

New Zealand and ASEAN at 50

Relations and Relationships: **50 years of people movements from ASEAN countries to New Zealand**

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Asia New Zealand
Foundation

Te Whītau Tūhono

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Contents

IN THIS REPORT

- 3** About the authors
- 4** Introduction
- 6** New Zealand-ASEAN relations and people movements: A background
- 11** Students from ASEAN countries
- 16** Migrants from ASEAN countries
- 29** Irregular migration from ASEAN countries
- 32** Tourists and other short-term visitors from ASEAN countries
- 35** Looking ahead
- 38** Conclusion
- 39** Sources



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Kate McMillan portrait, supplied by author.

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Alex Smith portrait, supplied by author.



Introduction

IN 2025, NEW ZEALAND and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) celebrate 50 years of formal dialogue relations. Much has changed in the past half century. Official celebrations will note the major milestones achieved along the way, namely the elevation of the relationship to a 'strategic partnership' in 2015, the further upgrade of the relationship confirmed in October 2025, and ASEAN's status as one of New Zealand's largest trading partners. For most New Zealanders going about their daily lives, however, the relationship is experienced via people — the temporary and permanent migrants from ASEAN countries that have fundamentally changed New Zealand's demographics and in turn New Zealanders' understanding of their place in the Indo-Pacific region. These people-to-people ties have, of course, been facilitated by the strengthening of diplomatic and trade ties, but they are also what ultimately give these relationships meaning.

This report was originally commissioned by the Asia New Zealand Foundation Te Whītau Tūhono, to commemorate the 40th anniversary by looking at one aspect of people-to-people links over the previous four decades: the movement of nationals from ASEAN countries to New Zealand.

That report discussed three broad categories of people movements: students, immigrants and refugees, and short-term visitors such as tourists, businesspeople and those visiting friends and family.

This updated version seeks to also capture the developments and movements over the past 10 years across these categories. Among the most significant are the rise and rise of New Zealand's Filipino population, the impact of Covid-19 across all aspects of people flow, changes to New Zealand's work visa schemes, and the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar which has led to growing numbers of refugees.

There has been a slow but steady increase in the number of people visiting New Zealand on a permanent or temporary basis from ASEAN countries since 1975. People movements from ASEAN countries to New Zealand have also greatly diversified since the 1970s. Where early flows were dominated by refugees from Laos, Cambodia and Viet Nam, contemporary movements include highly skilled professionals intending to live permanently in New Zealand, young people on working holiday visas, seasonal horticultural workers, full-fee-paying students, tourists, touring artists, musicians and scholars, refugees and business visitors. While previously overshadowed by much larger flows from China and India, the Philippines has been a key driver of New Zealand's net migration gains in recent years, with the number of citizens arriving from the Philippines now currently roughly equal to those arriving from China.¹

The Buivan family from Viet Nam in their Tasman Street shop in 1982. Many refugees from Southeast Asia settled in New Zealand between the 1970s and 1990s. Photograph taken by Don Scott. Dominion Post (Newspaper): Photographic negatives and prints of the Evening Post and Dominion newspapers. Ref: EP/1982/2248/4A-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.





Such flows have undoubtedly increased New Zealanders' understanding of Southeast Asia and increased awareness of New Zealand in Southeast Asia. Formal relations between New Zealand and the ASEAN countries are also enhanced by such relationships. Attesting to the importance of people flows as a way of increasing awareness and understanding of Asia, New Zealanders' self-assessed knowledge of Asia is at an all-time high, with friends and family typically the key sources of information for the places New Zealanders have the highest knowledge of, according to the 2024 and 2025 Perceptions of Asia surveys by the Asia New Zealand Foundation.² Visits to the country were also particularly important sources of information about Thailand, Indonesia and Viet Nam.³ The Foundation's findings have consistently shown that the more connected New Zealanders are with Asia and Asian cultures, the higher their knowledge of the region and perceptions of its importance. They also tend to view it more positively. This is nowhere more evident than in New Zealanders' shifting perceptions of the Philippines. While fewer than half of New Zealanders viewed the Philippines as a friend to New Zealand in 2017, 62 percent saw it as a friend in 2024.⁴ Such findings provide evidence for the view that people movements have a central role to play in enhancing political, economic and social relations between New Zealanders and people from ASEAN countries.

Most people movements from ASEAN countries to New Zealand currently occur at a bilateral level. There are, however, an increasing number of ways in which the processes of regional integration and people movement overlap. Both bilateral and ASEAN-centred people movements are considered throughout the report.

