2024b).</p>	<p>hiring both onshore and offshore graduates when the relevant skills are not available domestically.</p> <p>It's a more reactive model that can address immediate labour needs but does not have a uniform national strategy for enhancing overall economic competitiveness through immigration and based on this skills mismatch, it can only address the immediate labour market shortages.</p>	<p>language proficiency, and salary. Applicants need to meet the required points threshold to be eligible for a visa.</p>
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**Table 1: Skilled Migration Model Comparison Summary of Canada, Australia, US and the UK**

Canadian Model	Australian Model	US Model	UK Model
<p>Graduates may apply for a PGWP program with a maximum duration of 3 years.</p> <p>70% of international students planned to stay and work in Canada upon graduation and 60% intended to apply for permanent residency (Netierman et al., 2021).</p>	<p>Post-Higher Education Work stream of the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) is only available to international student graduates who have recently graduated with a degree from an Australian institution (Department of Education and Home Affairs, 2025) and from the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024, the eligible age is capped to a maximum of 35 years and the visa duration for bachelor and masters by coursework graduates from Australian institutions is 2 years (Department of Home Affairs, 2024e).</p>	<p>F-1 students are eligible to apply for up to 12 months of Optional Practical Training (OPT) upon graduation. Students who complete certain STEM degrees are eligible for a 24-month extension of OPT (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2024).</p> <p>Bachelor degree holders and above on OPT are eligible to apply for non-immigrant H1-B visas that allow employment for up to three years with employer sponsorship.</p>	<p>The Graduate visa is a route for international higher education graduates from UK educational institutions to stay back in the UK normally, for 2 years unless they graduated after concluding their studies minus any employer sponsorship requirement (UK Home Office, 2025a) but efforts are now being made to reduce this to 1.5 years (UK Parliament Library, 2025).</p> <p>Under existing rules, student visa holders are eligible to switch to a 5-year employer sponsored Skilled Worker visa.</p>

**Table 2: Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) Comparison with Canada, New Zealand, US and the UK Summary**

The OPT is a temporary visa available to former international students who studied in the US to remain in the US to work in occupations related to their major area of study for 12 - 24 months and (Tran et al., 2020) also found that the non-permanent nature and complexities of the OPT added to the difficulty in securing post-study employment.

All of these skilled migration models aim to enhance economic competitiveness through immigration as all 4 countries aim to attract international students to boost their economies, enhance cultural diversity, and support their education sectors (Joshi & Ziguras, 2024).

As a comparative analysis, Canada and Australia have a proactive selection process designed to attract highly skilled immigrants who align with specific national economic priorities as opposed to the US and UK models which also attract skilled individuals but rely heavily on employer demand rather than a centralised selection process. While Canada and Australia's strategies seem to be more aligned with a national economic agenda, the US and UK approach is a market needs dependent model and lack a comprehensive national strategy (Department of Education and Home Affairs, 2025; Tran et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

The Canadian and Australian models focus on attracting highly skilled professionals through their skilled migration programs e.g. the Canadian Express Entry system or Australia's GSM program while the H-1B visa introduced in 1990 (Koslowski, 2018; Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019) and the UK through the Skilled Worker route introduced in 2020 (Mckinney et al., 2022).

The US and UK direct employer sponsorship visas issued, means that the applicant has a guaranteed employment upon commencement of the visa, whereas in the case of Australia and Canada, visas issued under their skilled migration models, does not guarantee employment for the visa applicant but rather an opportunity to be eligible to legally work in these countries, post-graduation.

The employer sponsored visas of Australia are becoming more like the US employer-sponsored visas, which is highly driven by short-term employer interests rather than addressing the national labour market concerns (Parkinson et al., 2023).



Based on unpredictable global market conditions, the UK and US models can be unfavourably viewed as a tunnel vision mentality whereas the Australian and Canadian approach as one which is strategically based as Canada offers the most straightforward pathways to permanent residency, and both Australia and Canada provide better post-study work opportunities compared to the US and UK.

## **2.5 Major Government Reviews and Their Impacts**

The period of 2010 – 2022, covered in this longitudinal research experienced an unprecedented number of reviews conducted by the successive Australian governments relating to higher education and international students. There were 2 reviews conducted just prior to this period which had a lasting impact on the higher education sector and were forerunners to the other reviews conducted thereafter.

### **2.5.1 Bradley Review**

On 13<sup>th</sup> March 2008, the Australian government commissioned the Review of Australian Higher Education to focus on the higher education sector for future directions and any improvements through reforms which was chaired by Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley and came to be known as the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008).

The Bradley review identified the contribution of the 24 - 35 years age group cohort as a major contributor to the higher education space and called for their enrolment to be increased in higher education (Birrell & Edwards, 2009) and it is interesting to note that this same age group cohort also forms the largest portion of international student enrolment at Australian universities for the period covered in this research.

The Bradley Review led to key policy changes and even though it was focused on the domestic higher education sector, there were 2 out of the 46 recommendations which took into account international students and their welfare (Bradley et al., 2008) and triggered a formal investigation into the ESOS Act 2000 (Marginson, 2007).

Recommendation 19 of the review stated that for higher education, an independent national regulatory body be responsible to register and audit providers for the purpose of the

legislation, protecting overseas students studying in Australia and assuring the quality of their education.

Recommendation 20 was a similar recommendation, that a national regulatory body be responsible for registering and auditing providers for the purposes of the ESOS Act 2000 and both of these recommendations were targeted towards the protection of international students and further strengthening of the ESOS Act 2000.

The concern raised by the panel of the Bradley Review was not regarding the increasing international student enrolments but rather on the reliance of institutions on the international fee income as this was seen as a risk factor based on the shifting geopolitical developments (Department of Education and Training, 2015), with over 50% of the total international students studying in the management and commerce disciplines, of whom 67% were from China.

A good example of this shift in this geopolitical situation was visible with the fragile Australia and China relationship evident during the COVID-19 pandemic which had a negative impact on the higher education earnings for Australia and inclination towards the emerging Indian market (Department of Education, 2023b).

### **2.5.2 Baird Review**

In August 2009 the then Minister for Education, Julia Gillard appointed the Honourable Bruce Baird to review the ESOS Act 2000 with the intention to make the international education offering by Australia, comparable to world class standards.

The aim of this review was to assess the effectiveness of the ESOS Act 2000 and related legislation in safeguarding the rights and welfare of international students, maintaining the quality of education provided to them, and ensuring the integrity of Australia's international education sector.

The terms of reference of the review required enhancement to the ESOS Act 2000 in the following 4 key areas, mainly:

- Supporting the interests of students

- Delivering quality as the cornerstone of Australian education
- Effective regulation
- Sustainability of the international education sector (Department of Education, 2009).

The review can be deliberated as a result of recommendation 20 of the Bradley review, which recommended the establishment of national regulatory body to be responsible for registering and auditing providers for the purposes of the ESOS Act 2000 by 2010 (Bradley et al., 2008).

Australia wide consultations were held, and the report more commonly became known as the Baird Review, detailing issues affecting the international education sector, made recommendations to strengthen the ESOS Act 2000 and associated regulatory and legislative frameworks, including the National Code 2018 and outlined better protection of the international students studying on a student visa (Baird, 2010).

The review recommended the rectification of the ESOS Act 2000 with improvements to the institutional governance structures, holding educational providers accountable within a risk management framework and to conduct ethical recruitment of international students with the provision of accurate information at their disposal.

The recommendation for the provision of accurate information, available to international students by education agents representing educational institutions, was the result of one of the themes which emerged during the consultation process whereby students expressed their dissatisfaction at the limited information at their disposal to make informed decision about their studies.

It also recommended the cancellation of student visas of students who did not maintain satisfactory course progress or attendance and also recommended the transition to the Tuition Protection Service (TPS) from the Tuition Assurance Scheme (TAS) based on the high volume of international student enrolments in courses, linked to migration outcomes.

The TPS guarantees the refund of the tuition fees paid by international students, in case a provider defaulted on their obligation to deliver the course and replaced the TAS arrangements and the ESOS Assurance Fund (Australian Education International, 2012).

The Baird review did not raise any alarms about the transitioning to Australian permanent residents or citizens by international graduates from Australian universities, instead noted the significant contribution brought about by them to the Australian economy (Baird, 2010).

### **2.5.3 Knight Review**

Based on the sudden reduction in the number of university applications from international students, the Honourable Michael Knight was commissioned to review the student visa program, and this review became known as the Knight Review and all 41 recommendations from this review accepted by the Australian government (Australian Embassy China, 2011).

The major recommendations from the Knight Review in line with the research were: Streamlining the Visa Processing (SVP) (Australian Embassy, China, 2011) for universities, based on Recommendation 3 of the Knight Review, as part of a new streamlined student visa processing and became known as the Simplified Student Visa Framework (SSVF) (Department of Home Affairs, 2018) which benefitted the universities who were classified as low-risk educational institutions.

- The Genuine Temporary Entrant (GTE) (Department of Home Affairs, 2024f) requirement was based on recommendations 1 and 2 of the Knight Review to ensure that the applicant genuinely intends to stay temporarily in Australia for the duration of their studies to prevent misuse of student visas issued and the introduction of the GTE criterion was added to the Migration Act 1958 in 2016 and became known as Direction Number 69 (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2016) and a mandatory criterion to be satisfied as part of the student visa (Subclass 500) application process. To satisfy this requirement, applicants need to provide a Statement of Purpose (SOP) by listing their reasons for studying in Australia, their future plans upon the completion of their studies and why they chose Australia as the host country for their education.

- Amendment to the Post Study Work Rights (PSWR) for international students to obtain the required work experience through a post degree work visa was based on recommendation 4 of the Knight Review.

The Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) was introduced in 2013 for students studying on a student visa (subclass 500), who graduated from Australian institutions in Australia in a course with a minimum duration of at least 2 years to gain post-study work experience for a maximum period of 2 years for bachelors and masters by coursework graduates, currently based on the post-higher education work stream (Department of Home Affairs, 2024p; Clibborn & Wright, 2022).

Currently, the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) holders could work or study in any field, for any employer and can apply for Australian permanent residency based on their occupation on the MLTSSL or STSOL. The increasing trend in the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) granted over the past few years demonstrates the aspirations of overseas students (Norton, 2022) to transition to Australian permanent residency. Australian permanent visas issued in the 2022 – 2023 period included those applicants who were previously on a Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485), accounting for 29,375 places or 24.4% of the total Australian permanent visas issued. The Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) increased by 10,070 or 52.2%, compared to the 19,305 places in the 2021 - 2022 period (Department of Home Affairs, 2023).

Though the GTE criterion in principle was viewed as filtering out and identifying those applicants, with the intention of solely gaining Australian permanent residency, by acquiring a student visa, its effectiveness lies in its ability to accurately distinguish between genuine students and those seeking to exploit the system.

A simple desktop audit revealed that several universities provide guidelines on their university websites on how to prepare a SOP to satisfy the GTE statement. This is a mockery of the GTE criterion as Recommendation 3 of the Knight Review, regarded universities as low risk.

Ironically, even with the GTE criterion in place, the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) exists, which, apart from giving international graduates an opportunity to stay back in

Australia after the conclusion of their studies and work unlimited hours legally, also provides them with a pathway to Australian permanent residency.

The GTE criteria and the existence of the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) contradict each other and raises the question, if the GTE criterion was a failure to identify ‘genuine students’, since after the conclusion of their studies, they transitioned to the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) and chose Australian permanent residency.

According to (Birrell, 2019), following the Knight review, the previous rigid visa conditions became more feasible in terms of the visa eligibility criteria for international students to enrol at Australian universities.

The GTE requirement was replaced with a Genuine Student (GS) requirement from 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2024 (Department of Home Affairs, 2024f), based on Recommendation 31 of the Parkinson review (Parkinson et al., 2023), aimed at prospective international students, whose primary reason for the student visa issued to them is to study in Australia.

The replacement of the GTE criterion with the GS criterion shows how inadequate it was to curb the inflow of non-genuine students to Australia. This is another example of a policy failure and (Tran et al., 2019) describes this conundrum as “making the water muddy” because even though the GTE criteria separated education and migration, the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) contradicted this since one policy is trying to decouple the higher education and migration nexus with this criterion which has been the goal of the Rudd - Gillard Labor government, but on the other hand, professional skilled workers who enter the country on a student visa (subclass 500) are sourced as potential migrants.

International graduates place importance on acquiring relevant Australian work experience in their area of study to improve their chances of obtaining Australian permanent residency or to increase their employment prospects upon return to their home country as the vast majority of Australian employers only consider hiring international graduates who have permanent visa status and only experienced graduates with specialist skills obtained sponsorship from employers (Tran et al., 2019).

For the international undergraduate student living experience, the lowest positive rating was given for the work experience in area of study option at 74.5% and for the criteria reasons for choosing to study at current institution, 95.8% chose employment opportunities after completing the course (QILT SES, 2023).

An international student's employment opportunity in Australia increases by gaining Australian permanent residency status based on the limited understanding by Australian businesses, about temporary visas and the negative stereotype that students on the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) or a bridging visa will not succeed in Australian workplaces due to their lack of local work experience or networks (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023a; Tran et al., 2019).

Regrettably, even after the revelation of the consistent findings uncovered throughout the several research and published works to increase awareness amongst Australian employers about visas and working rights that is available, there is very limited action taken by the successive governments to address this crucial issue which has a negative impact on international student post-graduation employment.

On the contrary, as part of their Migration Strategy Action Plan (Department of Home Affairs, 2024n), the government has an action item to help migrants understand their workplace rights to tackle worker exploitation and the misuse of the visa system.

#### **2.5.4 Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program**

On 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021, a Joint Standing Committee on Migration was commissioned to inquire into and report on Australia's skilled migration by the then Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs and the Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program report was released in August 2021 (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2021), providing a comprehensive analysis of Australia's skilled migration framework with insights, recommendations, and analysis aimed at improving and optimising Australia's skilled migration policies.

The following recommendations from the inquiry were in alignment with the findings of this research:

- Recommendation 1 was for the NSC together with the relevant bodies to identify skills shortages at a regional level by occupation.
- Recommendation 2 was for the NSC to develop a new occupation and/or skills identification system for the skilled migration program, replacing the ANZSCO.
- Recommendation 3 was for the development of accepted definitions of acute skills shortages and persistent skills shortages with a set of perimeters to be taken into account.
- Recommendation 4 was for the consolidation of the MLTSSL and STSOL into one list, the SOL to avoid proliferation of skills lists.
- Recommendation 5 was the replacement of the PMSOL with the Acute and Persistent Skills Shortage List (APSSL) at the cessation of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Recommendation 6 was for the skills lists to be regularly reviewed.
- Recommendation 7 was for the visa conditions of the Skills in Demand (Subclass 482) visa to provide a pathway to Australian permanent residency.
- Recommendation 10 was changes to the post-study work arrangements for a portion of international graduates from Australian universities and reputable Non-University Higher Education Institutions (NUHEI), reducing their work experience component required for Australian permanent residency and allocation of additional points for these students applying for Australian permanent residency under the GSM program.
- It also recommended, increasing the duration of the Temporary Graduate Visa (Subclass 485) from 2 to 3 years, to provide the time and flexibility for these graduates to find work.

The 18 recommendations of the inquiry were acknowledged by the government but none of it was implemented with the excuse given that there has been a timelapse since the report was tabled; hence a substantive government response was no longer appropriate (Department of Home Affairs, 2024g).

## **2.6 Key Reforms in the GSM Points System (Post 2019)**

In March 2019, to address the issue of congestion in metropolitan Australian cities, the government, as part of its Plan for Australia's Future Population program, announced 2 new visas with the intention of allocating 23,000 places for these visas within the annual migration program with the policy aim to reduce the migration cap by 15%, giving new



migrants an incentive to settle outside the major cities in designated regional areas, to tackle the roads and trains congestion and future planning in collaboration with the state and territory governments regarding infrastructure in respect to population needs (Centre for Population, 2019).

The purpose of these 2 new proposed visas was to encourage new migrants to stay in regional Australia for a longer period than previously and ensure that ties were built with those regional areas through workforce participation and community involvement.

On 16<sup>th</sup> November 2019, a new provisional visa, Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa was introduced, replacing the Skilled Regional (Provisional) visa (subclass 489) which was also a temporary visa for skilled workers to live and work in regional Australia.

According to (Birrell, 2018), the Skilled Regional (Provisional) visa (subclass 489) allowed a wide range of relatives, to sponsor a relative, as long as they met the minimum threshold of 60 points and had an occupation on the MLTSSL, but it was not taken up by many applicants, because they would have been obligated to live in an area of the state or territory classified as regional or as a low population growth area for a minimum of 2 years.

The Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa gave an advantage to the applicant in procuring more points through regional nomination and receiving a priority processing compared to other onshore Australian permanent residency or pathways to Australian permanent residency visas. The priority processing meant that an applicant would be able to score more points for the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa due to the extra 15 points given by the state or territory nomination compared to the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) and the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) and get an invitation to apply for Australian permanent residency before the other 2 visas.

The Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa required the main applicant and their families to live, work and study in a classified regional area, for at least 3 years, report any change of circumstances to the DHA within 14 days such as change of location or passport details, based on which the DHA could ensure compliance to the visa conditions by

collecting evidence from the applicant, addressing the issue of congestion in metropolitan areas.

A Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa holder could apply for Australian permanent residency after 3 years from the time the visa was granted, and he/she had resided in a designated area. An important condition with this visa which eliminated any visa hopping was that holders of a Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa cannot apply for other permanent visas such as the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) or the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) until they have held the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa for at least 3 years.

The second new visa commenced on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2022 called Permanent Residence (Skilled Regional) visa (subclass 191) for persons already holding a Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa, who had lived in the allocated regional area for at least 3 years.

One of the assumptions of the implementation of this policy was that migrants were more likely to stay in a regional area on a longer-term apart from the mandatory 3 years as stipulated for maintaining this visa which was an incentive for an immigrant to stay in a regional area.

On 16<sup>th</sup> November 2019, the government amended the points test system for the following visas:

- Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189)
- Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190)
- Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491)

An applicant would get 10 points automatically, for being single, but if married, the applicant may claim an additional 5 - 10 points depending on their partner's age, educational qualification/occupation and English language skills.

The majority of the student cohort covered in this research could safely meet the allocated 10 points as a common observation is that a significant portion of students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) studying in Australia are single and even though the introduction of the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa and the modification to the points test system was implemented after the 2019 federal elections, its efficiency in meeting the aim of the visa, could not be determined due to the effects of COVID-19 pandemic such as border closures.

This was evident based on the number of Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visas issued for the first time for the financial year, 2019 – 2020 was 13,789 but for financial year, 2020 – 2021, this number reduced to 8,806, a decrease of 36.14% followed by an increase to 12,385 for the financial year 2021 - 2022, an increase of 40.64% and for the financial year 2022 - 2023, it further increased to 19,396 with an increase of 56.61% (Department of Home Affairs, 2020;2021).

Even though the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visas issued post COVID-19 pandemic has improved, it is not viewed upon favourably, since previous approaches to the regional migration issues were patchwork and complex (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023a) based on no clear objectives to be achieved as they were not well designed to support long-term regional development in Australia.

## **2.7 Impact of COVID-19 on Migration and Higher Education**

In December 2019, the COVID-19 virus was first detected in China (WHO, 2020a) and was declared a global pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO), (WHO, 2020b). All major industries and normal way of life including work and trade felt its effect globally in the months following the outbreak. The higher education industry around the globe was no exception to this economic downfall. The Australian higher education institutions faced financial issues, the transition to online learning, mental health concerns from students and the long-term consequences for international student recruitment.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020 (Gibson & Moran, 2020), the then Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison after a national cabinet meeting made the announcement that “those on temporary visas in Australia and could not support themselves should return to their home countries”

(Leask & Ziguras, 2020) which was directed to more than 700,000 international students (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020).

Though this statement was to focus the economic support required on Australian citizens and its residents, international students that were already in Australia were left in a limbo because even despite the economic benefits that international students brought to Australia, this statement echoed the commitment level that the Australian government had towards them and a blatant disregard of their welfare.

This treatment towards international students, was a self-reflection for them, regarding what their presence was perceived as, in Australia and if they were viewed as a person or a commodity (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020) and this statement damaged Australia's reputation among international students (Lawrence & Ziguras, 2021).

One of Australia's competitor countries for higher education students, Canada, which was second only to Australia in its proportion of international to domestic post-secondary students, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hamilton et al., 2022) also had a similar limited response regarding the provision of welfare support to international students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shields & Alrob, 2020).

Governments of higher education competitor countries for higher education students such as the UK, New Zealand and Canada provided support to eligible international students in terms of wage subsidy and income support programs (Universities Australia, 2021), while the Australian government abandoned its onshore international students.

The Australian government introduced travel restrictions for temporary visa holders, and this included international students who were either stranded in their own countries or had arrived in Australia to discover that they could not attend the traditional face to face learning in universities, because of the lockdown policies announced by the Australian government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Leask & Ziguras, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed structural weaknesses for universities in its reliance on international student fees and recommended for a more diversified funding model, reducing

this reliance (TEQSA, 2021) and the findings of (Blackmore et al., 2014), conducted a decade ago, also echoed similar sentiments, recommending that universities together with the government to take action to address the support mechanisms for current students and to also ensure the long-term sustainability of Australia's international education sector.

The discussion around the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on international education in Australia predominantly centred around the concerns of stakeholders like educational institutions and governments due to the loss of income from undergraduate international student enrolments curtailed by cross border bans and restrictions (Gomes et al., 2021) and this section discusses the reliance on international enrolments by Australian universities and the broader effect it has, economically on Australian university finances as well as the image of Australia as a preferable host nation for international university students by revealing the vulnerability of the Australian higher education sector during this period and which needs addressing.

### **2.7.1 Higher Education Sector**

Student enrolments at Australian universities declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, evidenced by border restrictions e.g. prior to COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, 37.61% and 19.87% of all international students enrolled in Australian universities were from China and India respectively and in 2023, this number reduced to 33.66% and 18.28% (Department of Education, 2023c). The data demonstrates how the 2 top source countries which account for more than 50% of international student enrolments at Australian universities prior to and after the COVID-19 pandemic, declined in enrolment numbers with an indication towards a lowered future enrolment outlook trend.

Australian universities remained agile, adjusting policies regarding enrolments, withdrawals, and academic progress to accommodate students facing challenges due to the pandemic as well as a financial adjustment to their budgets and operations (Hurley & Van Dyke, 2020) as many universities adjusted their assessment methods, to accommodate the challenges faced by international students during the COVID-19 pandemic of a new pedagogy, providing additional academic support services to assist students in their studies (Fan et al., 2024; Eckley et al., 2023)

Australian universities as per the normal practise had accepted the tuition fees from international students but were in no position to deliver classes on a face-to-face basis, based on the international border restrictions (Kwee, 2022), thus some universities were proactive while others improvised to introduce flexible learning delivery options such as offer classes, to students on an online basis (Lorenza & Carter, 2021), while some even gave incentives in terms of reduced fees or payments to students affected by COVID-19 (Leask & Ziguras, 2020).

Australian Universities swiftly transitioned from the traditional face to face course delivery, to online learning, based on the social distancing measures and government restrictions such as border closures, as previously they could only deliver 30% of the units in a course to students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) by online or distance learning as stipulated in Standard 8.19 of the National Code 2018 (Department of Education, 2022d).

As highlighted by (Hossain et al., 2025), strengthening the digital capabilities of an institution and enhancement of its support services and policy reforms were critical for any disruptions to Australian universities, such as that, faced during the COVID-19 pandemic which was clearly reflected as many universities did not have a proper online policy in place, nor the capacity to support their international student cohort's online learning transformation.

The directive from TEQSA (TEQSA, 2022b) regarding the delivery of courses was that students should not be disadvantaged by their location or mode of delivery and allowed a historic adjustment to the ESOS Act by offering flexibility to institutions offering higher education courses to deliver their courses fully online which involved virtual lectures, and tutorials using various online platforms (Johnston, 2020) which was previously not used extensively with students on a student visa (subclass 500) due to the legislative impediment.

Some institutions extended or brought forward the mid-semester breaks to prepare for the move from the traditional face to face delivery to online-only classes, while the relaxation of Standard 8.19 of the National Code 2018 (Department of Education, 2022d) temporarily allowed for the online delivery of courses fully, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Education, 2022a).

The shift from the face-to-face delivery to the online delivery affected international and domestic students (Welch, 2022) and came with its own set of flaws with an overall decline in the student experience from international students and viewed negatively by them (QILT SES, 2020). As conditions improved and restrictions eased, universities began phased approaches to bring international students back to campuses, combining online and on-site learning where feasible and safe (Dos Santos et al., 2024).

The online delivery for students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) came to an end on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2023 (TEQSA, 2023) with the online delivery reverted to the permitted requirements outlined in Standard 8.19 of the National Code 2018 (Department of Education, 2022d) and even though the blended and online learning model worked during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was an eye opener of how this could potentially compromise the quality of delivery (QILT SES, 2020) in the future and at the same time deprive Australian universities, of their revenue, lost during the pandemic due to border closures and lockdowns.

With the international border restricted to international students and the public health measures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian higher education sector suffered a financial crisis due to a decline in international student enrolment resulting in a loss of income previously derived from the premium fees they paid, thus universities assertively had to resort to a range of cost cutting measures to address this operational catastrophe (Marshman & Larkins, 2020).

According to (Littleton & Stanford, 2021), prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, employment in the tertiary education sector had been growing on average, approximately at 10% annually from 2015 through to 2020 and apart from the non-agriculture sector in the economy, universities suffered the highest job loss, equating to 40,000 tertiary education jobs or 1 in 5 positions from the COVID-19 period from May 2020 to May 2021 and about 35,000 jobs lost from public universities, which is 75% of the total employment in the tertiary education sector.

The public universities were left to fork out their costs for operations as well as accommodate the new infrastructure costing for online learning while dealing with the loss of revenue from

international students as Australian university employees were ineligible to access the JobKeeper wage subsidy program (Thatcher et al., 2020).

The reliance of Australian universities funding models on international student tuition fees, resulted in a loss of about \$2 billion in 2020 (Universities Australia, 2021), with 15 out of the 38 universities, reporting a deficit (Hurley & Van Dyke, 2020). This loss was just a small part of the overall loss experienced by the Australian economy due to the non-arrival of international students as about 57%, or \$21.4 billion, of the \$37.5 billion that is contributed to the Australian economy from the higher education revenue, is associated with international education, which comes in the form of goods and services (Hurley, 2020). This is a clear indicator of the revenue contribution of international students to the Australian economy, beyond their tuition fees and which impacts other industries that they are a part of directly in terms of the part time work that they engage in during and after their studies or indirectly in terms of their accommodation, meals and transport.

It was anecdotally accepted that universities would suffer financial losses in this period and undertook their own steps to maintain financial viability and sustainability e.g. the University of Sydney as part of its austerity measures froze its human resource recruitment, offered voluntary redundancy and reduced the annual base salary for their university executive by 20% (University of Sydney, 2021).

