

KEEPING CONNECTED

**AUSTRALIA-ASIA
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT
AFTER THE PANDEMIC**



A new research collaboration mapping the challenges and opportunities for Asia-engaged young Australians

KEY FINDINGS

- Over 60% of the world's youth live in the Asia Pacific
- Australia-Asia youth engagement provides future leaders of - and contributors to - governments, business, education institutions and for-purpose organisations across our region
- This report explores four key enablers of Australia-Asia youth connectivity: tourism, international education, employment and civic engagement



- An evidence-based framework for an Australia-Asia Pacific Youth Engagement Index is presented in this report
- Australia-Asia youth volunteerism is a crucial component of civic engagement for which comprehensive participation data is not readily available, highlighting a need for regular information collection
- International education and civic engagement have driven Australia-Asia Pacific youth connectivity during COVID-19, but as borders re-open and young people resume travel, tourism and employment will regain importance within Australia-Asia youth engagement
- During COVID-19, over half a million student visa holders from the Asia Pacific engaged with Australian education
- Many Australia-Asia youth-led organisations offered new forms of engagement during COVID-19 which extended their reach to diverse groups of young people and assisted to maintain existing connections
- Youth leaders agree that returning to in-person engagement requires additional, multi-year funding to sustain operations and to provide certainty
- The pandemic has been a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Australia-Asia youth-led organisations to pause and reflect on their values and goals; to re-set; and to innovate and experiment with different types of engagement

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INTRODUCTION

This report explores the impact of COVID-19 on young Australians' engagement with youth from across Asia. It also highlights a selection of varied and creative solutions to sustaining youth engagement, many of which have been generated by youth-led organisations throughout the pandemic and amidst geopolitical tensions and ongoing travel restrictions.

Australia's engagement with Asia has faced substantial challenges since early 2020 arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and mobility restrictions. This has especially impacted young people from Australia and across Asia and the ways in which they have been able to engage with one another.

This is the first report in a series of three which have been commissioned by Asia Society Australia to explore technological, policy and program innovations and solutions to maintain people-to-people connectivity and youth engagement between Australia and Asia in COVID-19 contexts and restricted mobility. Subsequent reports will address links between Asia literacy and employability and the ways in which the talent of young people from Australia and across Asia can be championed.

The first part of this report presents an evidence-based framework for measuring and monitoring changes to engagement between young people from Australia and across the Asia Pacific, especially in relation to physical mobility. These Australia-Asia Pacific Youth Engagement Indicators focus on three key channels of engagement: tourism, international education and employment.

The second part of this report explores civic engagement between young people from Australia and across Asia and provides insights into the ways in which Australia-Asia youth-led organisations were affected by, and responded to, COVID-19. It draws on discussions from the [Generation Asia Young Leaders Forum](#) convened by the Asia Society Australia in August 2021 and a series of interviews with these organisations' leaders.

DEFINITIONS >

There are two key terms used in this report which are important to define from the outset

Youth

refers here to young people aged between 18 and 35 years.

Asia

is intentionally used as an umbrella term to cover the following regions, nations and economies:

- **Southeast Asia:** Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam.
- **Northeast Asia:** People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Mongolia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea and Taiwan.
- **South Asia:** Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
- In the Australia-Asia Pacific Youth Engagement Indicators, the **Pacific** is also included because of its growing importance to youth engagement. This is evident in the inclusion of the Pacific in the [New Colombo Plan](#), a signature Australian Government program that has the explicit goal of lifting knowledge of the 'Indo-Pacific region' among young Australians. In this report, **Pacific** uses the Australian Bureau of Statistics classifications of [Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia](#), and excludes New Zealand.

ASIA
TODAY

40%
OF THE
WORLD'S GDP

59%
OF THE
WORLD'S POPULATION

60%+
OF THE
WORLD'S YOUTH LIVE
IN ASIA PACIFIC

7 OUT OF 10
TOP TWO-WAY
TRADING PARTNERS

YOUTH CONNECTIVITY

Connectivity between young people from Australia and across Asia is essential. The rationale for greater engagement between Australia and Asia has not dissipated with the pandemic and geopolitical tensions surrounding China's rise. Economic and geostrategic forces are pushing Australia even closer to Asia, whilst cultural and societal settings seemingly work to separate Australians with people from across Asia.

As future leaders of - and contributors to - governments, business, education institutions and for-purpose organisations across our region, it is imperative that Australia-Asia youth engagement is supported. This report presents four key enablers and channels of youth connectivity: tourism, international education, employment and civic engagement.

Australia-Asia youth engagement complements existing diplomatic and business relationships, is underscored by fluency in new technologies and is driven by young people's desire to foster innovation and to develop exploratory people-to-people relationships that can grow into new ventures and collaborations.

Youth-led organisations whilst having a country-specific interest are driven by a common mission of creating a platform for youth to connect, have their voice heard as well as share their insights to a wider community... Youth-led organisations are places where young people come together to talk about global issues, develop networks, enhance personal and professional development, and create meaningful change within their communities and societies.

Tran, Bui and Nguyen, 2021



In their own words

Young people from Australia and across Asia see themselves as...

a significant demographic to the future of bilateral and multilateral relationships

emerging leaders

at a formative stage in relation to their future studies, careers and interests

the largest generation of changemakers

a bridge between nations

contributors to Australia's economy and economies across Asia

the future of society

wielders of demographic power

key drivers of social media production and consumption

early career professionals who are seeking experiences to shape their futures

Fluent in digital technologies

bringers of **passion, optimism, vibrancy** and **ambition** to current issues and relationships

able to address sensitive issues through informal dialogue

keen to travel, learn languages and to volunteer or undertake work experience in the region, with the available time to do so

The ability of youth to experience difference is not to be understated

Lucy Du

Australia-China Young Professionals Initiative

The role of youth is to remind a very broad group of stakeholders that there is so much more to bilateral and multilateral relationships than at the government-to-government level.

Mathew Benjamin

Australia-China Youth Dialogue

AUSTRALIA-ASIA PACIFIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT INDICATORS

The Australia-Asia Pacific Youth Engagement Indicators are a compilation of data sets that provide key insights into the engagement of young Australians with youth from across the Asia Pacific in three areas: tourism, international education and employment. The Indicators are unique in presenting for the first time an evidence-based assessment of trends regarding Australia-Asia Pacific youth engagement.

This first iteration of the Indicators presents the most recently available data on a range of measures, along with data from 2018 and 2019 to provide a pre-COVID-19 'baseline'. The Indicators also provide a framework which can inform a more fully-developed future Australia-Asia Pacific Youth Engagement Index. Future updates to these Indicators will enable the extent and pace of recovery to be tracked as young people across the region move through the impact of COVID-19 on their lives, studies and careers.

A note on the Indicators

These Indicators are a work in progress and do not capture the depth and breadth of youth engagement between Australia and the Asia Pacific. In addition to tourism, international education and employment, there are many other important components of youth engagement that were not able to be incorporated due to a lack of readily available data, including volunteering, social media engagement and outbound travel by Australian youth to destinations in the Asia Pacific. It is hoped that these Indicators spark ideas and that other data sets may be incorporated into a more fully developed Australia-Asia Pacific Youth Engagement Index.

These Indicators focus on data that is collected and disseminated regularly, usually on a monthly or annual basis. This includes data sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other cited government agencies. Of course, many other *ad hoc* data sets are available that highlight particular areas of youth engagement between Australia and the Asia Pacific, not all of which can be included here.

This Australian bias of these Indicators is noted, in that all data sources are Australian.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS >

The data presented in these Indicators clearly illustrates the impact of COVID-19 on the engagement of young Australians with youth from across the Asia Pacific.

Due to international border closures and travel restrictions in Australia and across the region at the onset of COVID-19 in early 2020, mobility for tourism and employment purposes profoundly declined. Indeed, in 2021, Australia reported negative net migration from Asia for the first time in at least 15 years and visitor arrivals from across the Asia Pacific were close to zero.