The report is divided into six sections. The first section on page six provides some context for the New Zealand-ASEAN relationship after 50 years of formal dialogue, as well as a brief overview of the drivers of people movements within the ASEAN region itself. The second section (pages 11 to 15) looks at New Zealand's experiences hosting ASEAN students in the past 50 years. The third section beginning on page 16 looks at patterns of permanent and temporary migration to New Zealand from the ASEAN countries during that time, including those of refugees.⁵ The fourth (pages 29 to 31) discusses the rare instances of irregular migration to New Zealand from Southeast Asia, while the fifth section (pages 32 to 34) presents data on the number of short-term visitors to New Zealand for the purposes of tourism, visiting family and friends, and doing business. The sixth section on page 35 looks ahead to how existing demographic and migration trends are likely to affect future people movements to New Zealand.

The key rupture of the past decade of course is the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw a near total shutdown of New Zealand's border and, in turn, of inbound migration and tourism. While the number of ASEAN citizens seeking work opportunities and longer-term stays in New Zealand have since rebounded, tourist and international student numbers are yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, as these sections illustrate.

Although the focus of this report is on the one-way movement of ASEAN nationals to New Zealand, it must be emphasised that people movements in the other direction will be of growing importance to the New Zealand-ASEAN relationship. ASEAN is a hugely diverse and dynamic region with much to offer and teach New Zealanders looking for experiences and opportunities abroad. For the New Zealand-ASEAN relationship to prosper, it is important that increasing numbers of New Zealanders become literate in Southeast Asian languages and cultures and develop an appreciation for the experiences and perspectives of those in Southeast Asian countries. This can be best achieved through spending time in the region.⁶ As these migration links shift the fabric of New Zealand's own demographic make-up, New Zealand also needs to consider how to best support the growing number of New Zealanders with Southeast Asian heritage to maintain their cultural and personal ties to the region. ●

New Zealand and ASEAN at 50

Relations and Relationships:

50 years of people movements from ASEAN countries to New Zealand

New Zealand- ASEAN relations and people movements: A background

“Since 1975 ASEAN has grown from its original five members to 11, and from an economically weak, turbulent region riven with confrontation between communist and anti-communist powers to a stable, prosperous region, albeit one also characterised by large economic disparities between member states.”



New Zealand-ASEAN relations and people movements: A background

New Zealand became a 'dialogue partner' of ASEAN in 1975. As several scholars have noted,⁷ New Zealand's early interests in ASEAN were primarily security related, although there was already a growing perception by 1975 that the ASEAN countries could be an important market for New Zealand goods following Britain's entry to the European Economic Community in 1973.

SINCE 1975 ASEAN has grown from its original five members to 11, and from an economically weak, turbulent region riven with confrontation between communist and anti-communist powers to a stable, prosperous region, albeit one also characterised by large economic disparities between member states.

New Zealand has, likewise, redefined its relationship with ASEAN during this period. Early inklings that ASEAN would emerge as an important trading partner have been confirmed, perhaps beyond even the wildest hopes of that time. ASEAN has consistently been New Zealand's fourth-largest trading partner over the past decade; the value of two-way trade between New Zealand and ASEAN in the year to March 2025 exceeded \$28 billion.⁸

Several initiatives in recent years demonstrate New Zealand's recognition of the increasing importance of its relationship with ASEAN, and its commitment to deepening that relationship. Among the most important of these was the October 2025 announcement that ASEAN and New Zealand have upgraded their Strategic Partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership by October 2025.⁹ An upgrade of the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA), which first came into effect in 2010, also entered into force in April 2025, while the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between ASEAN, New Zealand, and five other countries that have free trade agreements with ASEAN was signed in 2020.¹⁰ New Zealand also regularly participates in ASEAN-centred regional institutions such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). Further diplomatic acknowledgement of the importance of the relationship came with the appointment of a dedicated New Zealand ASEAN ambassador in 2014. Reflecting the emphasis the current Government has placed on the ASEAN relationship, Winston Peter's attendance at the East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 2025 marked the 36th visit to Southeast Asia by a minister of the current Government since February 2024.¹¹

People movements are an important component of New Zealand's economic relationship with ASEAN. Of the \$10 billion New Zealand earned in exports to ASEAN countries in the year to March 2025, almost \$2 billion was in services, including over \$1.2 billion in travel.¹² While international visitors to New Zealand, including those from ASEAN, remain below their 2019 pre-Covid-19 levels, arrivals from ASEAN countries are around 30,000 higher than they were in 2015.¹³ While total migrant arrivals are also yet to catch up to 2019 levels, ASEAN arrivals in the year to June 2025 were approximately 3,000 higher than the year to June 2019.¹⁴

“... if done well, people movements to and from ASEAN countries can play an important role in improving the lives of potentially many thousands of individuals, thereby also strengthening relations between New Zealanders and nationals of the ASEAN countries...”