The research conducted by (Babones, 2019) focused on 7 Australian universities where Chinese students accounted for more than 50% of all enrolled international students and this already exposed a heavy reliance on fee paying Chinese students for operation and should have been immediately flagged as a high-risk indicator but there is no evidence of any concrete action taken by any of these universities or other higher education policy makers and the effects of COVID-19 further exposed this dependence on international student tuition fees.

### **2.7.2 International Students**

International students in Australia were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions as many of them relied on casual jobs for financial security to cover their living expenses or



their tuition fees, since there was no direct support provided to them by the Australian government (Leask & Ziguras, 2020; Welch, 2022; Roitman et al., 2024).

Reduction of financial resources was the most severe problem faced by international students, with mental health issues following closely and regardless of their contribution to the Australian economy through university tuition fees and taxes while they worked part time, international students did not receive the same resource support as their domestic counterparts (Roitman et al., 2024) and felt that the government's responses during the COVID-19 pandemic, was inadequate (Dhanji et al., 2023).

Lockdown restrictions imposed by the Australian government to curb the spread of the corona virus, included reduced working hours and closures of certain industries which resulted in a sharp decrease in available jobs leading to 66% of international students who had been working in Australia prior to the COVID-19 losing their jobs while it was only 17% for domestic students who were compensated through the JobKeeper assistance (Lawrence & Ziguras, 2021). International students found themselves in a vulnerable position due to the working hour limitations on their visas and often those students working in sectors affected by the COVID-19 pandemic e.g. those in the hospitality, retail and tourism sectors, found it challenging to secure employment (Ullah & Harrigan, 2022; Roitman et al., 2024).

The effects of the COVID-19 restrictions weighed heavily on international students in Australia who faced the following 2 circumstances that they found themselves trapped in and which were major impediments to their academic success:

- financial challenges (Nair et al., 2024; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020; Ullah & Harrigan, 2022; Uda & Francis, 2022; Uda et al., 2024; Backman et al., 2024)
- social isolation affecting their mental health and well-being (Bista & Allen, 2021; Weng et al., 2021; Freeman et al., 2022; Dash et al., 2022; Larcombe, et al., 2024; Gomes, 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Backman et al., 2024; Maharaj et al., 2024)

These identified circumstances warranted the need for support services for international students (Cameron et al., 2019; Singh & Fan, 2021) including career support services (Tran et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) as their financial and emotional strain was based on job losses,

housing insecurity, and uncertainty about their studies and future due to the lockdowns and travel restrictions (Gomes et al., 2021; Gomes, 2022a,2022b). Adding to this, was an abrupt transition to online learning, which led to an overall decline in the student experience (QILT SES, 2020) as this pedagogy was something new for international students to adapt to (Leask & Ziguras, 2020).

International students were excluded from the support provided by the Government during the COVID-19 pandemic (Roitman et al., 2024) and while mental health support services efforts were provided by many universities, the effectiveness and accessibility of these services were uneven (Dhanji et al., 2023).

One of the revelations from the COVID-19 restrictions was the fact that even though as part of the student visa (subclass 500) application process, applicants were able to demonstrate that they had enough funds to pay for their stay in Australia and not rely solely on work to sustain themselves (Department of Home Affairs, 2025c), a contradictory image was exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic which could have been contributed by the failure of the government to properly implement the recommendations of the Knight Review in screening and issuing visas to genuine student visa (subclass 500) applicants and maintaining a robust monitoring process.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government relaxed the work restrictions of international students from 40 hours a fortnight to unlimited hours (Ferguson and Spinks, 2021) in an effort to fill in what they described as critical staff shortages in the aged care sector (Tudge & Colbeck, 2020) which included international students studying management and commerce courses on a student visa (subclass 500) (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023a) and this arrangement ceased post COVID-19 pandemic on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023.

This action taken by the government showed both the fluidity of the GSM policies as it suited the government's narrative and based on the circumstances, as well as the Australian government's double standards, since aged care is not on the SOL but students studying management and commerce courses can work in this sector while studying on a student visa (subclass 500).

In recognition of the challenges faced by international students and with no support from the federal government, state governments and territories provided extensive support in terms of grants and aids including mental health wellbeing and financial assistance. The following states and territories announced relief packages including the provision of financial assistance to international students during the initial phase of the COVID-19 period:

- South Australia: \$13.8 million to distribute to students in hardship (Insider Guides, South Australia, 2020)
- Queensland: \$2.2 million package (Media Statement, Queensland government, 2020)
- Tasmania: \$3 million package for temporary visa holders, including \$250 for individuals (Tasmanian Premier, 2020)
- ACT: \$20 million for people who are ineligible for Commonwealth Government support (Universities Australia, 2020)
- Northern Territory –\$5 million ‘Worker and Wellbeing Fund’, which included international students (Office of the Chief Minister, 2020)
- Victoria: \$45 million International Student Emergency Relief Fund (ISERF) (Pakula, 2020) to provide direct and immediate financial support to for international students who were unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including a \$1100 for eligible students (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020).

The Priority Migration Skilled Occupation List (PMSOL), a subset of the SOL was introduced in support of the post COVID-19 economic recovery, streamlining the processing of skilled visa applications for occupations identified as critical to the Australian economy with only 5 management and commerce course related occupations in it. These 5 occupations, not surprisingly, were based on the accounting discipline, namely:

- Accountant (General) (221111)
- Management Accountant (221112)
- Taxation Accountant (221113)
- External Auditor (221213)
- Internal Auditor (221214)

A close look at the invitations issued for Australian permanent residency in that period showed a consistent trend of higher points required for these occupations in the invitation to apply for Australian permanent residency, compared to other occupations requiring only the minimum points threshold scores.

It brings into contention the question that if these occupations were considered as essential in the post COVID-19 economic recovery, then why were the points required for these occupations, increased, compared to other occupations being given invitations to apply for Australian permanent residency at the same time? The use of the PMSOL ceased on 28 October 2022.

## **2.8 Ongoing Inquiries into the Skilled Migration Program**

### **2.8.1 Nixon Review**

In January 2023, Ms. Christine Nixon, the former Victorian police commissioner was appointed to conduct a rapid review into the potential exploitation of the Australian visa system, and this became known as the Nixon Review (Nixon, 2023).

The overwhelmingly majority of the recommendations from the review focused on either Registered Migration Agents (RMA)s or education providers exhibiting a link between the courses offering listed on CRICOS and its eligibility for the GSM program.

Recommendations 16, 17 and 19, proposed the development of a refined risk framework for CRICOS-registered education providers. This unethical practice of migration agents is not something new (Tran et al., 2019; 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) but can be traced back for at least a decade and was a contributing catalyst for the major GSM policy overhaul in 2010 (Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014).

According to Chris Evans, the then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, “unscrupulous migration agents” had misled international students into believing that completion of a course in Australia gave them an automatic entitlement to Australian permanent residency (Australian High Commission, New Delhi, 2010a).

### **2.8.2 Parkinson Review**

On 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2022, the Minister for Home Affairs commissioned a comprehensive review of Australia's migration system, and the final report of the Review of the Migration System was presented on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2023 and became known as the Parkinson Review (Parkinson et al., 2023).

Key recommendations from the review together with some recommendations from the Nixon review were included in the Government's Migration Strategy, which was released on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2023 and the Migration Strategy Action Plan (Department of Home Affairs, 2024n) included 8 key actions and over 25 new policy commitments, highlighting the presence of more than 1.8 million temporary migrants legally living in Australia, who had the potential to participate in the labour market but without a clear pathway to permanent residency like the cohort of international students studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities.

The report mentioned 'visa hopping', a method employed by which international students in Australia frequently change from one visa to another e.g. from a temporary graduate visa (subclass 485) to another student visa or transition to other temporary visas beyond the typical duration permitted for their original student visa to prolong their stay in Australia while seeking employment or pursuing further studies. The visa hopping strategy is utilised by student visa (subclass 500) holders to accumulate points for migration and meet the requirements for Australian permanent residency by gaining work experience or obtaining additional qualifications. International students in Australia get trapped in a vicious cycle of visa renewals, going on a different tangent of acquiring temporary visas to legally stay back in Australia, while trying to acquire Australian permanent residency instead of focusing on career advancement through educational advancement (Migrant Workers Centre, 2024a).

Though visa hopping is legal and provides an opportunity to international students for more time to gain work experience post-graduation, and potentially transitioning to Australian permanent residency, it leads to regulatory and compliance issues as students must adhere to strict visa conditions such as work limits and course requirements. The Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) was viewed as a means to an end, to secure Australian permanent residency (Tran et al., 2020).

Apart from the misuse of the visa program and the associated challenges in monitoring visa compliance and ensuring that students are meeting the conditions of their visas, visa hopping leading to a 'permanent temporariness' with 108,000 international students and graduates having temporarily lived in Australia for 5 or more years (Parkinson et al., 2023).

This stage of 'permanent temporariness' is brought about because it takes longer to process permanent visa applications compared to temporary visa applications (Migrant Workers Centre, 2022), as can be expected due to the high level of scrutiny required for a permanent visa. International students, disregard the actual intention of the student visa (subclass 500) which is to attain academic advancement, instead using it to prolong their stay in Australia in lieu of meeting Australian permanent residency requirements. To address the issue of visa hopping, the DHA restricted certain visa holders to apply for a student visa (subclass 500) onshore while in Australia from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024 (Department of Home Affairs, 2024h; O'Neil, 2024).

From 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024, as part of the changes to the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485), the Post-Study Work stream was renamed to the Post-Higher Education Work stream and the maximum eligible age for applicants of this stream got capped to 35 years or under (Department of Home Affairs, 2024e).

Based on the student visa (subclass 500) issued to those above 35 years of age in financial years from 2020 till 31<sup>st</sup> August 2024 (DHA, 2024) ranges from 0.35% - 2.69% of the total visas issued. Though the percentage of students who are more than 35 years by the conclusion of their studies is a very small percentage of the total student visas issued, it is expected to impact approximately 20,000 international students studying in Australia (Carasi, 2024).

This new policy, which was brought in abruptly, is discriminatory and disadvantageous to those overseas students who currently are studying in Australia and will be more than 35 years by the conclusion of their studies and is an unethical move as the restriction on this policy was not in place at the commencement of enrolment for these international students. An interesting observation is that this policy is similar to the one implemented by Canada with its age capping of the PGWP program (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2024a).

The Migration Strategy Action Plan (Department of Home Affairs, 2024n) had a new commitment of designating the highest visa processing priority to regional Australia, an action correlating with the submission made by the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) (RAI, 2023) to the Parkinson review, which noted that regional Australia has the potential for skilled migration opportunities and is still an untapped market.

Australia's migration system and migrant workers' job market experience revealed that graduates of management and commerce courses such as accounting and marketing lived in regional Australia since it led to permanent residency through a regional pathway requiring them to live and work in a defined regional area as part of the visa condition (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023a).

The Australian government expects, based on the timeframe imposed as part of the regional pathway visa leading to Australian permanent residency, that graduates will develop an attachment to these regional areas and settle there but this relocation to areas classified as regional for the purpose of migration isn't necessarily the preference of international students but rather a forceful imposition by the Australian government, imposed through policy and does not guarantee that these graduates would continue to reside in these regional areas after acquiring Australian permanent residency (Migrant Workers Centre, 2021).

As (Tran et al., 2019) reveals, graduates on a Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) relocate temporarily to these regional areas to acquire Australian permanent residency and once they have achieved this goal, they relocate to metropolitan areas and since some of these graduates are proactive, they intentionally choose to study in institutions located in regional areas as it entitles them to an extra 5 points for their Australian permanent residency application, however, one of the risks of regional migration for international graduates is the mismatch of skills and experience into an underdeveloped regional labour market.

According to the Australian Census and Temporary Entrants Integrated Dataset (ACTEID, 2021) from August 2021, out of 1,639,000 temporary visa holders in Australia, approximately 98.5% were temporary residents of which:

- almost 4 out of 5 (79%) lived in capital cities,

- almost 2 out of 5 (39%) had a bachelor's degree or higher and
- the most common industry of employment was food and beverage services (12%).

Anecdotally, students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) and graduates on a Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) constitute a major chunk of the temporary visa holders in Australia, taking into account, the minimum qualification threshold mentioned in this dataset.

Clearly, the preference of settlement of this group is metropolitan locations as opposed to the regional areas, which has been the efforts of the successive governments traditionally (Koleth, 2010) and in the period covered by this research (Centre for Population, 2019; Migrant Workers Centre, 2021;2022).

On 27<sup>th</sup> August 2024, the Australian government announced a new international student cap called a National Planning Level (NPL) to limit the annual growth of international student programs.

The proposed 2025 NPL cap (Study Australia, 2024) was set at 270,000 new overseas student commencements, inclusive of

- 145,000 student commencements for public universities
- 30,000 student commencements for private universities and NUHEIs and
- 95,000 student commencements for Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers.

The draft International Education and Skills Strategic Framework (Department of Education, 2024c), was released on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2024, justifying the introduction of the NPL for a sustainable growth in the international education sector while blaming overseas students for a housing crisis in Australia with a connection between the increasing rental prices in the Australian housing market based on an increase in international student numbers.

Return of international students after the COVID-19 pandemic due to the borders being opened has put additional pressure on the Australian rental market leading to the housing crisis (National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation, 2023) and according to (McCloskey & Birrell, 2024), the overseas student influx is not only to be blamed for the



housing crisis, but also for the urban congestion and infrastructure shortages which is contradictory to the findings of (Tran et al., 2025), who argued that the allegations on international students in Australia as a vote winning gimmick to garner votes on the pretext of cutting net overseas migration by making international students scapegoats when they account for only between 6.8% to 7.2% of the overall Australian rental market.

This argument is further endorsed by (Mu & Soong, 2025) who challenged the politicised connection between international students in Australia and the rental costs, concluding that international students were not the culprits of the rental crisis in Australia.

The number of homes per person in Australia consistently rose for decades, contributing to the increase in overall housing stock in proportion to the Australian population and international students in Australia are highly likely to live in dedicated student accommodation (Everybody's Home, 2024), accounting for only 4% of the Australian rental market and could not be blamed for the Australian housing crisis or the increased rental demand pinned on international students (Accenture Strategy, 2024) and 39% of international students live outside the general rental market (Mandala, 2024).

Based on these reports and the academic literature, the current housing crisis in Australia cannot be attributed to international students in Australia as claimed by the Labor government as these allegations have existed from the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period (Birrell & McCloskey, 2015; Birrell & Healy, 2018).

One of the recommendations of the Australian Universities Accord report (O'Kane, et al., 2023) included the expansion of regional study opportunities for international students to study in regional areas and increasing housing support to make these areas more attractive to international students. This recommendation was in recognition of the current housing and cost pressures experienced in the Australian major cities.

Based on renewed pressure from the opposition, the government's proposed legislation, the Education Services for Overseas Students Amendment (Quality and Integrity) Bill 2024 commonly known as the ESOS amendment bill was not tabled in the senate based on announcements from the opposition parties that they will not support it (ICEF Monitor,

2024); Victoria University, 2025) thus making the proposed legislative amendments, null and void.

Had the bill passed parliament, the Department of Education would have handled student visas instead of the DHA (McCloskey & Birrell, 2024), however, in its claimed effort to improve the quality and integrity of the higher education market and manage the amount of onshore international students, the government introduced Ministerial Direction 111 - Prioritisation Process (Department of Home Affairs, 2024i) with indicative international student allocations for institutions.

The new prioritisation process approach gives priority to offshore student visa applications who have approved CoEs and have not reached 80% of their 2025 indicative allocation of New Overseas Student Commencements (NOSCs). The second priority is standard visa processing for providers who have already reached 80% of their 2025 indicative allocation of NOSCs.

An interesting point to note here is that these allocations are the same as the caps placed on institutions that were earlier proposed. This unfair approach discourages Australian higher education institutions to enrol students beyond the 2025 indicative allocation of NOSCs as set by the government. Some universities may have a larger capacity to cater for more international students compared to others but because of Ministerial Direction 111, they will be unable to do so, creating a financial conundrum for universities.

### **2.8.3 Australian Universities Accord**

As part of their pre-election campaign, the shadow education Minister in 2021, Tanya Plibersek from the Labor party proposed the establishment of an Australian universities accord to end any political interference over higher education policy (Tanya Plibersek, 2021).

On 16<sup>th</sup> November 2022, the Minister for Education announced the details of the Australian Universities Accord to be led by Professor Mary O'Kane. The Australian Universities Accord Report was released on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2024 with 47 recommendations (O'Kane, et al., 2023).

While the report acknowledged the significance of international students to Australia's economy and the higher education sector, it noted and mentioned as part of its findings:

- a large reliance on a group of source countries and
- the need for more international students studying in regional campuses.

The financial risk of Australia's reliance on certain source countries has been continually highlighted in several reports (Oyetunji, 2024; Chaney, 2013), academic research and reviews, both in the pre and post COVID-19 pandemic periods.

Out of the 47 recommendations, the following recommendation is relevant to this research:

- The creation of a clearer pathway to skilled migration by streamlining the process for international students to transition from their tertiary education to skilled migration through a seamless integration into the Australian job market.

The recommendation correlates with

- the implementation of the Migration Strategy Action Plan (Department of Home Affairs, 2024n)
- the recommendation of the Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2021) and
- the research by (Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014; Tran et al., 2019; Jones, 2018; Chan, 2020).

This recommendation placed emphasis on the post-study work rights, as this is one of the failures of overseas students to enter the Australian job market (Han et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Tang, et al., 2022) since with limited work experience and exposure to the Australian job market, it takes more than just an Australian tertiary qualification to get employment in their area of study.

Lack of awareness of visas and visa conditions by Australian employers (Tran et al., 2019) and non-recognition of overseas qualifications and work experiences by Australian employers were identified as obstacles to integrate into the Australian job market.

- To address the challenges of student safety and well-being within the higher education sector, the report recommended the introduction of a National Student Ombudsman who is expected to handle mental health support and student workplace exploitation, which is commonly faced by international students.

The issue of mental health and student well-being faced by overseas students especially during the COVID-19 period was a predominant finding (Bista et al., 2021; Freeman et al., 2022; Larcombe et al., 2024; Gomes & Forbes-Mewett, 2021) and this recommendation was viewed as a positive step to address the need for support services for international students as earlier recommended (Cameron et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Singh & Fan, 2021).

## **2.9 Performance Outcomes of International Graduates in Australia**

Many international students do not return to their country-of-origin post-graduation based on their prospects of gaining permanent residency in the host country (Tremblay, 2005), however this clearly differs between nationalities, in terms of demand and migration outcomes which exist with each cohort having different motivations for studying in Australia as well as for returning to their home country after graduation (Pham, 2021).

There are international students, who, depending on their source country, return to their home countries to work in the local job market (Zhai et al., 2019; Pham, 2021; Tran et al., 2021a,b,c; Singh & Fan, 2021), because of their failure in the Australian job market due to cultural and language barriers (Han et al., 2022; Pham, 2022; Tan & Cebulla, 2023; Chan, 2020), lack of professional networks (Han et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Tang, et al., 2022; Coffey et al., 2021; Pham, 2021; Tang, et al., 2022), the high cost of living or based on the perceived notion of career development opportunities in their source country.

A comprehensive analysis of the motivations and factors influencing Chinese students' decisions to pursue higher education in Australia, as well as their motivations for returning to China after completing their studies by (Zhai et al., 2019) concluded that the motivation for Chinese students to pursue higher education in Australia included employment and career prospects post-graduation.

Employment rights at the conclusion of their studies and internship opportunity are key factors for Chinese students when choosing to study abroad (Thompson, 2023) but international students cannot be treated as a homogeneous group who have similar aspirations and experience a similar linear post-study journey (Pham, 2021), even though most international students studying in Australia search for employment opportunities upon

graduation and this is a motivating factor for them to choose Australia as a desirable study destination. (Han et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Cameron et al., 2019).

The common conclusion from studies regarding international student employability during their transition from education to employment in host countries (Han et al., 2022) and the complexities surrounding post-graduation work visas for international graduates in Australia (Tran et al., 2022a) was the emphasis on the importance of the role played by universities and networks in providing career services support in the transition of international graduates into the Australian workforce.

This is a critical issue that successive Australian governments seem to have neglected as the findings in this research from 2005 (Tremblay, 2005), correlates with some intersecting recommendations from the Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program from 2021, the Nixon review and the Review of the Migration System report from 2023, all of which recommended:

- streamlining visa processing and
- provision of a clear pathway to Australian permanent residency.

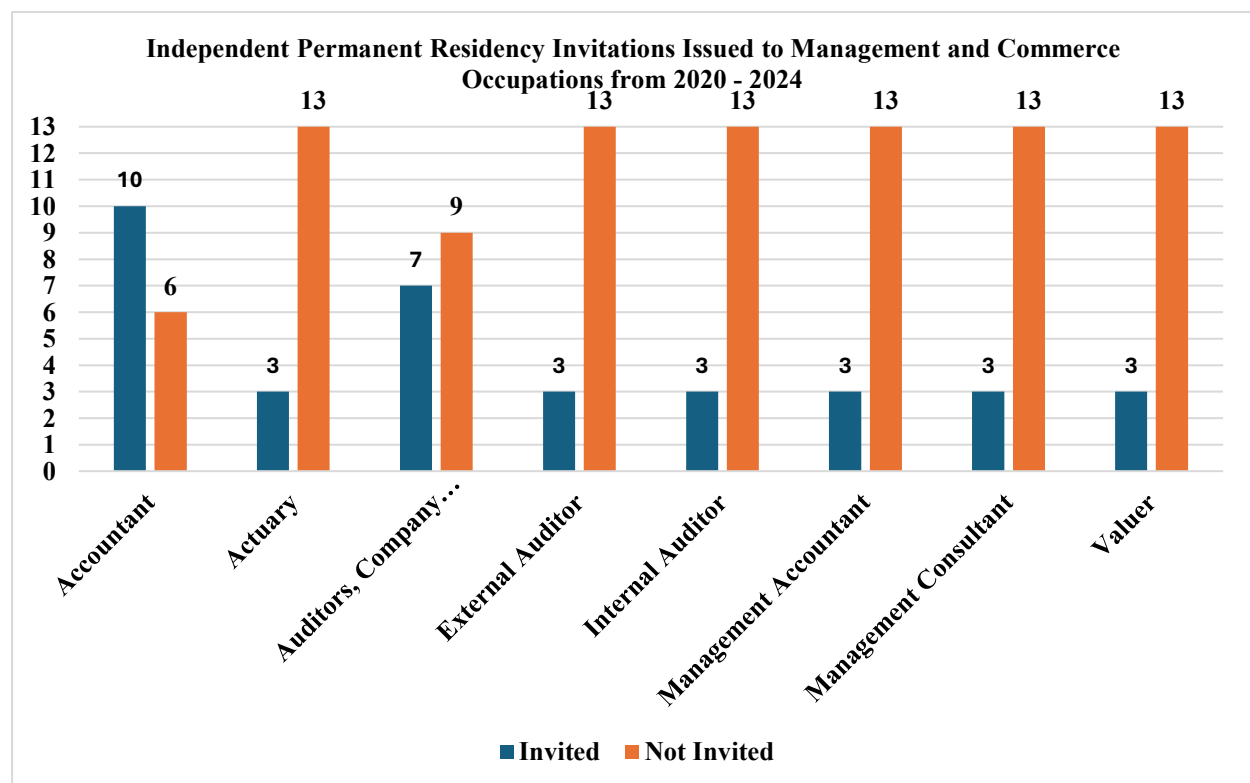
It is interesting to see that the common findings and conclusions from research conducted in the last 5 years looking into the challenges faced by international graduates to integrate into the Australian workforce due to visa and immigration policies which are not favourable (Han et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022a; Tan & Cebulla, 2023; Coffey et al., 2021; Pham, 2021; Tang, et al., 2022; Chan, 2020).

The argument by (Faggian et al., 2016), that there been no research carried out to investigate the working conditions and interregional migration patterns of graduates remaining in Australia post-graduation on the graduate skilled visa is rejected as uncovered by the findings of this research (Tran et al., 2019; Cameron et al., 2019).

The study by (Cameron et al., 2019) coined the term two-step migration intender for international students/graduates who aim to first study and then seek employment as a pathway to Australian permanent residency, showing the difference compared to the two-step

migration process, coined by Professor Lesleyanne Hawthorne (Hawthorne, 2010) whereby an immigrant first obtains temporary residence in a host country before transitioning to permanent residency (Triadafilopoulos & Taylor, 2024).

The enrolment pattern exhibited in Figure 1 from 2014 till 2023 shows the highest international student enrolments in the management and commerce BFoE though occupations related to these courses are not in high demand as evident from the invitations issued to file for independent Australian permanent residency applications as shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5: Independent Permanent Residency Invitations Issued to Management and Commerce Related Occupations from 2020 – 2024**

Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2024k

As clearly visible from the 16 rounds of invitations for Australian permanent residency issued between 2020 – 2024, the accountant occupation, was given the highest number of invitations in the 10 rounds of invitations for the management and commerce related courses, while the rest of the management and commerce related occupations, barely received any invitations.

An important finding, visible throughout this research and which aligns with (Cameron et al., 2019) is that STEM graduates in fields such as engineering, IT, and health sciences often have better employment prospects due to the high demand in the job sectors as opposed to the cohort of management and commerce students who have the highest enrolment as shown in Figure 1 and have occupations listed in the SOL, yet have limited prospects in the Australian workforce.

## **2.10 Performance Outcomes of International Graduates in Home Countries**

According to (Nghia, 2019), Vietnamese students unnecessarily pursue immigration opportunities and based on the volatility of Australian GSM policies, they return to Vietnam post-graduation as a trend of international students returning to their source countries is not a post COVID-19 pandemic phenomena but something which existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic as (Tran et al., 2021c) highlighted the existence of a gap between the perception associated with an Australian educational qualification and its practical value in the Vietnamese job market for returning bachelor and masters graduates from Australian universities who utilise the agency theory and the socio-economic situation in Vietnam to navigate challenges to effectively align their international experiences with the Vietnamese job market expectations.

Chinese graduates overcome obstacles to secure employment in China upon their return with value given to their Australian university qualifications and work experience gained as being sufficient to secure employment in the Chinese job market (Singh & Fan, 2021). Contrary to this conclusion, (Tran et al., 2021a) concluded that the lack of localisation was a challenge faced by Chinese accounting graduates upon their return to China based on the gap between the expectations of employers who showed lack of value placed on Australian qualifications and the actual capabilities and experiences of these graduates with importance to Australian qualifications, only given to specific business needs e.g. foreign projects/clients.

The findings of (Tran et al., 2021a) correlates with that of (Blackmore et al., 2017), since Chinese employers are reluctant to hire returning graduates without relevant local Chinese or Australian work experience and an important recommendation from the study emphasised the importance of building a dual *guanxi* (transnational social networks), encompassing of both Australian and Chinese connections to give these returning graduates a competitive edge over

local Chinese graduates by combining their Australian education with a strong understanding of the Chinese job market.

