IN LIMBO:
PERSPECTIVES ON AUSTRALIA-CHINA RESEARCH MOBILITY

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Executive summary

International academic mobility between Australia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) forms part of the global research ecosystem. In recent years, however, research collaboration and academic mobility have increasingly been assessed within national security frameworks, including in the context of visa administration.

In October 2025, the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI) published a quantitative survey, *In Transit: Australia-China Research Mobility and the Visa Experience*, based on responses from 371 PRC nationals who had applied, or were applying, for postgraduate study or research-related visas in Australia.[1] The survey identified extended and variable processing durations and reported impacts on study and research planning.

The present report complements that earlier work through qualitative interviews with 24 PRC visa applicants conducted between November 2025 and January 2026. By centring applicant perspectives, the report provides insight into how visa policies and administrative practices are experienced and interpreted by applicants, highlighting the human dimensions of mobility not captured in aggregate statistics. These experiential factors may influence individual mobility decisions and, over time, patterns of international research collaboration involving Australia.

Key findings:

- **Australia continues to be viewed as an attractive study and research destination.** A frequently cited factor shaping destination choice was prior collaboration with Australia-based researchers or established supervisory relationships, which reduced uncertainty and facilitated research continuity. Institutional reputation and opportunities for collaboration were also influential. Lifestyle considerations, including perceptions of safety, environmental quality and work-life balance, further contributed to Australia's appeal. In most cases, these positive assessments were maintained despite extended visa processing periods, although some participants indicated that prolonged uncertainty influenced their perceptions and future mobility considerations.

- **Mobility decisions are shaped by intersecting family, workplace and regulatory considerations.** Applicants demonstrated agency in deciding whether, when and how to pursue study or research in Australia. However, these decisions were shaped by intersecting institutional and regulatory environments in both Australia and the PRC. Interviewees described balancing career advancement, promotion timelines, income stability, caregiving responsibilities and reproductive planning against the anticipated benefits of international collaboration. Visa timelines and funding conditions formed part of this broader calculus.

- **Visa processing is frequently interpreted through a security lens.** Many participants understood prolonged processing within a broader geopolitical and research security context. Applicants in engineering and technology disciplines often associated extended processing durations with dual-use considerations or institutional affiliations, while those in non-technical fields also situated their experiences within wider Australia-PRC policy dynamics.

- **Prolonged uncertainty has professional and personal consequences.** Extended and indeterminate waiting periods were described as affecting research continuity, promotion eligibility and workplace planning. Interviewees also reported strain within family relationships, emotional stress linked to limited communication and financial pressures in some cases. Even in the absence of refusal, uncertainty itself was widely characterised as consequential for planning and wellbeing.

- **Concerns centred on communication and procedural clarity rather than opposition to screening in principle.** Participants generally acknowledged that states may incorporate security considerations into visa assessment. Recurring themes instead related to clearer communication regarding processing status and more procedural clarity to enable informed planning.
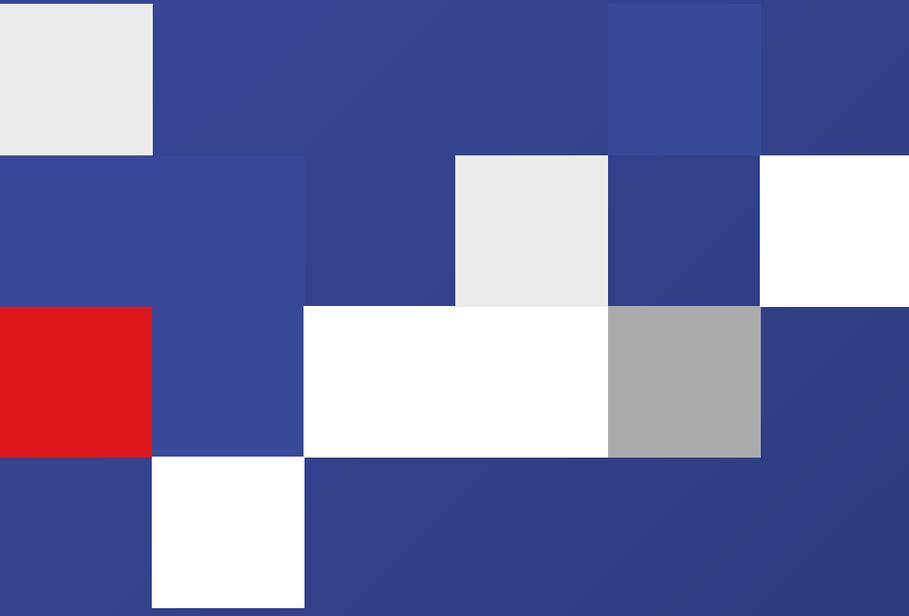
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Introduction

International academic mobility extends beyond educational exchange. Through the cross-border movement of students and researchers, states develop networks of trust and professional interdependence that contribute to diplomatic engagement and economic activity.[2] This form of engagement is often described as knowledge diplomacy and is associated with what is commonly termed soft power, that is, the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion.[3]

Australia has long regarded educational mobility as a strategic asset. The Colombo Plan, established in 1951, positioned inbound student exchange as central to Australia's post-war regional engagement. Approximately 40,000 students from across the region studied in Australia under the scheme over 30 years, contributing to the development of professional and interpersonal networks with long-term regional implications.[4] More recently, the New Colombo Plan (2014-present) has supported outbound mobility for Australian students to the Indo-Pacific.[5] Across successive governments, educational exchange has been treated both as a component of foreign policy and as a significant export sector.

In recent years, however, international academic mobility has increasingly been assessed through a national security lens. Forms of collaboration previously framed primarily in terms of openness and interdependence are now, in some contexts, potential sources of vulnerability, particularly with respect to technology transfer. Governments have therefore sought to strengthen mechanisms designed to protect sensitive research. In Australia, the incorporation of security considerations into research mobility governance has increasingly entered public discussion. Court and tribunal records indicate that a small number of postgraduate visa applicants in technical fields have been assessed under proliferation-related public interest criteria, with underlying intelligence assessments withheld on national security grounds.[6]

Colombo Plan students gather around a globe. (Image credit: Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade)

This shift reflects wider changes in the governance of science and technology. Scientific research has long intersected with national strategy, particularly in defence-related domains. What appears to have expanded over the past decade is the application of security-oriented review mechanisms to a broader range of civilian research fields and international collaborations. In a more fragmented and geopolitically competitive international environment, governments have adopted policies aimed at de-risking or, in some cases, de-coupling.[7]

Relations between Western nations and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have become more strained in this context. The PRC's rapid technological development and military modernisation, US-PRC geopolitical competition, as well as uncertainty about Beijing's intentions, and longstanding concerns about intellectual property theft, have contributed to increased scrutiny of research collaboration and academic exchange involving PRC-affiliated institutions.

Public commentary by politicians and those in policy circles reflects this more securitised framing. At a 2026 Universities Australia conference, former Department of Home Affairs Secretary Mike Pezzullo described the PRC's appetite for foreign research intelligence as 'voracious', stating that engagement with PRC scholars and institutions must be understood in light of the 'very tight controls' exercised by the PRC state across society. He said, 'We just have to face the fact that any relationship with Chinese scholars and Chinese institutions is going to have... the Chinese state sitting behind it.'[8]

Most recently, Shadow Minister for Education Julian Leeser expressed 'enormous concern' over March 2026 reports in *The Australian* of Australian academic collaborations with the PRC and Iran on drone research. He said, 'Australia's research program should serve Australia, not our adversaries... [O]ur research sector needs to be hardened against foreign interference and it needs to work shoulder to shoulder with the security agencies in deciding whether to collaborate on sensitive research with high-risk jurisdictions.'[9]

Such statements illustrate the degree to which research collaboration with PRC institutions is now situated within broader national security discourse, shaping the context in which visa and mobility decisions are interpreted.

Within this changing policy landscape, this report examines research mobility from the PRC to Australia through qualitative interviews with 24 PRC visa applicants. These interviews complement findings from the 2025 survey report *In Transit: Australia-China Research Mobility and the Visa Experience*, published by the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI).

The 2025 survey found that a majority of respondents were awaiting a decision at the time of data collection, with median processing durations of approximately six months and longer reported waits in engineering and technology fields. There was also a widespread perception among respondents that visa duration was influenced by policy or bilateral relationship factors.[10]

The analysis does not evaluate the legitimacy of national security frameworks. Rather, it considers how research mobility governance is experienced and interpreted by applicants navigating visa processes. Interviewees discuss their reasons for selecting Australia, their interpretations of visa processing times and how they have handled waiting periods.

By situating individual accounts within broader research security and mobility governance frameworks, the report examines the interaction between policy design and applicant experience. Understanding this interaction may assist policymakers and institutions in assessing how research security objectives intersect with conditions that support international collaboration.
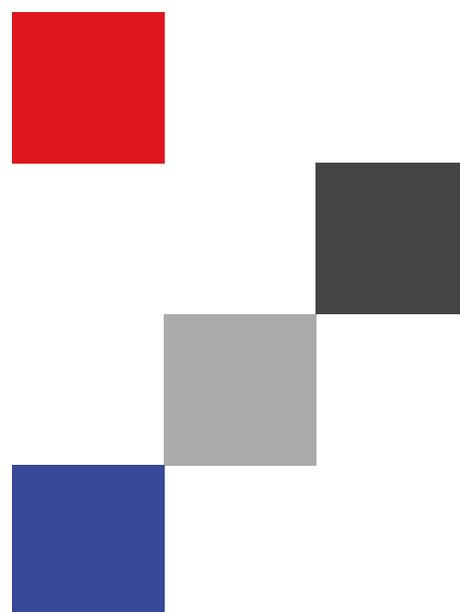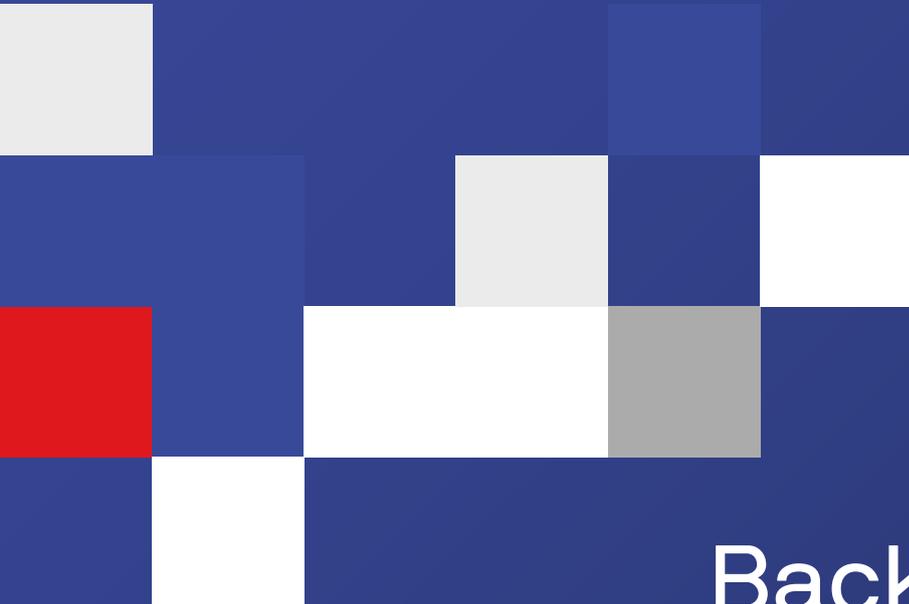
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Background and policy context

2.1 International research security developments

Over the past decade, an increasing number of jurisdictions have expanded the application of national security considerations to civilian research collaboration and academic mobility.