International education remained a primary mechanism for engagement between young Australians and youth from across the Asia Pacific during COVID-19. Whilst there were declines in international student enrolments from countries in the Asia Pacific in Australian education programs during 2020 and 2021, this was not as significant as declined engagement in tourism and employment. The buoyancy of international education has been fuelled by ongoing engagement with Australia by international students from across the Asia Pacific who:

- Remained in Australia for their studies or post-graduation
- Engaged in Australian transnational education programs
- Commenced or continued their studies remotely through online platforms as well as new virtual and physical 'study hubs'

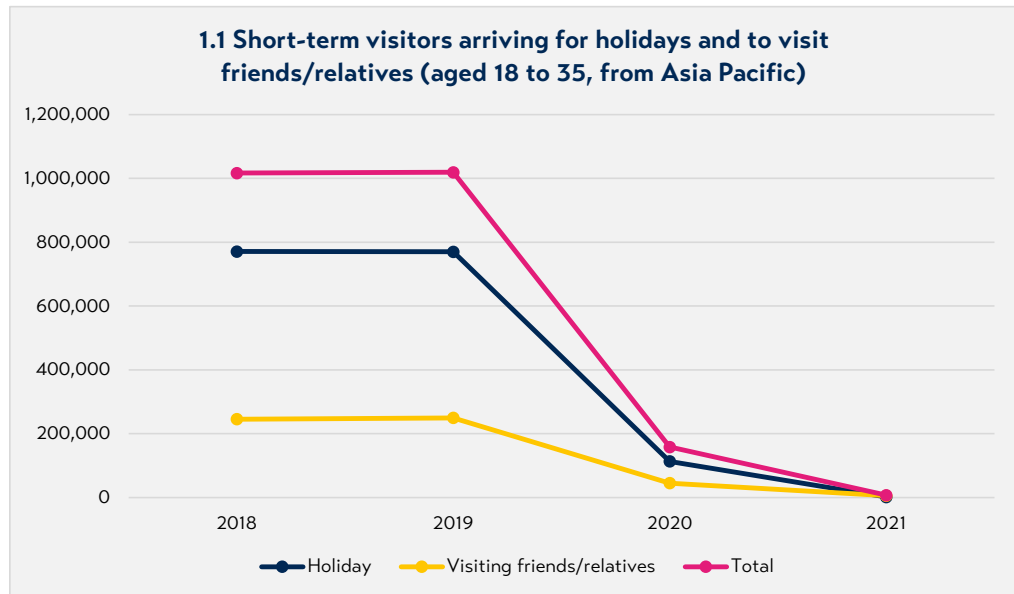
Furthermore, demand by Australian university students for learning abroad programs in the Asia Pacific also remained relatively strong and will drive the re-mobilisation of Australian students to the region in 2022 and 2023. There is also a cohort of Australian university students who are willing to engage in Asia Pacific 'virtual mobility' even when learning abroad programs that involve international travel re-commence.

This highlights the significance of international education in driving engagement between young Australians and youth from across the Asia Pacific during COVID-19. As borders re-open and young people can resume travel between Australia and the Asia Pacific, it is expected that youth engagement through tourism and employment will rebound.

PILLAR 1: TOURISM >

Tourism is an important catalyst in seeding and supporting relationships between young Australians and youth from across the Asia Pacific. Prior to 2018, the number of individuals travelling from Asia to Australia had been growing. COVID-19, however, has significantly and negatively impacted the number of young people travelling to Australia for holidays or to visit their friends or family.

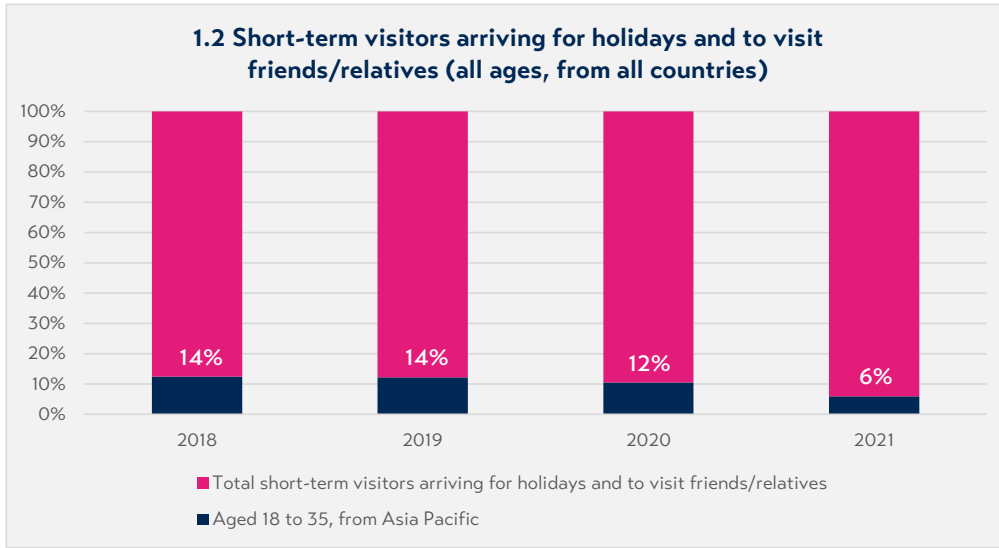
As expected, due to Australia's international border closure and travel restrictions across the Asia Pacific, the number of young visitors from the region significantly declined in 2020 down to almost zero¹. Australia's international border remained closed to tourists until 21 February 2022.



Source: Based on ABS data, Overseas Arrivals and Departures (ABS Cat. 3401.0), 2021.



¹ This data is sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and is used consistently in this report across tourism, international education and employment. Further information on the ABS' methodology is available [here](#).



Source: Based on ABS data, Overseas Arrivals and Departures (ABS Cat. 3401.0), 2021.

The above graph demonstrates the significance of the Asia Pacific’s youth market for Australian tourism. Before the onset of COVID-19, young people aged 18 to 35 from across the Asia Pacific constituted 14% of all visitors to Australia for ‘holiday’ and ‘visiting friends/relatives purposes’.

The value of international tourism from selected markets in Asia to Australia, across all ages groups, is shown below².

**1.3 International travel estimates
(selected Asian markets, year ending September)**

	2019	2021	Change
Visitors	4,337,013	22,933	-4,314,080
Nights ('000)	162,788	2,431	-160,357
Spend (\$ billion)	\$26.22	\$0.31	-\$25.91

Source: Tourism Research Australia: International Visitors Survey.

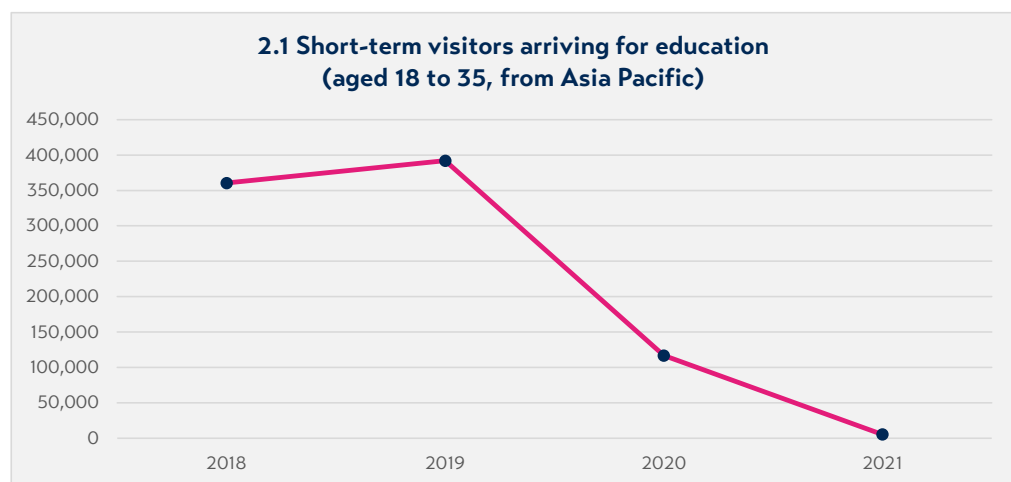
² This data is sourced from Tourism Research Australia for available countries. For a breakdown of available countries, see Appendix A. 2018 data is not available.

PILLAR 2: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION >

International education has continued to play a key role in youth engagement between Australia and the Asia Pacific. Although the delivery of education services was significantly disrupted from early 2020, new delivery modes emerged, including remote study through online platforms and offshore study hubs³.