Australian education providers and industry bodies in collaboration with the Australian government should promote employment pathways for Chinese graduates (Department of Education, 2019) as accounting graduates of Australian universities, who comprise of the majority cohort of management and commerce students face hurdles upon their return to China, post-graduation with an Australian university qualification (Tran et al., 2021a).

Even though (Singh & Fan, 2021) had a contrary conclusion to (Tran et al., 2021a), it also picked up the absence of social capital as a weakness displayed by these returning graduates as they did not have any networks in China to access the employment market with the lack of networking being the common denominator in both the research, highlighting the importance of networking as a critical attribute to have, apart from an Australian university qualification for career progression in the Chinese job market.

The contradicting conclusions of (Tran et al., 2021a) and (Singh & Fan, 2021) can be linked to the findings by (Pham, 2021; Tran et al., 2021b), to not treat international students as a homogeneous group.

The lack of professional networks as identified by (Tran et al., 2021a) of returning Chinese graduates from Australian universities who faced challenges in finding employment and integration into the Chinese job market is a synonymous barrier faced by international graduates from Australian universities, to successfully enter the Australian workforce (Han et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Coffey et al., 2021; Pham, 2021; Tang et al., 2022).

Vietnamese graduates who returned to Vietnam after studying at Australian universities, used their educational qualifications, professional skills and cultural competencies as capital to adapt to the Vietnamese job market upon their return to reposition themselves in the Vietnamese labour market but even though all returnees had an Australian university qualification, the cohort was not a homogeneous group based on different career starting capital and the self-positioning stance that they undertook (Tran et al., 2021a,b) which again



emphasised the need for networking for entering a workforce and not to rely on Australian university qualifications only.

### **2.11 The Role of Education and Migration Agents**

Education and migration agents, both play a very crucial role in assisting international students and graduates with visa applications, immigration procedures, and navigating the convolutions of the overall migration process, being the first point of contact for international students with Australia's education systems (Department of Education, 2022a; Crowe & Ey, 2024), thus their advice determines the path an international student takes regarding their choice of institution and course they study and usually these students are not aware of the underlying benefit that the agent receives in the form of commissions from the tertiary institutions whose course they promote.

In 2018, 75% of overseas student enrolments utilised the services of an education agent to find a study program in Australia (Department of Education, 2022b) and in 2022, this number rose to 86% (Department of Education, 2024d).

This rising trend of international students utilising the services of an education agent shows the trust international students place in the advice offered by education agents and migration agents to seek the right course for them leading to post-graduation employment opportunities and Australian permanent residency. This trend also shows the trust universities place in education agents to operate in an ethical manner to recruit students for them and this is formally emphasised in Standard 4 of the National Code 2018 (Department of Education, 2022c; Crowe & Ey, 2024).

RMAs in Australia are registered with the Office of Migration Agents Registration Authority (OMARA) on an annual basis and must adhere to OMARA's regulations which includes completing an accredited course in migration law and practice for registration apart from other requirements. The failure to adhere to the code of conduct for RMAs (OMARA) can result in their deregistration.

86.5% of international undergraduate students used an agent to help with visa applications or enrolment and 93.5% of these students rated the service provided by these agents as positive

(QILT SES, 2023) thus the majority of these agents have a high satisfaction rating amongst international students undertaking higher education studies, revealing the importance of the role that RMAs play in terms of procuring international students and the advice they give to these students as based on this, international students decide on which course of action to take regarding their studies.

Education agents on the other hand do not have a stringent process for registration and operation and the onus falls on Australian educational institutions employing their services to ensure that they operate in an ethical manner, exercising an appropriate level of confidentiality and transparency in dealing with overseas students, since the operations of education agents is not regulated in Australia and the government is considering to expand the responsibilities of OMARA to include education agents based on recommendation 13 of the Nixon Review (Crowe & Ey, 2024).

As (Tran et al., 2019) reveals, international students and graduates are in a vulnerable situation due to the unethical practices of some migration agents who damage the reputation of the higher education sector.

One of the findings of the Nixon Review was that education agents exploit both the existing visa and education systems and a recommendation from the same review was for the management of migration agents by the government, more closely with the advice that they provide to student (subclass 500) visa holders, not to be guaranteed a pathway to Australian permanent residency or employment.

To avoid the complexities associated with acquiring Australian visas, international students act on migration pathways recommended by migration or education agents for academic and career advancement opportunities relying on their exaggerated assurances about better visa options but end up getting financially exploited by them (Migrant Workers Centre, 2024a).

This reliance by international students on migration or education agents renders them a demigod status like image whereby they decide on the course and visa pathways to be taken by these international students and since these agents do not have any expertise on specific industries, they cannot be held accountable, for the inaccurate information provided by them

(Migrant Workers Centre, 2023a). The role of education agents in shaping skilled migration pathways for international students by providing them with options for staying in Australia after graduation, such as graduate work visas or Australian permanent residency pathways is very important.

Poorly regulated migration agents present a significant challenge in the immigration landscape. Many individuals, operating without proper oversight, often exploit vulnerable migrants, providing inaccurate advice and charging exorbitant fees (Migrant Workers Centre, 2024a). Their actions not only jeopardise the migration process for individuals but also undermine the integrity of the migration system.

During this research, the role of education and migration agent came under the spotlight as the feedback from international students have revealed their dissatisfaction with these 2 groups.

## **2.12 Skilled Occupation List: Disparities and Ethical Dilemmas**

The role of the SOL in linking education and migration outcomes and including accounting in the SOL is the motivating factor for international students seeking Australian permanent residency to enrol in the accounting discipline as from the early 2000s, the completion of an Australian higher educational degree or a VET credential allowed graduates to apply for permanent residency via the GSM and not having to return to their home country (Tran et al., 2019).

The lure to apply for Australian permanent residency via the GSM without the requirement to leave Australia and the elimination of the previously required category of work experience being waived for overseas students who had completed their course in Australia, resulted in a spike in overseas enrolments both at the undergraduate and postgraduate courses in business and IT during the 2000s (Birrell & Betts, 2018a).

As (Blackmore et al., 2014) mention, international students are highly likely to acquire Australian tertiary qualifications, despite the high tuition fees because these jobs are present in the SOL and accords them the opportunity to obtain the post-graduation employment through the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) creating permanent residency pathways.

For Australian permanent residency, students would generally need to gain qualifications and experience in an area of study related to an occupation on the SOL and for those students whose main aim is a migration outcome rather than career advancement, this means that they study a discipline related to which an occupation exists on the SOL as long as it will provide them with a favourable migration outcome.

Students studying management and commerce courses at Australian Universities can obtain work in the following broad discipline category of:

- Accounting
- Business and Management
- Sales and Marketing
- Tourism
- Office Studies and
- Banking Finance and Related Fields.

Overseas students studying at Australian universities can work in aged care roles in Australia while on their student visa (subclass 500), however, aged care worker positions are not part of the GSM program, primarily because aged care roles are classified at ANZSCO Skill Level 4, requiring a Certificate III or IV in individual support or aged care whereas the GSM prioritises higher-skill level occupations (Skill Level 1–3) for Australian permanent residency eligibility.

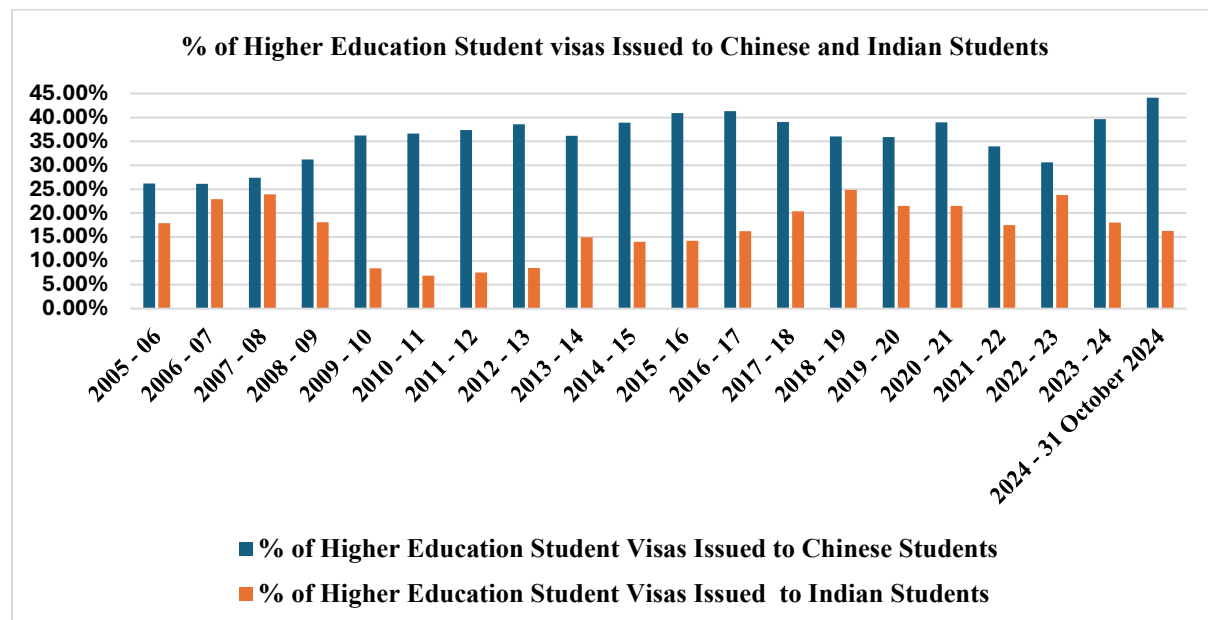
The aged care worker role is typically classified as lower-skilled under Australia's skilled occupation listing, and the GSM program focus is on high-demand skilled occupations requiring specific qualifications and higher-level skills to address labour shortages.

Students studying management and commerce courses can work in aged care as it suits the government's narrative but cannot use that role as part of the GSM program to apply for Australian permanent residency.

### 2.13 Australia's Reliance on China and Shift to India

The Asia-Pacific region is home to 60% of the world's population (Hawthorne, 2008b). Chinese students are important and contributing to migration to Australia, Canada, the US and to several European countries based on the highest number of students and this finding from over a decade ago is still evident (Skeldon, 2013; Babones, 2019).

In 2019, more than 260,000 Chinese students were enrolled in Australia and almost 160,000 of these student enrolments were in the higher education sector (Department of Education, 2023). Around 46% of Chinese students were studying a postgraduate masters by coursework course, with the majority of them, studying in business schools (Leask & Ziguras, 2020).



**Figure 6: % of Higher Education Student Visas Issued to Chinese and Indian Students from 2005 - 2024**

**Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2024j**

As visible from Figure 6, the percentage of student visas issued to students from China and India from 2005 – 2024 for higher education courses make up 50% or more of the student visa (subclass 500) issued to overseas students studying at Australian higher educational institutions.

Based on the data trend shown above, it is in Australia's political, economic and social interest, to be better hosts to Chinese international students (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2020) as Chinese international students, comprised 49% of the international student enrolments in accounting courses at Australian higher educational institutions a decade ago (Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014), and this trend has been consistent as Chinese students have consistently made up a large portion of international enrolments in accounting and business programs (Wei, 2021) even now. Even though Australian universities are not required to disclose detailed overseas student numbers by country of origin, level of study, and area of study, about 1 in 2 Chinese students are enrolled in management and commerce courses (Babones, 2019).

Even without this explicit data, based on related and anecdotal data, it is fair to say that China and India are the 2 largest source countries, not only overall for the Australian higher education industry but also in the management and commerce courses taught at onshore Australian universities and the Australian Government should expand their marketing and promotional activity in China to promote courses beyond the field of management and commerce as the return rate of overseas Chinese students since 2014 has remained above 78% (Department of Education, 2019) since students return to China at the conclusion of their course (Zhai et al., 2019).

In terms of a supply chain model, China is still the top source country for the Australian higher education market, hence, it is only logical that China, as a traditional source country for the Australian higher education sector is given prominence in this research and the Australian government's future higher education and GSM policy directions regarding China and India is mentioned.

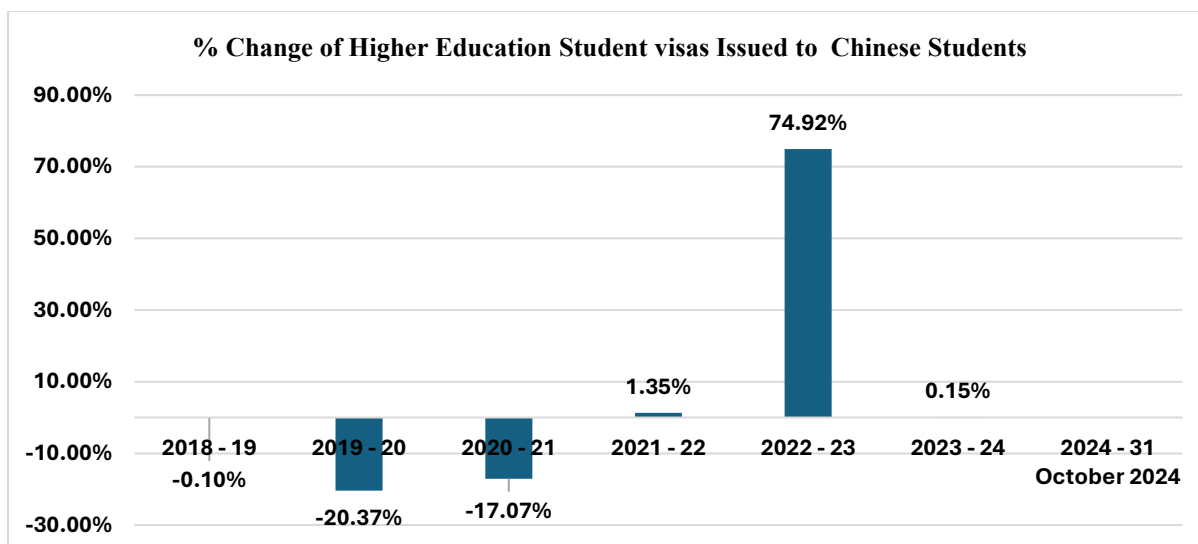
The Australia and China relationship started deteriorating from the pre COVID-19 period with Australia accusing Chinese international students of spying for the communist party and China accusing Australia of such claims being absurd and relating it to the delay in visa processing for its students who wished to study in Australia (Xu & Kong, 2018; Knaus, 2017; Munro, 2018). This spill on effect from the pre-COVID-19 period carried on with the civil unrest in Hong Kong (Mao, 2019).

In July 2020, the Morrison government offered new visa arrangements for Hong Kong passport holders onshore to remain in Australia legally and provided pathways for them to obtain Australian permanent residency (Tudge, 2020). The action taken by the Australian government to relax visa conditions for students from Hong Kong in Australia further enraged the Chinese authorities and both countries expelled journalists and academics working in their countries (Rubinsztein-Dunlop, & Hui, 2020; Walsh, & Weedon, 2020).

The economic relationship between the 2 countries further deteriorated when the Morrison government called for an independent investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, (Walsh, 2021; He & Feng, 2024) and created uncertainty for Chinese students considering Australia as a study destination (Ruhmann, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened the already present rift in the Australia–China relations (Welch, 2022) and what followed was a range of informal sanctions and trade blockages against Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2025), announced by China on a range of Australian industries which included barley, wine, coal, lobster and timber with an impact on the flow of Chinese students to Australian universities.

Although there was no official boycott of Australia’s higher education system, Chinese student enrolments declined by 39% (Paynter et al., 2023) based on the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, due to which Chinese students could not travel to Australia for their studies and the decline in Chinese student enrolments at Australian universities is reflected in the percentage change of student visa (subclass 500) issued to Chinese students as illustrated in Figure 7, showing the immediate pre COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period with the recovery from the 2021 – 2022 period and a spike in the 2022 – 2023 period as the Australian border restrictions were eased.



**Figure 7: % Change of Higher Education Student Visas Issued to Chinese Students from 2005 - 2024**

Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2024j

In the 2023 – 2024 period, when the overall student visa (subclass 500) issued for the higher education had a negative percentage change of 22.73% overall, the percentage change of the student visa (subclass 500) issued to Chinese students for the same period showed an increase of 0.15%, as Chinese students resumed their studies onshore.

Many Chinese students delayed or cancelled their plans to study in Australia during the COVID-19 border closures which resulted in competitor countries like the UK, US, and Canada vying for Chinese students (Hurley et al., 2021a; Visentin & Bagshaw, 2020). Since then, the Chinese international student numbers in Australia have largely returned to pre-pandemic levels, evident from the student visa (subclass 500) issued to Chinese students as shown in Figure 7.

Even amidst the rising costs of living in Australia, especially with the current housing crisis which is being blamed on international students in Australia and the high university tuition fees, 94.8% of undergraduate international students rated the costs of living in Australia as an important reason for their choice of Australia as a favourable study destination (QILT SES, 2023).



Contradicting this sentiment, (McCloskey & Birrell, 2024) suggested a reduction in the overseas student influx to be the solution to ease the demand side of the current housing crisis faced in Australia. Being cognisant of this claim, it is a fair assumption that the recent proposed changes to the Australian immigration and international education policies such as the failed capping on international student enrolments for 2025 to alleviate pressures on housing and infrastructure and the capping of the graduate age to 35 years or under for the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485), will definitely result in a negative perception by Chinese students regarding an Australian higher educational qualification.

The narrative around the capping of the student visa (subclass 500) commencements to alleviate pressures on housing and infrastructure, assertively advocated by the government can now be undoubtedly classified as an election ruse of 2025, since the government has now increased this cap to 295,000 for 2026 (Study Australia, 2025c), of which 196,750 will be for higher education (Department of Education, 2025b; Department of Education, 2025c).

Also, despite such adverse conditions for international students seeking post-graduation employment opportunities and/or Australian permanent residency, higher education enrolments have increased compared to the same period in 2024 (Department of Education, 2025d) and this can put further pressure on the current housing crisis as claimed by the government in 2024.

The announcement of this increase of 25,000 places within less than a year, compels one to ponder if this increase is due to the following 2 reasons or a combination of the 2 reasons whereby Australians are not supporting a reduction in international student visa numbers (Leng et al., 2024) or due to a decline in international student enrolments in 2025 (Department of Education, 2025c).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed Australia's heavy reliance on Chinese students and many universities have since diversified their international student source country base to reduce dependency on a single market (Babones, 2019) as the COVID crisis deepened the rift in Australia–China relations (Welch, 2022). Australia's focus in the overseas student market has shifted significantly from China to India in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic by Australian universities who are expanding into the Indian market to diversify their

international student source country base (Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 2023), and this is seen as an opportunity for Australia to overcome its over-reliance on China (Freeman et al., 2022) but (Babones, 2019) highlights India as a poor source country alternative, based on the primary intention of students from the Indian subcontinent to wish to stay in Australia post-graduation (Birrell, 2019).

Indian students look at their return on investment for their career opportunities such as job placements and internships apart from an educational qualification (Basu, 2016). India is Australia's 6<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner (Farrell, 2022), with the Indian community in Australia growing faster than any other immigrant community in Australia and 32% of all Indian student enrolments at Australian universities in 2021 were in Victoria with the state's largest services export being international education (Dhanji & Barker, 2024).

The Australia - India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) came into force on 29<sup>th</sup> December 2022 (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022) and the outcome of the agreement that is concerning in regard to the Australian higher education industry and the GSM program is the mutual recognition of qualifications, licensing and registration between professional services bodies.

This is alarming as it can be viewed as an imminent threat to the Australian high education industry because if Indian students who have completed a bachelor degree at an Indian university enrol in postgraduate studies at Australian higher educational institutions by circumventing the normal requirements for international students for postgraduate courses, then the academic integrity of these courses, especially in terms of international admissions will be compromised because not every Indian bachelor's degree is comparable to the equivalent of an Australian degree.

This loophole will allow students with low English language proficiency and sub-standard bachelor level qualifications to enrol in postgraduate courses at Australian higher educational institutions, without fulfilling the normal admission requirements for international students in lieu of ECTA and even eliminate the need for Indians to enrol at Australian universities, hence depriving Australian universities of potential international students. This will be counterproductive for the Australian higher education industry.

On one hand, the Australian government policy restricts the eligibility of overseas graduates from Australian universities for the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) by capping their age limit to a maximum of 35 years but on the other hand, it gives fresh Indian graduates from eligible Indian higher educational institutions, the same post-graduation opportunity to be part of the Australian workforce. This set of contradictory standards paint a very negative picture of the Australian higher education market by denying overseas graduates from Australian universities over 35 years of age a return on investment for their tertiary studies.

Indian and Chinese graduates aim for employment and career prospects post-graduation as their motivation to study at Australian higher educational institutions (Basu, 2016; Zhai et al., 2019).

## **2.14 Chapter Summary**

The research intends to highlight what benefits, if any, apart from a tertiary educational qualification attained, exists for international graduates and if they can get a return on investment for their tertiary education. The policy comparison of Australia and the international tertiary education comparator countries revealed that all have a policy to only procure the *crème de crème* of potential skilled migrants through their skilled visas, but this is now further hindered by the capping of student visa (Subclass 500) issued to international students studying at Australian higher educational institutes.

It is imperative to note, that while Australia seeks to retain some former international graduates, the aim of the GSM program was never to provide all of these students with a pathway to Australian permanent residency (Koleth, 2010; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014; Nixon, 2023).

The position of the education and migration agents in the education migration nexus and the anomaly of the scarcity of the Australian workforce as deliberated in the SOL is explained, as evidenced by the different reviews and other reports from the available body of literature.

The chapter ends with India, perceived as a weak alternative to China (Babones, 2019) and the discrimination towards other international students from the trade agreement with India.

## **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Research Design**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The chapter expounds the research flow, outlining the structured approach employed for this research, showcasing the research design and the 4 subsequent questions developed from it which assist in answering the overarching research question.

Since immigration policy development is a complex process with several stakeholders (Hollifield & Foley, 2022) and countries do not necessarily have a uniform migration model with the same objectives (Triadafilopoulos & Taylor, 2024), this enigma cannot be discounted to only 2 players as the main stakeholders at a micro level e.g. Basu's solution to 'harassment bribes' (Basu, 2011), based on the game theory framework, outlined only 2 options for the 2 identified main players, but these options were countered by Drèze (Drèze, 2011), who proposed the existence of a third option, which brought about a total change of expected outcomes in terms of payoffs.

Hence, multiple players could be considered in the evolutionary game theory, multi-actor decision-making or competitive intelligence scenarios which exist, beyond the suggested elucidations to the existing migration problems which could generate contrasting outcomes, depending on the view point it is being assessed from e.g. the economics angle could differ from the demographic perspective, which could differ from the sociology standpoint.

This research, however, observes it from the education migration nexus lens, thus the 2 main stakeholders identified are the cohort of management and commerce students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) at Australian universities since they comprise the largest international student enrolments and the successive Australian governments within the research period covered, as they are broadly the policymakers.

The complete analysis of the constraints governing the immigration policy making process at a micro level, is outside the scope of this research and as concluded by Pham (Pham, 2021), the interests of international students cannot be treated as part of a homogeneous group since it clearly differs between nationalities.

The research design diagram illustrates the 2 major stakeholders of this research and highlights the positions of the 4 subsequent questions in this diagram.

Furthermore, the chapter then presents the content analysis methodology, utilised to collect both the quantitative and qualitative secondary data from genuine sources for this research and the reason for choosing it as the preferred method of data collection.

Finally, the chapter concludes with the chosen theoretical framework employed for this research, chosen over the 3 other traditional research models.

### **3.2 Research Intent**

NUHEIs and Technical and Further Education (TAFE)s providers offer higher education courses and play a crucial role in the understanding of the diverse educational landscape in Australia, as well as the various pathways available to international students seeking favourable career outcomes and/or Australian permanent residency.

Acknowledging these stakeholders, provides an inclusive observation of the overall Australian education sector and the multiple avenues through which individuals access education and training aligned with the various AQF levels in Australia.

The focus of this research and its perimeters are set around management and commerce students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) at Australian Universities, as an example, to demonstrate the probability of them obtaining Australian permanent residency and post-graduation employment.

TAFE and NUHEI graduates from different AQF levels and study disciplines are not included as part of this research, though the findings of this research is applicable to them as well. This exclusion is purely based on their low numbers compared to Australian university students, who comprise of 92.2% of the proportion of students by provider type with TAFE and for-profit students, which includes NUHEI students, who comprise of 0.5% and 5.2% respectively (TEQSA, 2019).

International student enrolments at Australian universities, typically take the forefront of the post-secondary education sector in Australia due to their larger enrolment size and broader academic offerings, compared to the VET sector.

With the GSM policy overhauls from 2010, the VET sector, which still is the main competitor of the higher education sector, was dented, as reflected by the VET sector enrolments which followed these policy overhauls and since then, the VET sector enrolments never returned to the high levels as it used to be prior to 2010 since it was no longer viewed as a bridge to acquiring Australian permanent residency (Birrell, 2019).

The GSM program was originally designed to address the skill shortages in the Australian labour market and to attract skilled migrants who could contribute to the country's economic growth, hence mitigating the risk of an ageing population (McDonald, 2024) but on the contrary, policies or rather the implementation of these policies by the successive Australian governments during this period did not fully align with the intended objectives of the GSM program, particularly concerning international students (Castles, 2004).

It led to an unexpected consequence e.g. the objective of the PSWR opportunity created by the Australian government through the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) had the primary motive of ensuring, that international students get the opportunity to acquire work experience in their area of study, post-graduation, but the negative consequence of it was the creation of a potentially large and highly skilled, temporary workforce (Chew, 2019).

Though the original purpose of the GSM policies was a solution to address the issue of a demographic decline (Ziguras & Law, 2006), the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the financial vulnerabilities of the Australian higher education sector based on the sector's heavy reliance on the international student tuition fees (Thatcher et al., 2020, Yang, 2022, Roitman et al., 2024), hence Australian universities are now in a need to explore other sustainable financial models to remain competitive in the global education market (Marginson, 2020).

There are some contestations of the direction taken by the successive Australian governments between 2010 and 2022 regarding the fulfillment of the intended purpose of the GSM program with regards to international students and the areas of contention include the

changes in visa policies over this period, limitations in PSWR, complexities in obtaining Australian permanent residency and the challenges faced by international students studying management and commerce courses in securing employment post-graduation in their area of study (Lawrence & Ziguras, 2021).

This chapter outlines the research design, the development of the subsequent questions to answer the predominant research question based on the research design, the methodology employed for data collection and the theoretical framework employed to analyse the findings from the data collected.

Analysing these data sets in tandem, allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of how the GSM program has functioned from 2010 - 2022, its alignment with the GSM policies, and its impact on the international student pathways to permanent residency or skilled employment in Australia.

Even though the research through the analysis of the various GSM policies from 2010 – 2022 uncovered that the findings which are generally applicable to most students studying on a student visa (subclass 500), the research deliberately focused on students on a student visa (subclass 500) studying management and commerce courses at Australian Universities as a sample to demonstrate the effectiveness of the GSM policies regarding Australian permanent residency pathways and the PSWR opportunities available to this cohort of students.