In the US, concerns regarding military-civil fusion strategies and dual-use technology transfer have informed both visa screening measures and entity-based restrictions. Since June 2021, the US Department of Defense has maintained the Section 1260H List (commonly referred to as the Chinese Military Companies List), an annually updated list of entities meeting the statutory definition for what constitutes a company connected with the PRC military.[11]

These developments intersect with scrutiny of specific PRC institutions with longstanding roles in defence research and development. Among those frequently referenced in policy discussions are seven universities commonly described in Chinese discourse as the 'Seven Sons of National Defence', including Beihang University (formerly Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics) and Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics. These institutions maintain formal linkages with defence-industrial entities and have therefore attracted attention within foreign research security assessments.[12]

Research security considerations have also been incorporated into funding governance. The CHIPS and Science Act restricts participation by federally funded US researchers in foreign talent recruitment programs sponsored by the PRC and Russia. In 2025, the US administration announced plans to intensify scrutiny of PRC nationals on student (F-1) and exchange visitor (J-1) visas, including revocations in designated 'critical fields.' Although subsequent statements moderated aspects of this position and large-scale revocations were not implemented as initially framed, enhanced vetting procedures have remained part of the broader visa assessment environment.

Comparable, though not identical, adjustments have occurred elsewhere, most notably in Europe.[13] In Australia, amendments to the Migration Regulations under the Migration Amendment (Protecting Australia's Critical Technology) Regulations 2022 came into effect in April 2024. These created Public Interest Criterion (PIC) 4003B which permits visa refusal if there is an 'unreasonable risk of unwanted transfer of critical technology'.[14] The provision formalises the consideration of technology transfer risk within visa decision-making processes.

Although Australia has strengthened research security governance, it has not adopted categorical institution-based entry restrictions or legislated prohibitions on participation in foreign talent recruitment programs of the kind introduced in parts of the US research security framework. Instead, security considerations are applied primarily through case-by-case visa assessment, alongside existing export-control and foreign interference mechanisms.

Publicly available court and tribunal decisions document instances in which postgraduate visa applicants were found to fall within public interest criteria linked to the potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In several reported cases, applicants and host institutions described the research in question was civilian or dual-use in character, including areas such as drone navigation systems and biomedical research. However, intelligence assessments underpinning such determinations were subject to non-disclosure provisions, meaning the full evidentiary basis of decisions is not publicly available.[15]

Within the PRC, inbound academic mobility continues to be supported through visa facilitation and talent recruitment programs. At the same time, changes to national security and data governance frameworks have introduced additional regulatory oversight over certain research activities.[16] These frameworks may shape research topics, data access and collaboration arrangements involving foreign scholars. Although the mechanisms differ from Western screening regimes, they also condition cross-border research engagement.

These regulatory developments are particularly salient in disciplines characterised as dual-use. Dual-use frameworks recognise that certain scientific fields, including advanced engineering, materials science, synthetic biology and infectious disease research, may have both civilian and military applications.[17] A significant proportion of PRC research applicants to Australia are concentrated in engineering and technology fields, increasing the likelihood that their applications intersect with such assessments.

Debate continues regarding the appropriate scope and application of dual-use risk frameworks. Some scholars argue that this risk framework conflates legitimate scientific inquiry with national security threats, and that overly restrictive interpretations can create barriers to beneficial research while offering minimal genuine protection against determined malevolent actors.[18] Others contend that research security and science diplomacy objectives can be balanced through tailored research governance frameworks, investment in research security capacity, the evaluation of science diplomacy initiatives and maintenance of ongoing dialogue between scientific and security communities.[19]

It is within this international landscape that research mobility between the PRC and Australia must be situated.

2.2 PRC research mobility to Australia

At the aggregate level, available visa data do not indicate a contraction in overall PRC participation in Australia's research training sector. Postgraduate Research Sector (PGRS) visa grant data show that applicants from the PRC received 28 percent of all PGRS visas granted in 2024–25, with provisional 2025 year-to-date figures indicating 30 percent (Table 1).

The proportional increase in PRC nationals' share of PGRS visas to 30.3 percent in 2020-21 occurred in the context of COVID-19-related border restrictions and overall reductions in international student mobility. Total PGRS visa grants declined in that year relative to pre-pandemic levels, indicating that the rise in proportional share occurred within a reduced overall intake rather than reflecting an expansion in absolute numbers.

Subsequent fluctuations, including the decline from 30.8 percent in 2023-24 to 28.0 percent in 2024-25 and the provisional rebound in 2025-26, may reflect multiple factors, including post-pandemic mobility adjustments and shifts in application timing.

While these figures suggest continued participation at scale, they do not provide disciplinary breakdowns or capture variation in processing times and applicant experience.

Table 1. **Number of visas granted to PRC nationals in Australia's Postgraduate Research Sector (PGRS) 2017-present**

Year	PRC PGRS	Total PGRS	%
2017–18	1495	6572	22.7
2018–19	1550	6829	22.7
2019–20	1475	6261	23.6
2020–21	1812	5977	30.3
2021–22	1316	5449	24.2
2022–23	2650	10367	25.6
2023–24	2563	8326	30.8
2024–25	2337	8361	28.0
2025 year–to–date	1736	5823	29.8

Source: Data.gov.au (accessed February 23 2026)[20]

The 2025 UTS:ACRI survey data provides additional insight into applicant outcomes. At the time of the survey, 78 percent of respondents were still awaiting a decision, 21 percent had received approval and one respondent (0.3 percent) reported rejection. Among approved cases, the median processing time was six months, with approximately one in six reporting waits exceeding one year. Pending applicants had already been waiting a median of six months, indicating that processing durations were extended for a subset of cases and likely to lengthen further prior to resolution.[21]

To contextualise these timelines, survey responses were compared with the Department of Home Affairs' published indicative processing ranges. Median processing times in several visa categories fell near the upper end of, and in some cases beyond, the Department's 90th-percentile benchmarks. While many applications were completed within indicative timeframes, a substantial subset, particularly among pending cases, had already exceeded those published ranges at the time of data collection, reflecting variability in processing experiences within this cohort.

Processing duration also had practical consequences. Eighty-four percent of respondents reported that visa timelines significantly affected their study or research plans. The most frequently cited impacts were delayed commencement (59 percent), followed by personal or family disruption (16 percent) and missed academic or employment opportunities (11 percent).

Publicly available data do not permit causal attribution for extended processing durations. However, survey findings indicate that applicants frequently interpret waiting periods within a geopolitical frame. Seventy-three percent of respondents attributed extended processing to policy or bilateral relationship factors, compared with 32 percent who cited administrative workload and nine percent who cited documentation issues. Regardless of objective causation, this pattern highlights how visa processing is understood by many applicants within a broader policy context.

Shifts in global research mobility patterns may also influence application behaviour. Changes in US-PRC academic exchange settings, for example, may plausibly affect application volume or composition in third countries, including Australia. Such dynamics may contribute to variability in processing experiences in particular visa categories, although the present study does not attempt to quantify these effects.

These findings are best understood within the broader social context shaping mobility decisions. Research on transnational mobility in Chinese contexts emphasises the centrality of family relations to migration decisions. Although family structures have evolved alongside economic modernisation, filial obligation, intergenerational reciprocity and collective family advancement remain influential. Career and life choices are often evaluated in terms of their implications for household arrangements, elder care, educational planning and long-term family advancement.[22]

Recent studies also indicate that the evaluative frame among PRC undergraduate and postgraduate students considering overseas study is shifting from whether overseas study is feasible to whether it yields sufficient marginal benefit relative to domestic opportunities.[23] This changing thought process occurs alongside improvements in the global research standings of Chinese universities. For example, the 2026 CWTS Leiden Ranking data, based on publication output and citation impact, shows Chinese universities now leading the world in these metrics.[24] Although international rankings represent only one factor influencing mobility decisions, they contribute to a broader reassessment of opportunity costs associated with overseas study.

Funding opportunities further shape mobility patterns. The China Scholarship Council (CSC), established in 1996 under the Ministry of Education, administers national programs supporting outbound study and research. Provincial and municipal governments operate parallel scholarship schemes.[25][26]

Within this decision-making environment, extended visa processing introduces uncertainty into both professional and personal planning. Sociological scholarship has described such conditions as 'enforced waiting', in which administrative timelines constrain individuals' ability to make forward commitments. Migration studies have likewise examined how prolonged administrative delay, limited communication and procedural opacity can generate unintended personal and professional strain.[27]

Although much of this literature focuses on asylum, detention and irregular migration, the underlying dynamics of uncertainty are not confined to those contexts.[28] For skilled applicants whose mobility depends on fixed-term funding, employment arrangements and family coordination, prolonged indeterminacy can similarly shape decision-making and life trajectories.

