

Overseas student numbers blow out to historic high

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A record 200,000 overseas students flooded into Australia in February, defying expectations that 18 months of tougher entry rules would dampen demand and help bring migration back to historic norms.

New Australian Bureau of Statistics data reveals that 201,490 people came to Australia on student visas last month – 15 per cent higher than last year and 10 per cent higher than the last monthly record in February 2019, before the pandemic.



Sunny Singh arrived as an international student to study civil engineering at Deakin University and now works for the local government. **Eamon Gallagher**

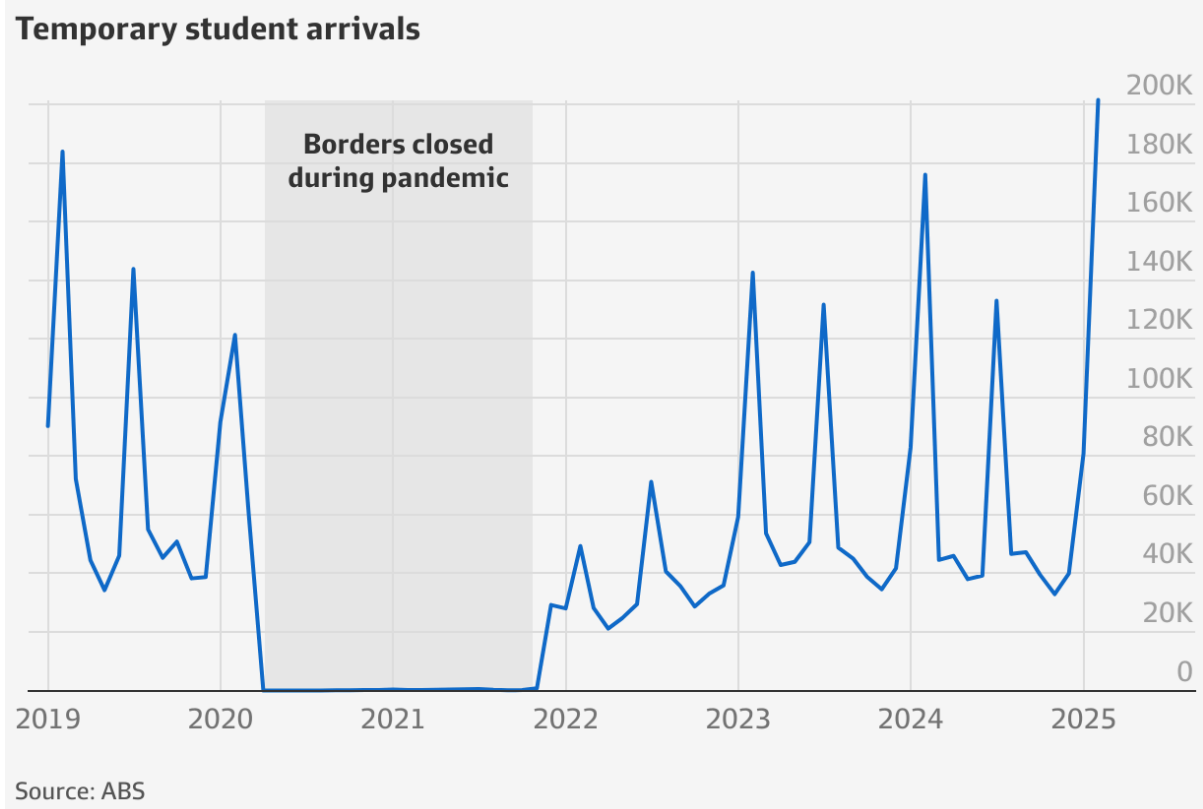
Dr Abul Rizvi, a former deputy secretary of the Home Affairs Department, said there were now about 700,000 foreign students in Australia. This figure is the highest on record, exceeding the 671,000 in March last year, and does not include 100,000 former students on bridging visas and 25,000 more fighting to stay with cases in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

“The government has no effective tools to control student numbers,” Rizvi said.

Attempts to bring down student numbers are proving more difficult than expected, leaving the Albanese government vulnerable ahead of an election where cost of living and rental affordability are big issues for voters.

The international student market’s post-pandemic resurgence, following years of closed international borders, has plagued Labor in this term because it drove migration to record levels and stoked anger about housing and city infrastructure.

Annual net overseas migration – the difference between long-term arrivals and departures – hit a record 528,000 in 2022-23, prompting Labor and the Coalition to promise to rein it in.



Labor put in place tougher migration settings such as higher English-language requirements and proof of more cash in the bank, and more than doubled the non-refundable visa application fee from \$710 to \$1600 – by far the highest in the world.

An attempt to cap foreign student numbers through legislation was defeated by the Coalition and the Greens last year, but the uncertainty played havoc with the sector and gave rise to warnings of financial collapse for affected universities and colleges. Labor has since attempted to stem numbers through ministerial directions controlling visa processing.

Treasury forecasts in the May 2024 budget that net overseas migration would fall to 395,000 in 2023-24, and taper further to 260,000 this year both failed to materialise as new enrolments remained resilient despite uncertainty, and more students attempted to stay in the country for longer after graduation. The figure for 2023-24 hit 446,000 and Treasury has since recast the 2024-25 figure to 341,700.

Some migration experts still expect international student numbers will taper off soon. Phil Honeywood, chief executive of the International Education Association of Australia, noted that student visa applications in February slumped 30 per cent.

“It will take time for this sudden fall in demand to translate into lower arrivals,” he said.

Education Minister Jason Clare said the government's reforms were working. "This ABS data is not an accurate reflection of the impact of the government's reforms," he said. "Peter Dutton's reckless arrogance killed international student caps and in the process he killed his credibility."

Government data also reveals that in the 12 months to February there were 30,000 refusals for new student visas from people already here – a 320 per cent increase – over the same period in 2023-24.

Shadow education spokeswoman Sarah Henderson slammed Labor for creating "an immigration mess". She said the Coalition would control numbers in a "measured and responsible way".

Sunny Singh, 23, arrived in Geelong to study civil engineering at Deakin University in February 2020 and two weeks later found himself in COVID-19 lockdowns.

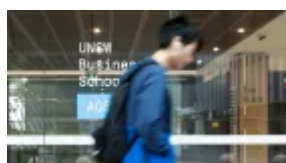
He now works as a stormwater engineer with the local government, a job that started as an internship and eventually turned into a full-time role before he had even graduated.

Singh's decision to study in Australia was based on several factors including that he was aware of skill shortages in engineering here, and also difficulty in qualifying for the highly regarded Indian institutes of technology, which attract about 1.5 million applications a year.

"I missed the mark, so I looked, started looking overseas. One thing that stood out in Australia was definitely the skill shortage. And the Australian government was very open at the time to having more young engineers on board because they wanted to fill those gaps," said Singh.

Singh, who is on a postgraduate work visa, said he will apply for permanent residency when his current visa expires.

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