



Biometrics in Offshore Visa Processing

Frequently asked questions for agents

What is the Biometrics in Offshore Visa Processing Program (the program)?

The program is an Australian Government initiative that introduces biometrics collection into the offshore visa application process.

What are biometrics?

The term 'biometrics' commonly refers to measurable physical characteristics or personal behavioural traits that are unique to an individual such as fingerprints, facial structure, the iris or a person's voice.

Why is biometric data collection being introduced?

The Australian government is undertaking this program to strengthen Australia's national security by increasing its capacity to identify overseas applicants.

What biometrics will be collected? How will biometrics be collected?

Biometrics will be collected using a quick, discreet and non-intrusive process that captures a facial image with a digital camera and a 10-digit fingerprint scan with a digital finger scanner.

When will the program start? Which countries are included in the first stage of the program?

Biometrics collection will commence at selected locations from late 2010. The first stage of the program will include visa applications processed at Australian missions across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Locations will be announced as they are rolled out.

How will biometrics collection be implemented in the offshore visa application process?

Australia and the United Kingdom have signed an agreement to share a global network of Visa Application Centres with biometrics collection facilities.

What are Australian Visa Application Centres?

Australian Visa Application Centres are run by commercial Service Delivery Partners contracted to the Australian Government to provide visa application lodgement and biometrics collection services.

Does the Australian Visa Application Centre make a decision about visa applications?

No. All applications will be assessed and decided by the visa and immigration office at the Australian mission in accordance with Australian migration legislation and policy.

Will appointments be necessary for my clients to attend an Australian Visa Application Centre?

Yes. To avoid long waiting times, applicants are encouraged to make an appointment at an Australian Visa Application Centre to lodge their application and/or have their biometrics collected.

Please note that each person included in the visa application must attend the Australian Visa Application Centre in person to have their biometrics collected.

Will the Australian Visa Application Centre offer services in languages other than English?

Australian Visa Application Centres provide services in English and in the main language of the region. You can contact your relevant Australian Visa Application Centre for more information on languages spoken by staff.

Who needs to provide biometrics?

Applicants who lodge a paper-based visa application in selected locations, regardless of their nationality, will need to attend an Australian Visa Application Centre to lodge their application and/or provide biometrics.

For a list of included visa subclasses see Attachment A.

Who is excluded or exempt from providing biometrics?

Applicants who apply online and meet the requirements for an electronic visa or Electronic Travel Authority are excluded from the program

Some people are exempt from providing biometrics, for example Heads of State and accredited diplomats.

For a list of excluded and exempt people see Attachment B.

Will biometrics be collected from Australian citizens?

No. Australian citizens and permanent residents will not be required to provide their biometrics.

Will biometrics be collected from minors, incapable persons or those physically unable to provide a fingerprint scan?

Applicants under 15 years of age, incapable persons, or those who are physically unable to provide a fingerprint scan will only need to provide a facial photograph.

Minors above 15 and less than 18 years of age will need to provide both fingerprint scans and a facial photograph.

What is the definition of an incapable person?

The *Migration Act 1958* (the Act) defines an incapable person as someone who is incapable of understanding the general nature, effect and purpose of a requirement to provide a personal identifier such as biometrics.

The definition of an incapable person includes, but is not limited to, persons with an intellectual disability.

Can a parent or legal guardian be present when biometrics are collected?

Yes. If a client is less than 18 years of age or is incapable according to the Act, a parent or legal guardian will be asked to give consent and be present when the client provides their biometrics.

Will my clients be charged for the collection of biometrics?

No. The biometrics collection process will be free of charge; however your clients will still need to pay the visa application charge.

Australian Visa Application Centres may offer additional optional services, such as courier or photocopying, which your clients may choose to use on a fee-for-service basis.

Will biometrics collection increase the processing time for visa applications?

The introduction of biometrics is a new step in the visa application process, however in the majority of cases it will not increase the overall processing time.

Processing time may be reduced if your clients lodge a complete application, including supporting documentation, and provide their biometrics as required.

Will mobile biometrics collection devices be available?

No. Mobile biometrics collection facilities will not be available during the first stage of the program.

What will happen to my clients' biometric records?

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship (the department) values your clients' privacy. Facial images and fingerprint scans will be kept on secure departmental databases. Only authorised officers under the Act, as regulated by the *Privacy Act 1988*, may access clients' biometric records.

Who has access to biometric records?

Under the Act, the department is allowed to provide clients' biometrics for permitted purposes to certain Australian Government departments, agencies and countries.

The purposes may include verifying identity, combating identity fraud or determining if a client has a criminal history.

How long will biometrics be kept by the department?

The department retains client files, which may include information such as fingerprints and photographs, for over 80 years. Storage and disposal of biometric data is regulated by the Act and the *Archives Act 1983*.

How will my role as an agent change?

You may continue to prepare visa applications on behalf of your clients.