These policy settings, mobility trends and reported experiences together provide the empirical and conceptual context for the qualitative analysis that follows.
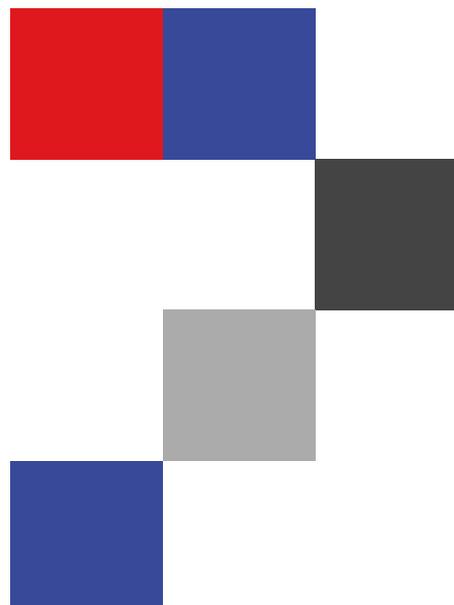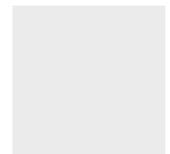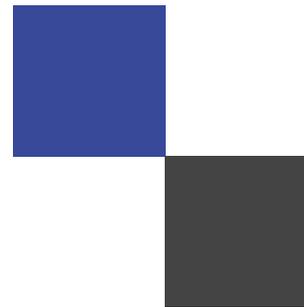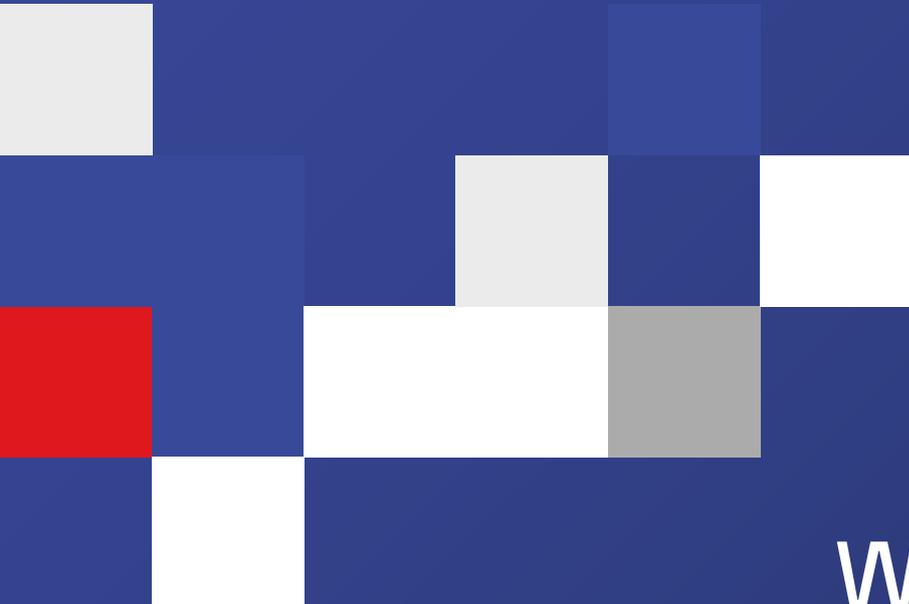
03

What attracts PRC researchers to Australia?

Australia has historically treated international education and research collaboration as components of its external engagement. Academic mobility contributes to professional and interpersonal networks, institutional partnerships and cross-border knowledge exchange. In policy and scholarly discussions, these processes are sometimes associated with concepts such as knowledge diplomacy and soft power.

Understanding the factors that shape the mobility decisions of PRC researchers is therefore relevant to how Australia is perceived as a study and research destination. This section draws on interview data to examine which aspects of Australia participants identified as attractive and how they explained their destination choices. Situated within the broader research security and mobility context outlined earlier, the section documents the motivations informing application decisions and the conditions under which Australia is regarded as a viable destination.

3.1 Prior knowledge of Australia's research capacity

One of the most frequently mentioned factors shaping interview participants' destination choices was prior collaboration with Australia-based researchers or familiarity with specific research strengths within Australian universities.

Many interviewees referred to existing supervisory relationships or familiarity with academic profiles through word of mouth. Many of the Australia-based researchers mentioned were Chinese-Australian academics, suggesting that diaspora scholars function as bridging actors in facilitating research training and academic mobility between the PRC and Australia. In most cases, Australia was not described as an unfamiliar research environment but rather an extension of pre-existing academic ties.

Interview Participant (IP) 3 said that while her child's opportunity to study English was one consideration in choosing Australia, her primary motivation was to continue working with her former thesis advisor, a leading authority in climate economics and environmental management, now based in Australia. She also described challenges within her research environment in the PRC, including increasingly intense competition, high journal rejection rates and difficulties in securing research funding. In this context, she decided to apply for a government-sponsored visiting scholarship to Australia. She described her prospective supervisor in the following terms:

The overseas supervisor I applied to work with is an authoritative expert in urban sustainable development, particularly in climate economics and environmental management. This supervisor was also my thesis advisor when I studied at NUS [National University of Singapore], and we have maintained a strong long-term relationship. This makes it very convenient for me to continue my research seamlessly and further develop my academic capacity.

Similarly, IP6 attributed her decision to nearly a decade of collaboration with an academic who had relocated from a university in Sydney to a university in Melbourne, emphasising that their long-term cooperation made Australia a natural choice:

It was because of the professor. We did some work together when he was originally based in New South Wales. He then moved to Melbourne after securing a teaching position there. We have always collaborated, and this collaboration has probably lasted eight or nine years, starting from when I first began working as a scientist. Because he is based here, I decided to follow him.

IP12 likewise highlighted her prior familiarity with her doctoral supervisor at the Australian National University (ANU), noting that this relationship was central to her decision:

I visited Australia for one year during my master's degree. At that time, I was on a 408 visa. I had already been collaborating with my Australian doctoral supervisor for a long time before that, and during that period we developed a very deep connection.

What attracted me most about ANU – this might be somewhat different from others – is that I am very familiar with my doctoral supervisor's work, and he gave me a great deal of freedom in my research direction.

Also, I had stayed in Canberra for a year before, and I really liked the environment there.

Beyond individual supervisory relationships, interviewees also described Australia as a node within broader international research networks. IP6 described frequent academic exchanges between PRC institutions and Australian universities, and suggested that these exchanges have remained largely stable over time, apart from COVID-19 pandemic-related disruptions:

Relatively speaking, I think the relationship between Australia and China is still fairly good. In fact, whether in terms of academic exchanges or studying abroad, many of the children of my colleagues and teachers around me are studying or have studied in Australia.

Several professors we have long collaborated with are from UTS, the University of Queensland, Griffith University, and Deakin University. I feel that our exchanges have been quite frequent. For example, we sometimes invite them to China for academic guidance, invite them to conferences, or participate when they organise conferences here.

Overall, in recent years it has been quite good. Apart from the pandemic, from around 2017 until now, things have generally been friendly, at least from what I know.

These statements suggest that Australia was viewed as a destination where international collaboration remains feasible and productive, reinforcing its appeal as a site for building and maintaining global academic connections. IP4's response was typical of many interviewees who cited the good reputation of Australian universities:

When I saw Australian universities listed among the project options, I developed a particular interest. Subsequently, I searched for more detailed information about university rankings. Australia's QS [World University] ranking is among the top globally, so it has a strong academic reputation; and the prospective supervisor's research direction aligns well with my topic, and he enjoys considerable prestige in the academic community.

Image credit: Juergen_Wallstabe / Shutterstock

3.2 Environment, lifestyle and quality of everyday life

Interviewees also frequently referred to Australia's natural environment and high quality of life as factors influencing their decision to apply to Australia. Almost all participants noted that Australia offers fresh air, clean water and a lower population density.

Some impressions were based on indirect knowledge – such as IP10, who mentioned that some of his classmates described Australia as having 'beautiful sceneries'. Others drew on personal experience. IP12, who had previously spent a year in Australia, emphasised the relaxed social atmosphere and positive everyday interactions in the social environment, ranging from public transport to grocery shopping.

Several interviewees contrasted these views with their experiences in the PRC, describing PRC academics and professional environments as high-pressure and fast-paced. Australia was repeatedly characterised as offering a better work-life balance, even while acknowledging that research work remains demanding in any context.

Social stability and personal safety were also salient considerations, especially when interviewees compared Australia with other potential destinations. For IP5, Australia ticked all the boxes as an ideal destination:

> *Choosing Australia avoids the difficulty of obtaining visas for North America caused by Sino-US tensions and also avoids the geopolitical risks and social instability in Europe resulting from the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In terms of social environment and academic atmosphere, I hope to find a research environment that allows for a relatively balanced work-life dynamic. Within my limited understanding, Asia (Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan) is often labelled as having high pressure and low happiness indices, whereas Europe and Australia are often seen as having more relaxed lifestyles and research environments. Therefore, I am more inclined to choose these regions.*

For IP13, Australia's strict gun control policies made Australia appear a safer destination than the US – an issue of particular importance to his parents in the PRC. He explained that this safety consideration was especially important to parents of applicants belonging to the one-child generation. For these families, Australia represented a 'reassuring' option within the Western world.

3.3 Cultural experience and social environment

Beyond safety and work-life considerations, interviewees also expressed interest in cultural experience.

For IP5, the cultural difference between Australia and the PRC generated anticipation and excitement about encountering a world previously unfamiliar to her. She said:

> *The time difference between Australia and China is negligible, which is advantageous. Also, Australia's social atmosphere is similar to that of traditional Western countries and is culturally different from that of East Asia. This will give me an opportunity to experience a culture I have not directly encountered before.*

Interviewees also associated Australia with social openness and inclusiveness. IP7, who identified as gay and whose wife remains in the PRC, highlighted Australia's openness toward LGBTQIA+ communities and its suitability for childrearing. When asked if she planned to stay in Australia, she said it depends on whether she and her wife decide to have children. Her reasoning was not framed simply in terms of Australia's favourable policies toward LGBTQIA+ communities, but also in terms of her desire to avoid an excessively competitive environment embedded in the PRC's education and social systems.

'The education system in China is simply too involuted (juan),' she said. *Juan* – the excessively competitive and high-pressure pace of life in the PRC – is a recurring theme across interviews.

IP9 articulated this theme starkly by telling a joke: 'In Australia people are treated like people, whereas back home people are treated like livestock.' However, IP9 was quick to add that this characterisation was meant as a joke, reflecting his personal frustration, and was not intended as an accurate description. He also stressed that this was not necessarily a result of the PRC's 'bad' system, but possibly a consequence of the PRC having too many people. He elaborated:

> *In Australia, the overall pace of society is relatively slow, and the work environment tends to respect individual preferences. You often hear people saying in China: if you don't do it, plenty of others will. That leads to employers squeezing wages while still finding workers willing to work. This creates a vicious cycle, or what we call 'involution' (neijuan).*