In light of the education migration nexus which are at the core of this research, an example of how convoluted the Australian higher education and the immigration policy development process is can be demonstrated from the fact, that the mandatory requirement for students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) to study a full-time load is not mentioned in the ESOS Act.

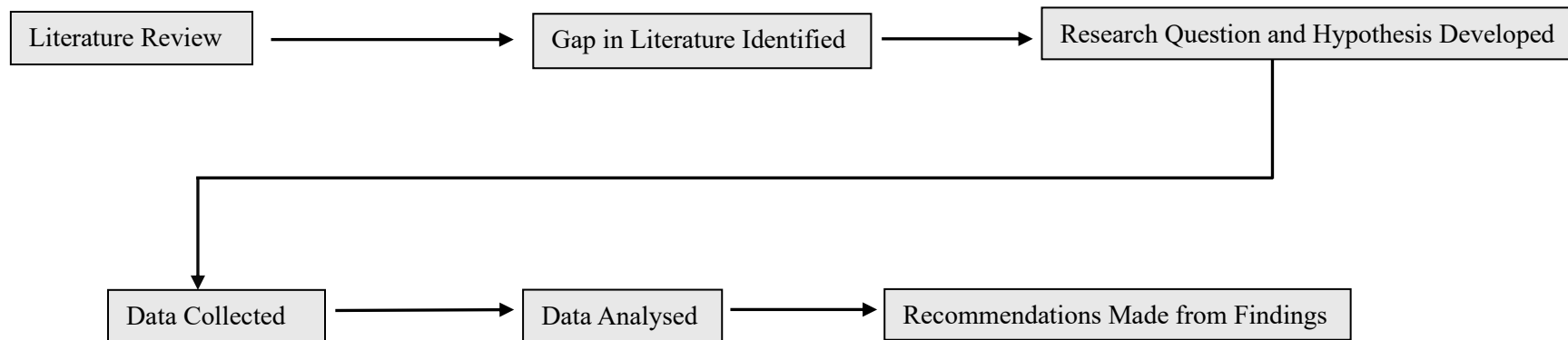
Conversely, the ESOS Act and the National Code 2018, outline the requirements for registering a course on the CRICOS register which explicitly mentions that these courses must be studied on a full-time basis.

The eligibility for the student visa (subclass 500), listed in Schedule 2 of the Migration Regulations 1994 states, that the visa holder must be enrolled in a full-time course that is registered on the CRICOS register.

The juxtaposition of these legislations, demonstrates their linkage to achieve a common outcome, which in this case, is for students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) to study a full-time load, a deterrent for the abuse of the student visa (subclass 500).



The research flow chart below outlines a structured approach employed for this research.



**Figure 8: Research Flow Chart**

The literature review served a dual purpose, firstly, identifying the gap in the existing body of literature, based on the research conducted till date, with limited exposition of the probability of international students studying management and commerce courses on a student visa (subclass 500) at Australian universities being able to obtain Australian permanent residency. Secondly, in setting the broad categories for data collection for the data collection methodology employed.

Combining both the qualitative and quantitative data in this research allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the GSM program's effectiveness between 2010 - 2022 in assessing how policy changes, numerical trends such as student enrolments and visas issued, and the implementation of the GSM policies have influenced the program's outcomes in its ability to meet its objectives.

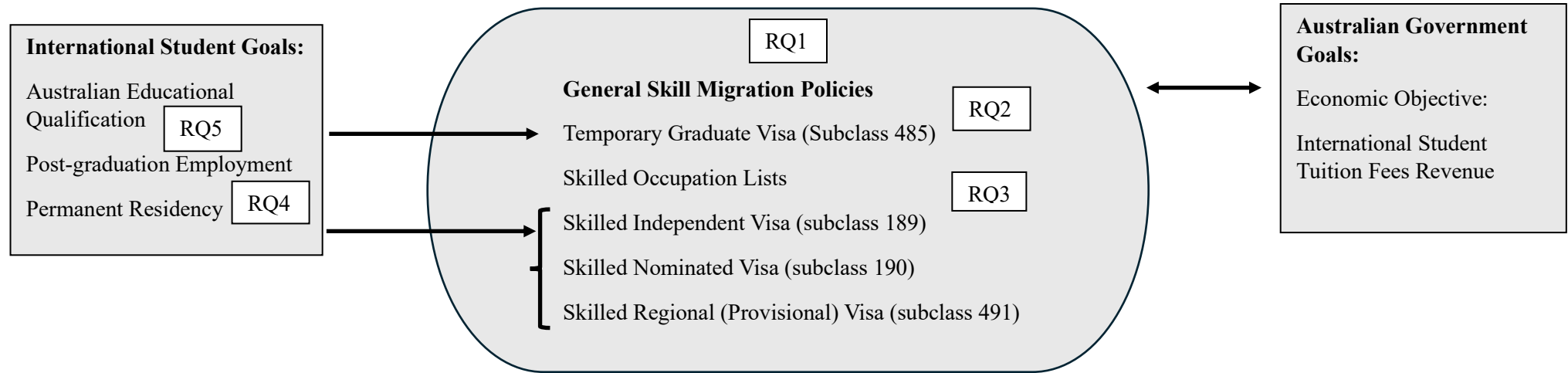
The data, sourced from government sanctioned reviews and reports, independent reports and academic journal articles provided the evidence regarding the trends in international student enrolments, migration patterns, visa granted, employment outcomes, and other relevant metrics in the Australian context. This data helped gauge the scale of the changes to the GSM program and its comparison with international skilled migration programs as exhibited in Tables 1 and 2.

The quantitative analysis offered the empirical evidence from the numerical trends, while the qualitative analysis provided context, depth, and diverse perspectives including the expected future trend prediction from the existing body of literature and reports.

The qualitative analysis involved a comparison of the GSM policies implemented during the time frame covered in this research and allowed for an in-depth examination of the policy changes, their objectives and impact on the skilled migration pathways. It enabled to identify shifts in policy priorities, changes in eligibility criteria, alterations in visa categories, and how these changes have influenced the effectiveness of the GSM program.

During the course of this research, Microsoft Access and Excel and NVivo were used to analyse the qualitative and quantitative data.

### 3.3 Research Design



**Figure 9: International University Student and Australian Government Objectives with the GSM Policies as the bridge**

The research design outlines, the 2 major stakeholders in this research, students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) studying management and commerce courses at Australian Universities and the successive Australian governments from 2010 – 2022, who are the actual GSM policy makers.

The 2 stakeholders have their goals listed and the GSM connects them as the bridge.

To answer the overarching research question (RQ1), the connection between these 2 stakeholders is examined and the subsequent questions, labelled as (RQ2), (RQ3), (RQ4) and (RQ1) are formulated.

### **3.4 Research Questions**

The literature review showed the historical existence and acknowledgement of the education migration nexus. In keeping with the stated aim of this research, the overarching research question that underpins this research project is:

**RQ1: What policy reforms to the Australian General Skilled Migration program can improve the Australian permanent residency pathways for international students studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities?**

To provide a substantive input into the formation of a response to the posed question above and based on the findings as exhibited from the extensive literature review and the development of the research design, the subsequent questions were formulated, as explained in the sub-section below:

**3.4.1 RQ2: Are the existing post-graduation work rights and visa condition(s) sufficient for graduates?**

The top 5 countries of post-graduation visa holders have also been the top 5 source countries of international commencements in the masters by coursework courses, namely China, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Vietnam since 2013 (Tran et al., 2019) and a notable increase in the postgraduate masters by coursework programmes in accounting, IT and engineering are a result of the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) introduced in 2013 with the international graduate cohort dominated by Chinese and Indian graduates (Berquist et al., 2019).

International graduates on the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) who studied IT, have a higher chance of procuring employment in their area of study and obtain their first job in less time in their area of study compared to business and engineering graduates (Tran et al., 2022c).

The Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program also recommended changes to the PSWR arrangements as the attraction of the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) offers international graduates an opportunity to acquire Australian permanent residency (Chew, 2019) and is comparative to other similar post-graduation visas offered by other international student competitor countries like Canada and the UK.

Therefore, the following subsequent question was developed:

**RQ2: Are the existing post-graduation work rights and visa condition(s) sufficient for graduates?**

### **3.4.2 RQ3: Is the SOL a correct representation of the Australian labour market?**

The literature review explicitly uncovered the debate surrounding the relevance of the SOL as according to (Birrell, 2018), if the GSM program ceases to exist, Australian employers would not notice this. This claim emphasises the ineffectiveness of the SOL, raising the question of its very existence in the first place.

The Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program challenged the identification of the national skills shortages and recommended that the proliferated SOL be consolidated into 1 SOL to avoid confusion.

The requirement for occupations being in national shortage as reflected in the Australian job market was abolished in 2016 with the current MLTSSL, which contains occupations that may not be in immediate shortage but might be in shortage in the next 2 – 10 years (Birrell, 2018). As recommended by (Chan, 2020), the removal of the accounting occupation from the SOL is a solution that would end the employment paradox for students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) studying management and commerce courses at Australian Universities.

The accounting discipline related occupations on the MLTSSL still exists even though, research over several years, has revealed it as being an oversupplied occupation in the Australian job market (Hoang, 2024) and the SOL is a key component of the GSM program that international students, studying at Australian universities are cognisant of, when selecting Australia as their study destination.

Therefore, the following subsequent question was developed:

**RQ3: Is the SOL a correct representation of the Australian labour market?**

### **3.4.3 RQ4: Is the work integrated learning in the existing curriculum sufficient to enter the Australian workforce?**

Access to work integrated learning (WIL) is a top priority for international students who place a high expectation on it (Kay et al., 2020) in the selection of a host country and institution for overseas study (Jackson, 2016; Jackson & Wilton, 2017), with the perception that WIL is a valuable pathway to develop knowledge and skills related to their studies (Tran & Soejatminah, 2016).

Even though WIL is regarded as a conduit for international students to develop relevant professional skills, knowledge and attributes to enhance their employability, arranging this for them is a challenging issue for institutions (Tran & Soejatminah, 2016) and despite the efforts to place them in workplaces, many international students struggle in it (Vu et al., 2022).

The ESOS Review 2022 looked into what changes to the ESOS framework could facilitate the offering of WIL by Australian education providers (Department of Education, 2022a) and the 2023 Australian Universities Accord Report highlighted improvements to WIL by establishing a national jobs broker system.

Australian university graduates who have had WIL as part of their courses, are able to obtain better labour market outcomes by the age of 25, unlike those with university qualifications in management and commerce courses (Hurley et al., 2021b) and this is the lowest age in the age bracket criterion with the maximum points allocated for it in the GSM program.

The research by (Tran et al., 2019) questioned the quality of education received by international students, recommending the integration of WIL in the study programme.

Therefore, the following subsequent question was developed:

**RQ4: Is the WIL in the existing curriculum sufficient to enter the Australian workforce?**

#### **3.4.4 RQ5: Are the students getting a return on investment from their tertiary studies?**

Student welfare support bestowed upon domestic Australian university students was not rendered to international students at Australian universities as they were ineligible for the Australian Government JobSeeker program and other related assistance programs during the COVID-19 pandemic (Marshman & Larkins, 2020).

The contrasting image of Australia, advertised to international students as an ideal study destination based on social media promotions and the one that they experience is contrasting (Gomes, 2022a; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020).

An unequal amount of support was conferred to international students by the Australian government during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the billions of dollars that international students contributed to the Australian economy (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020) and more was expected from the universities and the Australian government based on the economic significance of international students to the Australian economy (Tani, 2018; Roitman et al., 2024).

International students looked at personal safety and security, the cost of living and the reputation of the Australian education system as the most important factors to determine their decision to study in Australia (QILT SES, 2023) and even with the increased English language test scores introduced in early 2024, the number of student visa (subclass 500) issued in the first half of 2024 for Chinese students increased against the tide compared to the same period in 2023 (McCloskey & Birrell, 2024).

Recent changes to the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) exclude graduates, who are over 35 years and this renders useless, the efforts of these graduates in their studies and this change is exacerbating the higher education sector and exasperating international students as it is closing avenues for them to get a fair, if not a good, return on investment for their tertiary studies.

Therefore, the following subsequent question was proposed:

**RQ5: Are the students getting a return on investment from their tertiary studies?**

### **3.5 Content Analysis**

This research utilised the content analysis methodology, a robust method of qualitative data analysis (Kleinheksel et al., 2020), that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from the different forms of communication (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002; Bengtsson, 2016).

The reason for choosing content analysis as the preferred method of collecting information is due to several factors:

- the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic made it impractical for conducting interviews based on the social distancing restrictions,
- interviews and questionnaires distributed in that period, would have portrayed a biased opinion from disgruntled international students feeling abandoned by the Australian authorities and
- the online survey administration was not feasible based on the tedious process of acquiring approval from the various university committees.

Based on these limitations, the data collected for the research was sourced from secondary sources such as validated government and independent records, thus the authenticity of the data cannot be disputed.

In this research, the patterns and trends were sought to answer the overarching research question by answering the 4 subsequent research questions, utilising the research design (Bengtsson. 2016; Martin & Oliver, 2022).

The procedure used in content analysis for this research included the following:

- The research objectives were clearly defined through a predominant research question and the 4 subsequent research question(s).
- The relevant sources from where to extract the required information was chosen.
- The data collected was based on a predetermined criteria of patterns and trends and systematically categorised, thus both deductive and inductive reasoning was used in the collection.

The content analysis broad themes around which existing literature was researched on and secondary data sourced from were:



- Australian GSM program,
- Australian higher education,
- International students studying at universities in Australia,
- Australian permanent residency and post-graduation employment opportunities for tertiary international students in Australia and
- Reviews of the GSM program and the ESOS Act.
- The coded data to identify the observed trends or other insights, showing if it correlated with popular beliefs or if the information collected was contradictory was analysed, and simple statistical methods were utilised to determine if the nature of the content met the research goals.
- The information was interpreted; conclusions were drawn from the findings and recommendations were made using the lens of the prisoner's dilemma research framework.

Coding is one among several procedural components of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) to sort data into similar categorical groups, identifying similar different patterns (Kleinheksel et al., 2020), and in this research, manifest data has been coded (Drisko & Maschi, 2015).

According to (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005), the coding schemes developed can be both inductive and deductive in nature, broadly comprising of the following 3 elements:

- Trustworthiness  
For this research, the raw data is indisputable, as it is sourced from various trusted sources such as official reviews, reports and statistics which is available and accessible for further verification any time and not from only one particular source.
- Credibility  
A credibility factor is assured, based on the work experience of the researcher over a decade in the field of Australian higher education and since the researcher is a registered migration agent.  
In any research conducted, any piece of data may seem important but as an investigator, one must eliminate irrelevant information, not relating to the aim of

the research and analyse the data collected from a neutral perspective to be objective and to avoid any bias (Bengtsson, 2016).

In terms of codifying the data for this research, it was based on the categories directly related to the aims of the research and any other data which was not of significance to this research was avoided e.g. avoiding students studying on the same student visa (subclass 500) studying VET courses or offshore immigrants, migrating to Australia on the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) or Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) as these visas are also available to the student cohort of this research.

The researcher has been cognisant of the experience and exposure to the research topic and avoided any form of bias while collecting data for the research which could be construed as reflecting any personal bias and not answering the research question more objectively. Though the researcher has worked with international students in both an academic and non-academic capacity, as well as a migration agent, the researcher did not let any personal bias corrupt the data collection process and avoided a condescending approach in the data collection process.

- Transferability

Recommendations from this research could be used as a tool and utilised by other researchers who could further research into the pathways for Australian permanent residency and PSWR opportunities available to international students in Australia as well as other associated topics such as using the findings of this research to analyse the Australian international student market, policies governing the GSM program, the success of the efforts in place to decouple the GSM program and higher education offering in Australia as well as the post COVID-19 pandemic after effects on the higher education industry in Australia.

The success of a content analysis depends greatly on the coding process according to (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and taking this as a guide, this research utilised a hybrid approach which combined elements of both deductive and inductive analysis.

The deductive analysis tested pre-existing assumptions e.g. during the course of the research, a popular myth that all international students studying in Australia remained in Australia to obtain Australian permanent residency was dismissed, as the research

debunked this myth and it was revealed that, this claim actually depended on a student's country of origin as it was true for students from the Indian subcontinent but not for Chinese students (Birrell, 2019).

Most international students eventually do depart Australia but not before a large portion of them stay on in Australia, switching from the student visa (subclass 500) to other temporary visas for several years after the completion of their studies (Birrell & Betts, 2018a) and this finding correlates with that of (Pham, 2021), who argued based on her findings that international students cannot be treated as a homogeneous group with the same aspirations and experience with a similar linear post-study journey.

Interestingly the findings of the research are not only applicable to management and commerce international students studying at Australian universities but overall to most students studying on a student visa (subclass 500), who are not studying STEM courses leading to health-related occupations as evident from the pre COVID-19 pandemic period (Coffey et al., 2021) and in the post COVID-19 pandemic (Han et al., 2022).

The inductive analysis on the other hand, based on the observations from the data collected from the academic literature and reports during the research process, exposed contradiction to the norm e.g. the differing motivations for studying overseas from the major cohorts of source countries is discussed though out this thesis.

### **3.6 Theoretical Framework**

It was important to distinguish the theoretical research framework utilised in this research from other conventional research frameworks in not only advancing the current discourse through a thorough exploration and scholarly engagement in this research but also having the capacity to trigger insights into addressing the research question in the form of recommendations.

Three widely used theoretical research frameworks were considered for this research with the aim to simply address the issue being investigated and showcasing the status quo from the perspective of an international student as opposed to what the existing GSM policies are attempting to portray.

### **3.6.1 Human Capital Theory**

The Human Capital theory was developed in the 1960s and is an economic concept which correlates investment in people through education with increase productivity and economic value (Mankiw et al., 1992) e.g. the accumulation of university higher education since the early 1980s resulted in the presence of skilled university graduates in the Australian labour force (Holland et al., 2013).

Human capital portability affects the quantity and the quality of international student migration and is an important policy question (Arenas, 2021) and the intertwining of permanent residency to human capital, is an incentive to invest into human capital with the expectation that this action will eventually result in the granting of permanent status in a destination country (Adda et al., 2022).

The Human Capital theory can be utilised to explain why international students pursue tertiary studies at Australian universities as an investment for career advancement and migration outcomes since an international educational qualification is treated as an investment in human capital and expected to yield returns in the form of employment, higher wages, and eligibility for skilled migration (Crawford et al., 2024). International students graduating from Australian higher education institutions and subsequently obtaining Australian permanent residency status, enhance Australia's human capital supply (Deloitte Access Economics, 2015).

The human capital methodology has also been used to identify employer recruitment impact on both the employee and organisational performance (Boxall, 1996) and to study employer motivations to recruit temporary sponsored skilled migrants in Australia (Wright & Constantin, 2021).

The economic outcomes of immigrants may depend on the international portability of human capital acquired in their source countries (Gibbons & Mukhopadhyay, 2020), however immigrants realise that the human capital acquired in their country of origin is not relevant to the labour market of the destination country based on a mismatch of their educational qualifications and work experience in comparison to that of the workforce of the destination country (Chiswick, & Miller, 2009; Basilio, et al., 2017).

As restrictions on migration gets relaxed, the return to attain education to accumulate human capital amongst migrants reduces further in the destination countries, due to a lack of incentive as they have the potential to earn a lot more money by migrating than staying in their country of origin (Navarro, & Zhou, 2024).

Though this methodology can be used to evaluate how effectively skilled migration policies attract and retain high-skilled individuals (Di Maria & Lazarova, 2012), contributing to economic growth and innovation and the employment prospects for skilled migrants (Syed, 2008), it does not have the adequacy to exhibit the existing state of affairs from the perspective of an international student studying at an Australian university and their probability of acquiring Australian permanent residency.

### **3.6.2 Bourdieu's Theory of Practice**

Bourdieu's theory of practice stems from the discipline of sociology, expanding the notion of capital framework beyond wealth and involves the interplay of habitus, capital, and field with habitus being the manner in which one perceives and responds to the environment based on their actions, modes of appearance, posture and communication (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu linked the concept of habitus to define an individual's capacity for social positioning (Kim, 2018) as part of *parenté pratique* or practical kinship (Tireli et al., 2023). Transnational habitus with respect to migration is a specific product of migration whereby immigrants build social fields to link their country of origin and their destination country (Radogna, 2019; Joy et al., 2020).

The provision of international education and its attainment provides the opportunity to develop forms of social and economic capital for universities and international students respectively (Nguyen & Hartz, 2020), whereby universities increase their social capital via the networks of alumni in key source countries and for international business and accounting students from Australian universities, WIL boosts their educational, cultural and symbolic capital (Gribble et al., 2015) which can be converted to economic capital.

The concept of cultural capital is another avenue to analyse the global field of higher education as educational credentials are an indication of possessing valuable human capital (Kim, 2018; Pöllmann, 2021).

The economic, social and cultural capital as described by Bourdieu are mutually convertible (Saksela-Bergholm et al., 2019; Joy et al., 2020). The economic capital acquired through migration is converted in cultural capital in the country of origin e.g. the economic capital that can be acquired by working in Canada, can be transformed into cultural and social capital in the Philippines (Radogna, 2019).

International students from Australia's source countries, who come from a privileged social group, accumulate their cultural capital through an overseas educational qualification (Birrell & Betts, 2018b, Yang, 2022), which is looked upon as an 'international currency' on their resume (Crawford et al., 2024).

Bourdieu's theory of practice has been employed in several research projects e.g. to test if the accounting PYP can be regarded as a work-readiness program to model future graduate training programs (Jones, 2018), to investigate the employment paradox of international accounting graduates in Australia (Chan, 2020) and to scrutinising the Australian international higher education policy and skilled migration between 2001 and 2010 (Hamilton, 2017).

Bourdieu's concepts of capitals, fields and habitus is used to explain the interrelationships between migrant careers and context e.g. even highly skilled migrants, with significant human capital, often experience undesirable career outcomes like Filipino migrants found about their degrees from prestigious universities in the Philippines which were deemed insignificant in Canada (Joy et al., 2020).

Albeit Bourdieu's model of habitus and field can be used in examining the experience of migrant resettlement (Noble, 2013), this research on the contrary, is based on the international student experience in Australia, prior to gaining a permanent migrant status.

Bourdieu's theory of practice maybe ideal for exploring social inequality and the existence of the mismatch between Australian educational qualifications obtained by international students and the level of success in the Australian labour market, it is also not appropriate for the purpose of this research topic since the goal is to pragmatically explore the probability of an international student studying at an Australian university to acquire Australian permanent residence as opposed to how they utilise their qualifications in terms of capital.

### **3.6.3 Push–Pull Theory of Migration**

The push and pull theory of migration was postulated by (Lee, 1966) providing an analytical framework to explain migration (Parkins, 2010; Urbański, 2022; Motadegbe, & Mogaji, 2025), as a model to explain the human movement in rural-urban migration (Harris & Todaro 1970; Peralta et al., 2024) and an established framework to understand the factors that influence students to study abroad (Altbach, 1998).

The push and pull factors are in reference to the factors that influence relocation to a new place or compel individuals to depart their original place of residence based on some issues or circumstances (Peralta et al., 2024).

(Lee, 1966) proposed the following 4 factors which influence migration:

- Factors associated with the place of origin
- Factors associated with the place of destination
- Intervening obstacles
- Personal factors

hence migration is selective and the decision for an individual to migrate as per (Lee, 1966)'s theory is based on economic, social and political factors (Urbański, 2022).

The push factors include economic factors such as limited or lack of jobs, inadequate educational system, social factors such as poor health facilities, religious freedom and political factors such as insecurity and fear of political crisis etc (Urbański, 2022; Motadegbe, & Mogaji, 2025).

Pull factors are viewed in contrast to push factors and include better employment prospects, living conditions, transportation and communication technologies, and established medical, educational, and political systems (Peralta et al., 2024).

Migration based on the push and pull theory of migration can be voluntary or involuntary (de Haas, 2021), whereby voluntary migration is based on the migrant's desire to enhance their economic condition, and involuntary migration is forced when the migrant is threatened by the circumstances in their country of origin (Motadegbe, & Mogaji, 2025).

According to (Mohamed & Abdul-Talib, 2020), apart from the conventional economic or psychological factors, situational pull factors also trigger reverse migration i.e. those factors which are the push factors originally in the home country but change overtime to motivate immigrants to return home, transitioning into pull factors.

An example of this situational pull factor as described by (Mohamed & Abdul-Talib, 2020) is the forced migration of Sri Lankan Tamils to Indian refugee camps due to 30 years of a civil war which ended in 2009, and this prompted a large number of these Sri Lankan Tamil refugees to return home (Valatheeswaran & Rajan, 2011).

In the context of the international student movements, the push factors are limited educational or employment opportunities in the source country which discourage international students to stay and this dissatisfaction forces them to depart these source country, while in contrast, pull factors is the lure of high quality education, career advancement opportunities and the migration potential in the host country (McMahon, 1992; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Zaman et al., 2023).

As (Dhanji et al., 2023) points out, these push and pull factors give Australian universities a competitive advantage, especially for international students from the Asia region.

The push and pull theory of migration is a very common approach in migration studies but limited in its applicability to this research, as it cannot comprehensively offer solutions to address the research question thus was also rejected.



Even though it has the potential to reveal the motivation for migration from an international student's perspective, it does not expose the dilemma an international student at an Australian university finds themselves in, trying to achieve their career or migration goals.

### **3.6.4 The Chosen Approach**

The application of Bourdieu's theory of agents and capitals framework, the human capital theory and the push and pull theory of migration for international academic mobility were the research methodologies employed as evident from the systematic review of 74 academic journal articles which examined the workforce integration of international graduates (Han et al., 2022).

However, the examination of these academic journal articles failed to propose a solution to how international graduates, could obtain Australian permanent residency or acquire better post-graduation visas, entitling them to work in Australia for a longer duration. Instead, these studies predominantly exposed the characteristics of international graduates, such as lack of host country cultural knowledge, low levels of English language fluency or the inability to comprehend recruitment and selection practises and the existence of unfavourable immigration policies to transition into the Australian workforce.

Even though, the 3 different research models were considered for this research, none could profoundly validate the existence of the education migration nexus and the employment paradox that is encountered by international students from Australian universities post-graduation and substantially showcase the unfavourable scenarios these graduates find themselves trapped in with the limited avenues available to them, which determine their subsequent action.

#### **3.6.4.1 Prisoner's Dilemma**

Migration policy development is a multi-layered process, with an equilibrium achieved with a trade-off between security, rights, markets, and culture (Hollifield & Foley, 2022) inclusive of a complex and contradictory mixture of objectives and programmes (Aydemir, 2020; Triadafilopoulos & Taylor, 2024) such as the higher education policy, which can be perplexing (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018).

Game theory is a branch of applied mathematics (De Bruin, 2005;2008), a formal study of conflict and cooperation between rational decision-makers where the ‘game’ is the object of study (Bhuiyan, 2016) and the decision makers are referred to as players, who may be individual persons or organisations (Kelly, 2003).