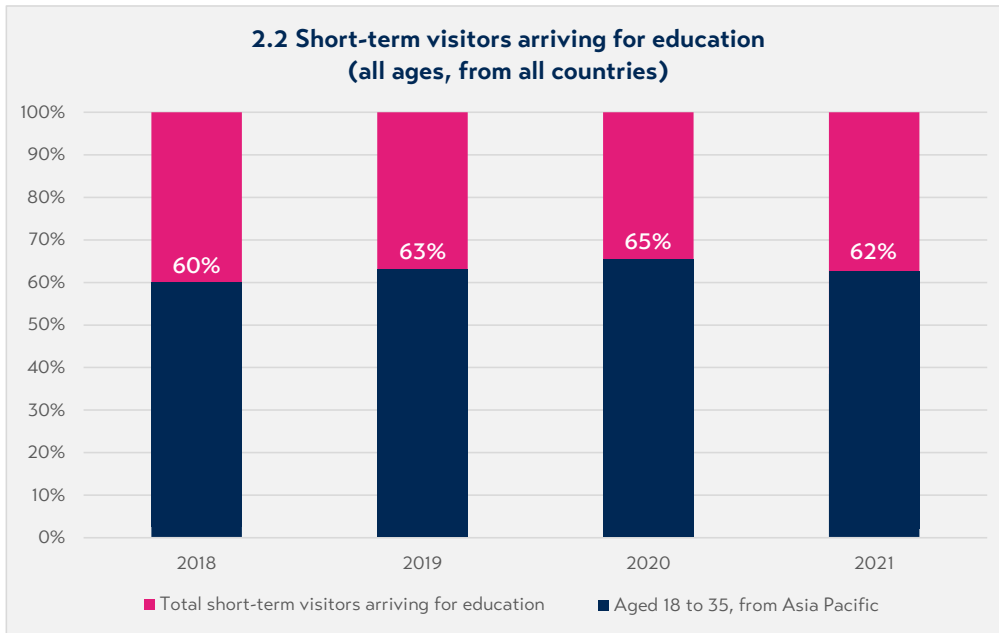
The engagement of international students from across the Asia Pacific with Australian education can be measured in several ways, including physical arrivals of students in Australia; enrolments in education programs, including those students who studied remotely from outside Australia during COVID-19; and student visas issued.

Similar to tourism and employment, the number of international students aged 18 to 35 from the Asia Pacific arriving in Australia plummeted in April 2020 and remained at very low levels throughout 2021. With the re-opening of borders to international students in various Australian states and territories from December 2021, these numbers have grown rapidly but may not recover to pre-pandemic levels until 2023 or beyond.



Source: Based on ABS data, Overseas Arrivals and Departures (ABS Cat. 3401.0), 2021.

³ Many international students from Asia who were studying in Australia at the onset of COVID-19 have not returned, or did not immediately return, to their home countries. This cohort of international students have experienced many significant challenges, including financial difficulties, isolation and mental health issues, which are further explored later in this report.



Source: Based on ABS data, Overseas Arrivals and Departures (ABS Cat. 3401.0), 2021.

The above graph shows the significance of the Asia Pacific to international education in Australia. Before and during COVID-19, young people aged 18 to 35 from the Asia Pacific represented more than 60% of visitor arrivals for education purposes⁴.

Despite travel restrictions, total enrolments of student visa holders from the Asia Pacific did not decrease as drastically as engagement in tourism and employment⁵. During COVID-19, over half a million student visa holders from the Asia Pacific engaged with Australian education. This includes those student visa holders outside of Australia in offshore campuses and partner-supported programs; those who stayed in Australia for all or part of 2020 and 2021; those who left Australia and continued their studies remotely; and new students who commenced their studies remotely with a view to studying in Australia once borders re-opened.

2.3 International student enrolments from Asia Pacific in Australian education programs

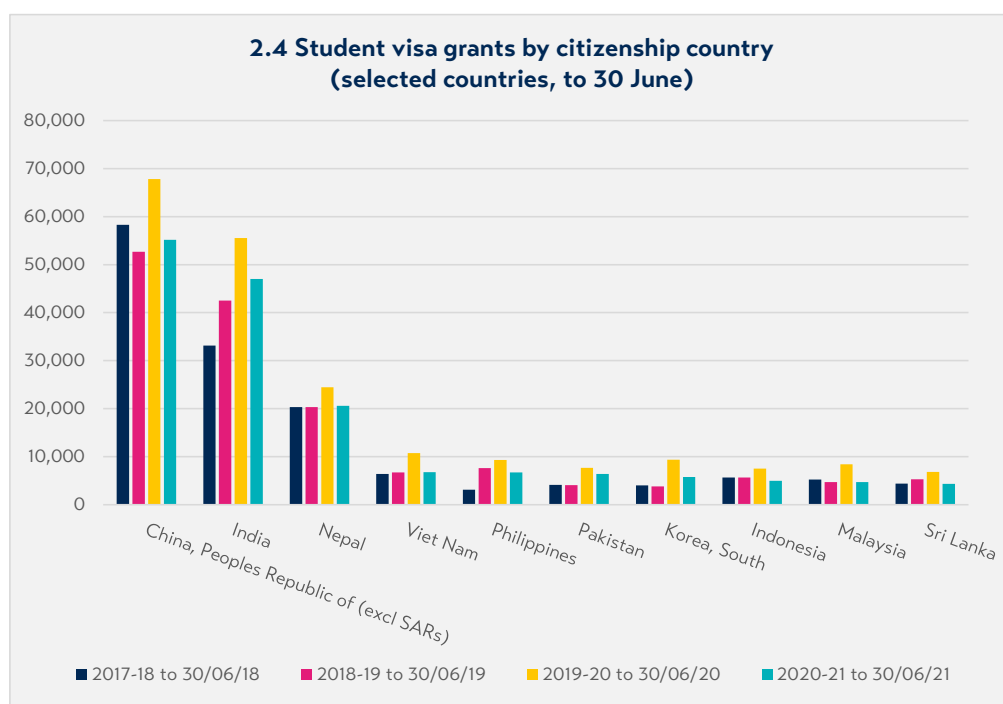
Region	2018	2019	2020	2021
Asia Pacific	682,111	754,546	711,105	584,820

Source: Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021.

⁴ This would be even greater if students aged under 18 were included in the data set. The primacy of markets in Asia, such as China and Viet Nam, for students aged under 18 who enrol in Australian education programs is [well-documented](#).

⁵ See Appendix B for a breakdown of these totals by source country in the Asia Pacific.

As indicated in the graph below, the number of student visas granted to international students from selected countries in Asia has remained steady over the last two years⁶. Throughout COVID-19, international students who enrolled in Australian onshore education programs whilst still physically located outside of Australia were encouraged to apply for a student visa. This enabled students to travel to Australia once borders re-opened and ensured that study undertaken outside of Australia was counted towards the qualifying duration for post-study work visas.



Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2021.

Case Study | Study Melbourne Hubs | China, India, Malaysia, Viet Nam

In response to international travel restrictions related to COVID-19, the Victorian Government established physical [Study Melbourne Hubs](#) in Ho Chi Minh City, Kuala Lumpur and Shanghai as well as a virtual hub servicing students based in India. These hubs have supported offshore international students studying with a Victorian education provider as well as alumni and prospective students. The hubs provide study spaces, meeting rooms and wireless internet to current students as well as enable the delivery of in-country activities. In China, Malaysia and Viet Nam, hubs services have been delivered in-person where possible, with the ability to pivot to online delivery if required by local COVID-19 restrictions.

Through the hubs, the Victorian Government has also delivered a number of programs from their '[Empowered Series](#)' that are also available to international students in Victoria, including:

- [Leadership Labs](#) which focus on building student leadership and personal development skills through social entrepreneurship, civic leadership and participation, decision-making and volunteering.
- [Future Founders](#) which strengthens student entrepreneurial and business skills; fosters trade and export links; and connects students to the start-up sector.
- [Career Catalyst](#) which focuses on students' return on investment and graduate outcomes through targeted employability skills development, professional networking and industry connections.

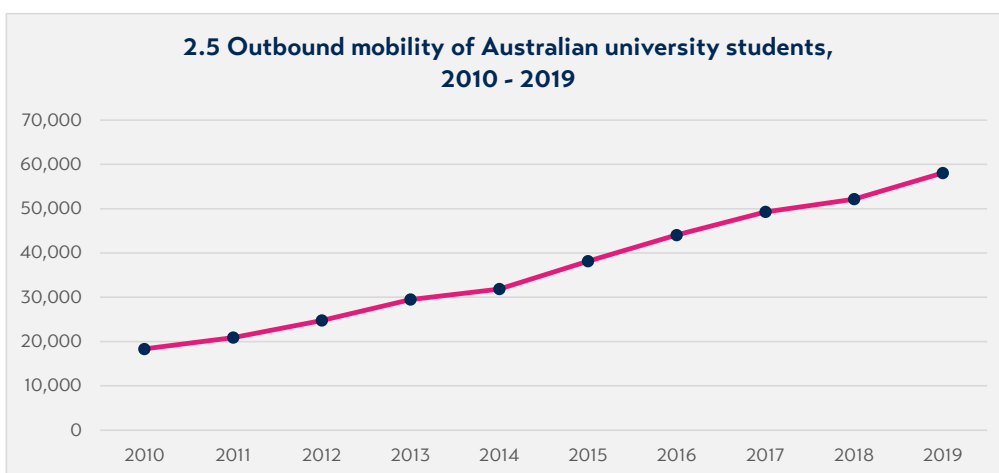
⁶ This data is sourced from the Department of Home Affairs and is not a comprehensive list of all countries in the Asia Pacific as defined in this report. This data also includes visas granted to international students who were already located in Australia.