IP15 echoed this sentiment, describing Australia as a society where people appeared 'laid back', in contrast to the long working hours and cumulative pressures faced by academics in the PRC, particularly women juggling professional and family responsibilities. She fleshed out this comparison in this way:
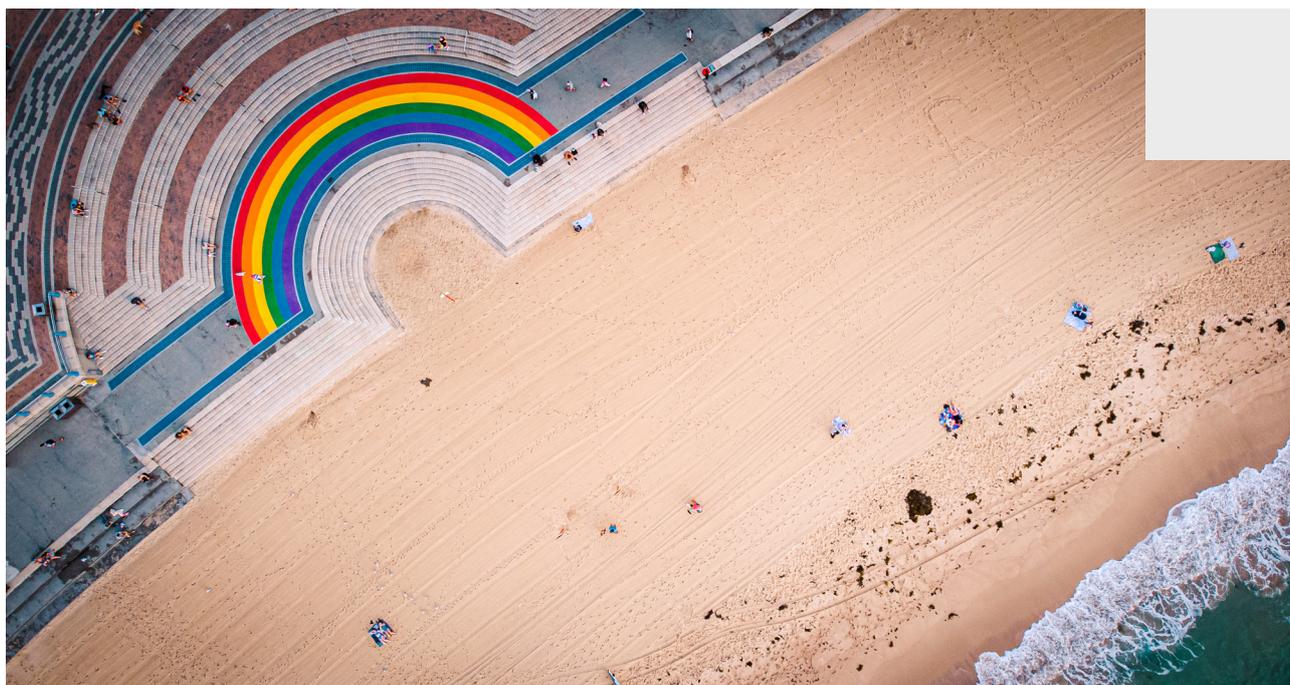

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Of course, doing research is not entirely relaxing wherever you are, but overall, people seem to be more at ease. Unlike in China now, where things are extremely competitive and work pressure is very high, people might spend most of the week immersed in work. I feel that Australia is relatively more relaxed, which I think is good. For example, civil servants generally work nine to five and then go home without continuing to think about work. For us, it often feels like we are working from nine in the morning to two in the morning the next day. It is really not easy, especially when you have to juggle work, career development, and family, particularly for women.

Australia's status as an English-speaking country was also widely regarded as advantageous. Some interviewees noted that an English-speaking environment would enhance their own proficiency while also providing educational benefits for accompanying children. IP3, for example, explicitly linked her choice of destination to both her career development and family considerations. She also observed that Australia's relatively minor time difference with the PRC would facilitate the maintenance of professional and personal connections, thereby reducing the social and practical costs associated with temporary relocation.

3.4 Instances of erosion of goodwill

Most interviewees maintained positive views of Australian society and lifestyle despite experiencing extended visa processing times. However, some indicated that prolonged waiting periods had affected their perceptions.

After waiting more than a year for a visa outcome, IP14 described a marked deterioration in his view of the Australian government, with his frustration with the administrative process extending then to a more generalised reassessment of Australian society:

My impression of Australia, including society, government, and research exchanges, was originally quite positive, and I did not expect to face a waiting period of over a year. Currently, my view of the Australian government has deteriorated considerably. Given that the government is still elected by voters so it must represent the sentiment of its public, my perception of the general public has also worsened to some extent.

3.5 Summary

Interviewees' accounts indicate that Australia's attractiveness as a research destination derives from the interaction of professional opportunities, prior academic ties, perceptions of social stability and safety, lifestyle considerations, opportunities for cultural experience and broader assessments of global research environments.

Long-standing supervisory ties and research collaborations, as described by IP3, IP6 and IP12, positioned Australia as an extension of existing academic communities, facilitating research continuity and reducing uncertainty associated with relocation. At the same time, broader social and everyday factors shaped decision-making. Participants including IP5, IP7, IP9 and IP15 emphasised Australia's appeal as a place where professional ambition can coexist with family wellbeing and personal dignity. These everyday experiences accumulate into broader judgments about Australia as an attractive country, shaping not only individual mobility decisions but also its international reputation.

However, positive perceptions were not unconditional. IP14's experience illustrates that prolonged visa processing can alter applicants' broader interpretations of Australian institutions and society, eroding goodwill even among those otherwise positively disposed toward Australia.

04

Navigating costs and opportunities

Decisions about international academic mobility are rarely shaped by academic considerations alone. For prospective students and researchers, choices about whether to relocate, when to do so, and for how long involve weighing anticipated benefits against financial, relational and career risks.

The experiences of PRC students and researchers seeking to come to Australia therefore reflect not only visa and research security settings, but also the practical negotiations required across family life, workplace expectations and administrative frameworks. This section draws on interview accounts to examine how these intersecting factors shape mobility decisions in practice.

4.1 Familial factors

Family considerations were central to many participants' mobility decisions. Interviewees described evaluating the effects of temporary or longer-term relocation on family unity, caregiving responsibilities, children's education and spousal employment. In several cases, short-term mobility was framed as a strategy that allowed professional development while limiting disruption to household arrangements.

Gendered dimensions of decision-making were also evident. Expectations around caregiving, reproductive timing, breadwinning and career prioritisation shaped how mobility was experienced and negotiated, influencing who migrates, who stays, and whether migration takes a short-term or longer-term form.

The case of IP19 is one example of mobility as a gendered process. She is a married mother of a five-year-old daughter and is applying for a one-year visiting position at an Australian university, funded by the CSC. In addition to professional development, she viewed the opportunity as beneficial for her daughter's exposure to an English-language environment. She explained that bringing a five- or six-year-old child to Australia would not affect schooling, but a later departure would disrupt her daughter's education. She said she needed to return to the PRC before her daughter starts Year One; otherwise, it would be very difficult to enrol her in a public school in a city like Guangzhou, where she lives and works. When asked whether she would travel alone if the visa were granted after May or June, she responded that she would still likely bring her child, but that her daughter might have to return earlier than she would.

IP16, also married but without children described how visa uncertainty affected reproductive planning. She has been waiting for her visa approval for several months, and this had led her to postpone plans to have a child. Her husband has a stable job in the PRC and does not plan to accompany her, but he supports her desire to 'go out and experience the world' and respects her decision to delay childbirth. On the question of childbirth timing, she said:

> *At the moment, I don't have children. The plan is that I would return in a year and then consider having a baby. For women, this is an unavoidable topic. But right now, if my visa was granted in the second half of the year, then during this half-year I wouldn't be able to get pregnant or have a child, right? So now, I'm still in this uncertain state. That kind of uncertainty can be quite distressing. Because this is about personal planning, and for women in particular, childbirth is time sensitive.*

4.2 Workplace constraints

In addition to family considerations, interviewees described workplace structures and career trajectories as shaping their mobility decisions. International experience was often viewed as beneficial for accessing research infrastructure, expanding professional networks and enhancing academic credentials. At the same time, participants described risks associated with employment precarity, career interruptions and the compatibility of overseas positions with long-term career trajectories.

IP6's experience illustrates how pursuing a career in Australia involves delicately balancing risk and opportunity. Having graduated from Nanjing University in 2022, she is now a medical doctor and a researcher in oral diseases at the affiliated hospital of a university in Jiangsu Province. After completing her postdoc at that university, she took up a Jiangsu Province grant program that provided funding for visiting scholar positions abroad. She accepted the opportunity and went to a university in Melbourne. While still in Melbourne, finishing the first postdoc fellowship funded by the PRC, she successfully competed for a postdoctoral position at the same Australian university. She framed her decision this way:

> *If I hadn't secured the postdoctoral position, I would probably have resumed my research work in Nanjing. But since I did obtain another postdoc here, I thought that while I'm still young, and since the world is so big, I should see more of it.*

When asked about her employment arrangements with her home institution, she said:

> *At the time, it was effectively unpaid leave. I still had an established position at my original workplace, as resigning would have involved a very lengthy administrative process. So I didn't resign. I retained the position but without a salary.*

What IP6 hadn't anticipated was that a lengthy waiting period for her visa would put at risk her opportunity to take up the postdoctoral fellowship. At the time of interview (January 3 2026), she faced a deadline of January 5 for visa approval, after which the contract would be withdrawn by the university and she would lose the promised job.

When asked whether further extensions were possible, she responded:

> *The university has already given me five extensions. My supervisor and the university's Pro Vice-Chancellor for international and Asia-related affairs helped me secure the fifth extension. It was initially extended to September [2025], but with his help it was pushed to January 5 [2026]. Since that date coincides with the next round of offers for 2026, I think the chances of another extension are very small.*

IP19 likewise described professional trade-offs involving being prepared to risk delayed promotion at her PRC-based university in exchange for gaining international collaboration experience. An associate professor in construction management, she applied for a visiting position at a university in Queensland to strengthen her research profile. However, waiting seven months for visa approval affected her teaching load and, consequently, her eligibility for promotion:

> *As my university knew I was departing for Australia soon, they did not schedule any teaching for me. But because no teaching was scheduled, failing to depart on time and having no classes to teach meant I could not meet assessment requirements. Failure to do so could have serious consequences, such as dismissal, salary deductions, or disqualification from applying for promotion. To qualify for the promotion process, I would have to demonstrate that I had completed 96 teaching hours. So, yes, I could not apply for promotion from associate professor to professor.*

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4.3 Caught between regulatory frameworks

Mobility decisions were also shaped by regulatory frameworks in both origin and host countries. Visa conditions, work rights, enrolment policies and funding requirements determined the terms under which mobility could occur.

IP6 (whose circumstances were described above) after completing a short-term visiting scholar fellowship funded by the PRC government, remained in Australia on a bridging visa while awaiting the outcome of her next application. Although she wished to commence her postdoctoral position and begin earning an income, uncertainty regarding her bridging visa work rights created difficulty. She described receiving conflicting advice from immigration officials. She noted that her supervisor had sought to seek clarification from the Department of Home Affairs via email, and her Melbourne-based university used a lawyer to verify her work rights, but the department did not reply to them:

Previously, immigration told me I could work using my bridging visa, but the university said the project name didn't exactly match and needed further confirmation. I had no way to verify it myself and to this day there's still been no reply.

IP9 is another student who lodged his visa application while waiting onshore. He had completed his master's degree in mechanical engineering at a university in Sydney and graduated in June 2025. He returned to the PRC but returned to Australia to attend his graduation ceremony in October. During his stay, he applied for a one-year tourist visa. He used his time in Australia on the tourist visa to explore his options and ultimately chose to submit his PhD application to a university in Sydney to pursue research in fluid mechanics. When the tourist visa was close to expiring, IP9 managed to transition to a bridging visa. He described institutional hesitation regarding enrolment:

Initially, the university didn't allow enrolment on a bridging visa because they couldn't guarantee that a PhD visa would be granted. After repeated communication with the Graduate Research School and explaining how difficult it was for Chinese students to obtain visas, the university eventually allowed me to enrol around September or October.