The results of the game depend on the independent and interdependent decision making of 2 or more players with 1 player not having full control of the outcomes (Kelly, 2003). This is true in the case of this research whereby the participation from both players can lead to a favourable outcome for them through a cooperative approach if both players cooperate with each other on a joint strategy (Bhuiyan, 2016) since mutual cooperation yields more than mutual defection (De Bruin, 2005;2008).

Game theory has the inability to formulate appropriate payoff function which is the value of the collective set of decisions of each player (Cruz & Simaan, 2000) and through this research, the intended purpose is to utilise the cooperative game theory approach to create value instead of potential outcomes of conflicts based on the strategy utilised by players to only win the game, an attribute of the non-cooperative games which assumes that individual players can not cooperate, resulting in a zero-sum game (Bhuiyan, 2016).

Zero-sum games are representative of a situation where one player’s gain must come at the expense of the other player (Leyton-Brown & Shoham, 2008), a classic case of only 1 winner. Non-zero-sum games, however, have a possibility of all players to win or have a loss together based on common and conflicting interests (Gintis, 2009).

The distinction between the formal (hard) and the informal (soft) approach to game-theoretic reasoning is where the hard definition stresses the use of mathematical models, and the soft definition sees game theory as the study of how the outcomes of the game depended on an equitable sharing action of 2 or more players. This is highlighted by Thomas Schelling (Schelling, 2010) regarding the conflict and cooperation through game-theoretic analysis, as conventional game theory concepts cannot solve the issue of payoff-dominance (Colman, 2003).

This approach, contrasts with the conventional reliance on sophisticated mathematical models in game theory with clearly defined players, strategies, payoffs, and rules based on formal, deductive reasoning (Chen, 2022) and this approach is critiqued for being too rigid to capture real-world strategic behaviour (Estrada, 2010) as it is not commonly used in academic literature.

Schelling's model of the prisoner's dilemma is an upgrade over the standard mathematical model (Barra & Tassier, 2008) as it is pragmatic with inductive generalisation containing the formation of mutually consistent expectations by the players that negates zero-sum games (Sugden & Zamarrón, 2006).

For the purpose of this research, the use of this 'soft' definition, as described by (Schelling, 2010) is chosen over the traditional 'hard' definition of utilising formal mathematical models, as it is more intuitive, giving a narrative-driven framework with the expectation management from both players, illustrating real-world contexts as later described in this research with the 2 case studies showcasing the scenarios faced by management and commerce students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) visa from Australian universities.

This approach highlighted the distinction by expanding the scope of game theory, thus incorporating a more nuanced, 'soft' interpretation beyond the strict formalism with informal reasoning (Colman, 2006), incorporating the prisoner's dilemma, a classic representative game (Chen, 2022) and a subset of the most widely used example of the game theory methodology (Bhuiyan, 2016), commonly used game for theoretical analysis (Ren et al., 2018).

It is a concept of the game theory methodology, which is not discipline based per se, unlike the Human Capital theory which stems from the discipline of economics or Bourdieu's theory of practice which stems from the discipline of sociology or the push and pull migration theory from the demography and geography field.

The prisoner's dilemma game, however, is a 2-player game, used to illustrate the value and the limitations of the game-theoretic thinking (Shubik, 1970) whereby each

player has a choice between a cooperating and a defecting strategy, and each player receives a higher payoff if both cooperate than if both defect (Colman, 2006).

As De Bruin (De Bruin, 2005;2008) points out, prisoner's dilemma exhibits epistemological dependence since each player's decision depends on how much they trust or understand the other player's rationality, knowledge of the game, and what the other player thinks about their own reasoning.

Schelling's model is an unpretentious model of strategic interdependence and aligns towards a semi or non-equilibrium model as opposed to a general equilibrium model (Easterly, 2009) and this puts it at odds with the equilibrium proposed by Hollifield (Hollifield & Foley, 2022) or the multiplicity of interests feeding into immigration policies (Triadafilopoulos & Taylor, 2024).

As such, the prisoner's dilemma concept clearly depicts the conundrum that international graduates find themselves in, in relation to obtaining an Australian permanent residence or the obstructed pathways to Australian permanent residency, viewing it from an education migration nexus lens.

By using the prisoner's dilemma model from the game theory framework, this research investigates the opportunities available to international students at Australian universities with post-graduation employment and immigration outcomes, demonstrating the historical, present and a future outlook if the existing trajectory is taken with the Australian GSM program.

The researcher does not profess to have any formal expertise in the prisoner's dilemma concept of game theory and as such, detailed calculations utilising mathematical models to calculate optimal moves have not been mentioned in this thesis, instead, the different scenarios are shown in the 4 quadrants of the prisoner's dilemma mentioned in Chapter 4 to analyse the findings from the data collected and based on the findings, recommendations have been proposed in Chapter 5.

The prisoner's dilemma, a concept in game theory is applied in this thesis as a 2 person, non-zero-sum game, where the 2 major stakeholders act in their own self-

interest and their actions are independent of each other, but which can lead to satisfying solutions for both parties based on a cooperative game, which is the intended outcome of this research, to deduce from the findings if a perceived utopian solution can be achieved whereby both players gain payoffs leading to at least a satisfying solution, if not an optimum one.

This formation of a mutually consistent expectation with the assumption that players in a game are capable of solving coordination problems by identifying a solution that is obvious to both of them is consistent with Schelling's model (Barra & Tassier, 2008).

This 2-players in this game setup for this research are the Australian government who are the GSM and higher education policy makers and international students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) at an Australian university. The choice of these 2 players is based on the literature review and the data collection for this research.

All 4 outcomes of the play or payoffs are dependent on how each player perceives their payoff compared to their position prior to the start of the game by either cooperating or defecting.

Based on the analysis of the payoffs of the prisoner's dilemma concept as exhibited as Figure 10, this research further delves into testing the efficacy of the GSM policies from the viewpoint of these international graduates.

In this research, the 2 players have the following choices at their disposal:

- **The 2 choices available to an international student are to:**
  - 'Invest' by studying at an Australian university, complying with the visa requirements of the student visa (subclass 500), achieving their return on investment with better post-graduation employment opportunities compared to existing ones and having a clear pathway to Australian permanent residency.
  - 'Not Invest' by only studying at an Australian university and then returning to their home country or another country offering them a better career

prospect or for permanent residency, viewing their education attainment as a non-permanent engagement.

This will lead to a zero-sum game result.

- **The 2 choices available to the Australian government are to:**
  - ‘Commit’ to provide a better career advancement pathway through post-graduation working opportunities to international graduates from Australian universities and eliminate any migration pathway hurdles for them to achieve Australian permanent residency.
  - ‘Not Commit’ to any career advancement pathways through post-graduation working opportunities for international graduates from Australian universities and making it more stringent, if not impossible for them to achieve Australian permanent residency.

This will lead to a zero-sum game result.

The 4 quadrants (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4) depict the payoffs in the prisoner's dilemma model, as applicable to this research:

<b>Australian Government</b>		
	<b>Australian Government Commits</b>	<b>Australian Government <i>doesn't</i> Commit</b>
<b>International Student Invest</b>	Both the International Student and the Australian Government benefit ( <i>Q1</i> ) ( <i>Win-Win</i> )	The International Student does not benefit, the Australian Government benefits ( <i>Q2</i> ) ( <i>Win-Lose</i> )
<b>International Student <i>doesn't</i> Invest</b>	The International Student benefits, the Australian Government does not benefit ( <i>Q3</i> ) ( <i>Lose- Win</i> )	Neither the International Student, nor the Australian Government benefit ( <i>Q4</i> ) ( <i>Lose-Lose</i> )

**Figure 10: Payoff Matrix for this Research, based on the Prisoner's Dilemma Model**

### 3.7 Chapter Summary

The chapter outlined the 4 subsequent research questions, and the content analysis methodology utilised to collect data for this research.

The multi-faceted approach of the immigration policy development process is mentioned with the crucial focus of this research from an education migration nexus perspective, in identifying the 2 main stakeholders.

It then delved into explicating the rationale behind choosing the theoretical framework of the prisoner's dilemma concept of the game theory methodology with a specific mention, that it is employed to demonstrate the different payoffs available to students on a student visa (subclass 500), studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities and not an analysis from a multidimensional perspective which would incorporate different fields of study and would be outside the scope of this research.

Lastly, the chapter outlines how Schelling's pragmatic 'soft definition' approach of the prisoner's dilemma is adopted for this research as opposed to the use of the traditional sophisticated mathematical models commonly utilised in the classical game theory.



## **Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The chapter introduces the 4 options from the prisoner's dilemma framework that is available to the 2 main identified stakeholders, based on the education migration nexus viewpoint: an international management and commerce graduate from an Australian university and the Australian government, who are the GSM and higher education policy makers.

The first case study highlights the options available to a fresh international management and commerce graduate from an Australian university on a Temporary Graduate Visa (Subclass 485) to acquire Australian permanent residency.

The second case study highlights the options available to the same graduate, 2 years post-graduation, on a Temporary Graduate Visa (Subclass 485) to acquire Australian permanent residency.

Based on the options available to an international management and commerce graduate from an Australian university as established from the 2 case studies, 4 strategic scenarios are constructed, and the prisoner's dilemma framework is utilised for analysis and the 4 common themes which emerge from the analysis is revealed and discussed.

### **4.2 Analytical Lens: The Prisoner's Dilemma Framework**

The possible outcomes of the prisoner's dilemma game are:

- Q1: win-win Mutual Cooperation (Commit/Invest)) (1)  
If the Australian government provides clear and supportive career advancement and migration pathways for international students, they are more likely to view their education as a worthwhile investment, resulting in mutual benefits for both themselves and the host country.

The Australian government gains professional migrants, who, based on the skills acquired from Australian educational institutions, can meet the labour shortages and international students achieve their post-graduation working opportunity and permanent residency goals.

The government views these graduates as skilled workers, who will not return to their countries of origin, but contribute to the economic development of destination countries (Koslowski, 2018) and transform into future migrants (Hong et al., 2022), who are termed as ‘designer immigrants’ (Morris-Lange & Brands, 2015; Wright et al., 2016), based on their education from an Australian tertiary educational institution and their ability to transition into the Australian workforce.

- Q2: win-lose One-Sided Cooperation (Commit/Don’t Invest) (2)

If the Australian government does not implement positive post-graduation visas and keeps changing GSM policies abruptly as experienced in 2024 by putting obstacles in the permanent residency pathways for international students, these international students may still invest in higher education but would feel misled and exploited. This is the current scenario which leads to the visa hopping situation (Parkinson et al., 2023; Migrant Workers Centre, 2021;2024).

This may harm the reputation of the Australian higher education market and reduce the international student inflows in the long run as international students in this case are viewed as cash cows by the Australian tertiary educational institutions (Hong et al., 2022; Dhanji et al., 2023) and are classified as strategic opportunists who are ‘backdoor migrants’ by the Australian media (Robertson, 2011) or as ‘PR hunters’ (Tran & Vu, 2018), utilising their investment from their studies to only gain Australian gain permanent residency (Hamilton, 2017).

- Q3: win-lose One-Sided Cooperation (Invest/Don’t Commit) (3)

If the Australian government offers favourable career advancement and migration pathway policies but international students no longer view career advancement prospects and/or Australian permanent residency as feasible anymore, then Australia gains short-term revenue from the international student tuition fees but loses long-term skilled migrants to meet the skilled workforce demands of Australia that the GSM program was developed for.

International students are learners who aim to gain an Australian educational qualification (Hong et al., 2022) and move out of Australia either to their own countries or to other countries with better career prospects in their workforce or become permanent residents as the Australian government views them as

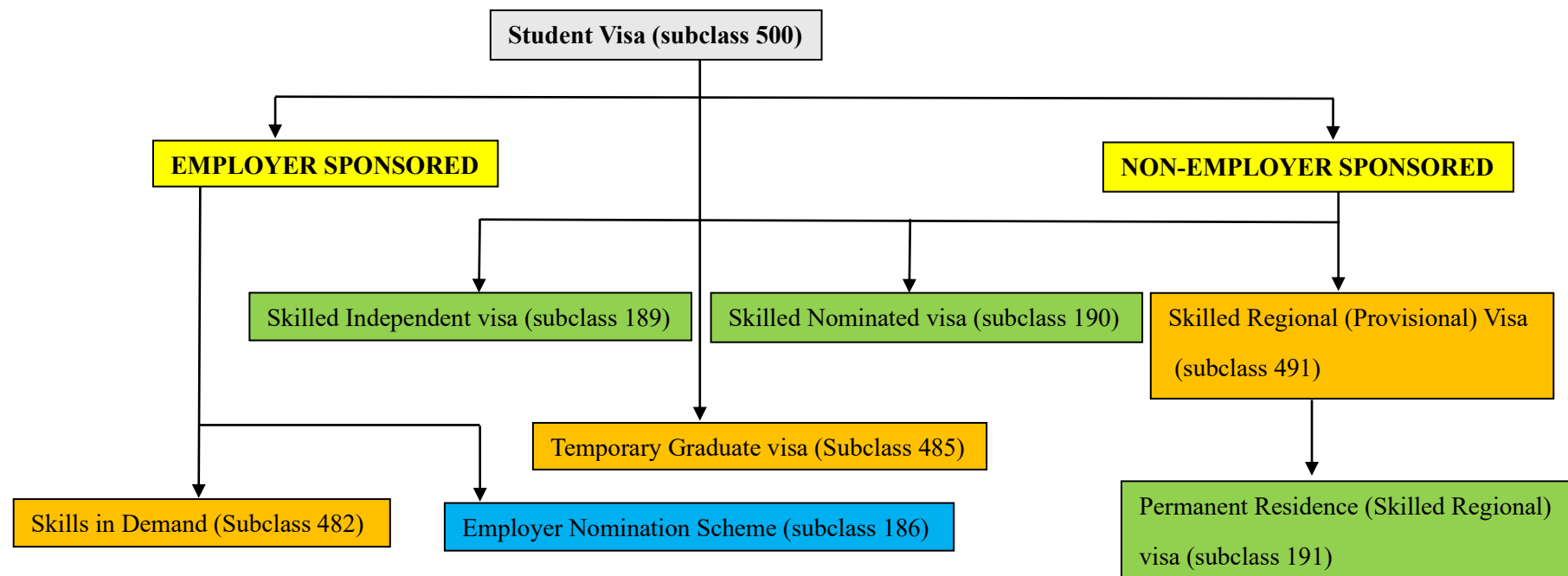
consumers whose intention is only to obtain the Australian education experience (Robertson, 2011).

- Q4: lose-lose Mutual Defection (Don't Commit/Don't Invest) (4)

In this outcome, the Australian government neither gains a stable flow of skilled migrants nor maintains high international student enrolments, while international students opt for other countries, who are competitors of Australia in the higher education space such as the UK and Canada, for better opportunities based on the uncertainty of the volatile Australian GSM policies.

### 4.3 Case Study Narratives

The chart below shows the Australian permanent residency visa options, available post-graduation to international students studying on a student visa (subclass 500). The permanent residency visas are highlighted in green, the employer sponsored permanent residency visa is highlighted in blue and the temporary visas, which are pathways to Australian permanent residency visas are highlighted in orange.



**Figure 11: Australian Permanent Residency Visa Options**

Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2024a,b,c,d,p; Department of Home Affairs, 2025a,d

The current criteria for the GSM program point categories are outlined below with the maximum achievable points for the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189), the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) and the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa for management and commerce undergraduate and postgraduate coursework graduates.

Criteria	Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189)	Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190)	Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491)	Details	Maximum Points Achievable
State Nomination	X	✓	✓	This criterion requires nomination by a state or territory government and for an occupation listed either to be on the MLTSSL or STSOL.	5 points: Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) 15 points: Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) visa (subclass 491)
Age	✓	✓	✓	For the age criterion, points are allocated based on the age brackets within which the applicant's age falls in	30 points

				and the maximum age allowed for the GSM program is 44.	
English Language Ability	✓	✓	✓	<p>The accepted standard exams required to test the English language ability of an applicant are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IELTS (General or Academic depending on the assessment requirements)</li> <li>• PTE Academic</li> <li>• Cambridge (CAE)</li> <li>• TOEFL iBT</li> <li>• OET</li> </ul> <p>(Based on the scores in these internationally accepted standardised tests, an applicant's English language ability would be rated as competent, proficient or superior.</p> <p>Only those applicants whose English language ability is proficient, or superior obtain 10 or 20 points respectively).</p>	20 points
	✓	✓	✓	For the Australian Educational Qualification, an applicant needs to have studied a course which took at	5 points

Australian Educational Qualification				least 2 years of full-time study in Australia at an Australian educational institution, relevant to the nominated occupation on the MLTSSL or STSOL.	5 points
				Studying in regional Australia or a low population growth area requires the qualification attained to take at least 2 years of full-time study in Australia with the campus of the Australian educational institution located in a regional area.	
Professional Year	✓	✓	✓	Completion of a Professional Year in Australia currently available to accountants, engineers and IT professionals only.	5 points
Qualifications	✓	✓	✓	Different number of points are awarded for the qualification criterion depending on where it falls on the AQF. AQF 7 to 9 graduates get 15 points while a PhD graduate gets 20 points, the maximum points allocated for this criterion.	15 points

Overseas Work Experience / Australian Work Experience	✓	✓	✓	<p>Work experience overseas in the nominated occupation or a closely related skilled occupation in the last 10 years, or</p> <p>Work experience in Australia in the nominated occupation or a closely related skilled occupation in the last 10 years.</p> <p>(8 Years or more: 15 points 5 Years or more: 10 points 3 Years or more: 5 points Less than 3 years: 0).</p>	20 points
Partner Skill Qualifications	✓	✓	✓	Not currently in a relationship with a spouse or de facto partner.	10 points
				Partner is under the age of 45 and has competent English ability.	5 points
				Partner is under the age of 45 and has competent English ability and partner can pass the skills assessment in an occupation listed on the MLTSSL or STSOL.	10 points



Competency in a Designated Language	✓	✓	✓	Accredited as a para-professional interpreter or translator (level 2) by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI).	5 points
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**Table 3: Maximum achievable points for the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189), the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) and the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa**

Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2024a,b,c

The permanent residency application process under the GSM program for international students studying in Australia is outlined below in the following steps:

1. A graduate gets their skills assessed which is an assessment of their educational qualification attained regarding an occupation on the SOL by the relevant skills assessment authority (Deloitte Access Economics, 2024), e.g. an accounting graduate gets their education and work experience assessed by either the Certified Practising Accountant Australia (CPA), or the Institute of Public Accountants (IPA), or the Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand (CA ANZ), the designated skills assessment authority for the accounting occupation.  
As part of this skills assessment, the graduate also undertakes the specified English language test e.g. IELTS or PTE etc and obtains the required score.
2. Upon the receipt of a successful skills assessment outcome and the specified score in the specified English language test, the graduate lodges an Expression of Interest (EOI) on the Australian Skill Select portal (Department of Home Affairs, 2024q) by filling out an online form based on the visa subclass(s) they are applying for:
  - Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189)
  - Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190)
  - Skilled regional (provisional) Subclass 491.

3. For those graduates applying for the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) or Skilled regional (provisional) Subclass 491, the graduate also applies and obtains state/territory nomination in addition to the EOI lodged to secure an extra 5 or 15 points respectively.
4. Upon the receipt of an Invitation to Apply (ITA) for Australian permanent residency by the government, through the Skill Select portal, a graduate then submits their Australian permanent residency application within 60 days of the invitation.

The EOI stage for many international graduates is the waiting period that has led to the long-term temporary stay, termed as ‘permanent temporariness’ (Parkinson et al., 2023), based on visa hopping.

Bridging visas are issued to applicants of a permanent visa (McDonald, 2024), so even after the EOI, once an invitation for Australian permanent residency is issued, these international graduates have another waiting period to face till their permanent residency application is finalised. Most have employment rights during this period, but this is not a uniform condition for all applicants.

Even though many of these international graduates have fewer to no prospects of becoming Australian permanent residents, they are forced to hop from one temporary visa to another until all avenues to legally prolong their stay in Australia is exhausted and in a survey conducted, only 15% of the participants were studying on a student visa (subclass 500) at the time of the survey, compared to 45% of the same sample at the time of their arrival in Australia (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023a). This finding revealed another case of visa hopping where majority of these former student visa holders transitioned to bridging visas, based on the delay of their visa processing which was brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The introduction of a maximum waiting time for visa processing (Migrant Workers Centre, 2021), if successfully implemented by the policy makers, could be a solution to address this visa hopping issue, brought about by more than 1.8 million temporary migrants legally living in Australia without a clear pathway to permanent residency (Parkinson et al., 2023).

#### **4.3.1 Case Study 1: Management & Commerce Graduate**

In the first hypothetical case study, it can be safely assumed that the international management and commerce graduate, who has freshly graduated, falls within the age bracket of 18 – 24 years, as approximately 50% of the student visa (subclass 500)s issued between 2017 – 2023 were issued to students in the age bracket of 20 – 24 years (Department of Home Affairs, 2024j) and these graduates are tertiary educated, aspiring to secure Australian permanent residency which they achieve within 5.8 years on average (Migrant Workers Centre, 2024b).

The graduate obtains at least a competent English score in a normal scenario or in the case of accounting graduates, a mandatory higher score of proficient English for their skills assessment as described in Table 3.

The graduate is still single which is the usual case within this cohort of students and if the university campus where they studied was located in an area classified as regional, they acquire an extra 5 points e.g. a graduate from Deakin university who has studied at the Geelong campus can claim 5 extra points for studying in regional Australia as opposed to a graduate from their Burwood campus because it is located in a metropolitan area.

The lure to study from an Australian university located in an area designated as regional by the Australian government and predetermined by a postcode for the purpose of migration, is a potential motivating factor for an international student, to increase their points score and eligibility for Australian permanent residency, through the regional pathway.

This enticement by the successive Australian governments is in line with the intention of migrant settlement in regional areas to boost population and economic development (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023a) by issuing regional visas for which the applicant needs to meet the work and residence requirement post-graduation (Migrant Workers Centre, 2022).

Regardless of the Australian government in power, the policy trend suggests promoting both population and economic development in regional areas through migrants and the reasons for this could range from countering the rural urban drift to reducing the urban congestion through the introduction of the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) in 2019

or the settling of migrants in rural areas as a piece meal solution rather than a concrete one which attracts migrant workers based on settlement possibilities with visas that restrict migrant workers' mobility and right to work (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023a).

Another factor to note is that these graduates usually have minimal work to no work experience, so for the Overseas Work Experience/Australian Work Experience criteria listed in Table 3, these graduates are ineligible to claim any points.

The existing regulation of work restriction for a student visa (subclass 500) was brought about by recommendation 28 of the Knight review, but it is both confusing and very impractical to students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) who have a work limitation condition (8105) placed on their visa which restricts them to work up to a maximum of 48 hours per fortnight from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2023 (Department of Home Affairs, 2024o). Prior to the Knight review, international students were permitted to work 20 hours per week while their course was in session.

The term fortnight as per the Migration Regulations 1994, means the period of 14 days commencing on a Monday, as the example sourced from the DHA website shows e.g. if a student worked

- 15 hours in week 1
- 25 hours in week 2
- 25 hours in week 3
- 10 hours in week 4,

the total hours worked in weeks 2 and 3 makes the student non-compliant to the work restriction condition of 48 hours per fortnight, as the total hours worked in weeks 2 and 3 equate to 50 hours, making the student's visa subject to cancellation due to the 2 extra hours worked, over the permitted limit.

Overseas students studying on a student visa (subclass 500), are faced with this dilemma daily throughout their studies while their course is in session and this adds on to the added pressure of a full-time study load (Ferguson and Spinks, 2021) that they need to successfully complete to maintain their visa status.

The student visa working hours cap should be removed as this restriction created an obstacle for international students to access meaningful employment opportunities and in building professional networks matching their skill levels post-graduation (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023b).

The justification for this recommendation is that the intent of the restriction was not being achieved, which was to ensure international students were genuinely studying while on a student visa (subclass 500). In lieu of the removal of the working hours restriction, the report suggested that condition 8202 (meet course requirements) should be relied upon to monitor the attendance and academic performance of international students.

A recent international management and commerce graduate from an Australian university then is faced with the following 2 options:

- to apply for a Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) and try to gain work experience within the 2-year duration of the visa to claim points for Australian permanent residency or
- to apply for another student visa (subclass 500) and study another course, to ensure a longer duration of stay in Australia, legally.

With both these choices, the graduate aims to procure the much-needed work experience by working in their area of study and/or to utilise that accumulated Australian work experience as the missing component, to claim more points in their application for Australian permanent residency.

Though the graduate might be genuinely seeking Australian work experience, since post-graduation visas are an attraction for Australia as a host country (Tran & Soejatminah, 2016; Crawford et al., 2024), a debate regarding the existence of the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) in giving international graduates an opportunity to secure work experience post-graduation in Australia or acting as a back door avenue for migration which holds true for many international graduates (Tran et al., 2019).

The points breakdown for this case study is listed below:

	<b>Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189)</b>	<b>Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190)</b>	<b>Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491)</b>
<b>State Nomination:</b>	0	5 points	15 points
<b>Age: (18 - 24)</b>	25 points	25 points	25 points
<b>English Language Ability:</b>	0/10 points	0/10 points	0/10 points
<b>Australian Educational Qualification:</b>	5 points	5 points	5 points
<b>Study in Regional Australia or a Low Population Growth Area:</b>	0/5 points	0/5 points	0/5 points
<b>Qualifications: Recognised Bachelor/Masters by coursework</b>	15 points	15 points	15 points
<b>Partner Skill Qualifications</b>	10 points	10 points	10 points
<b>Competency in a Designated Language</b>	0/5 points	0/5 points	0/5 points
<b>Total Scores</b>	<b>55/75 points</b>	<b>60/80 points</b>	<b>70/90 points</b>

**Table 4: Points Breakdown of a fresh Management and Commerce Graduate's Application for Australian Permanent Residency**

Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2024a,b,c

Applicants for Australian permanent residency under the GSM program require a minimum threshold score of 65 points to be considered for an Australian skilled visa. Compared to other occupations, accounting occupations require the highest points to secure an ITA for Australian permanent residency as evidenced by the invitations issued to apply for permanent residency and out of the permanent residency or pathways to permanent residency invitations issued for regional places in the 2022 – 2023 period, accountants topped the list of invitations with 2971 places or 20% of the total invitations given for management and commerce related occupations (Department of Home Affairs, 2024k).

As can be seen from Table 4, in a practical scenario, a fresh international management and commerce graduate from an Australian university is unable to obtain the required minimum threshold score of 65 points to obtain Australian permanent residency without state/territory nomination as the cut off points for that occupation is way higher than the minimum score and in the case of an accounting graduate, they need to obtain proficient English which is not possible for most international students since English is not their second language.

