

No increase in Pacific students in Australia, except from Fiji

by Huiyuan Liu

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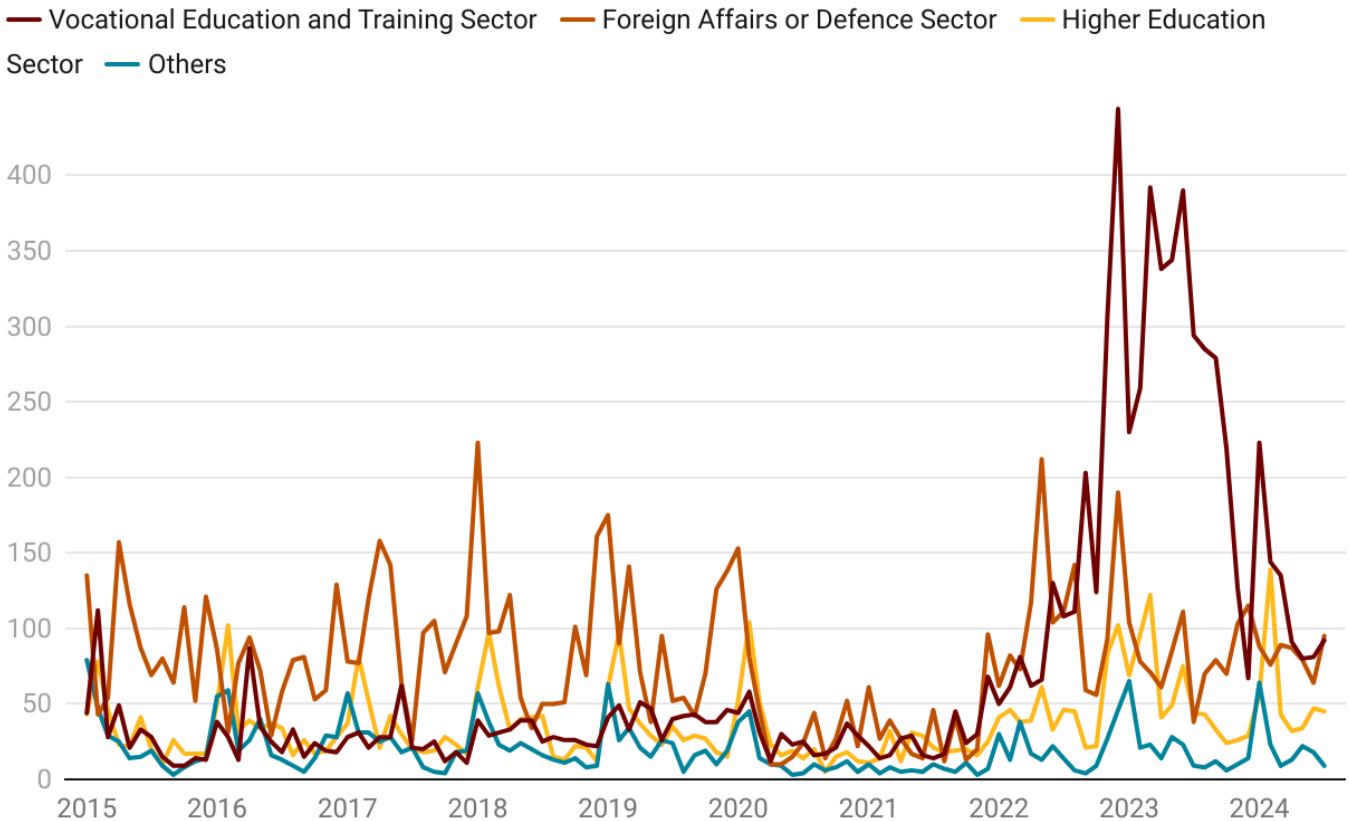
Staff and students at the Australian National University Commencement Address, March 2023

Photo Credit: ANU/Tracey Nearmy

Over the past four years, Australia has introduced several changes to its immigration policies to address the labour shortage during the COVID-19 pandemic and manage the post-pandemic immigration surge. (A summary of the changes in policy for Australian student visas is provided below as an annex: Table 1.) These changes have significantly affected the student diaspora in Australia. In 2022-23, **nearly 500,000 student visas** were granted to primary applicants, a 40% increase from the 2018-19 level and nearly double the number from a decade ago. However, due to gradual policy tightening, the number of student visas granted declined to 332,000 in 2023-24 and is expected to decrease further as new restrictions are implemented.

Students from the Pacific and Timor-Leste have experienced similar impacts. Historically, scholarships from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and also the Department of Defence **have been crucial** in attracting Pacific students to Australia, fostering the growth of the Pacific student diaspora prior to COVID-19. During the pandemic, the relaxation of working hour limits provided strong economic incentives for Pacific students to support themselves while studying in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. This incentive was removed in July 2023 and although its effect persisted for a couple of months, the visa numbers are now decreasing as new financial and other barriers are introduced.