Recognising the potential of people-to-people links to deepen and extend their relationship, ASEAN and New Zealand identified a 'People Strategy' as one of two key platforms of the Strategic Partnership announced in 2015 (the other being a 'Prosperity Strategy'). The 2015 People Strategy explicitly identified the experiences of mobile ASEAN nationals and New Zealanders as a tool of foreign policy.¹⁵ And, if done well, people movements to and from ASEAN countries can play an important role in improving the lives of potentially many thousands of individuals, thereby also strengthening relations between New Zealanders and nationals of the ASEAN countries, and between their governments. Students who have positive experiences in New Zealand, for example, will return home having formed strong personal relationships with New Zealanders and with an understanding of and appreciation for New Zealand's values and cultural norms. They have the potential to be ambassadors for New Zealand's political and economic interests in ASEAN, particularly if they attain leadership positions in their home countries or abroad. They are also, as Rod Oram noted back in 2011, a valuable talent pool for New Zealand employers, who can benefit from 'their business and language skills, their knowledge of their home countries and their ability to be bridges between the cultures of New Zealand and their home countries'.¹⁶ It is unsurprising then that developing people-to-people ties has remained a cornerstone of each New Zealand-ASEAN plan of action since.¹⁷

Temporary and permanent migrants to New Zealand likewise enrich New Zealand society by bringing with them linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, which can, when made accessible and comprehensible to a non-Southeast Asian New Zealand public, enhance New Zealanders' understanding of and appreciation for the ASEAN region. Skilled migrants from ASEAN countries not only fill important gaps in the New Zealand labour market but also bring valuable professional connections with colleagues in their home countries, thus increasing our connectedness with professional enterprises abroad. Alongside investments in the New Zealand economy, entrepreneurial migrants from ASEAN countries offer an understanding of the business practices and opportunities in their home regions. Oram argues that too often New Zealand businesses fail to 'tap into this rich vein of immigrant expertise, overseas connections, capital and entrepreneurial drive'.¹⁸

The fact that New Zealanders' perceptions of countries across Southeast Asia have warmed significantly in recent years amid growing migration from the region, particularly the from the Philippines, and record New Zealand travel to Asia, is testament to the impact of increased people-to-people connections.¹⁹

However, while the governments of New Zealand and the ASEAN countries see 'people-to-people' links as playing an important role in fostering positive political, security and economic links, the individuals who move are rarely themselves motivated by this goal. People move for a great variety of personal reasons, and will judge their travel, study, work and migration experiences on their own terms.

Governmental or industry language that suggests, even implicitly, that 'people movements' or 'people flows' are akin to movements of goods, services or capital, runs the risk of appearing to commodify such movements and should thus be used with caution. It is employed here with the caveat that people flows and movements are understood to be qualitatively different from those of goods, services and capital.

Before moving on to look at specific movements of people from ASEAN countries to New Zealand, it is worth looking briefly at the context in which people movements occur within Southeast Asia itself, some features of which have implications for New Zealand's experience with people movements from the region.

Southeast Asia has long been a hub of immigration and emigration. In 2020, over 40 percent of the world's cross-border migration originated in Asia.²⁰ A significant number of Southeast Asian migrants stay within the sub-region in contrast to declining intra-regional migration in many other parts of the world.²¹



The region includes primarily migrant-sending countries (the Philippines, Laos, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia) and others that are primarily migrant-receiving countries (Singapore, Brunei Darussalam), while Thailand and Malaysia, and increasingly Viet Nam, are both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries. Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia are also important transit countries for undocumented migrants from within and outside the region, and hubs of both people smuggling and human trafficking. The Philippines, Indonesia, Viet Nam and Myanmar are four of the world's largest labour-surplus countries.²²

Economic inequalities are a major driver of regular and irregular migration²³ within ASEAN. Higher wages and labour shortages in Thailand, for example, act as a drawcard for labour migrants within the Greater Mekong Region that includes Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia, which have all been sources of large refugee flows to Thailand in previous decades.

Much labour migration to Thailand is undocumented. Sustained levels of economic growth in both Malaysia and Singapore have seen both countries experience high levels of migration from the other ASEAN states, again, in the Malaysian case, characterised by a high level of irregular migration. Scholars have identified a third migration sub-system in the region as the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines—East Asia Growth Area, established in 1994, which sees high numbers of irregular migrants from the Philippines and Indonesia move through Malaysia's easternmost state, Sabah, on the island of Borneo. The Philippines has long exported its excess labour force to America, Europe and the Middle East. Human rights abuses and political persecution continue to drive significant refugee flows across land borders from Myanmar to Thailand and Malaysia — and in the case of the Rohingya, to Bangladesh — and by boat to Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

Climate change, and its intersection with economic inequalities, is expected to be another key driver of irregular migration from and within the region in the coming decades.²⁴ Southeast Asia is one of the world's most at risk regions when it comes to the physical impacts of climate change, with Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar included in the world's top 10 most at-risk countries.²⁵ Adding to the region's vulnerability is that many in Southeast Asia are reliant on the sectors likely to be most affected by climate change for their incomes, namely agriculture, forestry and fishing.²⁶ ASEAN is already looking to New Zealand and the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility as it prepares for this future reality.²⁷

Six Colombo Plan students from the Philippines admire the view of Wellington from the top of Vogel House. Archives New Zealand – Communicate New Zealand Collection AAQT 6401 W3537 53 A81048 R21435106.