An important observation from the last invitations issued for Australian permanent residency for the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) and pathways to permanent residency for the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) issued on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2024, was the higher points required for the management and commerce course related roles as outlined in Table 5 compared to other occupations:

Occupation	Minimum Points
Accountant (General)	95
Actuary	85
External Auditor	85
Internal Auditor	90
Management Accountant	95
Management Consultant	85
Taxation Accountant	85
Valuer	90

**Table 5: Management and Commerce Related Occupations with Minimum Points Required for ITA**

Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2024k

These are the only management and commerce course related occupations, listed on the MLTSSL and graduates vying for these roles, are eligible for the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189), as it does not require any state/territory nomination.

As evident from the ITA issued on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2024, a recent management and commerce graduate, in this case an accounting graduate, does not qualify for Australian permanent

residency under the Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) and Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) visa categories based on the minimum points allocated, unless they have

- proficient English (which could add another 10 points) or
- studied in a regional or a low population growth area (which could add another 5 points)
- or
- obtained credentials for a designated language (which could add another 5 points).

For the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visa however, the management and commerce graduate meet the minimum points by a stretch, based on the 15 points acquired by the state/territory nomination.

#### 4.3.2 Case Study 2: Temporary Graduate Visa (Subclass 485)

In the second case study, it can be safely assumed that the international management and commerce graduate falls within the normal age bracket of 25 – 32 years. Out of the student visa (subclass 500) issued between 2017 – 2023, approximately 22% were issued to students in the age bracket of 25 years – 29 years (Department of Home Affairs, 2024j).

Again, the graduate in this case obtains, at least competent English in a normal scenario or in the case of an accounting graduate, has proficient English, and may have completed the PYP in the case of an accounting graduate.

The points breakdown for this case study is listed below:

	<b>Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189)</b>	<b>Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190)</b>	<b>Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491)</b>
<b>State Nomination:</b>	0	5 points	15 points
<b>Age: (25 - 32)</b>	30 points	30 points	30 points
<b>English Language Ability:</b>	0/10 points	0/10 points	0/10 points
<b>Australian Educational Qualification:</b>	5 points	5 points	5 points



<b>Study in Regional Australia or a Low Population Growth Area:</b>	0/5 points	0/5 points	0/5 points
<b>Professional Year:</b>	0/5 points	0/5 points	0/5 points
<b>Qualifications: Recognised Bachelor / Masters by coursework</b>	15 points	15 points	15 points
<b>Overseas Work Experience / Australian Work Experience</b>	0	0	0
<b>Partner Skill Qualifications</b>	10 points	10 points	10 points
<b>Competency in a Designated Language</b>	0/5 points	0/5 points	0/5 points
<b>Total Scores</b>	<b>60/85</b>	<b>65/90</b>	<b>75/100</b>

**Table 6: Points Breakdown of a Management and Commerce Graduate's Application for Australian Permanent Residency after 2 Years post-graduation**

Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2024a,b,c

In the second case study, apart from the common parameters of the first case study, the management and commerce graduate is now at least 25 years old, thus obtains the maximum points achievable for the age criterion, which is 30 points.

In the case of an accounting graduate, there is an extra option available in addition to the 2 already listed above, which is:

- to apply for a Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) and complete the accounting PYP while on this visa.

Upon successfully completing the accounting PYP, an international accounting graduate is eligible to claim an extra 5 points under the professional year criterion. This option is only available to accounting graduates and not to other management and commerce graduates such as those studying disciplines like business, management and marketing.

What can be observed from this, is that out of all management and commerce courses, only the accounting graduates are allocated this opportunity to have a professional year and ultimately a better pathway to Australian permanent residency based on the extra 5 points attached to it.

In an ideal scenario, though this is impractical as one size does not fit all, a management and commerce graduate may be able to acquire at least 1 year of professional work experience in their area of study or in the case of an accounting graduate, complete the PYP.

For the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) visa and the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491), the management and commerce graduate is able to surpass the minimum threshold of 65 points by a stretch, though they may have to obtain a higher points score to be issued an invitation e.g. in the case of accounting graduates who have to meet the minimum of 95 points required to be able to meet the state/territory nomination, as evident from the last Australian permanent residency invitations issued on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2024.

The consistency of the trend from both the pre and post COVID-19 period is evident with the most ITA for permanent residency being issued for the health sector and teaching occupations, while notably, very limited ITA were issued for key employment sectors such as IT, management and commerce and engineering/science occupations in comparison. As mentioned in the first case study, the only management and commerce occupations listed on the MLTSSL are accounting related occupations.

Other management and commerce related occupations such as the Marketing Specialist, Market Research Analyst and Human Resource Adviser roles are all listed in the STSOL, making applicants in these roles eligible for the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) and Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visas only and these visas require a mandatory state/territory nomination.

Apart from the absence of these occupations on the MLTSSL, these occupations also have restrictive employer sponsorship caveats imposed on almost all of these management and commerce related occupations, such as business size of more than 5 employees, business with an annual turnover of more than \$1 million, regional only etc, thus making it more difficult for graduates from this area of study to gain employer sponsorship from a small sized employer or to eventually obtain Australian permanent residency or a pathway to a permanent residency visa.

Without the state/territory nomination, the international management and commerce graduates have none to very limited chances of even meeting the minimum points threshold scores required, to be considered for Australian permanent residency. For accounting graduates, even though the PYP gives them a clear advantage over other international management and commerce graduates in Australia by getting them an extra 5 points, it is still very difficult to meet the required minimum of 95 points as demonstrated from the 2 case studies above.

#### **4.4 Strategic Scenarios**

##### **4.4.1 Government Benefits / Student Doesn't**

A win - lose scenario results in only 1 player achieving or perceiving to have achieved the desired outcome. Based on the competition between the 2 players to achieve their desired outcomes, this scenario can be seen as distributive bargaining, whereby the government is achieving their economic and labour market objective at the expense of international students.

This scenario, as described in Q2, is based on the existing skilled migration policies with the participation from only 1 player, e.g., with international students being compliant to the existing higher education and skilled migration policies and investing in their Australian education, whereas the Australian government being the only beneficiary to this with minimal to no commitment from their end to create better post-graduation opportunities for international graduates from Australian universities or creating practical pathways to Australian permanent residency.

Enrolments in accounting courses exists because it leads to permanent residency and the 2 year masters courses in accounting were basically developed for the international student market for those seeking Australian permanent residency (Parker, 2012) and based on the increased ability for accruing points for permanent residency, leading to an exponential rise in international student enrolments in programs such as the Master of Professional Accountancy (MPA) across Australia (Crawford et al., 2024).

An close look at the courses offered by universities listed on the CRICOS register, confirm that the courses which do not have a related occupation on the SOL are slowly being ditched by the Australian public universities e.g. the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology, the last remaining collegiate of the Adelaide College of Divinity which offered their courses through Flinders university, joined the University of Divinity from 2023 (Vox, 2022) as Flinders university has ceased to offer theology courses.

Any change made to the GSM program, affects the points allocation, including occupations on the SOL, which is reflected in overseas student enrolments (Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014) and almost 50% of international students enrolled at Australian tertiary institutions in 2014 were studying business and management or accounting disciplines (Tran & Gomes, 2017).

This has been a clearly ongoing trend, as shown in Figure 1, with course completions in the management and commerce field accounting for 30% of total completions in 2020 nearly 50% of all overseas students were graduating in this area of study, (Birrell & Healy, 2022; Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018).

Almost 50% of all overseas students were enrolled in the business and commerce courses, despite there being no domestic shortage of graduates in this field and by 2020, overseas students made up 63% of all graduates in business and commerce courses (Birrell & Healy, 2022). Management and commerce related occupations, especially accounting roles, have low availability for overseas graduates from Australian universities in the Australian workforce due to an oversupply in the Australian job market, reflected in the high points required by management and commerce related occupations for Australian permanent residency as seen in the last invitations for Australian permanent residency issued on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2024.

The SOL in 2010 which was abolished in 2016 and replaced by the MLTSSL, contained occupations which were not in national shortage (Birrell, 2018), and only a small fraction of the migrant professionals with degrees who arrived in Australia were employed as accounting positions are already oversupplied, (Birrell & Betts, 2018a).

Higher education policy does not directly target scarce skills, as it is based on a methodology that identifies skill shortages through an employer survey, conducted by the Commonwealth employment department. If employers report being unable to fill vacancies, the occupation is then classified as being in shortage (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018).

The argument concerning the existing methodology, is that there may, in fact, be an adequate supply of skilled professionals in the market, as evidenced by university enrolments and graduate numbers. However, professionals may choose to work in other fields, or international graduates may be unable to secure employment in their area of study. Therefore, classifying an occupation as being in skill shortage based solely based on this methodology can be misleading.

This system of relying on skill shortage lists, based on the current national vacancies data collected, suggest forecasting the rise of particular vacancies from certain industries (Crock & Parsons, 2023) as policy makers still had the accounting occupation on the SOL even after the advice from the Department of Employment in its 2015 – 2016 review that the accounting graduates exceeded the job market demand (Birrell & Kinnaird, 2017).

The accounting PYP comprises of 44 weeks of training, of which 32 weeks is classroom based, and 12 weeks is internship placement (IPO, 2024). It is available to overseas graduates of an accounting degree from an Australian university based on at least 2 years of study in Australia. Apart from the accounting graduates, the PYP is only available to IT and engineering graduates (IDP, 2024), both of which are STEM courses. To be eligible for the PYP, graduates from these disciplines must old or have applied for the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485).

Upon completing the accounting PYP, an international graduate is eligible to claim 5 extra points under the professional year criterion, as part of their Australian permanent residency application and this leads to some obvious concerns:

- Why are only these 3 disciplines given special preference over other disciplines studied by overseas graduates at Australian universities?
- How come accounting, the only non-STEM discipline is allocated this privilege when the SOL is dominated by occupations related to STEM disciplines, most notable, being those in the health sector?
- Even with the demand being less or limited for management and commerce courses related occupations in the Australian workforce for overseas graduates, why are these occupations still present on the SOL?

According to (Birrell & Kinnaird, 2017), the process for determining occupations on the SOL, through public submissions conducted by the government is a façade, because removing occupations in IT, accounting and engineering, will tear up the GSM program by 50%. An explicit relationship between the PYP and occupations relating to IT, accounting and the engineering discipline can be established from this.

The findings from this research, exhibits that a significant portion of overseas students enrolled in business and commerce courses, choose accounting with the intention of aiding them to apply for a migration pathway, as accounting related occupations are listed in both the MLTSSL and the STSOL, and it is perceived as a straightforward route to employment and migration (Crawford et al., 2024), a trend that has historically existed (Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014).

The 50% pass rule was introduced on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2022, for domestic students accessing the student loan assistance like HECS-HELP and FEE-HELP. This rule made them ineligible for this loan assistance, if they failed over 50% of their units in any study period but it ceased within 1 year of implementation as it affected 13,000 domestic students at 27 universities negatively (Department of Education, 2023e). Yet for international students in Australia, similar failures in their study can result in their expulsion from universities and subsequently leading to the cancellation of their student visas.

The cessation of the 50% pass rule was the result of a recommendation of the Australian Universities Accord Report (O’Kane et al., 2023). It could be argued that the stringent pass rate requirement for international students is enforced to maintain the academic quality of tertiary course offerings, while creating a deterrent in the international student life cycle to avoid unit failures but contrastingly, this rule does not apply to their domestic counterparts, either due to their inability to comply with this policy or based on their Australian citizenship.

This again exposes the double standards of the Australian government with a hostile approach shown towards international students under the guise of maintaining satisfactory academic progress.

The scenario demonstrated in this section, exposes the Australian government as the sole beneficiary incurred at a loss from the international student.

#### **4.4.2 Student Benefits / Government Doesn’t**

This existence of this scenario was prior to the Baird review (Baird, 2010) in 2010 which was followed by a major overhaul of the GSM policies and described in Q3.

With the participation from only 1 player, e.g., the Australian government developing, implementing and monitoring the GSM policy while the international students studying on a student visa (subclass 500), not complying with their visa conditions or taking advantage of the loopholes identified in the GSM program. This can be blamed on the government of the day being oblivious of the actual state of affairs and implementing GSM policies with flaws that overseas students exploited and took advantage of.

This is another example of distributive bargaining, benefitting only 1 player, which in this case are the international students who were able to achieve their migration outcomes ahead of their career advancement at the expense of the Australian government losing their economic and labour market objective.

The Parkinson review (Parkinson et al., 2023) highlighted the ‘permanent temporariness’ situation, caused by visa hopping of international students in Australia which (McDonald, 2024) declared as the result of the policy failures of successive Australian governments.

Though the end goal of the government through the GSM policies, was to replenish the Australian workforce, in the pre-2010 scenario, there was a whole list of occupations on the skills list which had become obsolete and was not relevant to the Australian labour market at that time and students were able to take advantage of such occupations e.g. taking hairdressing as a pathway to obtain permanent residency (Boucher & Davidson, 2019; Hurley & Nguyen, 2024).

Based on the budget cuts to the higher education sector in Australia from the 1980s onwards, a rapid commercialisation of international education brought the international education policy closer in line with the GSM policies (Baas, 2019) and till the late 1990s, the Australian migration policy did not favour former international students as they were required to return to their source country for a minimum of 2 years before applying for a permanent visa (Tran et al., 2025). The government developed a solution to address the vacuum of skill shortages in the Australian job market based on a new policy framework with a new points-tested permanent residency visa and from the late 1990s, successive Australian governments did not directly intervene in educational institutions to manage the characteristics and numbers of students but instead used the visa policy for this purpose (Norton, 2024).

From the late 1990s, the intersection of education and migration policies has been evident, based on the transition of overseas students, studying at Australian universities, transitioning from temporary consumers to potential Australian citizens (Robertson, 2011). In mid-1999, Australia introduced a new migration system to attract skilled applicants which included a new set of visa subclasses, and a skill list-based visa, based on which, one could apply for Australian permanent residency (Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014). These changes to the GSM program since 1999, contributed to the increase in both international students and permanent residency applications (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012) and from 1999, the selection of former international students with Australian qualifications was fast-tracked (Birrell et al., 2006).

According to (Hawthorne, 2010), the increase in international students in Australia, aiming for Australian permanent residency post-graduation was the result of the study-migration pathway, introduced in 1999, which contributed to the education-migration nexus and (Hou & Lu, 2017) mentions that in the late 1990s, international students in Australia were viewed as ideal immigrant workers, immediately eligible to immigrate upon the conclusion of their



studies. In the early 2000s, various concessions were granted to overseas students enrolled at Australian universities who applied for Australian permanent residency based on the GSM program with an outright advantage to the Australian economy in the form of the high tuition fees and living expenses forked out by them as students, while acquiring the supposed, needed skills for the Australian job market (Birrell, 2018).

According to (Birrell, & Perry, 2009), in 2001, the government coupled the higher education policy reforms with the migration policy, and this was done by providing international students, the opportunity to apply for Australian permanent residency onshore after the conclusion of their studies, in an identified skills shortage area (Wright et al., 2016; Wright & Clibborn, 2017). The coalition government then, linked the higher education policy reforms with the migration policy and both of these policies were merged to meet the skills shortages in the Australian labour market for international students educated in Australia and subsequently eligible to apply for Australian permanent residency (Birrell & Healy, 2010) leading to the exporting of Australia's higher education as a billion-dollar industry (Koleth, 2010).

This led to an increase in international student numbers and graduates and for the period 2002 - 2003, more than 50% of skilled migrants, who were accepted in Australia as permanent residents, had a qualification from an Australian university (Koleth, 2010). For the period 2000 to 2009, an increase of overseas student enrolments in higher education, with the enticement of the direct link between the attainment of an Australian university qualification and eligibility for permanent residency was observed (Spinks, 2016). This strategy turned into a disaster by the late 2000s because the Australian government further extended these concessions to overseas students who had acquired trade credentials in Australia, including occupations such as cooks and hairdressers (Birrell, 2018).

By the late 2000s, permanent residency was gained through the GSM program based on the acquisition of a Certificate III in cookery or hairdressing which contributed to these 2 occupations topping the list (Birrell, 2022) with most of these students coming from the Indian subcontinent (Birrell, 2019). These students viewed an Australian education as a feasible pathway to gain Australian permanent residency (Baas, 2019) and to pay off the

educational loans taken by them since many of these students, illegally worked for more than the allocated 20 hours per week, in violation of their student visa condition (Baas, 2015).

Based on this policy change to accommodate cooking and hairdressing occupations, private providers offering these 2 trade courses increased in number, to capitalise on the low-cost delivery associated with these courses and the overseas student enrolments increased, as they found an easy pathway to Australian permanent residency (Boucher & Davidson, 2019; Birrell & Betts, 2018a; Robertson, 2011). According to (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012), changes to the GSM program since 1999, especially, the introduction of the Migration Occupations in Demand List (MODL), triggered an increase in international student enrolments who could now seamlessly apply for Australian permanent residency and be exempted from the normal required work experience.

The MODL was introduced in 1999 with the aim to make the GSM program directly responsive to the Australian labour market needs (Cully, 2011) and comprised of a list of 106 occupations that were classified as in immediate demand thus additional points were allocated to it and it was further expanded to cover scarce skilled and semi-skilled trades (Birrell et al., 2006) and from 2004 - 2005, trade occupations in demand were added to the MODL, which gave more points to applicants for Australian permanent residency and this saw a colossal increase of enrolments in the VET sector, based on the new migration options now available through these VET courses (Robertson, 2011; Boucher & Davidson, 2019).

Overseas students whose main objective was to obtain Australian permanent residency through a post-secondary Australian qualification now had an opportunity to do so with the less costly alternative of a Certificate III in cookery or hairdressing qualification, instead of paying higher tuition fees for a university degree. Adding to this, was the advantage that, applicants who were based onshore in Australia were eligible for extra points for their Australian qualification with a minimum course duration of 2 years of full-time study, a practise that has remained till date. Universities strategically structured their curriculums of the courses listed on the SOL, including accounting courses to meet the requirements of the skills assessment authorities and except for engineering, overseas students commencing a postgraduate degree by coursework, only needed to possess an undergraduate degree, regardless of the discipline (Birrell & Betts, 2018a).

A desktop audit of the accounting degrees offered by Australian universities revealed that they are accredited by either 1 or all 3 of the skills assessment authorities, to ensure that upon completion, these overseas students studying at Australian universities have a pathway to Australian permanent residency by obtaining a successful skills assessment for migration as these types of programs were designed for international students (Jones, 2018).

Though the Australian government did not explicitly guarantee a migration outcome for international students, the sentiment of most student-migrants was that if they met the requirements, they would be successful in gaining Australian permanent residency and as (Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014) pointed out, though universities, did not market courses directly to students on the basis of migration outcomes, VET providers used this, as a marketing tool.

This sentiment has formed the basis of the education-migration nexus which showed the lack of efficacy of the government policies and is still evident to this day, even after a number of government sanctioned reviews conducted, which are mentioned in this research. Based on the identification of the disjoint that exists with the shortcomings of the GSM policy as well as the gap that existed whereby the intentions of the policies were not met, the government introduced radical changes, and this included a major overhaul of the GSM policy regarding international students.

Between 2009 and 2011, based on the mounting pressure from the public, attention got drawn to the GSM program and the Labor government then, implemented major reforms (Birrell, 2019) by disconnecting the link between the post-secondary education attained at Australian educational institutions and an immigration outcome.

On 8<sup>th</sup> February 2010, the Australian Government announced a major overhaul of its migration policies based on employer pressure, due to the shortages in fields such as engineering, nursing and accountancy. Chris Evans, the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship then, announced a new set of reforms for the GSM program from being a 'supply driven' to a 'demand driven' program (Koslowski, 2018) and based on this policy shift, the Government would ensure that the employer driven model could exist, and the government incorporated other employability related factors as part of this model (Evans, 2010). He

further stated that, “the current points test put an overseas student with a short-term vocational qualification ahead of a Harvard-educated environmental scientist” (Crock & Parsons, 2023) and that “a student visa was meant to study in Australia and not to stay permanently in Australia” (SBS News, 2010).

This statement showed, what the dire state of the GSM program at that time was with overseas students studying in Australia, taking full advantage of the flaws of the migration system to obtain Australian permanent residency, based on the lowered entry points available, while other stakeholders such as private colleges targeted these courses, classified as low skilled, based on the Certificate III qualification, leading to a fair conclusion that the GSM policy makers were oblivious to on the ground reality and the formulation of the occupation list(s) associated with the GSM program was out of date.

According to (Neilson 2009), colleges that provided degrees in the field of education that resulted in Australian permanent residency for international students were like factories authorised by the Australian government for converting economic capital to cultural capital.

These new policies were made to make the immigration system more demand driven than supply driven (Koslowski, 2018) and as (Robertson, 2011) points out, and to put an end to the surge of enrolments motivated by Australian permanent residency (Norton, 2024), these policy changes regarding the GSM program and international students were claimed to be responding to employer needs, addressing future skill needs and improving the quality and integrity of the international education sector to ensure that international students can stay and work in Australia at the conclusion of their studies (Australian High Commission, New Delhi, 2010a,b).

Australian permanent residency intake through the GSM program was slashed between 2010 – 2012, with priority given to those with employer sponsorship (Blackmore et al., 2014), based on the demand driven system and the highest priority being given to the employer sponsored category to fill these jobs which could not be easily filled locally. The employer sponsorship for skilled migration in the 2009 - 2010 financial year comprised of 38% of the GSM program and the majority of those granted an employer sponsored visa, were already in Australia on a temporary visa (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2010). This two-

step migration process allowed an applicant after matching their qualifications and work experience to an occupation on the SOL, to have a skills assessment done with the relevant assessment body and upon a successful skills assessment outcome, apply for Australian permanent residency (Harrap et al., 2021).

The uncoupling of the post-secondary educational qualifications attained at Australian educational institutions and an immigration outcome affected overseas students studying management and commerce courses in Australia, as they now needed higher English proficiency, relevant work experience and educational qualifications to score enough points for Australian permanent residency (Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014) and this trend has continued with the management and commerce related occupations, especially accounting, which still requires higher points compared to the other applicants in the invitations given to file for Australian independent permanent residency applications (Department of Home Affairs, 2024k). The points system for the GSM program was refined and points were allocated for skill, age and English language ability to replenish the Australian labour market through skill migration (Walsh, 2011).

Higher minimum English language standards were introduced, with the increase in financial requirements for a student visa and permanent residency applications by overseas graduates from Australian educational institutions onshore, was also tightened (Birrell, 2019) which saw both the higher education and the VET sector overseas student enrolments in a massive decline. Due to the increased scores for the English language requirements (Tran et al., 2025), introduced as part of the reforms, there was a dip in university enrolments in 2010 and 2011 which impacted Chinese student enrolments who were aiming to obtain Australian permanent residency through the GSM program as these students struggled to reach the required standard (Birrell & Betts, 2018a).

These migration reforms included:

- Cancellation and refund of all skilled migration applications lodged prior to 1<sup>st</sup> September 2007 to accommodate a new SOL which was to be introduced later in the year and to avoid any occupations in the existing list which might not be present in the new SOL (Evans, 2010)

- The new SOL listing had occupation listings based on a national shortage, as judged by the Department of Employment (Birrell, 2018), yet still included traditional occupations, including accounting related occupations to cater for the overseas graduates from Australian universities (Birrell & Betts 2018a).
- The revoking of the MODL in 2010, replaced with the new targeted SOL and the phasing out of the Critical Skills List (CSL) which was introduced at the beginning of 2009 with occupations identified in critical demand (Evans, 2010), cooking and hairdressing occupations were not on the MODL (Boucher & Davidson, 2019; McDonald, 2024).
- Amendments to the Migration Act 1958 allowing the Minister to put limits on the number of visas for certain occupations and the development of the state and territory specific migration and employer sponsored visas (Evans, 2010).

The demand driven system reflected an inclination towards an employer-sponsored migrant model as opposed to the skilled independent categories for acquiring permanent residency which existed prior to 2010, reflecting a similarity to the US model of the US, H-1B visa which is an employer sponsorship-based visa.

First priority for skilled migration was given to those applicants with a job offer from an Australian employer (Australian High Commission, New Delhi, 2010a,b) since, based on the supply driven system, 40,000 independent visas were issued to accountants in the preceding 5 years, yet still showed a lingering shortage of accountants in the Australian job market because the migrant accountants did not find work in their profession (Evans, 2010).

Priority was also given now to applications with a nomination by a state or territory ahead of an independent skilled migration application and the existing Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) was modified to allow for states and territories to choose the type of skilled migrants who would add value to their state and territory based on specific occupation for which they would give sponsorship (Harrap et al., 2021). e.g. mining occupations is of importance in Western Australia but not in other states.

Employer sponsored and regional focused visas, Temporary Work (Skilled) visa (subclass 457) and Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme visa (subclass 187) respectively were introduced as part of the demand driven model, ensuring that students who could genuinely

fill in the identified skills shortage in the Australian job market and were retained (Hawthorne, 2018; Wright & Clibborn, 2020) and this got replaced by the Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) Visa (subclass 482) in 2018 (Wright & Clibborn, 2017; Australian Embassy, Republic of Korea and Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2018; Clibborn & Wright, 2020b; Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2024), to eventually be replaced by the current Skills in Demand (Subclass 482) visa (Department of Home Affairs, 2025d).

The state and regional migration visas issued, accounted for 34% of the GSM program with a notable increase in the 2009 – 2010 financial year, though there was a decrease of 44% in the new state/territory sponsored migration applications lodged. The skill independent category visas issued in the 2009 – 2010 financial year decreased by 16% as did the applications for this visa (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2010).

This was followed by an announcement on 17<sup>th</sup> May, 2010 of the new SOL (Australian High Commission, New Delhi, 2010b) which was developed by an independent body called Skills Australia. The new SOL was effective from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2010 and consisted of 181 occupations which was a reduction from over 400 occupations in the previous SOL (Spinks, 2016). This drastic reduction of occupations on the SOL showed how occupations, irrelevant to the claimed skill shortage in the Australian workforce existed on the previous SOL.

The SOL was introduced in 2010, at a time when the previous selection system was in disarray because of the huge number of cooks and hairdressers transitioning to Australian permanent residency (Birrell & Kinnaird, 2017) and with the new SOL moving almost all of the management and commerce related occupations to the Consolidated Sponsored Occupation List (CSOL), which required a graduate to obtain nomination by a state or territory Government or obtain employer sponsorship, since these occupations were no longer eligible for independent skilled migration and had limited direct pathways to permanent residency, especially compared to the high demand STEM related occupations such as IT and engineering (Spinks, 2016). The CSOL is comparable to the current STSOL based on its sponsorship requirements.

Not surprisingly, 91% of the applicants in the skill independent category had an occupation on the CSL (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2010) and the previously planned

level of permanent skilled migration was reduced by 20% in the 2009 – 2010 financial year with the skills testing program designed to make sure that international students were job ready (Koleth, 2010).

Prior to 2010, some occupations were allocated more points than others based on the MODL and CSL which emphasised its importance then, based on the GSM policies at that time. Many management and commerce occupations were moved to the CSOL as part of the new reforms, limiting direct pathways to Australian permanent residency.