Data Snapshot | Articulation agreements

Articulation and ‘recognised prior learning’ (RPL) agreements are examples of institutional connectivity which enable youth engagement. These agreements benefit young people by providing study pathways between institutions, usually facilitating access to Australian education. In 2021, according to [Studymove](#), there were 3,571 articulation and RPL agreements between Australian universities and education providers across the Asia Pacific.

Outbound mobility of Australian students to the Asia Pacific

Prior to COVID-19, learning abroad had grown significantly to become a distinctive feature of Australian university education. At the undergraduate level, Australia had become a world leader in learning abroad with a participation rate of almost 1 in 4 Australian undergraduate students (23%). In 2019, [49% of all learning abroad experiences](#) by Australian undergraduate students were in the Asia Pacific region.



Source: Australian University International Directors’ Forum (AUIDF).

Data Snapshot | Australia’s New Colombo Plan

The Australian Government’s [New Colombo Plan](#) (NCP) has been a primary driver for Australian participation in learning abroad programs in the Indo-Pacific since its inception in 2014. The NCP supports a range of learning abroad experiences through scholarships and mobility grants and has enabled outbound student mobility to new destinations across the region, particularly in the Pacific. In 2020 and 2021, Australian students funded through the NCP were able to participate in virtual mobility programs or to defer their participation until international travel resumed.

Australia’s New Colombo Plan				
	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of students	13,654	11,535	11,196	9,997
Funding (AUD)	N/A	\$46,524,635	\$43,722,360	\$34,816,430

Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021.

In surveys of Australian university students during 2020 and 2021 regarding their interest in outbound mobility, demand for learning abroad programs in destinations in the Asia Pacific remained steady, as shown below. Interest in virtual mobility appears to have peaked in August 2021, as shown in Figure 2.7, probably due to the renewed possibility of physical mobility with announcements in late 2021 regarding the easing of Australia's border restrictions. Nonetheless, demand for virtual mobility continues, including for destinations in Asia, despite travel restrictions being lifted.

Future iterations of these Indicators can also include metrics that focus on the experience of international students from the Asia Pacific in Australia⁷.

2.6 Australian university students considering learning abroad programs in Asia

August 2020	November 2020	August 2021	November 2021
29%	28%	34%	28%

Source: D Huckel and K Ramirez, 'Measuring the impact of COVID-19 on Learning Abroad, 2021', Studymove, 2022.

2.7 Australian university students interested in virtual overseas experiences

	August 2020	November 2020	August 2021	November 2021
All students				
Yes	16%	14%	24%	15%
No	50%	58%	38%	51%
Maybe, if there are still travel restrictions	34%	28%	38%	34%
Students considering destinations in Asia				
Yes	14%	12%	22%	18%
No	48%	57%	36%	44%
Maybe, if there are still travel restrictions	38%	31%	42%	39%

Source: D Huckel and K Ramirez, 'Measuring the impact of COVID-19 on Learning Abroad, 2021', Studymove, 2022.

⁷ For example, through the annual 'Student Experience Survey Report' produced by Quality Indicators for Learning Teaching and the annual 'International onshore VET qualification completer outcomes' produced by the National Centre for Vocation Education Research.

Case Study | Virtual mobility | International education

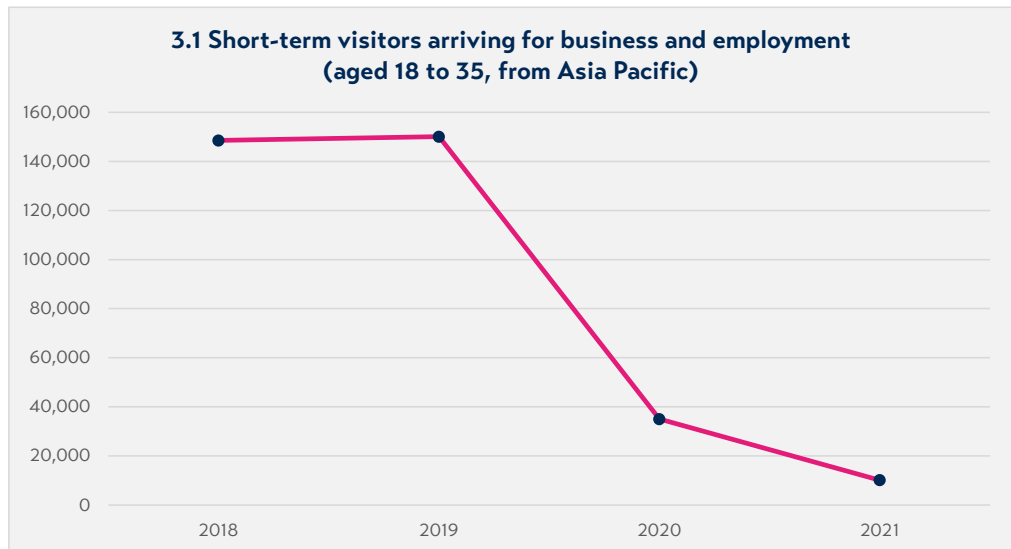
In response to the inability of most Australian students to participate in learning abroad programs during 2020 and 2021, a number of education institutions and third-party providers developed virtual mobility programs. An [early mover](#) was the Australian Consortium of In-Country Indonesian Studies ([ACICIS](#)), which initially pivoted seven programs to virtual delivery in late 2020 and further developed their portfolio and delivered additional iterations throughout 2021 and into 2022. ACICIS' virtual programs have included a public health study tour, Indonesian language short courses and professional practicum programs in agriculture, business, creative arts and design, development studies, journalism, law and sustainable tourism.

The majority of ACICIS students use New Colombo Plan mobility grants to partially fund their ACICIS participation and ACICIS played a key role in lobbying for changes to funding rules to support virtual mobility programs. Despite a short lead-time, over the 2020-21 summer break, 200+ participants enrolled in ACICIS' virtual programs, equivalent to nearly 80% of enrolments in comparable in-person programs in the previous year. Alongside burgeoning demand, [participant feedback was strong](#), with most participants recommending both the academic and work placement components of their virtual mobility program to future students.

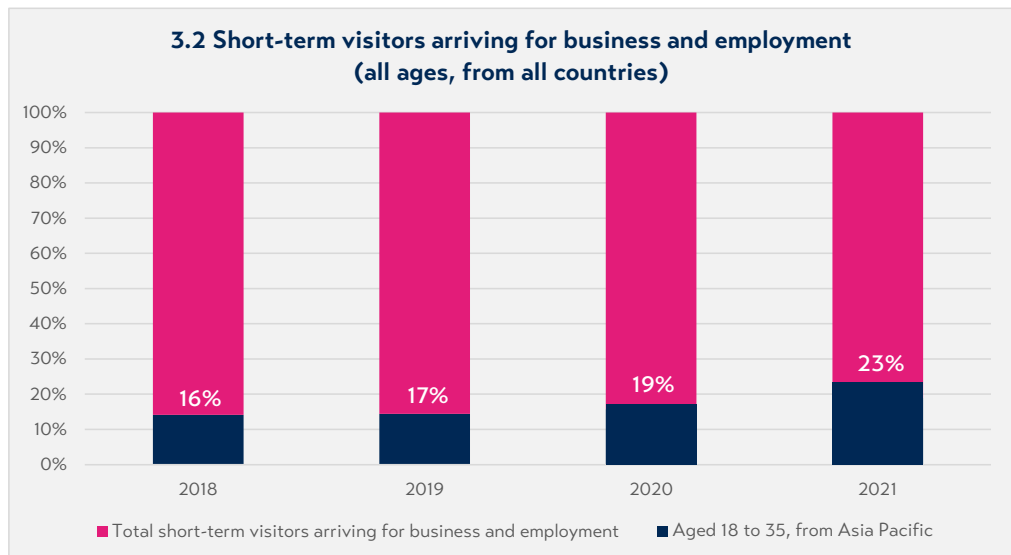


PILLAR 3: EMPLOYMENT >

Young people from Australia and across the Asia Pacific, particularly young graduates, engage with each other through employment and travel for business purposes. The number of young people from across the region travelling to Australia for employment and business-related travel fell to almost zero in 2020 as a function of Australia's closed borders, as shown below. Before COVID-19, there were nearly 150,000 young people from across the Asia-Pacific visiting Australia for business or employment purposes annually, comprising 17% of all such visitors, as shown in Figure 3.2.