If you lodge applications on behalf of clients for any included visa subclass (see Attachment A), you will need to inform them that they will be required to attend an Australian Visa Application Centre in person to provide their biometrics. Clients will need to wait until they receive a letter from the mission requiring them to provide their biometrics before making an appointment at the Australian Visa Application Centre.

If you have arranged with your clients not to lodge their application in person at the Australian Visa Application Centre, you will need to make them aware that this might result in some delays in the processing of their visas.

Will I be able to lodge applications on behalf of my clients at an Australian Visa Application Centre?

As clients are expected to lodge their application and/or have their biometrics collected in person you will not be able to lodge on their behalf at an Australian Visa Application Centre.

Will I be able to accompany my client when they lodge an application at an Australian Visa Application Centre?

Australian Visa Application Centres will generally only admit clients who are lodging applications and parents or legal guardians of applicants under 18 years of age. If your client has special requirements, this should be raised with the Australian Visa Application Centre at the time of making an appointment.

How long does it take to have biometrics collected and to lodge an application?

Biometrics collection should only take a matter of minutes for each person. The average appointment at an Australian Visa Application Centre, including time for biometrics collection and application lodgement, is around 10 minutes.

Will it be possible to block-book appointments for clients with an Australian Visa Application Centre?

No. It is not possible to block-book appointment times. Bookings can only be made in the name of individual clients.

Will it be possible for me or my client to challenge a decision made on a visa application at an Australian Visa Application Centre?

Australian Visa Application Centre staff are not responsible for making decisions on visas. Enquiries about a decision should be directed to the immigration office responsible for processing the application. The contact details for this office will be in the decision letter provided to the authorised recipient.

My client is a regular visitor to Australia. Will they need to provide my biometric data each time they apply for a visa?

Yes. Each time your client applies for an Australian visa they will need to have their fingerprints scanned and photograph taken. If they visit Australia on a regular basis, they may consider applying for a multiple entry visa.

What are the benefits of collecting biometrics?

Collecting biometrics:

- better protects clients from identity fraud
- makes travel to Australia safer
- strengthens Australia's border security
- improves national security.

Are there restrictions on what my clients can wear for the digital photograph?

Yes. Your clients' faces must be clearly visible for a digital photograph to be taken. This means that they cannot:

- have hair that covers the eyes
- wear a hat or scarf or any other item that obscures the face, hair or neck (with the exception of religious head coverings detailed below).

Your client may also be required to remove their glasses when the photograph is taken. If your clients wear a head or neck covering for religious reasons, they must ensure that their face is clearly visible, from the bottom of the chin to above the eyebrows, including both cheeks. If possible, both ears should also be displayed.

Will my clients still need to provide finger scans if any of their fingers are missing, decorated or injured?

Yes. If your client has fingers missing, they will need to provide scans of remaining fingers. Staff at the Australian Visa Application Centre will make a record on the client file of any missing scans.

If your client has cut or damaged fingertips, an appointment with the Australian Visa Application Centre should be made when the injury has healed.

If your client has a temporary decoration, such as mehendi, you or your client should advise the Australian Visa Application Centre when making an appointment to determine whether a scan will be possible. In most cases, non-permanent henna tattoos do not affect the scanning process and fingerprint scans can be taken as normal.

My client has an injury to their face. Can they still apply for a visa?

If your client has a non-permanent facial injury, they are advised to wait until the injury has healed before having their photograph taken and lodging their visa application.

What if my client's religious beliefs do not allow them to have their fingers scanned or their photograph taken?

It is widely accepted that most religious beliefs permit finger scans and the taking of photographs for official and legal purposes.

Is the fingerprint scanning machine safe?

Yes. The fingerprint scanning machine complies with all relevant international and Australian safety standards. It does not use ink, liquids or chemicals.

Can germs be picked up from the scanning machine?

The glass scanning surface will be cleaned regularly to minimize the possibility of germs being transferred.

Will the provision of my client's biometrics slow down the process of obtaining a visa?

Biometrics collection is a new step in the visa application process that may increase processing times. Processing times may be reduced if your clients lodge a complete application and provide their biometrics at the same time.

What if my client refuses to provide their biometrics?

If your client refuses to provide their biometrics, they may be required in writing under section 46 of the Act to provide their biometrics, and if they do not comply with the requirement their application will be invalid.

Do my clients have to make an appointment with the Australian Visa Application Centre to lodge their application and/or provide their biometrics?

Yes. To avoid long waiting times, applicants are encouraged to make an appointment at an Australian Visa Application Centre to lodge their application and provide their biometrics collected

Where are the Australian Visa Application Centres located?

Australian Visa Application Centres will usually be located in the capital cities of the countries participating in the program.

Can my clients lodge their visa application at any Australian Visa Application Centre?

No. Visa application lodgement and biometric collection services will only be offered by Australian Visa Application Centres participating in the program.

Will my clients have to travel to attend the Australian Visa Application Centre? Will this increase my clients' costs?

