



## Migrant Key Workers and the Impact of Covid-19 on Mobility in Australia

### Asia Briefing

#### Summary

- Health was the largest sector of employment for migrants from Asia, with a significant number of migrants also working in the hospitality sector.
- Key workers were almost half the Asian-born workforce.
- The number of temporary visas held by Asian migrants decreased by 38% from September 2019 to September 2020, from 1,127,315 to 698,142. As of September 2022, temporary visas held by Asian migrants have increased to 91% of pre-pandemic levels.

#### Impact of Covid-19 by Industry

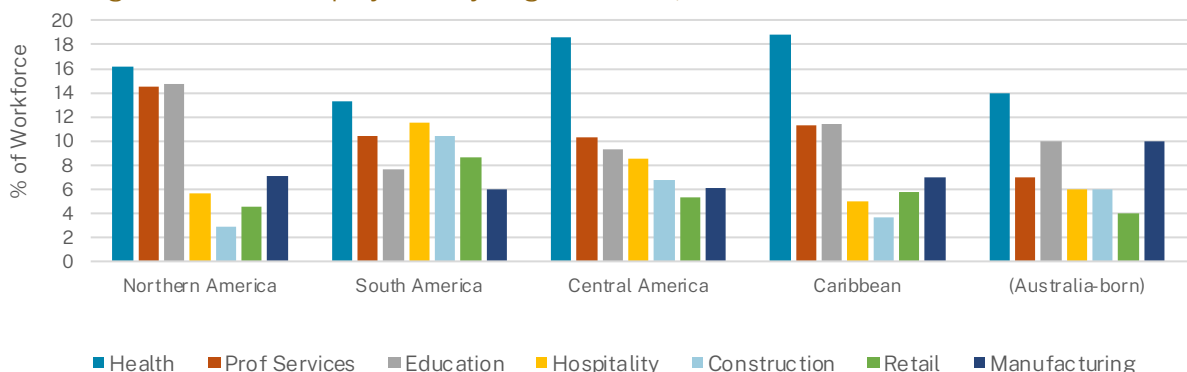
The Covid-19 pandemic reshaped global migration flows and the positions of migrants in Australian society (Guan, O'Donnell and Raymer 2024). As key workers in healthcare, agriculture and food services, migrants were essential to the national response to Covid-19 in Australia. At the same time, the economic shocks of the pandemic had significant impacts on migrants in a range of economic sectors and occupation. Undertaken during the disruptions of state lockdowns, the 2021 Census provides a unique dataset on the distribution of migrants from Asia across the economy during the employment shocks of the pandemic and before the 2022 recovery of the labour market.

The health care and social assistance sector was the largest industry of employment identified in the census by migrants from Maritime South-East Asia (23%), Southern Asia (21%), and Chinese Asia (14%). Professional services is the second leading sector of employment for workers born in Chinese Asia (12%) and Southern Asia (11%).

The Central Asian migrant workforce has a distinct employment profile compared to other Asian sub-regions, as 28% worked in the construction industry. Retail workers represented 9% of the migrant workforces for those born in Central Asia, Chinese Asia and Southern Asia.

Almost half of the migrant workers from Mainland South-East Asia are concentrated in manufacturing (16%), hospitality (15%), and health (13%), retail

Leading Industries of Employment by Region of Birth, 2021





Impact of Covid-19 and proportion of population employed across Australian industries, 2021



(9%) and other services (7%). Over a third of migrant workers from Japan and the Koreas are split between hospitality (18%) and the health sector (17%). Hospitality was the second-most affected industry during the early months of the pandemic, with 11% of Asian migrants and 6% of Australian-born workers employed in this sector. Six of Australia’s employment sectors, including health, education, professional services, retail, hospitality and public administration, were expected to recover strongly following the pandemic (Wood 2021). While 56% of the Australian-born workforce are employed in these industries, there is a similar share for Asian-born workers (58%).

Industries expected to have moderate post-COVID recovery employ 26% of Asian migrant workers, compared to 22% of Australian-born workers. Notably, a higher percentage of Asian migrants are employed in finance, administration and Information, media and telecommunications industries.

Three sectors projected as having weaker employment growth are manufacturing, construction, and mining. The former employs 8% of Asian migrants, and 6% of Australian-born workforce.

**Gender and the Covid-19 Crisis**

At the national level, female-dominated economic sectors, including retail, hospitality, education and health and social assistance industries, were the most negatively impacted by the pandemic. Women workers were also more exposed than their male counterparts to

casual or precarious employment and a greater burden of unpaid care during the pandemic (Wood 2021).