Irregular modes of migration expose migrants to great vulnerability in the form of labour exploitation and trafficking, something that is even more true where the receiving state is unable or unwilling to accommodate and protect the rights of migrants. Legal, voluntary and planned migration, on the other hand, is most likely to lead to positive outcomes, especially if the receiving societies have the capacity and willingness to protect the human rights of migrants. In the case of ASEAN countries, much intra-regional migration still falls towards the irregular end of this spectrum.

For New Zealand, on the other hand, geographical isolation has made effective border control a reality. Nonetheless, the dynamics of irregular migration within Southeast Asia have the potential to spill over to New Zealand, as do the politics associated with such migration

New Zealand's need for workers and its strong labour protection laws and comparatively high salaries will ensure that it remains an attractive destination for skilled and unskilled migrants from the region.

But greater levels of migration from the ASEAN region to New Zealand bring with them the risk that people smuggling or human trafficking rings will become involved in such migration.

New Zealand agencies are well aware of these risks and the important middle-man role that recruitment agencies play in countries such as the Philippines and India, and the potential they raise for workers to experience exploitation when such agencies are used to secure work in New Zealand. Relevant government agencies are working to actively manage and address these risks and have implemented a series of measures discussed in the 'Temporary workers' section of this report. In addition, New Zealand has been part of regional responses to issues of irregular migration and asylum seeking. These developments are discussed further in the section on irregular migration.

These are challenging issues that require a clear understanding of the migratory pressures caused by uneven economic development, human rights abuses, climate change and natural disasters, conflict and environmental degradation. The provision of legal, planned methods of people movement can act as a release valve for such pressures. New Zealand has a role to play in both providing opportunities for legal entry to New Zealand and helping the ASEAN countries to increase their own capacity to manage regional migration and assisting with addressing the problems that lead to irregular migration. ●

New Zealand and ASEAN at 50

Relations and Relationships:

50 years of people movements from ASEAN countries to New Zealand

Students from ASEAN countries

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Students from ASEAN countries

New Zealand's most formative experience with people movements from Southeast Asia was perhaps that of providing education to young students who were part of the Southeast Asian 'Colombo Plan' — which was described as a 'cooperative venture for the economic and social advancement of the peoples of South and Southeast Asia'.²⁸

AROUND 3,500 STUDENTS from South and Southeast Asia came to New Zealand on Colombo Plan scholarships between the 1950s and 1970s,²⁹ with the largest number coming from Malaya, North Borneo and Sarawak (later the Federation of Malaysia). Others came from Viet Nam, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Burma, India and Ceylon (later Sri Lanka).³⁰ Their subject choices reflected the development needs of the region at that time: engineering, dentistry, agriculture, statistics, home science, accounting, railways, broadcasting, mining, telecommunications, tourism, architecture, commerce and arts. Qualifications in these subjects were often not available in the students' home countries.³¹

With the establishment of the Wellington English Language Institute in 1961, many Southeast Asian students also received English language training prior to enrolling in such courses.³² A number of privately funded students from ASEAN countries also arrived in New Zealand during this period, attracted by the educational opportunities and low student fees New Zealand then offered to international students.

Positive and enduring links forged during the 1950s, '60s and '70s between students from Southeast Asia and New Zealand have been frequently noted, often with reference to the advantages of these links for New Zealand's trade and defence relations with ASEAN countries.

Many such students went on to hold senior positions in government and business in their home countries, creating what Andrew Butcher has described as a 'deep reservoir of goodwill'³³ towards New Zealand in those countries. A poignant expression of this enduring sentiment was seen in 2011, when Christchurch suffered a devastating earthquake. A group of Vietnamese who had studied in New Zealand between the 1950s and mid-1970s, but who were then spread around the globe, rallied to raise money to support the relief effort. 'We spent our early years in New Zealand', they said, 'and have always had fond memories of the country and her people. We were given not only an education, but also hospitality and love by the people of New Zealand. We have been longing to have an opportunity to do something to express our love and gratitude to the New Zealand people who kindly and generously helped us in our education and training and also instilled in us a sense of personal responsibility.'³⁴