He further explained:

> *At first, the university didn't allow enrolment on it, so I couldn't work or fully access the university. Later, once they understood the situation, they allowed enrolment. Technically, visa status and enrolment are separate – if your visa allows study and doesn't violate its conditions, the university can choose to let you enrol.*

During the 11-month waiting period, he was unable to take up research assistant positions to help with living expenses and did not qualify for the student airfare discounts offered by PRC airlines to PRC students who hold a Subclass 500 visa, impacting his ability to visit family. He described attempts to follow up as a source of frustration:

> *There are two types of follow-ups: one is a note, which just records that you called; the other is priority processing. But it's very difficult to get priority. I've called maybe more than 20 times. Eventually, I stopped calling because every time they just told me to wait patiently.*
>
> *Sometimes they respond. They say 50 percent of students get visas within one month and the remaining 90 percent are marked as nine months. But if you exceed nine months and ask why, they'll tell you, 'Because you're in the 10 percent.' It's incredibly frustrating. We're sceptical about those statistics.*

Unlike IP9, who plans to fund his PhD through parental support, IP11's proposed visit to Australia is funded by the CSC. As a result, she has fewer visa options than IP6 or IP9. She considered entering Australia on a tourist visa but realised that this pathway was effectively blocked by the conditions attached to government funding. In other words, while the CSC gave her hope for coming to Australia, it is at the same time putting constraints on how she could access it. She said:

> *We also thought that if we were only going for six months, we could apply for a one-year tourist visa since those are processed more quickly. But that wasn't possible because our funding comes from the Chinese government scholarship. The scholarship involves a designated bank card used exclusively to receive the funds. If we entered on a tourist visa, the funding would not be recognised. When applying for the scholarship, the system required us to apply for the 408 visa and register the bank card. Only then would the funding be approved.*

4.4 Summary

The cases discussed in this section illustrate how transnational mobility among PRC students and scholars is shaped by complex negotiations across the intersecting regimes of family, workplace and the state. Workplace structures and career logics further conditioned these choices, as participants balance the anticipated benefits of international experience against risks such as delayed promotion, employment precarity and the potential loss of income or institutional attachment in the PRC.

These personal and professional considerations were, in turn, shaped by visa conditions and administrative timelines. Prolonged processing periods and uncertainty regarding work rights affected participants' capacity to plan, maintain income and secure career progression.

International mobility, as reflected in these accounts, emerged as a fragile and contingent process involving ongoing negotiation of opportunity and constraint across family life, organisational expectations and state governance structures.

05

The price of uncertainty

Applicants considering study or research in Australia typically weigh professional opportunities, career advancement, family arrangements and financial commitments against the anticipated benefits of overseas training and collaboration. Prolonged and indeterminate waiting for visa decisions introduces an additional layer of uncertainty that may not have been fully anticipated at the outset of the application process.

Scholarly research in political science and migration studies has examined how extended administrative waiting periods can generate psychological, professional and relational strain, even in the absence of formal refusal. Such work highlights how uncertainty itself can become consequential for individuals whose plans depend on time-sensitive decisions. Understanding how visa processing timelines are experienced and managed by applicants therefore provides insight into the indirect personal and professional effects that may accompany extended processing periods.

5.1 Workplace and professional life

IP1 described how visa processing times affected research planning and professional momentum. After waiting more than six months, she believed her work had stagnated and expressed a strong fear of falling behind her peers:

Originally, I had planned to use this visit as an opportunity to conduct fieldwork and advance academic collaboration with my host supervisor, but the delay meant that none of this could proceed as planned. This not only affected our collaboration but may also have caused me to miss a critical window in the field. Moreover, this visiting project is a key university-funded programme that expects high-quality outputs such as a final research report and international journal publications. The delay has compressed my visiting period, potentially affecting project evaluation outcomes and even my eligibility for future funding.

She further emphasised that the negative impacts were not confined to herself but extended to her colleagues and home institution:

On the one hand, my teaching plans were completely disrupted. I had planned to commence my visit to Australia in September 2025 and had already received approval to be exempt from teaching duties for that semester so that I could focus fully on research. However, due to the delay, the visit could not begin as scheduled, and the teaching duties I had relinquished were already reassigned to other staff. The university's teaching timetable could not be adjusted at short notice, leaving me in the awkward position of having 'no classes to teach' for the semester. This affected both my teaching workload assessment and created unnecessary administrative difficulties for the university.

Other applicants reported a sense of guilt associated with being unable to begin the planned visit abroad while occupying a limited quota that could otherwise have been allocated to colleagues. IP4, who had been waiting for more than eight months, said:

At the same time, CSC quotas in my faculty are limited and highly valued. My continued inability to depart while holding this opportunity has placed a significant psychological burden on me. I feel bad about it and feel that I need to apologise to my colleagues and supervisor, and I worry that my delay could affect future opportunities for my colleagues. When my friends ask about my situation, I cannot provide a clear answer. This passivity and uncertainty in everyday interactions has added to my stress.

5.2 Personal and family dynamics

The impact of uncertainty also extended into family life for many interviewees.

IP8, who had been waiting for 23 months at the time of the interview, described strain arising from his inability to contribute financially during the waiting period.

IP8 had earned his PhD from a prestigious PRC university and was offered the opportunity to participate in an Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded project at an Australian university. From the outset of the waiting period, he chose not to take up casual employment to supplement family income, instead relying on his wife, who held a stable job. The couple agreed that, rather than spending time on unrelated work that might not benefit his academic career, he should focus on research and publications while awaiting the visa. Despite this agreement, IP8 noticed growing impatience from his wife, and their relationship became increasingly strained. He understood her frustration, particularly in light of the recent birth of their child and the pressures of balancing paid work and parenting. When asked whether he could assume more childcare responsibilities during the waiting period, he explained that although he did contribute to some extent, becoming a full-time caregiver would undermine the rationale behind their original decision. He added that being financially supported by his wife while being unable to provide for the family made him feel deeply uneasy.

For IP1, guilt was directed towards her child:

Although I have relatively strong psychological coping abilities and have not experienced severe anxiety or depression like some people I know in a similar situation, prolonged uncertainty has still generated ongoing psychological pressure. The unpredictability of the visa outcome has kept me in a constant state of uncertainty, preventing me from fully committing to new research or teaching tasks. I often experience difficulty concentrating and feel low in spirit. My child had been eagerly looking forward to accompanying me to Australia for a year of overseas study, proactively practicing English and learning about Australian campus culture. Now that these plans have fallen through due to visa delays, his disappointment is palpable and I often feel guilty for failing to fulfil my promise.

IP5 reported that visa-related uncertainty, after 15 months of waiting, generated anxiety not only for himself but also for his parents and fiancée:

My visa status has caused anxiety not only for me but also for my parents and my fiancée. My parents are deeply concerned about my well-being and future plans, particularly about whether the visa situation is causing me psychological distress. My fiancée is currently completing a master's degree in Australia at the same university I applied to. Our original plan was to study and live together in Australia, but visa delays have forced us into a long-distance relationship. We now face difficult new decisions: she will graduate next year and plans to pursue a PhD, yet our original plan to continue studying together in Australia may need to change due to my visa uncertainty. Choosing new study or work locations creates disagreements and makes coordinating life in the same city extremely difficult, adding further uncertainty to our relationship.

5.3 Emotional and psychological impacts

Less visible, but frequently mentioned, was the emotional toll of prolonged waiting. Interviewees described the stress of living with persistent uncertainty and limited or a complete absence of communication regarding timelines. Indeed, most interviewees reported receiving no communication at all. This persistent sense of lacking control over one's life manifests in a range of psychological and physical symptoms.

IP5 said his concerns about strained family and romantic relationships, noted above, had contributed to a gradual deterioration in his mental health:

> *As the waiting period lengthened, my anxiety about the visa and my future has intensified and it has begun to affect my daily life. Recently, I've developed physical symptoms such as trembling hands, sweating, and constant leg shaking, and I've found it difficult to concentrate. For a period of time, I incessantly refreshed my email inbox, the immigration portal, and visa-related social media, hoping for information that ultimately proved useless. I have experienced chest tightness and shortness of breath and began smoking, something I had never done before. I have tried to distract myself with work and daily life, but every so often my thoughts would spiral, plunging me back into deep anxiety.*

IP6, who has been waiting for a year, also reported heightened anxiety and sleep disturbances. She described sometimes feeling 'depressed, anxious, prone to despair, and unable to concentrate', adding:

> *I would wake up at two or three in the morning, thinking over whether I should call immigration again and what I should even say to them if I do call.*

IP14, one of the few interviewees who ultimately decided to withdraw from the process, made it clear that the experience left a lingering sense of bitterness. Using the 'five stages of grief' as a metaphor to describe the process of waiting and finally deciding to abandon the application, he said:

> *The prolonged waiting mainly affected my future planning. Professionally, as mentioned earlier, I may no longer pursue an academic research career. In terms of family, their concern previously created a kind of positive pressure, but over time it made me feel anxious and regretful whenever the topic came up.*
>
> *Regarding mental health, without progress in domestic research, I might have experienced severe depression and anxiety, given the considerable time, energy, financial, and emotional costs I had invested, only to face failure.*
>
> *As for research outcomes, although the final result was positive – I did publish one academic paper – the credit certainly cannot be attributed to the Australian government, and the work diverged significantly from my original research plan. Fortunately, my project was not formally embedded in my domestic or overseas supervisor's research agenda, so it did not disrupt their timelines, though I regret having taken up a quota that could have been used by others.*

5.4 Financial costs

Although financial strain was not a major concern for most interviewees, the application process and prolonged waiting period nonetheless generated significant financial costs, particularly for applicants from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

IP16 noted that applicants incur multiple expenses, including visa application fees, medical examination fees and document notarisation fees. In some cases, applicants also made substantial payments to migration agents to help them navigate the process. For CSC and other government-funded scholars, some of these costs may be partially reimbursed by their workplaces; however, the majority of expenses are borne by individuals. Matters are further complicated by the expiry of required documents, meaning that prolonged waiting often necessitates resubmission and the incurrence of additional costs.

IP16 said that while these expenses were manageable for her and those around her, they could impose serious burdens on less well-off students:

> *When the visa approval doesn't come through for a long time, students from poorer families might start wondering whether they could ever recoup some of the money. I don't think that they would.*

> *In regions like the Yangtze River Delta where I come from, financial circumstances in households are generally better, but some students come from genuinely disadvantaged backgrounds and regions. Long delays disrupt their studies and create financial strain. If an agent is involved, the agency fee can be far higher than the visa fee itself. Some applicants' workplaces may reimburse these costs, but that varies greatly. In general, if reimbursements are not available, this becomes a real burden for students from poorer families.*

For this reason, IP4 believed that it would be unfair if applicants were forced to withdraw due to prolonged processing periods beyond their control and yet received no refund.