Figure 1: Student visas granted to Pacific and Timor-Leste citizens by sector



Source: Department of Home Affairs • Created with Datawrapper

However, despite the general trend, a closer look at individual country data reveals that Fiji has emerged as the major beneficiary among Pacific countries, capitalising on opportunities presented during COVID-19. The number of visas granted to Fijian primary applicants increased more than five-fold from 2018-19 to 2022-23, and remained relatively high in 2023-24. Most of this increase occurred in the VET sector, but the number of students accepted in higher education also more than doubled, which is a very positive development.

In comparison, Papua New Guinea, other Pacific countries and Timor-Leste experienced much smaller increases during the immigration boom. The share of student visas granted to PNG, relative to the total number of student visas granted to all countries, went down from 0.36% — the average over the ten years before the pandemic — to 0.23% in 2022-23. Similarly, the share for other Pacific countries and Timor-Leste fell from 0.25% to 0.18%.

The increased volume was also short-lived. In 2023-24, the number of student visas granted to PNG was below the 2018-19 level, and much lower than the 2014-15 level. Other Pacific countries and Timor-Leste rely heavily on Australian Government support. When excluding visas supported by DFAT and Defence, the

number of student visas granted in 2023-24 is lower than in 2018-19.

Figure 2: Student visas granted to Pacific countries, by sector

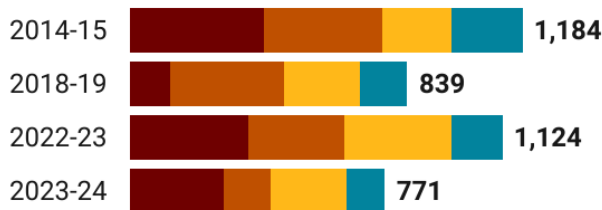
Numbers only include primary applicants.

■ Vocational Education and Training Sector
 ■ Foreign Affairs or Defence Sector
 ■ Higher Education Sector
 ■ Others

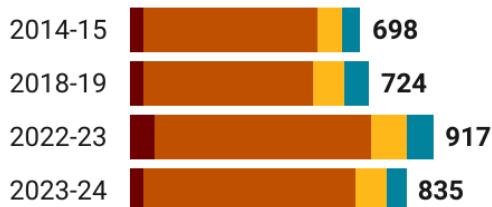
Fiji



PNG



Other Pacific countries and TL



Source: Department of Home Affairs • Created with Datawrapper

For most people from the Pacific and Timor-Leste, studying in Australia is economically challenging. This is why, apart from Fiji, other Pacific countries have not only struggled to benefit from Australia’s favourable student policies during COVID-19 but are now also facing increased pressure from tightened immigration policies.

While Australian government scholarships have been a stable and important source of education opportunities for students from Pacific countries, and the permanent residency status granted by the new Pacific Engagement Visa will allow recipients to access Australian student loans and benefit from domestic tuition rates, these opportunities are limited and conditional. As a result, an increasing number of Pacific people are opting for other study destinations largely influenced by economic considerations.

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Educational exchange is crucial for enhancing connections between individuals and societies and acts as a powerful tool for extending soft power. Australia needs to be mindful of how changes in its student policies affect neighbouring countries and should take action to reduce further harm to those already underrepresented and **in need of greater opportunities**.

The exemption for Pacific students in the recent international student policy changes (no fee increase, and **non-inclusion in the new international student cap**) are certainly positives for the Pacific. Their impact on Pacific student numbers is something to be watched going forward.

Table 1: Summary of changes to Australian student visa policies, 2023-2025

Requirements	During COVID	Post-COVID
Fee	Waived visa application fee if arriving in Australia between Jan 2022 to Mar 2022	07/2024: Doubled the student visa application fee from \$710 to \$1,600. Exemption for the Pacific and Timor-Leste.
Work rights	01/2022: Extended work rights beyond 40 hours to all student visa holders (initially only for those working in critical sectors)	07/2023: Reinstated work hour limit at an increased rate of 48 hours per fortnight
Post-study stay rights (Temporary Graduate Visa)	11/2021: Increased the stay period for graduates	03/2024: Increased English language requirements; 07/2024: Shortened the stay period for graduates; 07/2024: Decreased maximum eligible age from 50 to 35 years old
Student cap	-	01/2025: To cap international student enrolments at 270,000 (with a few exemptions, including exemptions for the Pacific and Timor-Leste).
English	-	03/2024: Raised test score requirements
Genuineness	-	03/2024: Replaced Genuine Temporary Entrant Requirement with Genuine Student Requirement for stricter assessment on applicants' background and intention
Application location	-	07/2024: Stopped visitor visa/temporary graduate visa holders from applying for student visas onshore
Financial capacity	-	10/2023: Increased saving requirements by 17% to \$24,505, 05/2024: Increased savings requirements by 21% to \$29,710

Source: Australian Government and various news sources • Created with Datawrapper

This blog was amended (20/9/24) to reflect exemptions for Pacific and Timor-Leste students from some of the recent policy changes (see Table 1).

Disclosures:

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Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/no-increase-in-pacific-students-in-australia-except-from-fiji-20240920/>