The elimination of the points allocated for these specialised occupations in 2011 was viewed negatively by international students, who were considering to study accounting, as they had seen it as a pathway to permanent residency (Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014) and this led to a quick drop in the international student enrolment numbers, since the government's aim was to shift the skilled migration program from a 'labour supply driven' system to an 'employer demand driven' system, making sure that the GSM program delivered the skills needed in the Australian workforce (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

More emphasis was placed on the importance of the English language skill, work experience, and high-level qualifications, ensuring that no single criterion guaranteed migration but rather a combination of these criteria, hence this favoured the employer-sponsored migrants as opposed to international students, ensuring only 'the best and brightest' applicants (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

In 2011, a new set of points were introduced with the change of the threshold from 120 points to 60 points based on an amended set of criteria which included an applicant to

- be younger than 50 years (currently the age limit is set to 44 years)
- nominate an occupation from the SOL (the SOL is now replaced by the MLTSSL and STSOL)
- have their skills assessed by a relevant skills assessment authority
- have at least competent English (competent English does not have any points allocated for Australian permanent residency but proficient and superior English have points allocated)
- meet health and character requirements and



- score at least 60 points in the points test (currently this points threshold has increased to 65 points).

The recalibrated points system gave priority to younger applicants with higher levels of English proficiency with qualifications and work experience for occupations listed on the SOL and the implementation of these changes came in the shadow of a high Australian dollar and violence against Indian international students, leading to a further decline in international student enrolments (Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014; Coates et al., 2023; Norton, 2024).

With declining international student enrolments, the Australian government commissioned the review of the student visa program to look into the quality, integrity and competitiveness of the program (Spinks, 2016) and the review became known as the Knight Review.

One of the key recommendations of the Knight review (Knight, 2011) which was fair and favourable to overseas students studying in the Australian higher education sector was the amendment of the PSWR for international students to obtain the required work experience at the conclusion of their studies based on recommendation 4.

The PSWR stream, was introduced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2013 by increasing the previous PSWR duration of 1.5 years (Faggian et al., 2016) to 2 years for the bachelor and masters by coursework graduates who had studied their course full time in Australia for a minimum of 2 years.

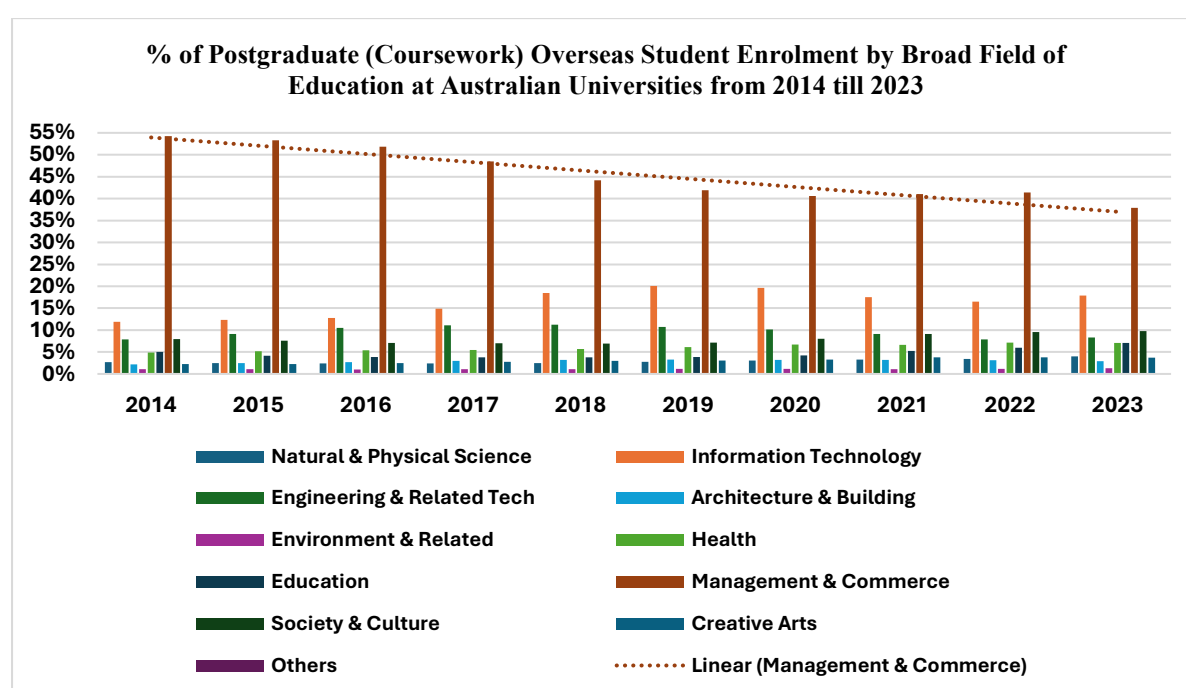
This post-study work visa allowed overseas graduates from the Australian higher education sector to gain work experience in Australia, which could be later utilised to obtain Australian permanent residency through the GSM program. Even though this was viewed by the overseas graduates as a return on investment, it could also be seen as part of a broader effort by the Australian government to retain skilled graduates in Australia post-graduation.

The growth of international student commencements, since the recalibrated PSWR policy in 2013 can be contributed to the enrolment increase in the masters by coursework courses (Tran et al., 2020) e.g. the Master of Professional Accountancy (MPA) course (Crawford et al., 2024).

There has been a steady increase of postgraduate (coursework) overseas student enrolments in the 3 BFoE at Australian Universities from 2014 till 2023 as visible from Figure 12:

- Information Technology
- Engineering & Related Tech and
- Health.

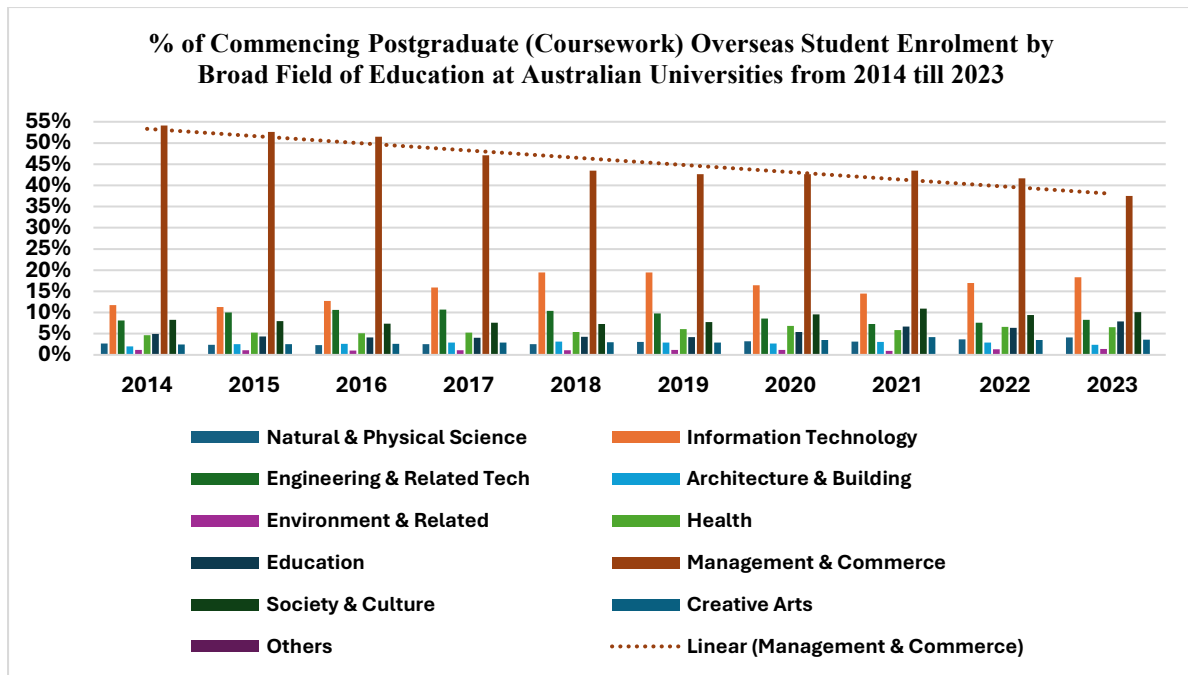
The increase in the Information Technology and Engineering & Related Tech BFoE can be contributed to the PYP and the increase in the BFoE of Health was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic based on scarcity, especially in the nursing profession (Mannix, 2021).



**Figure 12: % of Postgraduate (Coursework) Overseas Student Enrolment by Broad Field of Education at Australian Universities from 2014 till 2023**

Source: Department of Education, 2025

Even though the BFoE of management & commerce dominates the overall enrolments, the declining trend in the management & commerce commencements show how it is not the preferred course for overseas students at Australian universities as visible from Figure 13, as only the accounting discipline attracts the PYP.



**Figure 13: % of Postgraduate (Coursework) Overseas Commencing Student Enrolment by Broad Field of Education at Australian Universities from 2014 till 2023**

Source: Department of Education, 2025

#### 4.4.3 Neither Benefits

The payoff, of the prisoner's dilemma concept in Q4 as exhibited in Figure 10, is where neither player is getting better than what they could have achieved based on their mutual participation, and it is a lose – lose situation.

This scenario in the prisoner's dilemma concept arises when both players defect, hence both do poorly, extrapolating the loss due to individual rationality which could have been avoided and the gain that could have been accomplished through group rationality to both players through mutual cooperation (Axelrod, 1980).

This could be the future outlook of the Australian tertiary education sector, based on the direction it is heading towards for international students studying at Australian universities, since the existing GSM policies are detrimental to overseas students studying at Australian universities and the limited and restrictive post-graduation visa opportunities available to them.

A lose – lose situation does not necessarily mean that both players are losing but rather that all parties end up being worse off than what they would have achieved had they participated in the game whereby a win - win outcome may have been possible.

An example of a lose – lose situation in this research from the government's perspective would be, that no matter how well the policies regarding higher education and the GSM program is developed, it does not achieve its intended purpose of replenishing the Australian labour market and from the student's viewpoint, they are not getting a return on investment on their studies undertaken in Australia.

This scenario is totally opposite to the cooperative game theory, based on the non-participation from both players. It is rendered impractical in the real-world situation as a key inference in the prisoner's dilemma methodology is, that the players are rational decision makers, choosing optimal moves which are of benefit to them (Kelly, 2003; Bhuiyan, 2016; Ren et al., 2018), as both players will be worse off by their non-participation in the first instance.

#### **4.4.4 Both Benefit**

A win - win scenario results in both the players, in this case overseas students studying at Australian universities and the Australian Government benefit, creating mutually acceptable outcome for both parties, which is the ideal scenario and mentioned in quadrant Q1 as the payoff, of the prisoner's dilemma concept as exhibited in Figure 10 and this scenario can be seen as the Shapley Value concept in game theory where there is a fair distribution of the payoffs between the 2 players (Kelly, 2003; Leyton-Brown & Shoham, 2008).

A win – win result is when both players feel they have achieved the best result possible in comparison to their initial position prior to playing the game, hence both the parties, through cooperation achieve a win-win outcome as the result, thus it is based on the perception of the 2 players to have achieved better cooperating together, than individually, which motivates their participation as part of an integrative bargaining, whereby the outcome is a mutually beneficial solution to both parties (De Bruin, 2005; Colman, 2006).

The overseas students studying at Australian universities, benefit from post-graduation working opportunities and a clear migration pathway linked to the strategic workforce demands for skilled international graduates from Australian universities while the government gains the skilled migrants it needs, who can meet the identified labour shortages in the Australian labour force.

Since international students are from countries with limited educational opportunities, they wish to study overseas based on the assumption that a foreign qualification will increase their chances of employment with a higher salary and will give them a better social status (Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014) as some of these students do not qualify for university places in their source country, thus perceive a foreign degree as giving them a competitive advantage in the workforce post-graduation.

International students cited the reputation of the Australian education system as one of the most important factors to choose Australia as a study destination (QILT SES, 2023) and the post-graduation visa opportunities available to international students after the conclusion of their studies is another attribute that attracts international students to Australia (Basu, 2016; Tran et al., 2019).

Post-graduation visas are a crucial deciding factor which should be given the due importance by GSM policy makers as it is viewed as a return on investment by international students though based on the current GSM policies, it can be debatable as to how favourable this is for international student graduates as exhibited in Q2.

This payoff, of a win – win scenario, though seen as a utopian solution is what can be worked towards as a goal whereby both international students studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities are satisfied with the return on investment of securing employment post-graduation in their area of study and/or Australian permanent residency and the Australian government in succeeding in its efforts to achieve its economic and labour market objective as shown in Figure 10.

## 4.5 Cross-Cutting Themes

The relationship between international education and the GSM policies of the Australian governments within the period covered by this research is summarised in the table below (Spinks, 2016; Onselen, 2020):

<b>Government</b>	<b>Rudd – Gillard Labor</b>	<b>Abbott Coalition</b>	<b>Turnbull coalition</b>	<b>Morrison coalition</b>
Period	2007–2013	2013–2015	2016–2018	2018–2020
Relationship between international education and migration	Decoupled	Restore, encourage VET students	No significant change	Extended eligibility for poststudy work visas to future students

**Table 7: GSM Policies of Successive Australian Governments from 2007 – 2020**

Source: Hong et al., 2022

Prior to the period mentioned above, the Howard coalition government from 1997 – 2007 had higher education qualifications and migration outcomes coupled, which led to the GSM policy overhaul from 2007, including the tightening of the post-graduation, permanent residency pathways and the establishment of SkillSelect, an online system for skilled workers to submit an expression of interest (EOI) for a visa to live and work in Australia after which they could receive invitations to apply for the visa based on the job market demand and points rankings and this was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2012 (Australian Embassy China, 2011).

The Morrison coalition government had an increased focus on regional migration and targeted the SOL and in the post Morrison coalition government period, the Albanese government from 2020 – 2025, introduced tougher policies to eliminate visa hopping but failed in its bid to introduce a new bill in the senate (Truu, 2024) to curb new overseas student commencements caps and replaced it with Ministerial Direction No. 111 (Department of Education, 2024e) with the current indicative allocation of new overseas student commencements to solve the Australian housing crisis (Department of Education, 2024a).

The new overseas student commencements caps which are now the indicative allocation of new overseas student commencements could have a negative economic impact of revenue reduction by up to \$5.9 billion over the next 3 years (SPP Analysis, 2024), affecting the Australian economy with lost GDP of \$4.1 billion due to the reduction in the number of international students living and studying in Australia (Mandala, 2024).

Due to the new increased English language test scores in early 2024, the number of student visa (subclass 500) issued in the first half of 2024 was much lower than that issued in 2023 for the same time (McCloskey & Birrell, 2024).

This research reveals the limited post-graduation employment opportunities for overseas students studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities from the findings sourced extensively from the associated academic body of literature and independent reports, most of which were sanctioned by the successive Australian governments within the 2010 - 2020 period and can be broadly categorised as having 4 common cross cutting themes which correlated with the subsequent research questions.

#### **4.5.1 Employment Barriers**

The motivating factor for international students choosing Australia as a desirable study destination is the pull factor of post-graduation work opportunities available to them in Australia, (Basu, 2016; Tran et al., 2019; Cameron et al., 2019; Han et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c), however this is not the ground reality as Chinese students return to China after the conclusion of their studies based on their inability to enter the Australian workforce (Zhai et al., 2019).

International accounting graduates find it difficult to secure full-time employment within the accounting industry (Blackmore et al., 2014) and how can an international management and commerce graduate gain employment in their area of study, post-graduation, when the work rights on their visas are not understood by Australian employers (Tran et al., 2019) and based on their lack of awareness, these graduates cannot freely access the Australian job market like their domestic peers (Migrant Workers Centre, 2022; 2023).

This warrants an advocacy and awareness of the work right conditions on temporary visas for Australian employers as highlighted in this research so far, to solve this paradox of why an Australian employer would hire an international graduate based on their perception that there is no guarantee for the employer that the graduate would stay back in Australia, let alone in their organisation.

Even though obtaining Australian permanent residency is not the goal of international graduates, they are compelled to aim for this, to be considered by Australian employers (Tran et al., 2020;2025) because Australian businesses will choose domestic workers, to avoid the costly and time-consuming process of sponsoring a skilled migrant (The Productivity Commission, 2023).

Many international graduates see the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) as a pathway to Australian permanent residency, even though the reforms from the Knight review had decoupled the education-migration pathway a decade ago (Tran et al., 2019).

This double standards between the policies around the higher education and migration nexus is political in nature and is described as constantly changing and contradictory by (Tran et al., 2025) with this being evident with the Migration Strategy (Department of Home Affairs, 2023), explicitly stating that the majority of international students are expected to return to their home country post-graduation, contradicting the draft International Education and Skills Strategic Framework (Department of Education, 2024c) which links international education to the skills demands of Australia.

While from an international graduate's perspective, it is so difficult to obtain Australian work experience, since local Australian employers prefer Australian permanent residents, conversely, without the relevant Australian work experience, international graduates cannot obtain the much needed 5 points needed for obtaining permanent residency (Tran et al., 2022c) and this is the catch-22 conundrum that the cohort of international management and commerce graduates in this research find themselves in.

Overseas students can study at Australian universities on a student visa (subclass 500), transitioning to a Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) for typically 2 years to gain



Australian work experience which is essential for Australian permanent residency but as revealed from the second case study, it is very difficult, if not impossible for them to score enough points to obtain Australian permanent residency.

Based on the failure to gain and in the hope to obtain Australian permanent residency, a management and commerce graduate would then opt to study for a further qualification to prolong their stay in Australia while in the pursuit of accumulating relevant work experience in their area of study and in their quest to gain enough points to obtain Australian permanent residency.

A further qualification could be a postgraduate qualification or in the case of accounting graduates, the accounting PYP, which commenced in 2008 (IPO, 2024) and can contribute 5 more points to the graduate's Australian permanent residency application.

In the competitive process to even be eligible to be considered for Australian permanent residency, these graduates take out multiple temporary visas (Migrant Workers Centre, 2022) and this situation leads to the visa hopping situation as described in the Parkinson Review (Parkinson et al., 2023), one of the reasons used to justify the capping of eligible applicants to a maximum of 35 years of age or under for the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) which was introduced from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024 (Department of Home Affairs, 2024e).

The growth of international student commencements since the amendment to the PSWR policy in 2013, was to increase the post-graduation work duration period and this saw an enrolment spike in the masters by coursework courses (Blackmore et al., 2014; Tran et al., 2020). These courses were tailor made to fulfill the minimum 2-year period requirement in alignment with the GSM policy, making the international graduates from Australian educational institutions, eligible, to claim 5 more points for the Australian education criterion and Australian educational institutions took advantage of this post-graduation visa by promoting the 2-year masters courses (Chew, 2019).

As (Baik, 2018) concludes, a critical aspect of improving the quality of international students' experience includes supporting international students in Australia to develop their workplace readiness and employability and according to (Tran et al., 2025), the Temporary Graduate

visa (Subclass 485) did not accord international graduates any leverage in the Australian labour market, as the 2-year duration of the current Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) is a hurdle for Australian employers to employ an international graduate, train them with the uncertainty that based on the limited duration of their existing visa condition, they have a limited time to legally stay in Australia.

This puts the international graduate in a catch 22 situation whereby, they cannot get employment in their area of study without Australian permanent residency, but they also cannot get Australian permanent residency without being employed in their area of study.

The first subsequent question (RQ2) is tested here:

*RQ2: Are the existing post-graduation work rights and visa condition(s) sufficient for graduates?*

Based on the significant evidence in this finding, it can be fairly concluded the duration of the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) is not sufficient for international graduates.

#### **4.5.2 Misalignment of Skilled Occupation List and Graduate Outcomes**

The Occupation Shortage List (OSL) (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024a) contains a list of occupations experiencing shortages in the Australian labour market as opposed to the SOL which is a list of occupations, specifically, for the GSM program.

The accounting discipline related occupations appear on the OSL with no to very limited shortages in the different states and territories, so to have management and commerce occupations on the SOL is not based on scarcity of the occupation in the Australian workforce, but instead based on a strategic business decision for the survival of universities and misleading overseas students as the GSM program serves its purpose of providing skilled migrants to the Australian workforce, but the skills based on which these migrants are recruited is not in fact scarce (Birrell, 2018). The SOL is out of date and inflexible. (Boucher & Davidson, 2019; Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2024).

This is clearly a combination of a political and business decision and can be seen as an elaborate attempt by the successive Australian governments to keep the accounting discipline

afloat on the SOLs for the sake of luring potential applicants to the GSM program while maintaining a steady revenue stream available for universities to compensate for any financial shortfalls from domestic enrolments.

The 3 accounting related skills assessment bodies in Australia for migration, made a submission to the DHA in December 2023 regarding the accounting PYP and with no positive feedback from the government, they are now forced to close the program (IPO, 2024) as the accounting PYP started slowly closing post COVID-19 pandemic (Monash College, 2024; Navitas, 2023) and will eventually cease to exist by 1<sup>st</sup> May 2026 based on declining program participants (CPA, 2025).

It is interesting to note that the closure of the accounting PYP is not based on curbing this clearly unfair practise which goes against those accounting graduates who do not enrol in the accounting PYP but instead make efforts to acquire relevant work experience but rather, because it is not financially feasible.

The second option mentioned under the first case study, was for an international student studying on a student visa (subclass 500) to study for a masters course, based on compulsion and due to the limited avenues available to accumulate the much-needed Australian work experience in their area of study.

Students out of desperation and being aware of their inability to obtain employment in the field of accounting, opted for the PYP option, an unethical practise of taking advantage of an international accounting graduate from an Australian university in the shadow of the existing GSM policy.

The claim by (Birrell & Kinnaird, 2017), that Australian permanent residency is guaranteed for international accounting graduates from Australian universities based on their occupation being listed on the SOL, their age being less than 33 and having proficient level of English, even without any job experience in their occupation is debunked in this research, as evident from the 2 case studies.

The second subsequent question (R3) is tested here:

*RQ3: Is the Skilled Occupation List a correct representation of the Australian labour market?*

Based on the evidence collated during the course of this research, it can be confidently ascertained that the Skilled Occupation List is a misrepresentation of the Australian labour market.

#### **4.5.3 Gaps in Work Integrated Learning**

The need for WIL is more than a practice-based experience, which consolidates the acquired theoretical knowledge (Patrick et al., 2008) i.e. what the graduate has learnt through their studies can be put into relevant practise as part of the WIL program.

International business and accounting graduates view graduate employment as a return on investment (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Gribble et al., 2015; Tran & Soejatminah, 2016) and this puts pressure on Australian universities to ensure that international students are ‘work ready’ graduates (Leong & Kavanagh, 2013), however the experience of international graduates in the WIL program has often been unsatisfactory (Gribble et al., 2015) and concerns have been raised about the capacity of international students to be ‘work ready’ based on their work culture attributes, their capacity to handle unfamiliar problems and communication skills (Prokofieva et al., 2015).

Australian universities incorporated WIL in their curricula, based on the demand for greater employability and pressure from the industry (Nguyen, 2020) e.g. in the accounting curriculum it was included with the intention to bridge the gap between the required skills and the expectation of practitioners (Leong & Kavanagh, 2013).

Hence, Australian higher educational institutions strategised the use of WIL to position themselves to compete for international students (Tran & Soejatminah, 2016; Gribble et al., 2015) as the industry expects a ‘work ready’ graduate rather than a student learning to become ‘work ready’ (Crawford et al., 2024).

The importance of WIL is further exhibited in the submissions from the various universities to the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 (Department of Education, 2021), emphasising the need for supporting the WIL in the existing curriculum and as (Tran & Soejatminah, 2016) point out, it is viewed as a pragmatic approach to enable international graduates to transition into the Australian workforce and ensure a good return on investment in their academic journey.

Integration of courses and career support services, and clear pathways to Australian permanent residency, is the enticement for potential international students which needs to be developed between universities and policymakers (Migrant Workers Centre, 2024a).

The 2 main challenges highlighted for international business students from Australian tertiary institutions, entering the Australian workforce has been:

- a language barrier of limited competence in English and
- limited understanding of the local working cultural context

as a repetitive occurring theme (Prokofieva et al., 2015; Gribble & McRae, 2017; Tran & Soejatminah, 2016; Park, 2016; Jackson, 2017; Pham et al., 2019; Crawford et al., 2024).

Though the limited competence in the English language is identified as a barrier to enter the Australian workforce (Gribble et al., 2015; Jackson, 2017; Gribble & McRae, 2017), this is not uniform with all international students e.g. the Go8 universities adjust their teaching and assessment for Chinese students, who are weak in English but this is not the same for students from the Indian subcontinent at non-Go8 universities (Birrell, 2018).

However, the limited understanding of the local working cultural context can be catered for through WIL, thus, to facilitate the development of a ‘student-centred’ WIL, it is essential to understand students’ perceptions and expectations of WIL (Tran & Soejatminah, 2016). This enigma can be classified as a failure of the GSM policies, whereby, even though the intention to replenish the Australian labour market was a good strategic intention, it is a holistic failure if overseas students who were the input in this process cannot be absorbed into the Australian labour market at the conclusion of their studies from Australian universities.

The PYP makes the accounting discipline related occupations more lucrative to a fresh international graduate from an Australian university, as apart from the additional 5 points for migration, it is claimed to equip these graduates with professional accounting experience in an approved workplace (IPO, 2024). This intended intention of the accounting PYP is debatable though, as the 5 points allocated upon the completion of the PYP, equates to the same points that can be claimed for 3 years of relevant Australian work experience as part of the Australian permanent residency application.

The obvious question which arises then is, can 44 weeks of training in the PYP, of which only 12 weeks is internship based, equate to 3 years of relevant Australian work experience?

The flip side to these findings, are that, if not given the opportunity to practise in their area of study, be it through internships or through WIL as part of the curriculum, how can this conundrum be solved, especially when an Australian permanent residency is viewed as a necessary requirement to be considered for employment in their area of study in the Australian job market. The ESOS Review 2022 discussion paper highlighted the need for Australia to focus on encouraging study across a broader range of courses aligned with Australia's skilled workforce demands (Department of Education, 2022a).

This is a mockery of the GS requirement, the mandatory requirement of the student visa (subclass 500) as the international students are supposed to demonstrate their genuineness to study in Australia and depart, juxtapositioned with the encouragement to study courses which are listed on the SOL based on which they can go for post-graduation employment opportunities as well as Australian permanent residency. The dichotomy of the policy overhaul and implementation by the Rudd - Gillard Labor government and the counterproductive action taken by the current Albanese Labor government, raises the obvious question, if the decoupling of the higher education and migration nexus and the implementation thereafter was altogether an exercise in vain?

The third subsequent question (R4) is tested here:

*RQ4: Is the work integrated learning in the existing curriculum sufficient to enter the Australian workforce?*

Based on the inability of international management and commerce graduates from Australian universities to secure employment in their area of study in the Australian workforce, further supported by the evidence uncovered during the course of this research, it is determined that the WIL in the existing tertiary curriculum is, not sufficient to enter the Australian workforce.