IP17 described indirect financial implications, saying that uncertainty may lead to financial losses in ways that are often hard to predict. In his case, uncertainty has led to higher health insurance costs:

> *Since April 2025, I've kept up payment of my private health insurance. Anticipating departure, I asked about pausing it, but the insurer requested evidence of visa refusal or delay. As I assumed the visa would be granted soon, I didn't suspend it. I'm only visiting for one year, and I need to provide more documentation to cancel the insurance after April 2026. There may be some financial loss.*

At the conclusion of her interview, IP16 described the prolonged absence of updates as a form of 'cold violence', a Chinese idiom referring to emotional withdrawal or silence used as a means of exerting pressure in an interpersonal relationship. She said:

> *I know I'm not using polite language here; I know I'm just expressing my frustrations. But it does feel like when a couple have a disagreement, one party is not shouting, just not speaking. You're being ignored. You feel like saying to the other party: hey, if something is wrong, tell me so I can fix it. But this silence is unbearable, it's 'cold violence'.*

The metaphor captures the depth of frustration associated with prolonged uncertainty and the perceived absence of communication.

5.5 Summary

Interview participants reported that prolonged and indeterminate visa processing periods introduced uncertainty into professional and personal planning. Extended processing durations were described as affecting research commencement, employment arrangements and promotion timelines, particularly where mobility depended on fixed-term funding or approved leave. In some cases, institutions accommodated these changes; in others, uncertainty limited the ability to make alternative plans.

Family-related adjustments were also reported, including changes to childcare planning, reproductive timing and spousal coordination. Psychological strain, including anxiety and difficulty concentrating, was described by several participants, especially where communication regarding application status was limited. Financial costs associated with application fees, documentation, insurance and related expenses were noted, with impacts varying across individual circumstances.

Overall, the accounts indicate that extended processing timelines can shape applicants' professional and personal decision-making. Even in the absence of refusal, uncertainty itself was reported as a consequential element of the visa experience.
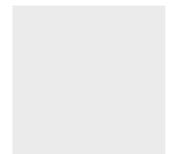
Security screening and visa processing duration

Contemporary research governance incorporates national security considerations into the regulation of international academic mobility. Within this environment, wsome applicants interpret prolonged visa processing as potentially linked to security screening mechanisms and situate this possibility within broader geopolitical developments. While processing experiences varied across participants, including cases of relatively prompt approval, the discussion below focuses on how those experiencing extended waiting periods interpreted their circumstances.

Survey data from the 2025 UTS:ACRI report, *In Transit: Australia-China Research Mobility and the Visa Experience,* indicate that 73 percent of respondents attributed visa application processing durations to policy or bilateral relationship factors and more than half cited security or background checks as influencing processing time. Administrative workload (32 percent) and documentation issues (nine percent) were cited less often. While these perceptions do not establish the internal criteria applied in individual cases, they indicate that many applicants understand waiting periods through a security-oriented lens. This section examines how interview participants articulate and reason about that perception.

6.1 'Third party' assessments

Several participants described experiences suggesting that research they regarded as primarily civilian, but situated within technical or engineering fields, may have been subject to additional review. While the interviews do not provide direct evidence of decision-making criteria, they illustrate how applicants interpret prolonged processing and references to additional assessment.

IP10 provides one example. At the time of interview, he had been waiting 16 months for his visa to be processed while working as a research assistant in Hefei. His research focuses on smart materials related to magnetism and how properties can be altered in response to changes in magnetic fields or electric currents in order to maximise efficiency. He characterised his work as having practical, civilian applications, explaining:

> *When a train turns, there is a joint at the pivot point. If this joint is made using our new materials, the turning process becomes much smoother. We have experimented using magnetorheological elastomers to make the rubber joints for trains. This has already been trialled on some trains in China and the results have been quite good.*

He also described potential medical applications:

> *For example, if a person suffers a serious hand injury and needs hospital treatment, or if the skin on their hand has been completely burned, research like this can make it possible to create a joint-like bionic structure. This kind of bionic design could greatly help with rehabilitation, or, if the person permanently loses their hand, using a mechanical hand could significantly improve their quality of life.*

Although he viewed these applications as non-military, he acknowledged that the broader field could potentially be interpreted differently by external assessors. After multiple attempts to inquire about the status of his application, he reported being informed that his case had been referred to a 'third party' for security assessment. In addition, he noted that he graduated from the University of Science and Technology of China, which is included on the US restriction list. He stated that this had earlier led him to conclude that applying to the US would be unlikely to succeed. While Australia's regulatory framework differs from that of the US, he believed that both his disciplinary area and institutional affiliation may have contributed to extended processing in his case.

Similar interpretations were expressed by others. IP22, an AI specialist applying for a student visa for himself and his family, had been waiting for a year and reported being advised that his application would undergo extra security checks and was asked to re-submit his application multiple times. IP12, specialising in computing science, had been waiting for what he calculated to be 530 days at the time of interview in December 2025. He described limited transparency regarding whether his case had been referred for security review:

> *When I called, I was told that the processing is proceeding as normal, but when I asked whether my case had been referred to the security agencies for further assessment, I received no clear response.*

IP8, whose research, relates to drone technology and wastewater treatment, described his work as focusing on the use of drones to address water pollution. His Australian supervisor's project, funded by the Australian government, centres on public health applications, including the use of drones to identify waste. IP8 regarded the project as environmentally and socially oriented rather than defence-related. However, he expressed uncertainty about how such work might be interpreted within broader dual-use frameworks, particularly given the technological components involved. He explained:

> *It might be deemed a bit sensitive; they might think, 'Oh, you're doing robotics,' but it depends on how you're using it. If you say your robotics work is applied to defence, well, the field of robotics is huge. I'm not doing any of that – I'm clearly working on this ARC [Australian Research Council] project. How could I be involved in military applications? If they judge it that way, then most people in engineering fields wouldn't be allowed to go; everything would be considered sensitive. Saying it could be linked to defence is really far-fetched.*

IP8 also emphasised that he was not working on robotics per se:

> *I'm only doing a small part of it. I work on antennas within robotics – a system. Robots may contain antennas, and I only work on a portion of the antenna system.*

These accounts do not establish whether particular research areas automatically trigger additional review. Rather, they demonstrate how applicants in technical fields anticipate the possibility of dual-use assessment and incorporate that expectation into their interpretation of extended processing durations.

Anticipatory adaptation was also evident. IP15 described carefully avoiding sensitive research areas in how she characterised her research when preparing her application:

> *There shouldn't be any problem, because when I submitted my visa application, I was afraid of accidentally touching on sensitive keywords. So I reframed my research area towards waste resource utilisation. Although my work involves battery chemistry, which may use some biomass raw materials, I categorised these materials as agricultural waste. So it falls under the category of waste-to-resource utilisation.*

Image credit: Gorodenkoff / Shutterstock

6.2 Sensitive research areas

IP15's account suggests that applicants from the PRC have developed heightened awareness of security considerations in Australia's visa assessment processes. She said that before submitting her visa application, peers advised one another to avoid potentially sensitive keywords. She also consulted publicly available government information to identify terms that might attract additional scrutiny.

IP13, who ultimately received a visa after an 18-month wait, reflected retrospectively on his experience. A lithium battery specialist who completed his PhD at a Sydney-based university and now works in Shenzhen, he suggested that if he were to apply today, approval might be less certain. He associated his extended processing period with both his research area and his alma mater in the PRC, one of the 'Seven Sons of National Defence' institutions that have attracted international scrutiny.

He interpreted the extended visa processing duration as likely involving additional review:

> *I was definitely subject to ASIO's review – otherwise it wouldn't have taken this long. I am absolutely certain that there was definitely a review process. This was something we learned when communicating with others in the same application groups. Many people with similar backgrounds, for example, those from the 'Seven Sons of National Defence'. They were among the first batch placed on the entity list. That was during the Trump administration, when they created an entity list to control these institutions. Australia then followed the US lead and included these universities on their own list.*

Australia does not maintain a publicly declared institutional exclusion list equivalent to US entity list frameworks. IP13's account nevertheless illustrates how applicants draw connections between their institutional background and broader international developments when interpreting prolonged processing.

IP13 further suggested that visa processing may be influenced by what he described as 'ideology' and 'economic bottom-line' considerations. By 'ideology', he appeared to be referring to national security and political sensitivities surrounding research collaboration, while 'economic bottom-line' referred to the financial contribution of international students to Australia's higher education sector. He observed that full-fee paying master's applicants under visa subclass 500 seemed to receive visa approvals more quickly, which he interpreted as reflecting the economic value of such enrolments.

Perceptions that security considerations contributed to extended processing durations were not confined to engineering or technology disciplines. IP2, whose research area is economic policy, withdrew her application after an extended wait and applied instead to Singapore. She reflected:

> *Rationally, I understand that any visa system involves procedural queues and case-by-case variations and not every issue can be simply attributed to politics. However, the current significant deviation from past processing times, combined with the fact that Chinese applicants are more noticeably affected, makes it difficult not to consider the underlying causes from the perspective of political and China-related policy factors.*

Similarly, IP1, specialising in energy economics, did not regard her research as security-sensitive but nevertheless interpreted extended visa processing times within a broader geopolitical framework, particularly the governance of research security. She said she understood the logic behind increased scrutiny but believed that overly cautious screening practices could risk overestimating threats and contribute to administrative inefficiency and visa application backlogs. In speculating on possible reasons for extended processing durations, she said:

> *First, research in science and engineering fields is often closely linked to technological development, resource utilisation and engineering applications. Some research directions may involve areas such as new energy technologies, advanced manufacturing, information technology and materials science, which are closely related to national strategy and industrial security. Although the vast majority of applicants are engaged in purely academic exploration and basic research, in today's complex international political environment, visa authorities in some countries may still harbour concerns about 'technology spill-over' or 'information security', worrying that research outcomes could be used for non-academic purposes. As a result, they initiate stricter background and technical reviews, and sometimes even over-interpret or misjudge applications. This directly leads to longer processing times and more complications.*

> *Second, science and engineering research is highly specialised. Ordinary visa officers may find it difficult to accurately judge the true nature and sensitivity of research content. In order to avoid perceived 'risks', they often adopt a 'better safe than sorry' approach, repeatedly verifying application materials and consulting multiple parties. This further lengthens processing times and increases uncertainty for applicants. But personally, I believe this does not mean that all science and engineering research involves sensitive content. Rather, it is a widespread phenomenon caused by 'one-size-fits-all' policies or excessive caution in the approval process.*

6.3 Summary

Interview participants included individuals whose visas were approved promptly, as well as those who experienced extended processing durations. Experiences varied across cases, although prolonged uncertainty featured prominently in participant accounts.

The cases discussed in this section show that a number of applicants interpret prolonged visa processing as potentially linked to security screening considerations, often situating this perception within a broader geopolitical context.