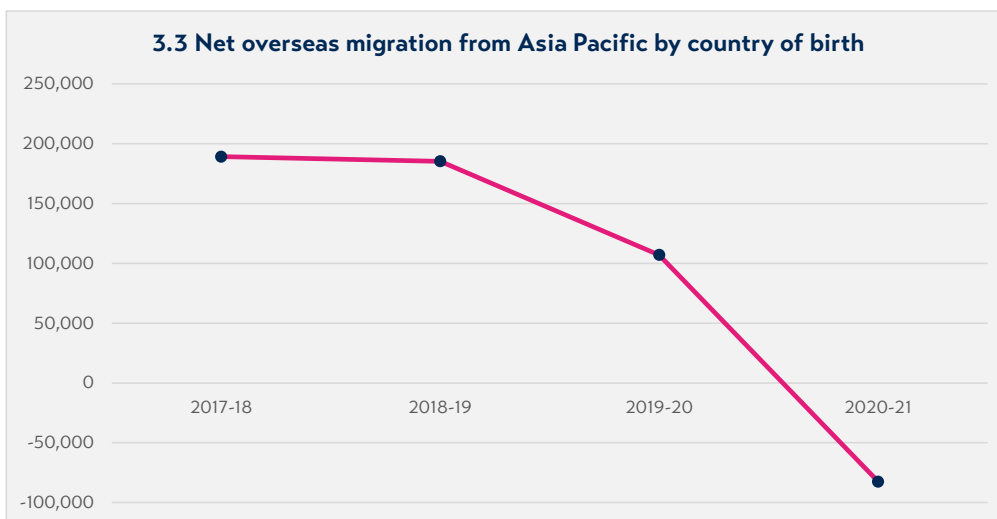


Source: Based on ABS data, Overseas Arrivals and Departures (ABS Cat. 3401.0), 2021.



Source: Based on ABS data, Overseas Arrivals and Departures (ABS Cat. 3401.0), 2021.

During COVID-19, young people from across the Asia Pacific who were already in Australia for employment purposes were also impacted. In 2021, across all age groups and all source countries, Australia experienced negative net migration for the first time since World War II. This means that more people departed from Australia than arrived in Australia during the pandemic. In 2020-21, Australia recorded a net loss of 88,800 people from the national population due to the impact of COVID-19. In 2018-19, prior to the pandemic, [Australia recorded a net gain of 241,300 people](#). The graph below presents net migration data for people of all ages from the Asia Pacific⁸.



Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2021. Further information on methodology is available [here](#).

Case Study | Virtual mobility | Internships

The Australia Indonesia Youth Exchange Program (AIYEP), established in 1981, focuses on providing Australian and Indonesian participants, aged 21 to 25, with opportunities to live, work and volunteer together across both countries. AIYEP is funded by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and receives support from Indonesia's Ministry for Youth and Sport.

In 2020 and 2021, AIYEP was delivered virtually. All participant selection interviews were conducted online, internship placements were virtual and, as a cohort, delegates never met or worked together in person. Through virtual delivery, however, an [innovative approach](#) to program design and implementation emerged. Internships were no longer bound by host city location, a more diverse range of speakers participated and a mentoring program was introduced, leveraging a diverse network of senior leaders from government, business and for-purpose organisations without geographic limitations. Participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive; despite not being able to physically travel to each other's country, participants noted strong learning and [intercultural competency gains](#). They developed meaningful connections and experienced other changes normally found in in-country work placement experiences.

⁸ For a full breakdown of countries across the Asia Pacific, see Appendix C.

In Australia, international students who meet certain eligibility criteria can apply for a ‘post study work visa’ (subclass 485), allowing them to stay in Australia post-graduation to seek or to undertake paid work. The graph below demonstrates that demand for this visa by international students from selected countries in Asia remains buoyant⁹.

3.4 Subclass 485 visas granted by selected citizenship country, to 30 June

CITIZENSHIP	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
India	14,026	19,420	19,662	17,052
Nepal	5,165	7,533	9,048	9,348
China, Peoples Republic of (excl SARs)	11,978	12,709	10,065	5,887
Sri Lanka	1,311	1,766	2,066	2,018
Viet Nam	1,989	2,326	2,179	1,833
Pakistan	2,917	2,838	2,433	1,751
Malaysia	1,505	1,726	1,631	1,265
Philippines	1,621	1,647	1,374	1,201
Korea, South	1,064	1,506	1,509	1,047
Bangladesh	981	1,063	993	968
Indonesia	1,101	1,185	1,224	956
Bhutan	322	554	800	845
Taiwan	465	626	677	598
TOTAL (SELECTED COUNTRIES)	44,445	54,899	53,661	44,769

Source: Department of Home Affairs, 2021.

A note on volunteering

In developing these Indicators and extensively reviewing available data, it was identified that at this stage, there is no consistent, reliable information to assess the engagement of young people from Australia and across the Asia Pacific in bilateral or multilateral volunteering programs and other volunteering opportunities.

Volunteering is a crucial component of civic engagement and it is important to note that all youth stakeholders interviewed for this report lead and contribute to bilateral and multilateral youth organisations as *volunteers*. Volunteering occurs via informal and formal arrangements, making it complex to measure. It is also noted that volunteering intersects tourism, international education and employment. For example, Australian youth participation in credit-bearing volunteering programs in the Asia Pacific may already be captured in the international education pillar of these Indicators.

There is a clear need to collect regular data about youth volunteering, at least on an annual basis, through stakeholders such as education institutions, for-purpose organisations and government bodies.

⁹ This data is sourced from the Department of Home Affairs and is not a comprehensive list of all countries in the Asia Pacific as defined in this report.

TOWARDS AN AUSTRALIA-ASIA PACIFIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT INDEX >

These Indicators provide a framework that can become the basis for a more fully-developed Australia-Asia Pacific Youth Engagement Index. An Index would synthesise these Indicators into a collective measurement of youth engagement between Australia and the Asia Pacific. It is this apparent simplicity of an Index which signifies its usefulness. An Index would not only allow for the regular monitoring of Australia-Asia Pacific youth engagement, but also enables other groups and audiences to use the Index as a benchmark or 'health check' of their own engagement levels.



AUSTRALIA-ASIA YOUTH ENGAGEMENT REIMAGINED

On 12 August 2021, coinciding with UN International Youth Day, Asia Society Australia convened the [Generation Asia Young Leaders Forum](#) to consider the ways in which young Australians were continuing to navigate shifting regional diplomatic relationships despite travel restrictions, create meaningful engagement online and be empowered to establish life-long connections with Asia in the context of COVID-19. The Forum was attended by over 600 young people and featured more than 15 speakers, including Jayathma Wickramanayake, United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth; members of parliament at the state and federal level; as well as representatives from the following youth-led organisations:

- [ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership](#)
- [Asia Society Australia's Gen A Young Leaders Network](#)
- [Australia-China Young Professionals Initiative](#)
- [Australia-China Youth Association](#)
- [Australia India Youth Dialogue](#)
- [Australia-Indonesia Youth Association](#)
- [Australia-Japan Youth Dialogue](#)
- [Australia-Vietnam Leadership Dialogue](#)
- [Young Australians in International Affairs](#)

... Policy responses, in Australia and across the region, must focus on young people... If we don't have a focus on young people, then we will see the consequences for decades to come.

The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP

The Forum focused on the impact of COVID-19 on young Australians and young people from across Asia, especially in relation to formative international experiences which have been so severely limited since early 2020. For example, the [International Education Association of Australia](#) estimates that between 120,000 to 180,000 Australian university students will 'miss out' on the opportunity to participate in credit-bearing learning abroad experiences due to COVID-19, half of whom would normally head to Asia.

The Forum heard that one of the after-effects of COVID-19 is the long-term impact on young people. If youth are not a focus of responses to COVID-19 and recovery initiatives, negativity and lost opportunities will be amplified as young people commence and progress through their careers.

