



Australian  
Chamber of Commerce  
and Industry

# TRANSCRIPT

**Event:** Andrew McKellar interview Steve Price, Australia Today.

**Speakers:** Andrew McKellar, chief executive Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Steve Price, host Australia Today.

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**Topics:** Staff shortages, foreign tourism, business travellers, international border closures, visa rebates, international students.

## E&OE

**Steve Price, host Australia Today:** Andrew McKellar is the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry CEO. He's called on an end for restrictions on international tourists and business travellers coming to Australia. Andrew, thanks for your time again. Thanks for hanging on.

**Andrew McKellar, chief executive Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry:** Good morning, Steve. Great to be able to talk to you.

**Steve:** I heard this morning that Queensland has opened its borders to unvaccinated international travellers. So who is the border in Australia now still closed to?

**Andrew:** There are still restrictions state by state and it's changing from day to day, as that most recent announcement shows. I'd have to clarify whether they're saying unvaccinated or vaccinated. I thought it was vaccinated.

**Steve:** I think you're probably right. I think that's my mistake. Vaccinated, yep.

**Andrew:** We're seeing Queensland moving more into line with where New South Wales and Victoria have gone. And I guess, ultimately, we do have to look to open the borders. I think we would fully understand at this point in time with the Omicron surge still going that there's some delay in that occurring but at a stage now where Australia has very high case numbers. The purpose of closing the borders loses its original intent. So we would say, at this stage, and as we move into living with the virus from an economic standpoint and there's been no health detriment, that we've got to look at opening up the borders. And from an economic standpoint, to get international tourists coming back in, to get those business visitors coming back in, this is going to be a huge boost for the economy at a time when we really need it. The risks now are as bad as they've been for almost the entire period of the pandemic.

**Steve:** I understand the Head of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness, Jane Halton, has agreed with your sentiments. As we understand it, if you are coming from Japan, Singapore, and Korea, you can come without a travel exemption, but there are still exemptions for people coming from places like Europe. And it wouldn't have helped too much yesterday, Andrew, with the United States telling American travellers not to come to Australia.

**Andrew:** And this is the thing, I mean, we will face intense competition to try and attract people here. I think we've gone through this whole Novak Djokovic debacle. We've got to restore confidence in Australia as an international destination. We've got to promote the fact that we have done a lot to protect the health of the country, but as we get in to a situation where it's no longer about zero COVID, the whole purpose of the restrictions that were put in place has gone by the wayside. So whilst it's I'm sure a step for people to think about at this point, we are coming very quickly to the point where governments have got to move to reduce or to remove those restrictions. I think addressing it for fully vaccinated people in the first instance should be the first step, but at some point we're going to have to open up fully. Now, if we need to have quarantine arrangements for a period for unvaccinated travellers, we've got to look at all of that. But this is the right thing to do.

**Steve:** Those visa changes announced by the Prime Minister yesterday, knocking off the charge for a visa, does that help?

**Andrew:** I think it's a small step. I mean, we are facing a lot of competition to get those international students back and there are about 125,000, 150,000 of those existing international student visa holders looking to come back into the country. We want to get them here so they can help with the labour shortages that we're facing at the moment. Equally, the international education sector, it's a huge industry for us, a huge export industry, about \$40 billion a year when it's going at full strength. Normally, we'd have 400,000 to 500,000

international students coming into Australia in a year. We're a long way from that at the moment but we've got to get back there. That's a critical export industry for Australia.

**Steve:** Hospitality's doing it particularly hard. A friend of mine put up job ads for 120 positions in a chain of restaurants he owns across Melbourne and Sydney. Did not get one reply.

**Andrew:** No, exactly. It is very tough in that sector at the moment. And they haven't had any of the concessions in terms of access to people who are close contacts but have no sign of infection that are testing negative. We would say that we've got to look at expanding that as quickly as possible because those sectors, much of retail, hospitality, restaurants, cafes, many small businesses are really struggling at the moment and it's a big risk to the economy if we can't start to address those areas quickly.

**Steve:** Have you been, just finally, watching the competition for workforce? I know when you look online at those job vacancy websites, I guess we are competing, are we, Andrew, with countries like New Zealand, Canada, the U.K. even, for workers?

**Andrew:** That's absolutely right. I mean, particularly countries like Canada have removed a lot of their restrictions more quickly. They are competing. So, for international students, huge competition, Canada, North America, parts of Europe, and so on, to get those people coming into the country. All the more reason we do have to start to think about these challenges. It needs to be a different mindset to what we've had for the past two years, but we've got to get back into the game and that will be a critical part of strengthening the Australian economy in the year ahead.

**Steve:** Are the politicians giving a confident enough, optimistic enough message, do you think?

**Andrew:** I think there are opportunities there that we should be grasping. I think we really struggled towards the end of last year to get these messages through. I don't know what it is, whether they're just being cautious in the run up to an election. But, look, we don't think they've gone far enough at this point. We're really urging both sides of politics to grapple with these questions and to ensure that we have the right plan as we struggle to get to a point where we are living with COVID, we're managing the health outcomes, and at the same time, really preparing to boost the economic situation as well.

**Steve:** Great to catch up. Thanks for your time.

**Andrew:** Thanks very much, Steve.

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