Participants in technical fields frequently associated extended processing with possible dual-use sensitivities or institutional affiliations. For example, IP10 understood the referral of his smart materials research for 'third-party' assessment as possibly related to its technical characteristics and his academic background. IP8 expressed uncertainty about how robotics-related terminology in a publicly funded environmental project might be evaluated within a dual-use context. IP13 associated his 18-month processing period with both his lithium battery research and his alma mater's inclusion in internationally scrutinised institutional groupings.

Some participants also described modifying how they characterised their research in anticipation of potential scrutiny. IP15, for instance, reported reframing aspects of her battery research in more neutral terminology prior to submission, reflecting awareness of how disciplinary labels might be evaluated. These accounts do not establish the internal criteria applied in individual cases, but they demonstrate how applicants anticipate and respond to perceived security screening logics.

Perceptions of security review were not confined to technical disciplines. Applicants in non-technical fields likewise situated processing times within wider discussions about research security, economic priorities and Australia-PRC bilateral relations.

In this respect, security and geopolitical considerations form part of the interpretative framework through which applicants make sense of uncertainty, influencing how they assess risk and destination choice.
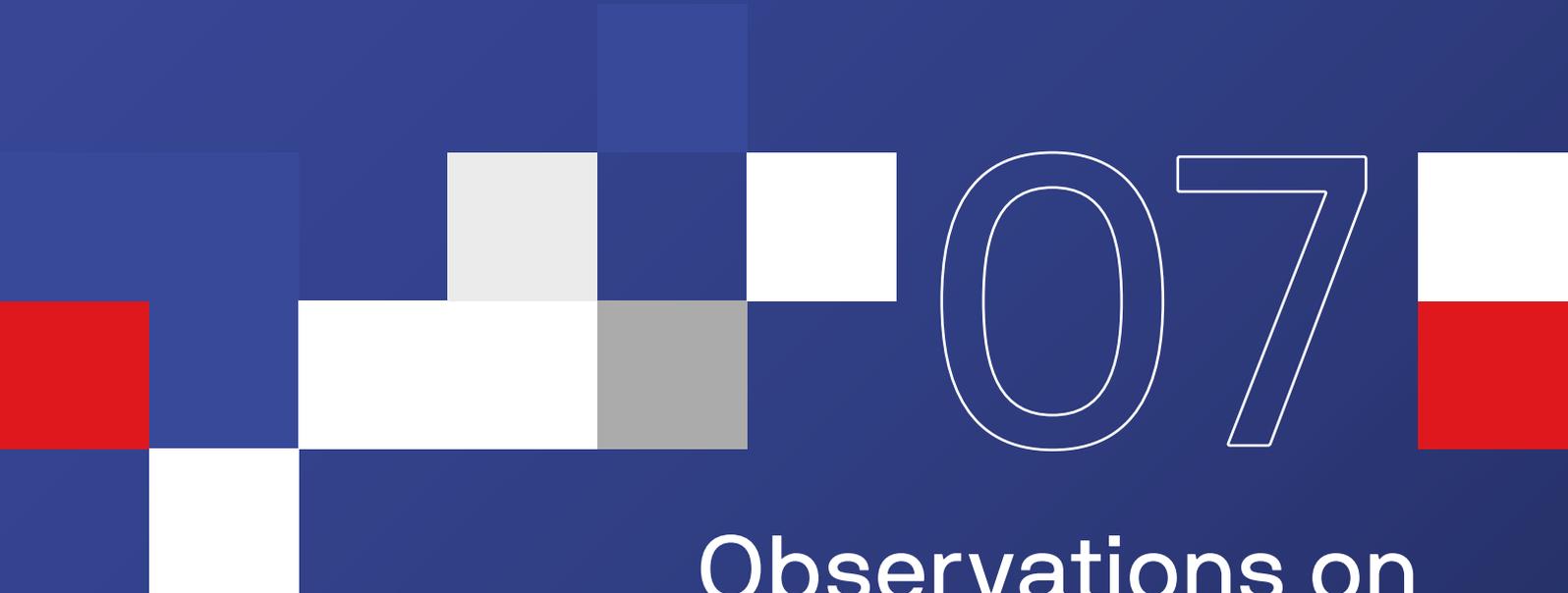
07

Observations on visa administration

Research governance increasingly involves balancing national security considerations with policies that support international scientific collaboration. Within this context, the experiences of visa applicants provide insight into how these governance frameworks are interpreted and encountered in practice. This section summarises interview participants' accounts of Australia's visa processes, including perceptions of communication and procedural clarity.

7.1 Research aims and anticipated impact

Many interviewees characterised their proposed research as having potential value for Australia.

IP9, who had been waiting more than 10 months to commence his PhD at a university in Sydney, described a project developed in collaboration with his prospective Australian supervisor to examine the relationship between extreme heat events and mortality rates in Australia using engineering and computer science:

> *Our research seeks to examine how extreme heat affects each postcode in Australia, both directly and indirectly in terms of mortality, and to produce a comprehensive report using a robust predictive model. For example, by estimating population growth and average temperature increases by 2050, we can assess how many people are likely to be affected under different climate scenarios. If the projected number is large enough, this data could be provided to government and relevant agencies as an early warning.*

When asked to give an example, he said:

> *For instance, if we can predict that during a particular period of extreme heat in the summer of 2050, hundreds of thousands of people may be affected, with a significant number of indirect or direct deaths, emergency services and hospitals could be overwhelmed. Having such a system in place would allow the healthcare system to make advance contingency plans.*

7.2 Research capacity and opportunity cost

Interviewees also reflected on how prolonged uncertainty might shape Australia's attractiveness within highly mobile and competitive research fields. IP12 recounted the experience of a close friend:

> *This friend of mine completed a master's degree at the Australian National University and wanted to go on to do a PhD there. He waited for about two and a half years and was unable to start his doctorate, so eventually he chose to pursue a PhD at Oxford. He is extremely hard-working, and his research output has been outstanding. He has already received the best paper award in our field, and is considered one of the brightest rising stars in artificial intelligence in recent years.*

> *Since he went to Oxford, he has had no further connection with Australia. Now when people talk about him, they mention Oxford University. Australia lost the opportunity to be associated with his achievements. His expertise is in IT, an area where Australia urgently needs cutting-edge research.*

7.3 Science as transnational practice

Interviewees differed in how they conceptualised the relationship between national security and scientific collaboration. Some acknowledged the legitimacy of screening processes in principle, recognising that states may restrict entry on security grounds. Others emphasised a view of science as inherently transnational.

IP13, who had completed a PhD in lithium battery research after an 18-month wait and later returned to the PRC, reflected:

> The reason I chose to continue on a research path was partly influenced by the idea of the 'global village'. When I was an undergraduate and master's student, both China and the world more broadly seemed to embrace the idea of a shared global community, working together on environmental protection and knowledge exchange. At that time, we also had international students in China and I really enjoyed interacting with them.

Similarly, IP6, who has been waiting to commence a postdoctoral project on new technologies for aural disease, emphasised the global character of scientific research, saying that both science and medicine should be conducted without borders. She said she recognised the need for national security but cautioned against excessive, one-size-fits-all approaches. IP6 said:

> My field is nanotechnology but the research project is aural disease and public health. This is the kind of research that is meant to benefit all humanity. Take SARS or COVID-19 as examples: once an outbreak occurs, it does not matter whether you are Australian or Chinese. These are global problems. The research we do is precisely aimed at overcoming such challenges for everyone, not for a single country. It should not be the case that one country develops something and then withholds it from others. Humanity is a shared community. When a snow avalanche happens, no single snowflake is responsible.

7.4 Communication and procedural clarity

A recurring theme across interviews was a desire for more timely communication, particularly in cases where an application is likely to be rejected, and procedural clarity. Participants did not generally contest the existence of security screening mechanisms, but expressed frustration regarding prolonged indeterminacy.

IP8 said:

> What I want to say to the Australian government is this: if the application is acceptable, then let people come as soon as possible; if it is not, and if you want to reject it, reject it quickly. If there are sensitivity or security issues with my application that require political or security review, then at least let me know about this as soon as possible, so that I am not kept in the dark.

IP3 similarly commented:

> Speed up visa processing and improve transparency. If the application will not be approved, a direct refusal is acceptable, as long as it is quick. But the current situation of indefinite waiting with only opaque communication is deeply frustrating.

IP4 described extended waiting as creating an 'information black box' and outlined several areas where, in her view, administrative adjustments could reduce uncertainty:

(1) Clearer estimates of processing times should be provided, along with regular updates on application progress.

(2) Greater procedural flexibility should be introduced, such as allowing eligible applicants to obtain temporary work or study permissions while waiting, in order to reduce disruption to research and daily life.

(3) *A partial refund mechanism should be established. Visa application fees represent a significant financial burden for students. If an applicant is forced to withdraw due to prolonged delays beyond their control, without any refund, this seems unfair. When processing times exceed the officially stated maximum due primarily to departmental delays, applicants should be given the option either to continue waiting or to withdraw and receive a partial refund.*

(4) *Finally, stronger support services are needed. Procedural rigidity risks undermining Australia's attractiveness as a global destination for education and research. Dedicated service teams could provide tailored guidance and responses, while clearer documentation requirements and compliance guidance prior to submission could reduce requests for additional materials and minimise delays at the source.*

She suggested that such measures would reduce uncertainty and improve applicant experience without altering substantive assessment criteria.

7.5 Summary

Participants' accounts indicate that concerns centred primarily on uncertainty and communication rather than opposition to security review in principle. Several interviewees emphasised the anticipated public benefit of their research, while others noted the possibility that extended processing periods may influence decisions about where to pursue academic opportunities.

Examples such as IP9's climate-health PhD proposal illustrate how applicants often frame their work in terms of potential public contribution to Australia. The account of IP12's peer, who pursued doctoral study at Oxford after an extended waiting period, reflects how prolonged uncertainty may coincide with the redirection of research trajectories to other institutions. Narratives from IP13 and IP6 also highlight a view of science as inherently transnational, particularly in areas such as energy, health and environmental research.

Across interviews, a recurring theme was the desire clearer timelines, more regular communication and greater procedural clarity. Participants frequently distinguished these administrative concerns from the principle of security screening itself.

Collectively, these perspectives suggest that the design and communication of visa processes may shape how security measures are experienced and interpreted by prospective researchers.