During the Forum, representatives from Asia-Australia youth-led organisations noted that during 2020 and 2021, like many other professional, social and education-based activities, their programming moved online due to international travel restrictions combined with requirements to work-from-home and socially distance. Although disruptive, organisations generated creative responses, positive outcomes and other opportunities throughout the pandemic, including via online engagement.

To further explore this, in-depth interviews were held with leaders of Australia-Asia youth-led organisations – including formal youth dialogues, student groups and groups of young professionals – to explore their ideas about youth engagement during COVID-19. How did their organisations pivot online? How did they continue to attract and engage other young people? And what were their greatest challenges as well as their hopes for the future?

MOVING ONLINE >

Although many Australia-Asia youth platforms and dialogues are already digitally located and used social media and other digital technologies to meet, communicate and connect, during COVID-19 a wholesale move online was required. This included entire multi-day youth dialogues as well as shorter events such as hackathons, networking events, speaker series, book talks, language exchanges and cooking classes.

We had to transition our face-to-face engagement to be completely digital.

Clarice Campbell
*Australia-Indonesia
Youth Association*

Many Australia-Asia youth-led organisations were able to capitalise on this disruption and offer new forms of engagement, often extending their reach to different groups of young people and maintaining connections despite limitations on travel and in-person meetings. Many online events were highly subscribed and freed youth-led organisations from their physical geography, opening a more expansive landscape of engagement. For example, the Australia-Japan Youth Dialogue noted they were able to tap into a potential pool of speakers that, pre-COVID-19, they would normally not be able to approach.

Indeed, because of the low entry barriers to hosting online events, one youth leader commented that there was almost an oversupply of online events relevant to Australia-Asia youth engagement in 2020 and 2021. Another noted the negative impact of the loss of immersive programming for language learning, especially for Asian languages which use non-Roman scripts such as Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean and Thai. Many youth leaders detailed other challenges of online events such as time zone differences as well as 'Zoom fatigue', particularly for young people who were already spending much of their day online for work and study.

A common experience across these Australia-Asia youth-led organisations were the difficulties and challenges of replicating 'in-between' time and space in online event agendas for organic engagement as well as recreating the experience of place, that is, of another country and culture. These included the informal conversations that previously occurred

The outcomes didn't change, it was just the mechanism of how we hosted the dialogue.

Nick Le
*Australia-Vietnam
Leadership Dialogue*

during coffee breaks and bus trips in multi-day youth dialogues and the actual experience of travelling to and staying in another country. Most youth leaders expressed their enthusiasm to re-create opportunities for this type of engagement in post-COVID contexts and the deeper connections and knowledge it fosters.

Case Study | Australia-Japan Youth Dialogue | GATHER

Whilst online meeting platforms can be used to host youth dialogues and other events, they are often limited in terms of allowing for mingling before, during or after the event.

In response to this, the Australia-Japan Youth Dialogue (AJYD) used an online platform - [GATHER](#) - which allows hosts to create 'customisable spaces', similar to gaming environments. Attendees create avatars to navigate this virtual space. Avatars can interact, talk and engage in formal events such as a keynote addresses as well as in informal activities such as games. AJYD found that GATHER allowed attendees to interact in ways that replicated the social mingling that characterises physical in-person conferences and dialogues.

All youth-led organisations either adopted or increased their use of social media as a means of keeping connected throughout COVID-19. Many maintained their presence on public-facing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn to share information as well as established 'private' groups specifically for dialogue delegates, program alumni or leadership teams, including on WhatsApp and WeChat.

CHALLENGES AND CHANGE >

The Australia-Asia youth-led organisations interviewed for this report either have membership-based or alumni-based structures¹⁰. For most membership-based organisations, pre-COVID-19 structures had been established to meet the needs of physical and in-person events and programs, such as membership groups in particular cities, states, provinces or campuses. As engagement moved online through COVID-19, however, these groupings became blurred or redundant. For example, an in-person event that had previously been held in a particular city and attended by members who lived locally could now be held online and attended by any member regardless of their location. Local events suddenly became transnational and this improved their reach, access and inclusivity.

Australia-Asia youth-led organisations experienced different changes to their organisational structures as a result of COVID-19 and online engagement. The Australia-Indonesia Youth Association (AIYA) experienced a 30% increase in membership because of their new online reach and their ability to attract new members from outside of urban centres. Young Australians in International Affairs (YAIA) closed their state and territory branches and created a new national team for virtual programming.

The Australia-China Youth Association (ACYA), which normally draws members from Chinese international students studying on Australian campuses, noticed that these students were now joining ACYA chapters in China. Similarly, Australian students, who had been unable to participate in learning abroad programs in China, joined ACYA chapters in Australia whereas they would usually have become active in China-based chapters during their learning abroad experience.

Many Australia-Asia youth-led organisations reported an increased need for funding due to declining revenue throughout 2020 and 2021. Young Australians in International Affairs noted that their visibility had reduced as they had not run in-person events in Australia for two years. Other organisations found that online events were less appealing to sponsors than in-person events, resulting in declining sponsorship, despite online events still incurring considerable expenses and volunteer time.

Youth leaders agreed that returning to in-person events and dialogues will require additional funding and that there is a need for more multi-year funding sources to sustain operations and provide certainty. The Australia-Japan Youth Dialogue noted that COVID-19 had provided them with the financial impetus to seek and engage with new companies and potential corporate partners. Other challenges experienced by organisations included inconsistent internet connectivity across Asia, which hindered online engagement, and difficulties in attracting and engaging future volunteer leaders.

“We’ve heard a change in the voices represented - and that’s hearing much more diverse voices across the bilateral relationship. We’re also able to access people in rural and regional parts of Viet Nam but also in Australia. It has changed the way in which we advocate, now with deeper and richer insights... the voices that we are hearing now are if not better than what we have heard in the past.”

Elise Giles

Australia-Vietnam Leadership Dialogue

¹⁰ For example, the AASYP, AIYA, ACYPI, ACYA and YAIA are comprised of members, such as students and other young people with a specific interest in the respective bilateral and multilateral relationships. ACYD, AIYD, AJYD and AVLD are comprised of current dialogue delegates and dialogue alumni.

The Council of International Students Australia (CISA) reflected on the particular vulnerability of international students who remained in Australia during 2020 and 2021 and the hardships they faced. These include racism, financial difficulties, isolation and other mental health and wellbeing issues. Many of these international students and graduates could not physically meet their families or support networks for more than 18 months because of Australia's strict travel restrictions and were simultaneously under pressure to achieve academically and to successfully complete their study programs. CISA observed this has led to negative sentiments about Australia within international student cohorts in Australia¹¹.

Our increased membership base can be leveraged for funding, where other funding has dried up.

Clarice Campbell
Australia-Indonesia Youth Association

My main focus is on mental health.

Oscar Ong
Council of International Students Australia

COVID-19 served as an impetus for us to really think about our organisation and really think about impact, including which activities give value to our members.

Cameron Allan
ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership



¹¹ For more details on the impact of COVID-19 on international students in Australia, see R Lawrence and C Ziguras, [Student Voices: International students' experiences during COVID-19](#), International Education Association of Australia, 2021.

LEVERAGING ASSETS >

The strength of many youth-led organisations, particularly those focused on bilateral youth dialogues, is the breadth and depth of their alumni. This was leveraged during COVID-19 in a number of ways, including engaging alumni as mentors, speakers and contributors. Many alumni have progressed their careers and moved beyond 'youth' classifications. Their contributions embody the importance of people-to-people connections as their careers in government, business and for-purpose organisations now enhance other areas of bilateral and multilateral relationships.

Case Study | Australia-China Youth Dialogue | Alumni engagement

ACYD found that throughout the pandemic there was an oversupply of competing events. In response to this 'information overload', ACYD designed smaller, more focused 'virtual circles', aimed at attracting an audience of 30 to 40 and held four to five times throughout the year. Industry and community leaders were invited to participate in 'fireside chat' style events with ACYD delegates and alumni.

ACYD also convened an [Alumni Symposium](#), which was a larger and more formal event hosted over a week with a different speaker each night and virtual attendance of up to 150 alumni. The symposium also featured 'alumni roulette', in which attendees were randomly assigned to online breakout rooms to re-connect with others they knew and to engage with new contacts.

Case Study | Australia-Vietnam Leadership Dialogue | Vietnam Surges Series

[Vietnam Surges](#) is a collection of 12 online videos which provide new insights from local business leaders and innovators in Viet Nam to the Australian market. Key industries, trends and market intelligence are highlighted as well as case studies to inspire greater engagement from Australian business, to forge new networks and to spur investment and trade. The series features Australia-Vietnam Leadership Dialogue alumni from industries such as technology, education, agriculture, tourism and sustainable urban development who impart deep sectoral knowledge and provide practical insights.