Such stories feed a commonly held view that Colombo Plan-era scholarships and foreign student admissions were a form of development aid that paid generous foreign policy dividends. However, with the introduction of a policy in 1989 that allowed New Zealand educational institutions to charge international students much higher fees than domestic students, 'education as aid' largely gave way to 'education as trade'.³⁵ The more overtly instrumental policy of 'export education' has seen the provision of education to foreign students become a key export industry — New Zealand's fifth largest prior to the coronavirus pandemic. New Zealand's international education was valued at over \$3.6 billion in the 2024 financial year, primarily from international students in New Zealand.³⁶ In 2024, the National-led government announced a goal to double the value of export education to \$7.2 billion within the next decade.³⁷

The goal comes as the sector continues its post-pandemic recovery. The pandemic and border closures saw international student enrolments plummet to record lows. By the time the border re-opened in July 2021, there were fewer than 15,000 international students holding valid study visas in the country, down from more than 115,000 in 2019.³⁸ The recovery has been uneven across the sector: while 2024 saw the number of international students studying at New Zealand universities return to their 2019 levels, 2024 international enrolments in primary and secondary schools, English language schools, private training establishments (PTEs) and Te Pūkenga – New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology were all well below pre-Covid-19 levels.³⁹

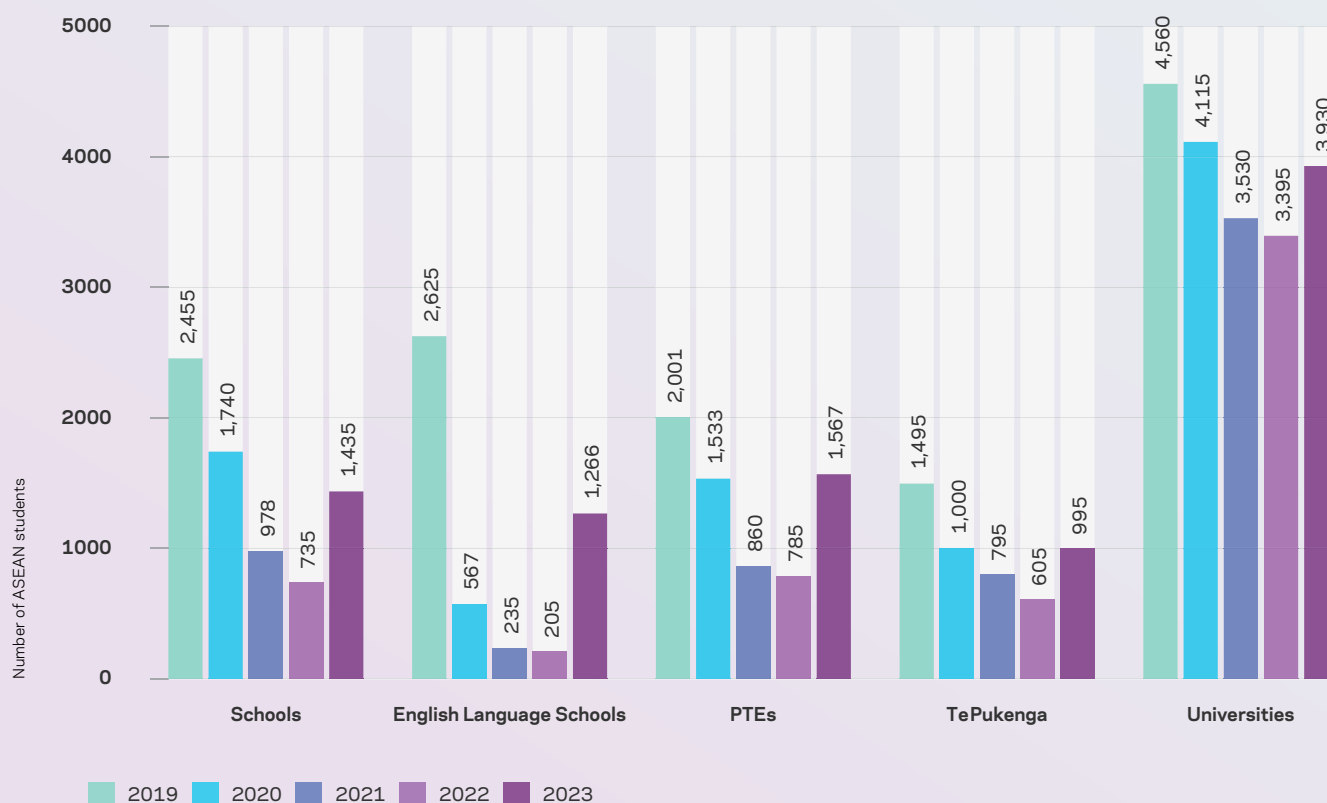


By far the largest proportion of overseas students in New Zealand comes from the Asian region, with China the single largest source country (making up 34 percent in 2024), followed by India (14 percent).⁴⁰ A small but significant number of students, however, come from the ASEAN countries.