Image credit: GFialkowski / Shutterstock
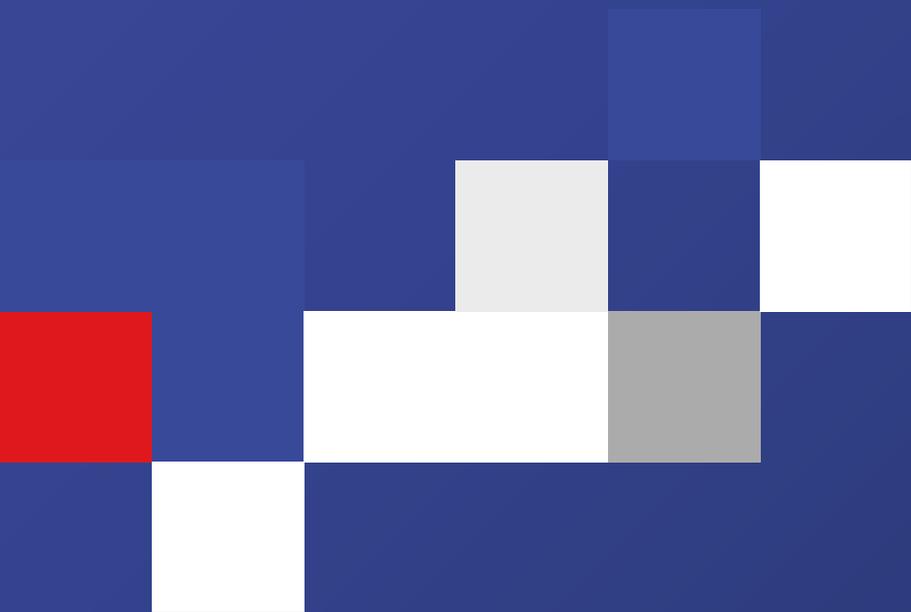
08

Conclusion

This study draws on in-depth interviews with 24 PRC visa applicants to examine how Australia's visa processes are experienced and interpreted by individuals seeking to undertake study or research. By centring applicant perspectives, the report illuminates the human dimensions of scientific mobility that are not captured in aggregate visa data. It does not assess the validity of national security settings; rather, it examines how those settings are experienced in practice by applicants navigating administrative processes.

Participants continued to regard Australia as an attractive research destination, citing academic collaboration, institutional reputation, safety, openness and quality of life. At the same time, extended periods of visa uncertainty were described as affecting professional planning, family arrangements and financial stability. Regardless of the underlying administrative or policy drivers, uncertainty itself shaped how applicants evaluated risk, opportunity and destination choice.

Many interviewees interpreted prolonged processing within a broader research security and geopolitical context. These interpretations illustrate how contemporary security frameworks are understood at the individual level and how perceptions of scrutiny may factor into future mobility decisions.

The findings suggest that research security and international collaboration are not inherently incompatible objectives. However, their interaction is mediated by administrative design — particularly the clarity, predictability and communication of process. Interviewees consistently identified procedural transparency as central to their experience. Attention to these administrative dimensions concerns implementation rather than principle and may reduce uncertainty without altering substantive security standards. National security considerations remain a legitimate and important component of research governance in an increasingly complex technological environment.

More broadly, the interviews indicate that administrative uncertainty functions as an intermediary layer between national security policy and international mobility. Even where security settings remain unchanged, their implementation influences how Australia is assessed as a research partner in an increasingly competitive and securitised global environment. By documenting these experiences, this study provides empirical insight into how research security governance is encountered at the level of individual decision-making.

Methodology

Shortly after the release of the UTS:ACRI 2025 report *In Transit: Australia-China Research Mobility and the Visa Experience*, 24 one-on-one interviews were conducted with PRC visa applicants between November 2025 and January 2026.

Although these interviews were open-ended, they were designed to generate detailed insights that would help interpret the quantitative data from the 2025 survey. Most participants were recruited from the survey participants who had indicated willingness to take part in a follow-up interview, while others were referred through word of mouth.

The interview guide was developed directly from the core research questions that informed the 2025 quantitative survey. In particular, the interviews sought to explore in greater depth patterns identified in the survey data, including reported causes of extended visa processing durations, perceived security screening, disciplinary variation in waiting times and the professional and personal impacts of prolonged uncertainty.

Where the survey provided descriptive evidence of processing durations, perceived geopolitical influences, and disruption to study or research plans, the interviews were designed to examine how applicants interpreted these experiences and how visa timelines interacted with career trajectories, family arrangements and institutional expectations. The qualitative phase therefore functioned as an explanatory extension of the survey, enabling more detailed insight into the lived dimensions of patterns observed in the earlier quantitative findings.

The majority of interviews were conducted online in Mandarin using WeChat video chat, with a small number conducted via email correspondence. Interviewees were selected to ensure diversity across age, marital status, gender, funding source (Australian government, PRC government or self-funded), length of waiting period, application status (pending, withdrawn or approved) and visa category (e.g., subclass 408 for temporary visitors or subclass 500 for students).

Limitations

This study is based on qualitative interviews with 24 participants and is not intended to be statistically representative of all PRC research visa applicants. While efforts were made to ensure diversity across gender, visa category, funding source, and processing duration, the relatively small sample size limits the ability to generalise findings across the full applicant population.

The study focuses exclusively on the perspectives of PRC applicants and does not incorporate interviews with Australian immigration officials, university administrators, or security agencies. As such, it does not evaluate internal decision-making processes, nor does it assess the evidentiary basis for individual visa determinations. Rather, it documents how visa processes are experienced and interpreted by applicants.

The research also captures perceptions at a particular point in time. It does not include long-term follow-up with participants to assess how visa outcomes may shape subsequent career trajectories, mobility decisions, or institutional relationships over time.

These limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings. The study aims to provide contextual insight into applicant experience rather than a comprehensive account of research security governance or visa administration.

Acknowledgements
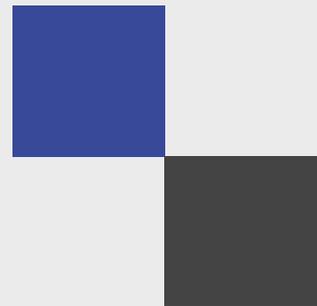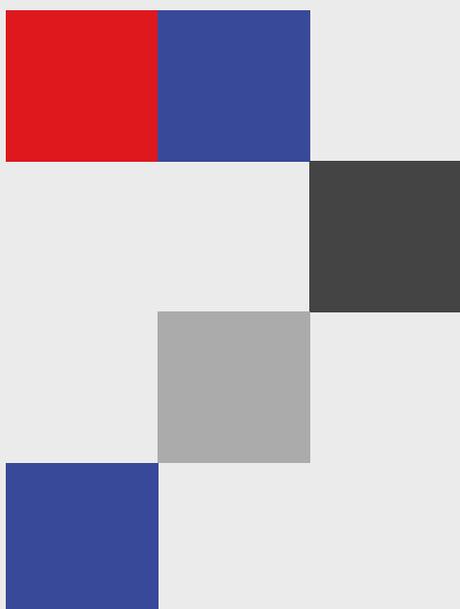
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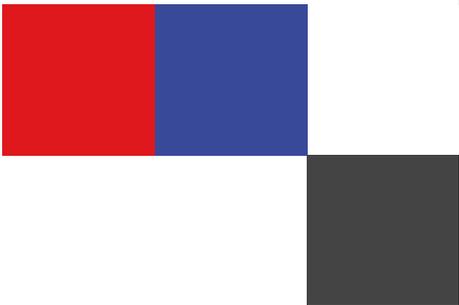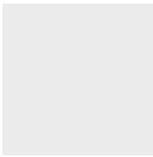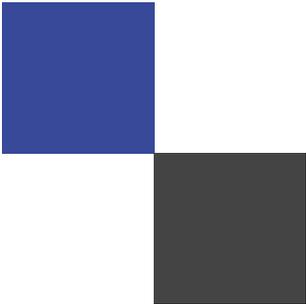
About UTS:ACRI

The Australia-China Relations Institute (UTS:ACRI) is an independent, non-partisan research institute established in 2014 by the University of Technology Sydney. Chinese studies centres exist in other Australian universities. UTS:ACRI, however, is Australia's first and only research institute devoted to studying the relationship of these countries.

In the past Australia's dominating economic relationships have been with the British Empire, the United States and Japan. Australia's most important trading relationship is now with China, a nation very different in governance, politics and values. As China's economy grows, so too does its strategic weight and the challenges and opportunities this presents to Australia.

UTS:ACRI seeks to inform Australia's engagement with China through research, analysis and dialogue grounded in scholarly rigour.
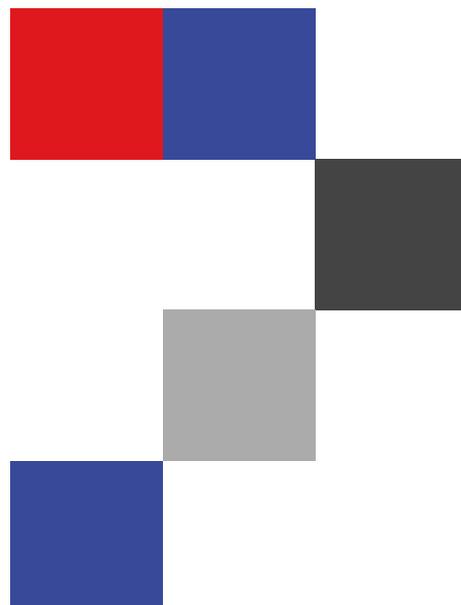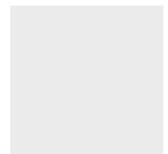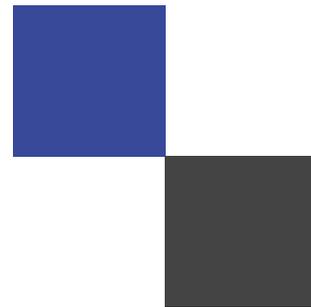
Appendix. Information about interview participants

Table 2. **Profile of interview participants**

ID	Field of research	Visa category	Visa status	Gender	Visa processing time
IP1	Economics	408	Pending	F	6 months
IP2	Economics	408	Withdrawn	F	14 months
IP3	Economics	408	Pending	F	6 months
IP4	Economics	408	Pending	F	12 months
IP5	Engineering and technology	500	Pending	M	15 months
IP6	Engineering and technology	408	Pending	F	12 months
IP7	Microbiology	500	Approved	F	10 months
IP8	Engineering and technology	408	Pending	M	23 months
IP9	Engineering and technology	500	Pending	M	10 months
IP10	Engineering and technology	500	Pending	M	16 months

ID	Field of research	Visa category	Visa status	Gender	Visa processing time
IP11	Social science	408	Pending	F	6 months
IP12	Engineering and technology	500	Pending	M	18 months
IP13	Engineering and technology	500	Approved	M	18 months
IP14	Engineering and technology	408	Withdrawn	M	10 months
IP15	Engineering and technology	408	Pending	F	12 months
IP16	Engineering and technology	408	Pending	F	12 months
IP17	Science	408	Pending	M	9 months
IP18	Engineering and technology (solar energy transfer)	408	Pending	F	10 months
IP19	Engineering and technology (management)	408	Pending	F	7 months
IP20	Economics and Finance	500	Approved	M	Same-day approval
IP21	Marketing	500	Pending	M	4 months
IP22	Artificial intelligence	500	Pending	M	12 months
IP23	Engineering and technology	408	Pending	M	6 months
IP24	Marketing	500	Pending	M	2 months

Endnotes

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