



More than 10,000 Australians to remain stranded overseas post-2020

International arrival caps have been confirmed for international airlines flying into Australia through to the end of the year, with flight arrivals to Sydney allocated at 30–35 passengers per flight. Unfortunately, these caps will result in more than 10,000 Australians being stranded overseas come 31 December. While the Board of Airline Representatives of Australia (BARA)¹ welcomes the increases to some arrival caps, we estimate that over 10,000 Australians who are currently on official airline waiting lists will not have an opportunity to return home, while airlines continue to fly into Australia with predominantly empty aircraft. These waiting lists represent only some of the Australians overseas seeking to return home, due to most international airlines halting ticket sales some months ago in an attempt to clear the existing backlog of ticket holders.

BARA firmly believes that the progressive re-opening of domestic borders presents an opportunity to bring home many more Australians overseas before the end of 2020 and into the early part of 2021. BARA understands that allocating this freed-up capacity to international flights could permit over 2,000 additional international arrivals each week, making a large difference to the Australians still overseas who currently do not have any prospects of returning home before the year's end.

Increases in permitted arrivals welcome but a large waiting list remains

There have been welcome increases in the total permitted arrivals each week, including the planned initial re-opening of Melbourne Airport, bringing permitted arrivals into the major capital city airports to about 6,000 per week from early December. It is not enough, however, to meet the demand that exists with an estimated 10,000 Australians on immediate waiting lists with international airlines. While airlines have maintained international passenger flight numbers into Australia's capital city airports, these aircraft continue to often land largely empty, despite airlines fully using the small arrival caps allocated.

"The number of Australians overseas seeking to return home before the end of 2020 but now without an option to do so far exceeds the immediate waiting list of at least 10,000. This is because to meet the tight international passenger arrival caps, which were implemented with very short notice, many international airlines were forced to stop selling tickets some months ago. This means that the estimated immediate waiting list of 10,000 Australians overseas after airlines have booked flights to the permitted caps, does not include those who have been unable to book a ticket or join a waiting list.

¹ BARA represents 33 airlines, which provide 90% of international passenger flights and carry most air freight to and from Australia.



“It is appropriate for the Australian Government to determine the passenger priorities for the permitted weekly international arrivals into Australia. But each choice within this tightly constrained environment ultimately must come at a cost to someone, which in the first instance is Australian universities, through the delay to international student arrivals,” Barry Abrams, Executive Director of BARA said.

Information about international and domestic quarantine capacity

While the permitted number of international arrivals each day or week is reported in considerable detail, far less is publicly known about domestic quarantine numbers and available capacity. Some information was provided in the *National Review of Hotel Quarantine*, which noted that domestic quarantine accounted for over one quarter of the total number of quarantined travellers between March and August 2020.

“Based on the data available to BARA, the re-opening of domestic borders could permit an additional 2,000 international arrivals each week through the reallocation of domestic quarantine capacity to international arrivals. The decision as to whether more Australians can return home prior to 31 December now ultimately rests with the individual state governments, who must decide if international arrivals can use the freed-up domestic quarantine capacity. For their part, international airlines are already providing more than enough flights and seats to return these Australians home,” Mr Abrams said.

Risk-based measures to overseas arrivals

BARA is advocating for a risk-based approach to international arrivals, consistent with a number of government inquiry reports.² Developing a risk based approach to international arrivals will allow more Australians currently stranded overseas to return home, while also allowing for business, student, and personal travel to restart while mitigating the risk of COVID-19.

“A risk-based approach to quarantine requirements with low-risk COVID-19 countries is consistent with the Australian Government supporting Australians overseas and its economic and social objectives focused on a staged and cautious approach to greater connectivity with overseas countries. It would also allow airlines to maintain a network of international flights to and from Australia until conditions support opening international borders across many countries without restrictions on the type of travel that can be undertaken.

“We need to move ahead with applying a risk-based framework, including the electronic processes that will be needed for the future of international travel. Member airlines are available and committed to working through the issues with all levels of government in Australia, their departments and health authorities, to ensure the sound application of a risk-based framework of international travel to and from Australia,” Mr Abrams said. **[ENDS]**

² See for example, the National Review of Hotel Quarantine (Australian Government) and COVID-19 Hotel Quarantine Inquiry Interim Report and Recommendations (Victorian Board of Inquiry).