Health is the leading sector for women’s employment in the Australian economy. The sex ratio of the Australian-born health workforce is 25 men per 100 women. For Asian-born health industry the sex ratio varies from Japan and the Koreas (26), Mainland South-East Asia (27), Chinese Asia (33), Maritime South-East Asia (34), to Southern Asia (41). Given that healthcare workers constituted a large proportion of Australia’s key workers during the pandemic, Asian-born women were similar to Australian-born women in their role on the frontlines of the pandemic.

In the hospitality sector, the sex ratio ranged from 67 men per 100 women for those born in Mainland South-East Asia to gender balanced for workers born in Chinese Asia (94) to male-dominated for Southern Asian born workers (207 men per 100 women). Other male dominated sectors were transport, manufacturing and construction.



## Migrant Key Workers

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in countries identifying a range of occupations as key workers that were essential to their societies. Based on European Commission guidelines, researchers defined 17 occupation groups as key workers which enabled comparison across the OECD (Fasani & Mazza 2020). Covering a range of skills and sectors these included cleaners, teaching professionals, personal care workers, agricultural workers, transport workers, ICT professionals and engineers.

### Categorising Key Workers in Australia

Applying Fasani & Mazza (2020) to ABS (2022b)

Health Professionals  
Health and Welfare Support Workers  
Carers and Aides  
Farmers and Farm Managers  
Food Trades Workers  
Farm, Forestry and Garden Workers  
Food Preparation Assistants  
Skilled Animal and Horticultural Workers  
Road and Rail Drivers  
Mobile Plant Operators  
Design, Engineering, Science & Transport Professionals  
ICT Professionals  
Engineering, ICT and Science Technicians  
Education Professionals  
Construction Trades Workers  
Construction and Mining Labourers  
Machinery Operators and Drivers  
Machine and Stationary Plant Operators  
Cleaners and Laundry Workers

Based on these occupation categories, one third (36%) of Australia's key workers in 2021 were born overseas. The above occupations represented 40% of employment held by the Australian-born population and almost half (49%) of the occupations of the Asian-born workforce. Key workers were more than half of the migrant workers born in Central Asia (58%), Southern Asia (54%), and for Japan and the Koreas (50%).

Three groups of key workers that were a focus for Australian policy-makers during the pandemic were health-related occupations, food-related occupations and transport and technology.

Health professionals, health and welfare support workers, carers and aides represented 11% of the occupations registered by the Australian-born in the 2021 census. A fifth of Australia's health professionals (21%) and carers (20%) are Asian-born migrants. Health-related key workers were a third (33%) of Nepalese-born workers, and a quarter of the migrant workforce from the Philippines (24%) and Bhutan (24%).

Nineteen countries from the Americas had a higher share of health-related key workers than the Australian-born workforce. El Salvador and Nicaragua were over-

Key Workers by Country of Birth	Health	Food
<b>Australia</b>	11%	6%
<b>Mainland South-East Asia</b>		
Myanmar	16%	9%
Cambodia	7%	14%
Laos	6%	10%
Thailand	14%	20%
Vietnam	9%	10%
<b>Maritime South-East Asia</b>		
Brunei Darussalam	16%	3%
Indonesia	9%	10%
Malaysia	16%	7%
Philippines	24%	7%
Singapore	16%	2%
Timor-Leste	6%	13%
<b>Chinese Asia</b>		
China	10%	6%
Hong Kong	16%	5%
Macau	13%	6%
Mongolia	5%	3%
Taiwan	14%	11%
<b>Japan and the Koreas</b>		
Japan	17%	12%
South Korea	16%	12%
<b>Southern Asia</b>		
Bangladesh	16%	5%
Bhutan	24%	9%
India	16%	5%
Maldives	13%	1%
Nepal	33%	17%
Pakistan	11%	3%
Sri Lanka	15%	4%
<b>Central Asia</b>		
Afghanistan	9%	6%
Armenia	9%	3%
Azerbaijan	15%	1%
Georgia	15%	2%
Kazakhstan	11%	3%
Kyrgyzstan	15%	5%
Tajikistan	19%	0%
Turkmenistan	9%	0%
Uzbekistan	13%	4%



represented as health-related key workers with 19% of their migrant workforce in health-related occupations.

Food-related key workers included farmers, farm managers, food trades workers, farm workers, forestry workers, garden workers, food preparation assistants, skilled animal workers and horticultural workers. These occupations represent 6% of the Australian-born workforce. Asian-born migrants were 42% of Australia’s food trades workers, and 24% of Australia’s food preparation assistants. Food-related key worker occupations were particularly important for migrant workers born in Thailand (20%), Nepal (17%) and Cambodia (14%).

