



## International arrival caps and airline operations

To date around 19,000 Australians overseas seeking to return home have formally registered their intent to do so with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. However, available information suggests more than 100,000 Australians could be seeking to return home, which is consistent with the reported difficulties faced by many and the current backlog of passengers for international airlines. Assuming 19,000 are but a modest proportion of a much larger total, the international arrival caps<sup>1</sup> will need to be increased to support more orderly outcomes for passengers and international airlines than are presently occurring. Under the existing tight international arrival caps into Australia, with passenger numbers on many arriving international flights capped at about 30, it will likely take six months for international airlines to return 100,000 Australians home.

### How many Australians are still overseas but want to return home?

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, each month on average some one million Australians travelled overseas and returned home. The travel restrictions introduced from February 2020 rapidly reduced the number of Australians travelling overseas, with passengers progressively returning home. When people choose to return home varies, but largely depends on visa requirements, or personal and work circumstances.

The Board of Airline Representatives of Australia (BARA)<sup>2</sup> is unaware of any official figures that state how many Australians who are overseas are, or will be, seeking to return to Australia over the coming weeks. About 19,000 Australians have registered with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)<sup>3</sup>, but this could represent a modest proportion of the total, as many people may be unaware of the registration process or are yet to do so.

“Based on available data and discussions with international airlines, it is possible more than 100,000 Australians are overseas who are, or will be, seeking to return to Australia. There is a pressing need to have a more accurate total of how many Australians overseas are seeking to return home. As more Australians register their intent with DFAT the true situation should become clearer. This information is necessary to support sound reviews of the international arrival caps, which often limit passenger numbers to about 30 per flight,” Barry Abrams, Executive Director of BARA said.

<sup>1</sup> Restrictions on the number of citizens who can return home during the COVID-19 pandemic are unique to Australia, New Zealand and Japan. BARA understands Australia’s arrival international caps were introduced due to limited capacity to quarantine passengers.

<sup>2</sup> BARA represents 33 airlines, which provide 90% of all international passenger flights and carry most freight to and from Australia.

<sup>3</sup> See [https://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Hansard/Hansard\\_Display?bid=committees/commsen/b23b29ce-3dc6-4a8d-bee4-c230b2c9338e/&sid=0006](https://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=committees/commsen/b23b29ce-3dc6-4a8d-bee4-c230b2c9338e/&sid=0006)



## How have international arrival caps disrupted travel plans?

When, with little notice given to international airlines, tight international arrival caps into Sydney were introduced in early July, they caused severe disruption for passengers and airlines. One airline told BARA that it had to deny over 100 passengers from boarding at the airport. It also created a backlog of thousands of passengers for many airlines that had sold tickets to them but were no longer able to offer a seat. This means some international airlines are not selling any more tickets until the current backlog is cleared.

“Based on the current ability to return less than 4,000 Australians per week, often at only 30 passengers per flight, it would take some six months to cover 100,000 Australians overseas. If the current tight international arrival caps continue, it could be some people will be unable to return home before the end of 2020.

“International airlines have told BARA they’re continuing to receive many hundreds of requests for priority travel back to Australia on compassionate grounds. International airlines are effectively ‘triaging’ the many cases put to them in the context of an already long passenger waiting list,” Mr Abrams said.

## Are capped international passenger flights commercially viable?

International airlines have displayed a high level of professionalism in supporting Australia to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. As the remaining airlines maintaining Australia’s international passenger networks, they are doing so in an environment that is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate both commercially and operationally.

Operating international flights is expensive, costing \$8,000–10,000 per hour in fuel and crew costs alone. Costs also increase when flight schedules are disrupted through government-mandated changes to operating requirements and passenger restrictions that must be implemented with little prior notice.

“With passenger numbers on many arriving international flights capped at about 30, the cost per passenger equation becomes terrible for airlines and passengers. Commercial viability can become particularly problematic if strong outward passenger loads are also not possible. If the tight arrival caps continue, it will also ensure the limited outbound passenger market deteriorates,” Mr Abrams said.

## Can returning Australians come home in a more orderly manner?

State and territory governments will ultimately decide how many Australians overseas they are prepared to accept each day or week in managing COVID-19. This is complex, noting the growing media coverage of the difficult situation faced by many Australians overseas and ongoing issues with quarantine processes.

“An increase in the international arrival caps is necessary to allow Australians overseas to return home in a more orderly manner than at present by permitting more passengers on existing flights.

“Given the existing backlog of passengers, greater flexibility within caps would also mean international airlines are better placed to support hardship cases, as there are plenty of spare seats on every flight. International airlines will continue to work with all levels of government in finding workable solutions for returning Australian citizens home during the COVID-19 pandemic,” Mr Abrams said. **[ENDS]**