Case Study | Australia India Youth Dialogue | Rapid Response Challenge

AIYD's [Rapid Response Challenge](#) sought to fund innovative solutions to issues arising within the bilateral relationship as a result of COVID-19 and proposed by AIYD alumni. In total, \$10,000 in funding was available and two alumni projects were funded:

- [Girls Take Over Parliament India and Australia](#) is a virtual, bilateral program in which 16 young women who are future political and policy leaders participate for two months. They are mentored by political leaders, participate in a crisis simulation using resources from the United Nations and receive policy briefs on youth-focused COVID-19 recovery efforts.
- [The Australian Indian Digital Creative Festival](#) brings together artists, poets, actors, writers and social change leaders and encompasses a competition to discover and spotlight new creative voices across both countries.

LOOKING FORWARD

This report has shown that despite causing deep-seated disruption to youth connectivity between young Australians and young people from across Asia and the Pacific, COVID-19 also seeded youth-led innovation in bilateral and multilateral youth engagement. Young people from across Australia and the Asia Pacific demonstrated their resilience and willingness to 'experiment' with new modes of engagement.

It is clear that innovation will only become more relevant as our world moves forward but youth-led innovation is not merely relevant, it is imperative if we are to recover better together from this pandemic.

Jayathma Wickramanayake
*United Nations Secretary-General's
Envoy on Youth*

Australia-Asia youth leaders recognise a growing need to foster forms of regional engagement that are not dependent on travel. Of course, many recognise the inherent value of travelling to other countries for gaining on-the-ground, in-person experience as well as intercultural competencies and language skills. Many, however, also emphasise that there are other ways to motivate young people to experience difference, to grow connections and to explore language learning and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Whilst Australia-Asia youth leaders have signalled their desire to re-convene in-person meetings and programs as well as to experience 'place' through travel and immersion, they do not necessarily want to revert to the way things 'used to be', pre-COVID-19. The pandemic has been a once-in-a-generation opportunity to pause and reflect on their organisational values and goals; to re-set; and to innovate and experiment with different types of engagement. There is a shared concern across Australia-Asia youth leaders that the opportunities presented by COVID-19 will be squandered if there is not sufficient reflection and the capacity to enact learning. For many, future engagement is hybridised and focuses on human capital. For all, there is a need to embrace innovation and change in Australia-Asia youth engagement in 2022 and beyond.

The next report in this series focuses on Australian youth and their diversity, their knowledge of Asia and the ways in which this connects to employment and future work patterns.

Travel isn't the be-all and end-all of engagement.

Deborah Zhang
Australia China-Youth Association

CONTRIBUTORS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contributors

The following individuals contributed to this report through Asia Society Australia's Generation Asia Young Leaders Forum:

- Cameron Allan, [ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership](#)
- Clarice Campbell, [Australia-Indonesia Youth Association](#)
- Elise Giles, [Australia-Vietnam Leadership Dialogue](#)
- Henry Lieu, [Australia-China Young Professionals Initiative](#)
- Mitali Mukherjee, [Australia India Youth Dialogue](#)
- Kanako Murase, [Australia-Japan Youth Dialogue](#)
- Mercedes Page, [Young Australians in International Affairs](#)
- Deborah Zhang, [Australia-China Youth Association](#)

The following individuals contributed to the report through interviews and follow-up correspondence conducted by the Research Team:

- Mathew Benjamin, [Australia-China Youth Dialogue](#)
- Clarice Campbell, [Australia-Indonesia Youth Association](#)
- Lucy Du, [Australia-China Young Professionals Initiative](#)
- Crystal Gordon, [International Education Association of Australia Young Professionals](#)
- Bodean Hedwards, [Australia India Youth Dialogue](#)
- Emily Knoblanche, [Asia Society Australia's Gen A Young Leaders Network](#)
- Nick Le, [Australia-Vietnam Leadership Dialogue](#)
- Erin McCullagh and Matthias Muehlbauer, [Australia-Japan Youth Dialogue](#)
- Oscar Ong, [Council of International Students Australia](#)
- Mercedes Page, [Young Australians in International Affairs](#)
- Mikaylie Page, [ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership](#)
- Deborah Zhang, [Australia-China Youth Association](#)



Research Team

The Research Team for this report was led by Dr Kirrilee Hughes, Research Manager, [International Education Association of Australia](#) (IEAA), and included:

- Dr Thomas Barker, Honorary Associate Professor, Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University
- Edmund Mollison, Student Intern, RMIT University
- Keri Ramirez, Managing Director, Studymove

Advisory Group

The Advisory Group for this project was chaired by Professor Ren Yi, IEAA Board Member, Chair of [IEAA Research Committee](#) and Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) at the University of Southern Queensland. Other members include:

- Jonathan Chew, Global Head of Insights and Analytics, Navitas
- Rebecca Cozens, PhD Candidate, Griffith University
- Eloise Dolan, Program Manager and Generation Asia Lead, Asia Society Australia
- Rebecca Hall, Commissioner for Victoria, South East Asia
- Philipp Ivanov, CEO, Asia Society Australia
- Dr Davina Potts, Director Future Students, The University of Melbourne
- Professor Ly Tran, School of Education, Deakin University

Victorian Government

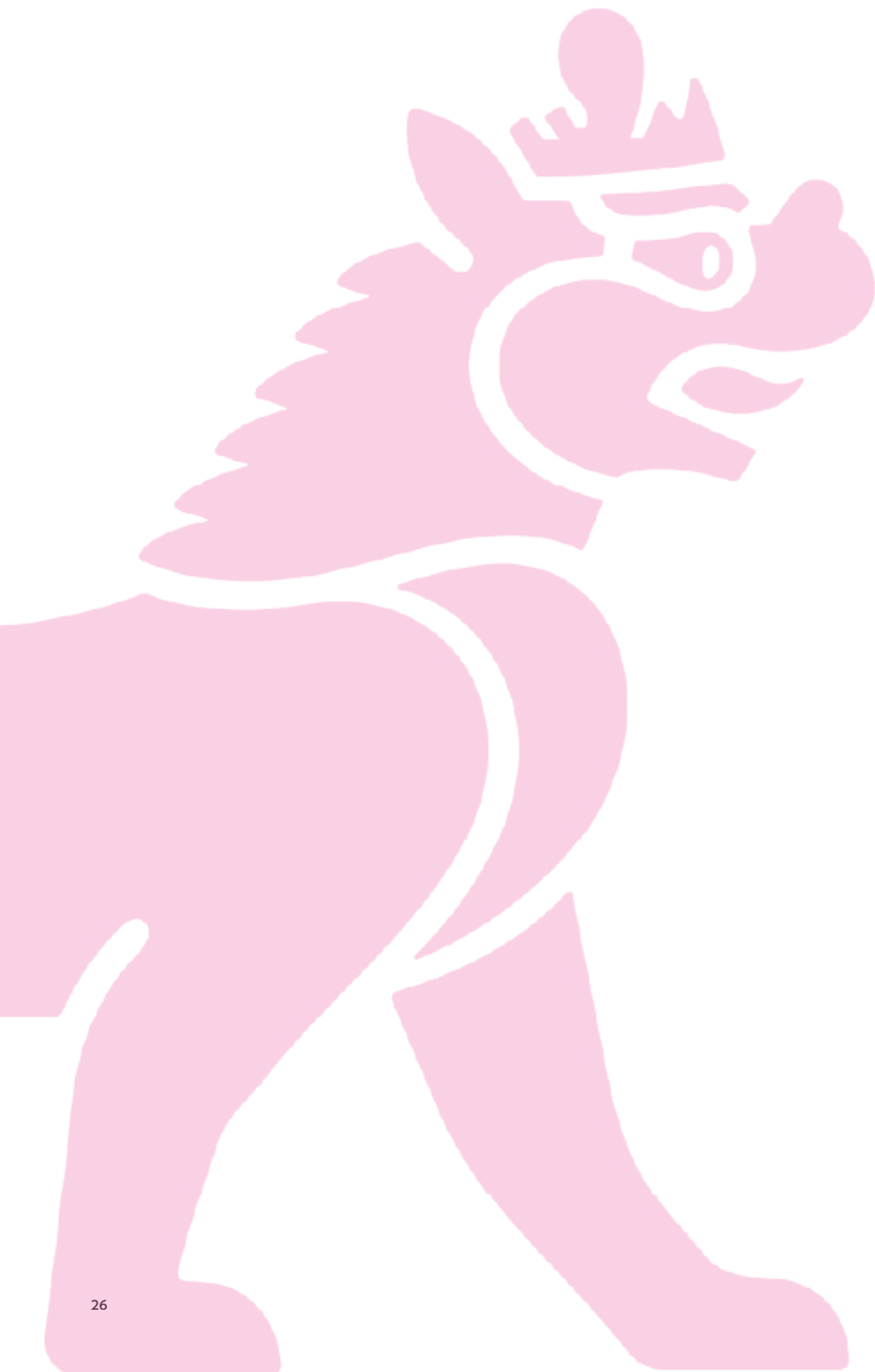
This project has been made possible through Asia Society Australia's foundational partnership with the Victorian Government.