Yes. Your clients will be required to attend an Australian Visa Application Centre in person. This travel will be at their own cost.

Can I still lodge a visa application on behalf of my client?

You may continue to lodge applications on behalf of clients at an Australian mission. However, if your client is applying for an included visa category included in the program (see Attachment A), they will need to attend an Australian Visa Application Centre in person to provide their biometric data. They will need to await a letter from the mission, before making an appointment to attend the Australian Visa Application Centre.

Can my client go directly to the Australian mission and lodge their visa application?

If your client is lodging a paper-based application for an Australian visa, they will need to attend an Australian Visa Application Centre in person to provide their biometrics. Therefore it will be faster for them to lodge an application and provide biometrics at an Australian Visa Application Centre. An appointment is required to lodge an application at an Australian mission.

Can my client lodge their visa application electronically? Do they still have to attend an Australian Visa Application Centre?

If your client is eligible for an electronic visa or Electronic Travel Authority and applies online, they will not need to attend an Australian Visa Application Centre to provide their biometrics. However, if their online lodgement is unsuccessful, they may be required to lodge a paper-based application and provide their biometrics at an Australian Visa Application Centre.

How does my client collect their visa?

Clients will be able to pre-arrange their preferred visa and passport collection method when attending the relevant Australian Visa Application Centre.

My client's visa application includes their family. Will all family members need to attend the Australian Visa Application Centre?

Yes. All persons included in the visa application must attend the Australian Visa Application Centre to provide their biometrics unless excluded or exempt (see Attachment B).

Can my client's family accompany them to an Australian Visa Application Centre?

Australian Visa Application Centres will generally only admit clients who have an appointment, and parents or legal guardians of applicants under 18 years of age. If your client has special requirements, these should be discussed with the Australian Visa Application Centre when the appointment is made.

Where can my clients direct their feedback about the service at an Australian Visa Application Centre?

They can provide direct feedback to an Australian Visa Application Centre through the complaints handling process offered by the Visa Application Centre.

Feedback regarding the services provided by the department can be directed to:
<http://www.immi.gov.au/contacts/forms/services/services-form.htm>

Or, you can post written feedback to:

The Client Feedback Coordinator
GPO Box 241
Melbourne VIC 3001
Australia

Will additional information be available?

If you would like more information on the program please visit: <http://www.immi.gov.au/allforms/biometrics>

ATTACHMENT A

List of visa subclasses that require biometrics to be collected from visa applicants

Permanent Family Visas	Temporary Family Visas
100 Partner 101 Child 102 Adoption 114 Aged Dependent Relative 115 Remaining Relative 116 Carer 117 Orphan Relative	300 Prospective Marriage 309 Partner (Provisional) 445 Dependent Child 461 New Zealand Citizen Family Relationship (Temporary)
Visitors and Other Temporary Visas	Student Visas
302 Emergency (Permanent Visa Applicant) 303 Emergency (Temporary Visa Applicant) 406 Government Agreement 411 Exchange 415 Foreign Government Agency 417 Working Holiday 419 Visiting Academic 421 Sport 423 Media and Film Staff 426 Domestic Worker (Temporary) Diplomatic or Consular 427 Domestic Worker (Temporary) Executive 428 Religious Worker 456 Business (Short Stay) 457 Business (Long Stay) 462 Work and Holiday 675 Medical Treatment (Short Stay) 676 Tourist 685 Medical Treatment (Long Stay) 771 Transit	570 Independent ELICOS Sector 571 Schools Sector 572 Vocational Education and Training Sector 573 Higher Education Sector 574 Postgraduate Research Sector 575 Non-Award Sector 576 AusAID or Defence Sector 580 Student Guardian

ATTACHMENT B

Persons and categories of visa applicants exempt or excluded from having their biometrics collected

Applicants lodging paper-based visa applications (as listed in Attachment A) in the selected participating countries will need to provide their biometrics (fingerprints and facial photograph) at an Australian Visa Application Centre unless exempt or excluded.

Persons Excluded from the First Stage of the Biometrics in Offshore Visa Processing Program

- Australian citizens and Australian Permanent Residents
- Applicants for an Australian Declaratory Visa or Australian citizenship
- New Zealand citizens
- Applicants who are eligible to apply for, and have been granted, an Australian visa online (including Electronic Travel Authority)
- APEC Business Travel Card (ABTC) holders

Persons Exempt from Biometrics Collection

- Sovereigns, Heads of State and members of their families forming part of their household, whether travelling officially or privately
- Heads of Government, Cabinet Ministers and their immediate family members travelling to Australia, whether travelling officially or privately
- Diplomats and consular officers accredited to Australia and their dependants (dependants must also be accredited and hold a subclass 995 visa)
- Senior government officials and senior officials of international inter-government organisations (including the Commonwealth) and accompanying family members
- Diplomatic Passport Holders visiting Australia on official business for their government and Diplomatic Couriers
- Special Purpose Visa (SPV) holders