#### **4.5.4 Return on Investment Challenges**

The Knight review (Knight, 2011) was a comprehensive review of the student visa program with all 41 recommendations of the review, being implemented (Australian Embassy, China, 2011).

Recommendation 4 of the Knight Review was for international students to obtain the required work experience through a post degree work visa which saw changes made to the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) for the bachelor or masters by coursework graduates, with an increased visa duration to 2 years post-graduation.

Though this was a significant step in the right direction whereby it gave a good return on investment to international students to obtain the required Australian work experience for both career advancement and provided a possible pathway to Australian permanent residency, based on the 2 case studies and compelling evidence from the body of literature in this research, it makes very minimal difference to an international management and commerce graduate in terms of obtaining Australian permanent residency which they view as a necessary requirement to be considered for employment in their area of study in the Australian job market, due to the ignorance of Australian employers regarding their work rights on temporary visas (Tran et al., 2019).

Employer-sponsored migration was viewed favourably post 2010 by the Labor government because employment for graduates was secured, based on a job offer from an Australian employer. The Skills in Demand (Subclass 482) visa (Department of Home Affairs, 2025d) replaced the Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) Visa (subclass 482) and has further reduced the probability of international management and commerce graduates to obtain post-graduation employment in their area of study as a new Core Skills Occupation (CSOL) (Department of Home Affairs, 2024l) which was released on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2024 and is utilised for this visa. Even though the CSOL has management and commerce related occupations in it, it is more

suitable for offshore applicants who have accumulated the minimum 1 year of professional work experience, impractical for a recent international management and commerce graduate in Australia to procure.

Overseas students can study at Australian universities on a student visa (subclass 500), transitioning to a Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) for typically 2 years to gain Australian work experience which is an essential criteria for Australian permanent residency through the GSM program but as shown with the 2 case studies, it is very difficult, if not impossible for them to score enough points to obtain Australian permanent residency, which is now viewed by them as an essential requirement to be even considered for an occupation in their area of study (Tran et al., 2019).

GSM policies introduced during the period covered in this research can be viewed as a colossal failure, with the COVID-19 pandemic, further dimming the effects of some of these policies to be judged in a positive light which comes down to the point of contention, if an international management and commerce graduate is of any use to the Australian workforce without any Australian work experience.

The fourth subsequent question (RQ5) is tested here:

*RQ5: Are the international students getting a return on investment from their tertiary studies?*

Based on the responses to RQ2, RQ3 and RQ4, and the post-graduation scenarios depicted in the 2 case studies as well as the minimal to no support from the Australian government for international students as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that international students are not getting a return on investment from their studies, since they are not able to obtain employment in their area of study and their PSWR does not benefit them in this pursuit. Their inability to acquire post-graduation employment, results in their inability to obtain Australian permanent residency through the GSM program.



#### **4.6 Chapter Summary**

The chapter highlighted the payoffs available to the 2 major players and the 4 themes which materialised from the findings and was deliberated on, as responses to the 4 subsequent research questions as follows:

***RQ2: Are the existing post-graduation work rights and visa condition(s) sufficient for graduates?***

No, the post-graduation work rights and visa condition(s) are insufficient for international graduates based on the short duration of 2 years for the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) which renders it impractical for them to secure full-time employment in their field of study, in spite of having unlimited work rights during the period of the visa.

***RQ3: Is the Skilled Occupation List a correct representation of the Australian labour market?***

No, the Skilled Occupation List is a misrepresentation of the Australian labour market, and this list should be substituted with the Occupation Shortage List (OSL), which accurately reflects the occupation scarcity in the Australian workforce at the existential level and is a better future occupation shortage predictor, through to the state level.

***RQ4: Is the work integrated learning in the existing curriculum sufficient to enter the Australian workforce?***

No, the work integrated learning component in the existing tertiary management and commerce curriculum, is insufficient to enter the Australian workforce based on the inability of international management and commerce graduates from Australian universities to do so in their field of study.

***RQ5: Are the international students getting a return on investment from their tertiary studies?***

No, the international students are not getting a return on investment from their tertiary studies post-graduation, based on their incapacity to accomplish their career and migration outcomes due to numerous redundant snags, brought about by a combination of higher education and GSM policy failures as uncovered in this research.

## **Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The chapter elaborates on the recommendations made in response to the answers of the 4 subsequent research questions. These recommendations, which are pragmatic in nature, should be observed cautiously, within the context of the education migration nexus equation and not exclusively, to avoid distorting the broader context of the Australian immigration policy, which is inclusive of numerous actors and is a multi-faceted process (Hollifield & Foley, 2022).

The research recommendations aim, not only to offer a solution to address the policy aim of the GSM program from an education migration nexus viewpoint, but to also aid the management and commerce students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) at Australian universities to achieve their career and migration outcomes.

The chapter concludes with outlining the precincts of this research and opens an avenue for further post-doctoral study, to correlate with the findings of this research.

### **5.2 Strategic Policy Recommendations**

This research uncovered the efforts to uncouple the higher education and migration nexus over the past decade as a botched exercise, based on the proximity of government sanctioned reviews conducted with overlapping findings and recommendations which were in support of international students studying at tertiary institutions in Australia to have pathways with migration outcomes available to them.

Uncoupling of the education migration nexus is an elephant in the room and the dichotomy of this can be shown with the majority submissions to the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 (Department of Education, 2021) emphasising pathways to Australian permanent residency be available to international students as well as enhancement to the PWSR, especially in terms of WIL for the non-core units, not to be included as part of the capped number of hours placed on the student visa (subclass 500).

Both the Nixon and Parkinson reviews, both of which were conducted outside the duration covered by this research, concluded that the student visa system lacked integrity with

educational providers using the system in favour of students whose motive was to work rather than study in Australia, defeating the purpose of the student visa and using it as a steppingstone to acquire Australian permanent residency only.

As (Ferguson & Sherrell, 2019) point out, an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 international students transition from student visas to Australian permanent residency visas annually though this could have been via other temporary visas in between, so an international graduate would go from a student visa (subclass 500) to another student visa or the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485), just to maintain a legal status in Australia before successfully obtaining Australian permanent residency.

As (Tran et al., 2025) highlighted, the previous education - migration nexus now has evolved into the education–work–migration pathway. The struggle of international students, especially the management and commerce graduates from Australian universities, extrapolated from the research findings, divulging their trajectory for obtaining Australian permanent residency, either to leverage it for employment in the Australian workforce or for settling in Australia, has been revealed throughout this thesis.

This research found an under-utilised form of epistemic dependence between the GSM policymakers and international students enrolled at Australian universities, though this epistemic dependence is asymmetrical in nature.

Even though information derived from international students is extensively collected through in house university surveys, QILT surveys and other independent surveys conducted by various organisations as mentioned in this research, international students have limited access to the higher education and GSM policy-making processes. The very existence of the cross-cutting themes from the findings of this research, highlights that albeit international students are part of the education – migration nexus, they are without any decision-making capacity.

It is firmly established that Australian permanent residency is sought after by international students at Australian universities, be it as an end goal, like that of students from the Indian subcontinent market (Birrell, 2019) or to get a good return on investment for career advancement (Tran et al., 2019).

The overarching research question, *What policy reforms to the Australian General Skilled Migration program can improve the Australian permanent residency pathways for international students studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities?* is answered based on the 4 recommendations, which stemmed from the findings of this research and as a result of the 4 subsequent questions getting answered.

### **5.2.1 Improve Graduate Employment Outcomes**

Over the past three decades, major source countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, the UK and the US, as part of their skilled migration policies, introduced post-graduation visas which bestowed on international graduates, unlimited work rights during the duration of the visa (Tran et al., 2025).

Career prospects, post-graduation is the motivation to study at Australian higher educational institution for Indian and Chinese graduates based on the findings by (Basu, 2016) and (Zhai et al., 2019) respectively.

The enormous amount of existing research mentioned in this thesis exposed the unfavourable situation international graduates from Australian universities encounter when trying to procure employment in their area of study in the Australian job market based on their temporary visas status which Australian employers look on unfavourably as

- 12% of Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) holders are not in the labour force,
- 10% of Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) holders are unemployed and looking for work and
- 3% of Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) holders are away from work (Chew, 2019).

The Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) does not give international graduates a competitive advantage in the Australian labour market, instead provides a pathway to permanent residency which subsequently can be utilised to enter the Australian workforce (Tran et al., 2020).

This impediment is further compounded for business and accounting students based on their lack of work experience, their limited English language skills for communication and their social and cultural skills to integrate into the Australian workforce (Gribble & McRae, 2017; Prokofieva et al., 2015; Jackson, 2016; 2017; Tran, & Soejatminah, 2016).

While things like communication ‘soft skills’ and racism have also been identified as barriers to employment for international graduates (Gribble et al., 2014), these differ in varying degrees between individual international students, whereas WIL and urgent improvements to the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) conditions are the predominant reasoning, applicable across the Australian higher education sector for international graduates.

With these obstructions in place, the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) accords them an opportunity to be able to gain this essential work experience with an added option of the PYP for accounting students. However, with the imminent end to the accounting PYP in May 2026, this advantage for accounting students will also cease (Monash College, 2024; Navitas, 2023; CPA, 2025).

By exempting Indian students, graduating from Australian higher educational institutions, from the changes made to the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) based on ECTA, the Australian government exhibits discrimination against other international students.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed an over-reliance on China as the prominent source country and the new pivot towards India is now viewed as an alternative with extended post-study work rights for international students (Freeman, 2022).

The Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) visa was extended from a duration of 2 to 3 years in November 2021 based on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2023, an additional two years was given to graduates with degrees in select areas of verified skill shortage which came to a surprising halt on 1st July 2024 (Department of Education, 2024f).

Increasing the duration of the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) visa to 5 years and removing the newly introduced age cap of 35 years will ensure a good return on investment

and entice prospective international students to study in Australia and this increase in duration will be appealing for Australian employers, to recruit and train international graduates, knowing that they would have a higher probability to transition to a permanent visa, hence stay with their organisation.

**To make the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) be of any benefit to international graduates from Australian universities and to Australian employers, it is recommended to increase the duration of the visa from 2 years to 5 years.**

### **5.2.2 Reform Skilled Occupation List Selection Methodology**

The SOL, has been heavily criticised in the academic body of literature and other reports, mostly sanctioned by the government as discovered in the course of the data collection and findings from this research.

The role of the SOL in linking education and migration outcomes and including accounting in the list is the motivating factor for international students seeking permanent residency to enrol in it (Tran et al., 2019). The current SOL consists of the

- MLTSSL,
- STSOL and the
- ROL with 77 additional occupations available to regional employers.

Majority of all occupations requiring management and commerce related qualifications are listed in the STSOL while most requiring accounting related qualifications are listed in the MLTSSL where an applicant does not need any form of state or territory government nomination to apply for Australian permanent residency.

On the other hand, the STSOL list consists of occupations from the management, marketing and business disciplines and applicants are left at the mercy of the state or territory government nominations. State or territory government nominations act on the advice of employers to list the occupations relevant to their state or territory which again forms a vicious cycle that international student finds themselves trapped in.

On 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024, JSA released the Core Skills Occupations List (CSOL) for consultation and on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2024, the Australian Government released the CSOL consisting of 456 occupations (Department of Home Affairs, 2024l) eligible for temporary skilled migration for the Skills in Demand (Subclass 482) visa (Department of Home Affairs, 2025d) and the Employer Nomination Scheme visa (subclass 186) visa (Department of Home Affairs, 2024m).

Even though the CSOL consists of occupations that are currently in immediate demand and of significance to the Australian workforce, it is not favourable to international students studying at Australian universities but more suitable to overseas applicants who apart from a university qualification, have several years of professional work experience.

The flaw in the previous SOL which existed immediately before 2010 can be evidenced by occupations such as hairdressing and cookery, which were hotcakes for obtaining Australian permanent residency in the pre-2010 period (Birrell & Kinnaird, 2017) and these occupations are still on the STSOL (Hurley & Nguyen, 2024) for the Skilled Nominated visa (subclass 190) and the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional) (Subclass 491) visas, while emerging occupations (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024b) e.g. in the data analytics sphere such as the data scientist and the data analyst roles which had existed in the Australian job market for almost a decade, has only been recently been added to the CSOL on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2024 for the Skills in Demand (Subclass 482) visa and the Employer Nomination Scheme visa (subclass 186) visa.

Recommendation 34 of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration recommended that the SOL be flexible enough to accommodate newly emerging occupations. (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2024).

The Parkinson review labelled the SOL as out of date and unresponsive to the changes in the Australian labour market, critiquing it for not being updated from prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The review also highlighted the existing perception that the Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs Minister who determines the SOL maybe swayed to stakeholder lobbying and vested interests to include occupations which maybe already be oversupplied in the Australian job market.

This perception, raises questions about the independence of the assessment methodology employed for the development of the SOL. Occupations requiring management and commerce related qualifications should be completely removed from the SOL, based on the demand for these occupations being very low in the Australian job market and oversupplied (Hawthorne & To, 2014) as evidenced in the invitations given for Australian permanent residency applications.

The Australian migration system is criticised as being without a proper policy discourse and instead relying on occupation shortage lists based on countrywide data on current vacancies instead of industry specific projections with the potential of considering emerging roles for the future (Crock & Parsons, 2023).

An example which aligns with (Crock & Parsons, 2023)'s criticism of the SOL, is visible from the stakeholder feedback received by the ABS as part of the review of ANZSCO, which recommended improvements to the description and classification structure to the existing Accountant (General) (221111) occupation to be divided between the Accountant (221114) and Forensic Accountant (221115) occupation (ABS, 2024c).

International accounting graduates in Australia find it difficult to secure full-time employment (Gribble et al., 2014), as many of these graduates do not find employment as accountants, evident from the invitations given for Australian permanent residency.

The overall demand for accountants is limited nationally but some states have reported shortages (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024a) and these shortages could be in certain specialised accounting areas like taxation, auditing or forensic accounting etc. in regional areas rather than nationally.

Another option could be to move occupations requiring management and commerce related qualification e.g. accounting from the MLTSSL to the STSOL. This corrective measure may avoid indirect misinformation, based on which international students choose the course to study with a related occupation on the MLTSSL.



**Based on the overwhelming criticism of the existing SOL as revealed from this research, it is recommended**

- **to amend the SOL based on actual job market needs without any external interference and/or**
- **totally remove management and commerce related occupations which are oversupplied in the Australian job market from the SOL and/or**
- **replace the SOL with the OSL.**

### **5.2.3 Enhance Curriculum and Work Integrated Learning Programs**

One of the pull factors of studying at an Australian tertiary institution is the post-graduation employment prospect and WIL is an avenue to capitalise on this, as it gives international students an excellent opportunity to demonstrate their skill set and exhibit their potential to Australian employers while studying.

The Parkinson review clearly emphasised improvements to the likelihood of international students obtaining employment in the Australian workforce with consideration being given to WIL to be exempted from the working restriction condition placed on the student visa (subclass 500).

WIL is viewed as the required pedagogy to create work-ready graduates by universities, to meet employer demands, but the accounting WIL, though valued as a positive experience by both Australian employers and domestic students alike, was not previously available to international students for an optional WIL program, based on the student visa restrictions then as it was not part of their curriculum and was optional (Elijido-Ten & Kloot, 2015). This finding of the research from a decade ago still holds true for the elective WIL units, as it counts towards the 48 hours per fortnight work restriction during study term placed on the student visa (subclass 500) (Department of Education, 2023d).

Analysing the Australian university offerings in the management and commerce field, showed that they all have a WIL component, though the effectiveness of this WIL is questionable when there is limited ITA given to these graduates when occupations related to their area of study are listed on the SOL.

Many international students struggle in WIL (Vu et al., 2022), and this is a historical trend as only 39.7% of international graduates in business and commerce courses are employed full-time compared to 76.4% of domestic students in 2009 and 2011 (Hawthorne, 2018) and employability rates for international graduates are as low as 25% compared to 75% for domestic graduates (Crawford et al., 2024).

This data raises the most obvious question of, what skillset do domestic graduates possess, that their international colleagues lack?

WIL to Work, is a collaborative project which developed online modules and resources, specifically designed to address the issues faced by international students in accessing and benefiting from their WIL experiences and support them to optimise their employability outcomes (Kay et al., 2020). These are the type of initiatives that are in the best interest of international students, and such efforts need to be supported and promoted to prospective international students.

For succeeding in the Australian workforce, international students need a range of skills, knowledge and attributes outside the classroom (Tran & Gomes, 2017) and this is where WIL is a very good tool for students to gain a competitive advantage.

To counter these missing skills, employers expected universities to equip international students with these skills to make them ‘job ready’ while universities claimed that their graduates were able to demonstrate this employer expectation upon graduation with their graduate attributes (Gribble et al., 2014).

**Since the current WIL embedded in the existing University management and commerce course curriculum is not meeting the Australian employment market needs, it is recommended that universities, through a collaborative effort with the industry, upgrade the WIL component embedded in their courses to make it beneficial, both to the international graduates and to Australian employers.**

#### 5.2.4 Development of a New Visa

Apart from the information collected in this research from the available literature, further evidence is demonstrated from the 2 case studies mentioned in chapter 4, which exposed the reality of the minimal probability to the impossibility, of international management and commerce graduates from Australian universities obtaining Australian permanent residency.

This impossibility is not limited only to bachelor and postgraduate (coursework) international management and commerce graduates from Australian universities but also to bachelor & postgraduate (coursework) international students studying other disciplines under the BFoE of

- Engineering & Related Tech had a percentage decrease from 9% of the total university commencement in 2014 to 8% in 2023
- Architecture & Building accounted for 2% of total university enrolments in 2014 and it is the same in 2023
- Environment & Related accounted for 1% of total university enrolments in 2014 and it is the same in 2023.

Figure 2 shows the decrease in percentage distribution of the international bachelor and postgraduate (coursework) student enrolments from 2014 - 2023 by BFoE at Australian universities. The percentage distribution of management and commerce commencing enrolments at Australian universities of bachelor and postgraduate (coursework) international students was 53% in 2014 and has now reduced to 37% in 2023 with a steady commencement decline within the decade with further decline possible for the future based on the trend and with the disadvantageous GSM policies.

This decline in commencement over this period is the result of the pull expectations not met, which is post-graduation working opportunities and/or Australian permanent residency at the conclusion of their studies.

The dogma labelled by the Australian media that all international students studying at Australian universities are 'backdoor migrants' is repudiated, as international students, studying in Australia, cannot be treated as a homogeneous group with similar aspirations (Pham, 2021).

Students from China and the Indian subcontinent comprise of almost 75% of all higher education overseas student enrolments in Australia but most Chinese students return to China post-graduation (Zhai et al., 2019) and fewer of them opt for the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) visa in contrast to students from the Indian subcontinent market who fit into the higher education and migration nexus and outnumber the Chinese students in proceeding to the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) (Birrell, 2019).

According to (Chand & Tung, 2019), a hybrid visa having features of Australia's points driven migration and the employer sponsored stream could prioritise employer demand to distinguish between applications of differing skill levels but concerns were also raised that employers could maneuver this to access cheap labour.

Such a recommendation will not favour management and commerce graduates, as firstly it is evident from this research that the Australian labour market is oversupplied with accountants despite the presence of the occupation on the SOL and secondly, the employer sponsored stream requires significant work experience which these graduates lack as explicitly shown in the 2 case studies.

Those studying on a student visa (subclass 500) take longer to transition to Australian permanent residency in comparison to those on a working visa (Treasury and Department of Home Affairs, 2018), based on the various visa hopping routes they have undertaken under compulsion to stay in Australia legally, while increasing their eligibility for Australian permanent residency.

International graduates from Australian universities possess higher qualifications compared to those of overseas migrants who acquire Australian permanent residency through the GSM program, but these graduates still work in low-skilled occupations, even after studying in Australian (Chew, 2019).

Migrants to Australia with overseas qualifications and work experiences were not recognised by Australian employers, even after residing in South Australia for 3 to 3.5 years and they had to acquire additional Australian qualifications as a strategy to enhance their career prospects and to be able to integrate into the Australian job market, hence a more coherent skilled

migration process should be developed to better harness the human capital of skilled migrants, based on the research findings about the disjuncture between the migration policy and praxis of how foreign qualifications and skills should be interpreted, both, at the pre and post migration phases of skilled migration (Tan & Cebulla, 2023).

It raises the question, that if these migrants, who migrate to Australia as skilled migrants and yet were not able to acquire employment in the Australian workforce and needed to reskill themselves by obtaining Australian qualifications, then what chance do international graduates from Australian educational institutions have, to get employed in their area of study and consequently, very limited to no prospects of obtaining Australian permanent residency?

It would be more pragmatic to transition these international graduates from Australian educational institutions into the Australian workforce as a tool for offsetting the demographic decline in addressing the skills shortages, based on their training in Australia as well as their living experience and familiarisation with the Australian work and educational culture and giving these graduates a return on investment for the time and money spent on obtaining an Australian educational qualification.

The counter argument to the proposal of an extension of the duration of the Temporary Graduate Visa (Subclass 485) is, that it is an ethical policy which will lead to an accumulation of temporary visa holders, hence the practise of visa hopping with minimum prospects of obtaining Australian permanent residency (Norton, 2022).

If such an argument is taken into consideration with the stringent aim to avoid an increase of international graduates from Australian educational institutions staying back in Australia post-graduation, then it leads one to conclude that the blame for ‘permanent temporariness’ (Parkinson et al., 2023) or the rental crisis that Australia is currently inundated with (National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation, 2023; McCloskey & Birrell, 2024) should be placed on this graduate cohort.

As such, these international graduates from an Australian university, who were left to fend for themselves without appropriate support during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ullah & Harrigan, 2022; Dhanji et al., 2023; Roitman et al., 2024) are not getting any mileage from the

Temporary Graduate Visa (Subclass 485), based on the failure of this visa to provide them a competitive advantage in the Australian labour market (Tran et al., 2020), are left in limbo to decide if they have obtained a return on investment in their Australian educational experience.

**Since the existing Australian permanent residency visas or pathways to permanent residency visas offer an unfair playing field to international graduates from Australian institutions because they have to compete with offshore visa applicants who come with several years of professional work experience, it is recommended that a new skilled visa be introduced with a set of criteria to be fulfilled, giving a pathway to Australian permanent residency should the applicant opt for this option.**

### **5.3 Research Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The thesis had its fair share of limitations based on different factors.

- The first proposed methodology had to be changed from mixed methods research to the prisoner's dilemma concept from the game theory methodology.
- This study used non-probability sampling and a generalisation of perceptions across all Australian universities. Future research could utilise a probabilistic method like random sampling of international students and graduates. It could also incorporate NUHEIs and TAFEs as part of the research to verify if the results of that research, correlate with the findings of this research.
- This study excluded international students who were not studying on a student visa (subclass 500) and not studying management and commerce courses at Australian universities. For future research, these excluded students could be considered in order to broaden the research.
- Despite the content analysis methodology used as underpinning for the research, a major limitation relates to a potential bias of the researcher's experience from the Australian higher education sector, in his interaction with international students and his role as a migration agent, though the inherent bias was addressed by adopting an objective research position while executing the research and analyses.
- The scope of the research is limited to secondary data and does not include any data collection directly from the 2 major players identified in this research who are international students studying on a student visa (subclass 500) and studying management

and commerce courses at Australian Universities at the AQF 7 – 9 level and the successive Australian governments, in particular GSM policy makers.

- These recommendations do not provide a comprehensive solution to end the higher education and migration nexus and as such could be problematic for readers seeking policy solutions. Instead, the content analysis data collection methodology utilised and the prisoner's dilemma concept from game theory to analyse the GSM policies for its ineffectiveness in addressing the vicious cycle of visa hopping international graduates in Australia find themselves trapped in while addressing their career and/or migration outcomes.
- The data sourced for this thesis was from secondary sources. Though the data was sourced from secondary sources, its authenticity is not disputed since it is directly sourced from government records and reports, independent reports and academic journals. However, for future research it would be advisable to use primary source data e.g. results of interviews directly from stakeholders such as university students, education/migration agents and GSM policy makers. This would give a more comprehensive outlook to the results and could be used to solidify the findings of this current research.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

Career advancement and migration outcomes for international students are interrelated and the denial of the existence of a higher education and migration nexus in the context of what is Australia's 4<sup>th</sup> largest export (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024) can be equated to a sheer state of oblivion.

Changes to the Australian GSM policies are followed by changes in the Australian international education market (Hong et al., 2022) and changes to the Australian migration policy gets reflected in the courses that international students enroll in, based on the student-migrant pathway (Spinks, 2016).

The prisoner's dilemma concept of the game theory methodology employed for this research, clearly highlighted the interdependence between the Australian government's GSM policies in providing post-graduation employment prospects and clear migration pathways and the decision of international students to choose Australia as their preferred study destination based on these 2 important factors.

This research aimed to show the effectiveness of the GSM policies by viewing it from the viewpoint of international students from the management and commerce BFoE, the largest cohort of international student enrolment at Australian universities.

It sought to propose a satisficing solution and not an optimal one, to the age-old education - migration nexus paradox which now has now evolved into to an education–work–migration pathway (Tran et al., 2025).

The Australian GSM program has evolved together with international students being a crucial stakeholder since the late 1990s as revealed in this research. Though a relatively new late entrant into the international higher education market, Australia has gained significant market share based on the reasons outlined in this research.

However, based on the findings of this research, it elucidated that the Australian GSM program is not meeting its intended purpose of replenishing the Australian workforce, based on the heavy criticism of the SOL for this inadequacy. The selected student cohort for this research which comprises of the largest enrolment at Australian universities is not able to meet their career advancement or migration outcome goals based on the findings of this research.

COVID-19 has been an eye opener which exposed the reliance on international student tuition fees by Australian universities (Freeman et al., 2022; Thatcher et al., 2020) and it's negative impact is currently felt by the university sector, and this would continue in the future unless strategic policies are put in place by Australian universities to mitigate their losses (Marshman & Larkins, 2020).

The recent changes made to the student and post-graduation visa hinders any prospects of the initial expected outcome that international students aspire for as part of the pull factors which enticed them to choose Australia as their preferred international study destination originally.

With the promise to increase the student visa application fees from \$1,600 to \$2,000, coming into effect from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025 and an anticipated contribution of \$760 million to the Australian budget, the recent Labor government win will have a negative impact on



international student enrolments and further deteriorate the image of Australia as a non-student-centred destination (Staszewska, 2025).

This can indelibly tarnish the image of the Australian tertiary international student market as it did in 2009 due to the violence committed against students from India and the Australian government had to go in repair mode to salvage Australia's reputation as a safe host nation for Indian students (Azmat et al., 2011; Robertson, 2015; Baas, 2015). Australians do not support a reduction in international student visa numbers and have shown strong support for more skilled migrants (Leng et al., 2024).

With ethical and pragmatic skill migration policies consisting of clear pathways for Australian permanent residency and post-graduation working opportunities by competitor countries, it is only prudent that both the Australian higher education and GSM policy makers collaboratively develop policies to address this, explicit priority, of international students to obtain a demographic dividend to address the Australian demographic decline with the right calibre of migrants.

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