Asian-born migrants were also over-represented in other key worker occupations. During the COVID pandemic, 39% of ICT professionals, 26% of cleaners and 21% of road and rail drivers, were migrants born in Asia.

**Mobility and Temporary Migration**

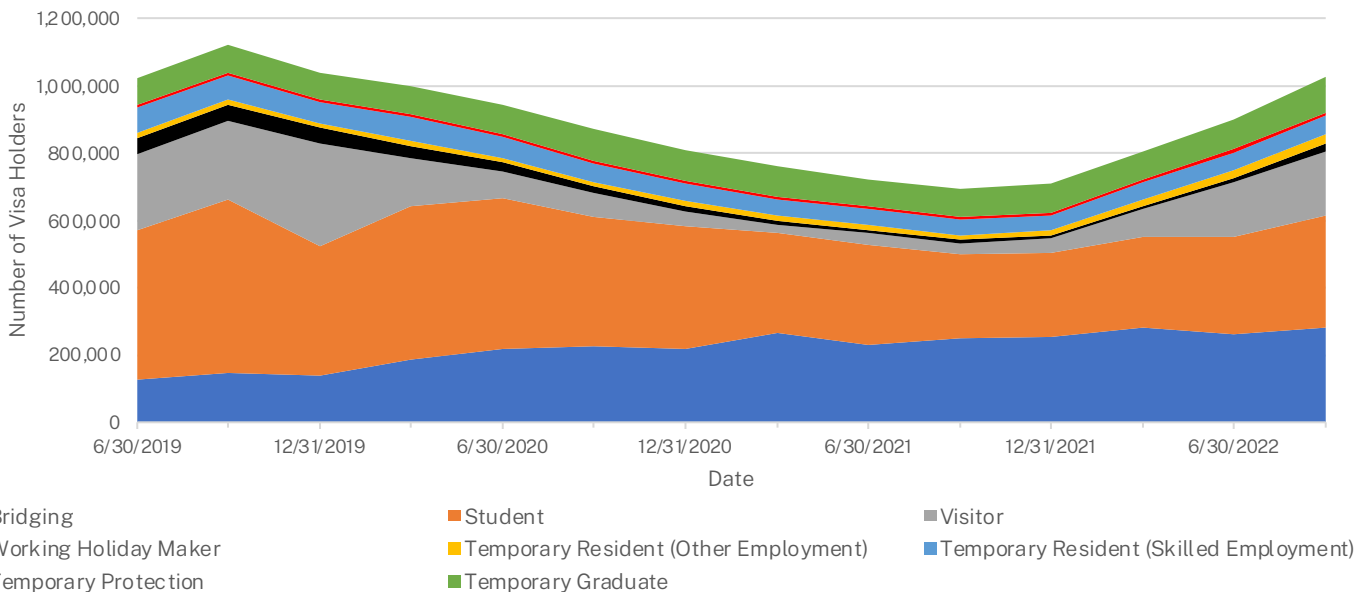
During the COVID-19 pandemic, global movement declined significantly. The number of temporary visa holders from Asia in Australia decreased from 1,127,315 in September 2019 to 698,142 in September 2021. In

the last year, this number has increased by 47% to 1,029,297.

Prior to the pandemic, 46% of temporary visas held by migrants from Asia were Student visas, 21% were Visitor visas and only 13% were Bridging visas. During the pandemic, the dominant visa types were Bridging visas (36%), Student visas (36%) and Temporary Graduate visas (12%). As of September 2022, the dominant temporary visas held by Asian people in Australia were Student visas (32%), Bridging visas (28%) and Visitor visas (18%). During COVID-19 there was a 123% increase in the number of Bridging visas held by people from Asia.

The number of people from Asia holding Temporary Employment Visas (89,619) is yet to return to its pre-pandemic level (95,087). However, from June to September 2022, there was a 12% increase in the number of people holding this visa type. The number of

Asian Mobility by Visa Category during the Covid-19 Pandemic



**Sources:**

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022a), Census of Population and Housing, 2021; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022b) ANZSCO - Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), “A year of COVID-19 through payroll jobs and wages statistics”; Home Affairs (2022), BP0019 Number of Temporary visa holders in Australia at 2022-09-30; F. Fasani & J. Mazza (2020), “Immigrant key workers: Their contribution to Europe’s COVID-19 response”; A. Gamlen (2020), “Migration and mobility after the 2020 pandemic: The end of an age?”; D. Wood et al. (2021), “Women’s work: The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Australian women”; Q. Guan, J. O’Donnell and J. Raymer (2024), “Changes in International Migration to and from Australia During the COVID-19 Pandemic”.

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