Thailand was New Zealand's fifth biggest source of international students in 2024 (2,840 enrolments), while the Philippines is the eighth after the United States and Germany with 2,480 enrolments.⁴¹ As Figure 1 below demonstrates, the majority of nationals from ASEAN countries studying in New Zealand do so at tertiary institutions, including Te Pūkenga, PTEs and universities.

A much smaller number of students from ASEAN countries, mainly Thais, study at New Zealand's primary and secondary schools as well as the country's English language schools.⁴² As with students from China and India, the number of ASEAN students enrolled in New Zealand institutions remains below pre-Covid-19 numbers, although enrolments have been on a sharp upwards trajectory since 2023.

Figure 1 — Enrolment of ASEAN students by institution type 2019 to 2023



Source Education New Zealand.



The quality of New Zealand's education system means it is an area where New Zealand will continue to have much to offer the ASEAN countries, and economic growth in some of the ASEAN economies will increase those countries' demand for high-quality education. The revenue that students from ASEAN countries generate for New Zealand educational institutions makes cooperation in this area mutually beneficial.

New Zealand officials and educationalists have been conscious for many years of the dangers of treating international students as 'cash cows'.⁴³ In 2011 Andrew Butcher and Terry McGrath cautioned that international students who have had negative experiences in New Zealand may become 'poisoned alumni' with the potential to damage New Zealand's reputation abroad. Butcher and McGrath's work some years later found that 'frequently Asian students [in New Zealand] encountered large numbers of other Asian students' and were often isolated from their New Zealand peers.⁴⁴

An interesting initiative developed by Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington to respond to international students' desire for more contact with domestic students is its International Buddy Programme, introduced in 2011. The programme matches international students with domestic or international students already enrolled the university. Buddies commit to spending at least an hour a week with the incoming international students, and 'to be a friendly face, and a source of first-hand knowledge regarding the Wellington and Victoria University lifestyle'.⁴⁵ Between 50 and 70 percent of the buddies enrolled since the programme's introduction have been New Zealand students.⁴⁶

In some respects, it is unsurprising that the experiences of contemporary fee-paying students from the ASEAN countries have been found to be quite different from those of their Colombo Plan scholarship-holding counterparts. For a start, around three times as many students from the ASEAN region study in New Zealand each year than the total number of those who studied here under the Colombo Plan between the 1950s and the 1980s. Today's ASEAN students study a broader range of subjects at a broader range of institutions, and are much more likely to work in New Zealand while they study — and many of them seek to stay in New Zealand after they finish their studies.

Additionally, although international students pay much higher fees than domestic students, the significant cost of tertiary education for all students creates financial pressures that were largely absent when Colombo Plan students were studying in New Zealand. All of these contextual factors present New Zealand educational institutions with a complex set of challenges in dealing with the needs of a growing cohort of international students.

Recent research into the experiences of international students, however, suggests that New Zealand tertiary institutions have taken on board some of the earlier negative research findings. According to Education New Zealand's *International Student Experience Survey 2024*, and a clear improvement from the findings noted above, 79 percent of international students rated their overall experience in New Zealand as good (15 percent), very good (23 percent) or excellent (41 percent). In fact, 'people and connections' was the highest rated aspect of their New Zealand experience, with 90 percent rating it at least 'good'. This was followed by the education experience itself, with 87 percent rating it at least 'good'.⁴⁷

Likely reflecting New Zealand's increased cost of living and the shortage of affordable housing options, living experience and value for money were rated far less favourably. The poorest ranking aspect of a New Zealand international education, however, is work experience opportunities, with almost one in five international students rating it as 'poor' and a quarter as 'adequate'.⁴⁸



Against this background, the Government announced in July 2025 that international students will be allowed to work up to 25 hours a week (up from 20). In addition, all tertiary students on approved programmes, including one-semester courses, will be allowed to work. The expanded work rights are part of the Government's International Education Going for Growth Plan to attract more international students and Immigration New Zealand has indicated it is exploring further changes.⁴⁹

Given previous research linking the significant impact 'living and support services' have on international students' experiences in New Zealand, ensuring an adequate supply of quality and affordable student accommodation will be crucial if New Zealand is to reach its goals of attracting international students — and in ensuring those students have a positive and worthwhile experience.⁵⁰