Design

The design team for this project at Asia Society Australia comprises Majdina Widodo, Digital Content Producer, and Andrew Tijs, Associate Director, Communications.

Suggested Citation

Generation Asia Report 1: Keeping Connected, Asia Society Australia, 2022



APPENDIX

A. International travel estimates (selected Asian markets, year ending September)

Country of residence	Visitors			Nights ('000)			Spend (\$ billion)		
	2019	2021	Change	2019	2021	Change	2019	2021	Change
Japan	455,426	1,295	-454,131	10,892	122	-10,770	2,101	14	-2087
Hong Kong	284,036	1,980	-282,056	5,983	203	-5,781	1,373	26	-1,347
Singapore	416,828	3,759	-413,069	5,663	327	-5,336	1,528	48	-1,479
Malaysia	344,173	891	-343,283	7,292	92	-7,200	1,273	10	-1,263
Indonesia	195,137	1,531	-193,607	5,636	152	-5,485	819	15	-804
Taiwan	178,631	330	-178,301	9,851	46	-9,805	991	4	-987
Thailand	93,248	605	-92,643	4,367	76	-4,291	472	7	-465
Korea	250,281	659	-249,622	10,230	76	-10,154	1,491	8	-1,483
China	1,331,428	3,350	-1,328,078	58,395	473	-57,922	12,296	76	-12,219
India	363,996	3,462	-360,533	22,253	354	-21,899	1,786	44	-1,743
Other Asia	423,829	5,071	-418,758	22,225	511	-21,714	2,092	56	-2,036
Total Asia	4,337,013	22,933	-4,314,080	162,788	2,431	-160,357	26.22	0.31	-25.91

B. International student enrolments from Asia Pacific in Australian education programs

Region	Citizenship	2018	2019	2020	2021
Northeast Asia	China	255,031	259,996	229,601	192,978
	Hong Kong	16,634	15,535	14,904	13,616
	Japan	16,162	16,035	12,288	7,482
	Korea, Democratic People's Republic of (North)	2	2	3	4
	Korea, Republic of (South)	29,912	28,644	24,285	18,132
	Macau	1,021	991	898	742
	Mongolia	4,464	5,756	4,689	3,294
	Taiwan	18,725	18,434	15,572	11,463
Northeast Asia Total		341,951	345,393	302,240	247,711
Oceania	Other	5	5	4	2
	Fiji	672	931	1,101	956
	French Polynesia	0	1	3	2
	Kiribati	12	13	11	11
	Marshall Islands	1	0	1	1
	Nauru	28	36	41	37
	New Caledonia	0	0	1	0
	Papua New Guinea	1,344	1,364	1,278	1,050
	Samoa	15	11	14	20
	Samoa, American	1	1	1	0
	Solomon Islands	188	189	154	138
	Tonga	43	56	61	52
	Tuvalu	12	13	13	14
Vanuatu	33	29	27	21	
Oceania Total		2,354	2,649	2,710	2,304

B. continued

Region	Citizenship	2018	2019	2020	2021
Southeast Asia	Brunei Darussalam	369	310	292	255
	Cambodia	2,782	3,266	3,404	2,929
	East Timor	108	97	74	47
	Indonesia	20,835	22,638	22,297	18,781
	Laos	662	785	792	551
	Malaysia	33,542	30,652	25,554	18,944
	Myanmar	1,661	2,716	3,138	2,162
	Philippines	12,690	21,128	24,727	19,854
	Singapore	8,466	8,328	7,506	6,192
	Thailand	27,673	26,025	22,338	15,507
Viet Nam	29,867	31,729	29,500	24,263	
Southeast Asia Total		138,675	147,674	139,622	109,485
South Asia	Bangladesh	7,188	7,843	7,860	6,958
	Bhutan	2,912	3,924	4,232	3,429
	India	107,466	142,824	147,636	125,442
	Maldives	143	143	145	141
	Nepal	51,948	68,914	70,739	58,230
	Pakistan	16,500	19,064	19,672	16,921
	Sri Lanka	12,974	16,118	16,249	14,199
South Asia Total		199,131	258,830	266,533	225,320
Total Asia Pacific		682,111	754,546	711,105	584,820

C. Net overseas migration from Asia Pacific by country of birth

Region	Citizenship	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Northeast Asia	China	44,610	20,170	-18,590	-50,540
	Hong Kong	1,290	1,830	6,050	700
	Japan	-350	-320	-1,980	-1,560
	Korea, Democratic People's Republic of (North)	-10	-30	-30	-30
	Korea, Republic of (South)	1,930	-150	-4,330	-4,750
	Macau	40	100	-80	-150
	Mongolia	1,220	1,550	410	-820
	Taiwan	2,620	-130	-3,970	-3,470
Oceania	Fiji	1,400	2,240	2,210	770
	French Polynesia	20	0	10	-30
	Kiribati	80	50	100	190
	Nauru	-20	60	50	-20
	New Caledonia	-10	0	10	0
	Papua New Guinea	270	310	630	-180
	Samoa	1,400	1,260	1,340	490
	Samoa, American	20	20	20	0
	Solomon Islands	70	50	300	520
	Tonga	460	720	2,430	1,430
	Tuvalu	20	30	40	-30
	Vanuatu	0	230	2,450	1,100

C. continued

Region	Citizenship	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Southeast Asia	Brunei Darussalam	40	0	0	-40
	Cambodia	1,530	1,420	1,260	-260
	East Timor	-20	60	1,210	40
	Indonesia	3,370	3,860	3,560	-2,460
	Laos	190	170	230	-150
	Malaysia	9,590	3,230	1,520	-4,330
	Myanmar	1,580	2,480	1,750	-10
	Philippines	12,620	18,400	15,350	1,110
	Singapore	660	440	-1,380	-750
	Thailand	2,580	3,180	1,670	-1,510
	Viet Nam	7,250	7,880	7,470	-1,410
South Asia	Bangladesh	2,910	2,590	2,660	-630
	Bhutan	1,630	1,930	1,950	-130
	India	55,860	73,190	59,810	-11,640
	Maldives	10	0	70	-30
	Nepal	21,000	24,060	13,340	-2,280
	Pakistan	7,840	7,510	5,600	-1,060
	Sri Lanka	5,480	6,980	6,960	-910
	Total Asia Pacific		189,180	185,370	107,100

ASIA SOCIETY AUSTRALIA

Asia Society Australia is a business and policy think-tank and membership organisation dedicated to Asia. We are a national, independent, non-partisan, and non-political institution with a national centre in Melbourne, an office in Sydney, and programs accessible in Australia and globally through digital and face-to-face platforms. Asia Society Australia is a centre of Asia Society – a preeminent global non-profit organisation dedicated to Asia, founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, with centres in New York, Hong Kong, Houston, Los Angeles, Manila, Melbourne, Mumbai, Paris, San Francisco, Seoul, Sydney, Tokyo, Washington, DC and Zurich.

GENERATION ASIA

Asia Society Australia's Generation Asia strategic pillar is a commitment to spotlighting younger voices across public, business and government debate and engagement on Asia, recognising youth as a key driver of Australia's future success in the region. Through this work Asia Society Australia seeks to reimagine Asia literacy and empower the next generation of Australian leaders and young professionals to stay interested and engaged with the region, amidst restricted mobility, geopolitical tensions and economic upheavals.

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LEVEL 2, 77 SOUTHBANK BOULEVARD, SOUTHBANK VIC 3006 PH: +61 3 9686 9873
LEVEL 24, ANGEL PLACE, 123 PITT STREET, SYDNEY NSW 2000 PH: +61 2 9235 3171
ASIASOCIETY.ORG/AUSTRALIA, PROGRAMAUSTRALIA@ASIASOCIETY.ORG