Of course, not all students from ASEAN countries are in New Zealand as full-fee-paying students. Continuing the earlier tradition of 'education as aid', 457 new students from ASEAN countries were supported by the MFAT-funded Manaaki New Zealand Scholarships programme to complete tertiary study or short-term training courses.⁵¹ The purpose of the scholarship is to "build prosperity, security, and sustainable growth in partner countries and fosters a lifetime connection to Aotearoa New Zealand and the leaders of tomorrow".⁵² The English Language Training for Officials (ELTO), now run under the Manaaki Scholarship umbrella, currently provides English training to officials from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Viet Nam, as well as Timor-Leste and Mongolia, as well as officials from many African countries. Established in 1992, the scheme currently offers three courses a year, with each course focusing on a theme such as agriculture and trade, renewable energy, education and good governance.⁵³ A further benefit of the scheme is the fostering of links between officials and regional communities of practice.⁵⁴

Universities themselves have also been driving opportunities for ASEAN students to study in New Zealand. The University of Auckland, for example, has set up its own ASEAN-focused scholarship. Established in 2022, the ASEAN High Achievers Scholarship seeks to attract ASEAN students of "high calibre" to undertake undergraduate or postgraduate study at the university.⁵⁵ Auckland University of Technology (AUT) offers a similar scholarship to ASEAN students.⁵⁶

Other institutions have developed direct partnerships with their ASEAN counterparts. Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, for instance, has numerous partnerships and joint teaching programmes with institutions in Viet Nam, including the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, the Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam (DAV) and Ho Chi Minh City University of Education. These programmes allow students to begin their degree in Viet Nam and finish it in Wellington, or allow for it to be completed in Viet Nam in its entirety.⁵⁷

Similarly, AUT offers students at the Viet Nam National University courses towards an AUT Bachelor of Computer and Information Sciences degree, which can be finished either in Hanoi or in Auckland. IT undergraduate students at the Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology University in Hanoi can transfer up to two years' worth of credits towards an AUT Bachelor of Computer and Information Sciences degree.⁵⁸ AUT has a similar arrangement with BUNUS University in Indonesia.⁵⁹ Massey University, too, has partnered with the Viet Nam National University, delivering Bachelor of Business Studies degrees in which students spend two years studying in Viet Nam and two in New Zealand.⁶⁰

Despite the public emphasis on creating deeper cross-cultural connections through study programmes, the opportunities for New Zealand students looking to study in Southeast Asia have narrowed. The Prime Minister's Scholarship programme established in 2013 enabled almost 4,000 New Zealanders to study or gain work experience in Asia and Latin America. The programme was disestablished in Budget 2025.⁶¹ ●

New Zealand and ASEAN at 50

Relations and Relationships:

50 years of people movements from ASEAN countries to New Zealand

Migrants from ASEAN countries

IN THIS SECTION

- 17** Refugees from ASEAN countries
- 22** Permanent migration from ASEAN countries
- 24** Temporary workers



Refugees from ASEAN countries

The first significant flows of migrants to New Zealand from Southeast Asian countries were composed of refugees from Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos. In total almost 11,000 refugees from these three countries were resettled in New Zealand between 1975 and 1993, 5,200 Khmer (Cambodians).

4,500 VIETNAMESE AND 1,200 Lao people,⁶² establishing New Zealand's first Southeast Asian communities. The Vietnamese and Khmer intakes between 1975 and 1992 remain New Zealand's largest-ever refugee arrivals from single countries.⁶³ Often collectively referred to as the 'Indochinese' refugees — a hangover from the period of French colonial rule — the term acted to conflate and obscure a distinct but related series of events in Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos, each of which created ongoing refugee flows for two decades from the 1970s.

New Zealand's response to these refugee flows was complicated by conflicting demands: concern about the capacity and willingness of the New Zealand population to accept Asian refugees; worry that by taking refugees from the region New Zealand would offend the newly unified Vietnamese government (New Zealand recognised the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam in July 1976); and growing pressure from both the local and the international communities to resettle refugees in New Zealand.⁶⁴

Early signs of how controversial New Zealand's response to the Southeast Asian refugee crisis would be were evident in debates over 'Operation Babylift'

An American plan to remove orphaned babies from Viet Nam ahead of the impending North Vietnamese victory, Operation Babylift was in part motivated by fear that children born to American fathers and Vietnamese mothers would be targeted by the new anti-American regime. The babies were to be given up for adoption to families in America, Canada, Europe and Australia. Not all babies removed were of mixed parentage, however, and many may not in fact have been orphans. The idea that New Zealand should participate in the plan faced stiff opposition at home.

A number of civil society organisations argued that it was wrong to remove children from their own countries and cultural heritage, and that to do so would be, as future Prime Minister but then President of Labour's Youth Advisory Council, Helen Clark, argued, a further undesirable example of foreigners attempting to 'impose solutions on the Vietnamese.'⁶⁵ New Zealand's caution with respect to Operation Babylift meant that only three Vietnamese children were brought to New Zealand.⁶⁶

The New Zealand government also deliberated extensively over whether the communist victory in Saigon meant it should grant asylum to the South Vietnamese students then studying in New Zealand under the Colombo Plan, and the South Vietnamese Embassy staff employed in Wellington. After some period both groups were granted asylum.⁶⁷ As the extent of the refugee crisis became apparent, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) appealed to New Zealand to contribute to international efforts to resettle some of the Vietnamese refugees. New Zealand agreed, but on the condition that those selected had had their refugee status verified by UNHCR and possessed skills that would be useful to New Zealand.⁶⁸

On these terms, an initial intake of 210 largely well-educated Vietnamese refugees from Thai camps arrived in New Zealand in 1977. They were scattered throughout the country and matched with community sponsors in each host centre. Anxious about public backlash, the government was at pains to reassure the public that the refugees would not place a burden on society.⁶⁹

However, an intake of 210 refugees in the face of the hundreds of thousands seeking refuge was viewed by the international community as inadequate. New Zealand came under increasing pressure from UNHCR, United States, and Thailand and Malaysia (each of which was hosting many tens of thousands of refugees) to increase its intake.⁷⁰ A commitment in 1979 to settle an annual quota of 600 'Indo-Chinese' refugees (later raised to 650) still compared unfavourably with Australia's commitment that same year to take 10,500.⁷¹

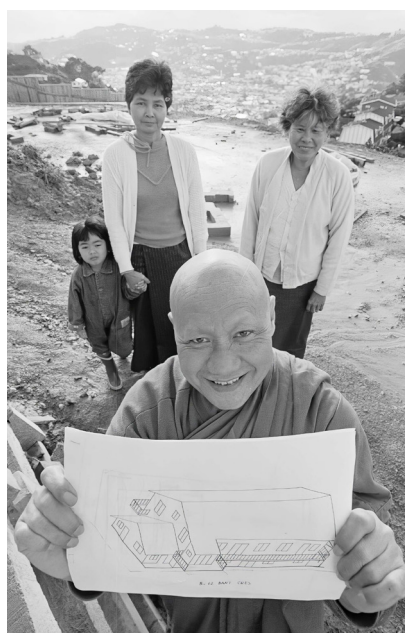


While New Zealand's acceptance rates were low compared with Australia's, Canada's and the United States, in some instances New Zealand took refugees who had been overlooked by other countries,⁷² and consideration was given by the government of the time to the advantages of developing communities of Khmer, Lao and Vietnamese who would be able to welcome incoming refugees. A number of places were made available to the families of refugees already settled in New Zealand. New Zealand made a further 900 places available in 1979 and continued taking refugees from this region until the early 1990s.

On arrival in New Zealand the refugees were granted permanent residence. This gave them legal equality with other citizens and residents, eligibility for welfare support, the rights to free primary, secondary and tertiary education (much higher domestic fees were introduced in 1990), to free hospital care, to work and to vote in national and local elections, and the ability to become New Zealand citizens after a period of three years.⁷³ They were housed during the initial six weeks after arrival at the refugee reception centre in Māngere, where they were provided with food, accommodation, recreational facilities, medical care, translation services, English lessons and information about how to settle into New Zealand society. They were then 'resettled' into different New Zealand communities, assisted by community volunteers.

Life for the Vietnamese, Laotian and Khmer refugees in New Zealand was far from easy during their first few years here. A lack of English, separation from and loss of family and friends back home, not being able to find work appropriate to their skills, being members of cultural and ethnic minorities and adapting to the New Zealand weather were among the challenges the refugees faced, often while they were also suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Established Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian communities exist in a number of New Zealand cities as a result of refugee flows from 1975, with associated temples and monasteries, ethnic media and community associations. In Wellington, for example, a Cambodian Buddhist temple was established in the suburb of Island Bay in 1985,⁷⁴ and later the Thien Thai Vietnamese Monastery was established in Upper Hutt.⁷⁵ A Cambodian radio show, Khmer Voice, or Samleng Khmer, broadcasts news from Cambodia and New Zealand twice a week in Auckland on Planet 104.6 FM, funded by NZ On Air.⁷⁶



Photograph of senior monk venerable Suthep Surapong holding a sketch of a proposed Buddhist monastery, Dart Crescent, Wellington. Photograph taken by Mark Round. Dominion Post (Newspaper): Photographic negatives and prints of the Evening Post and Dominion newspapers. Ref: EP/1990/2874/7-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

The Vietnamese Friendship Association has existed for many years. During his visit to Wellington in 2024, Viet Nam's prime minister, Pham Minh Chinh, thanked the association for fostering closer bilateral ties and noted the importance of the election of New Zealand's first member of parliament of Vietnamese heritage, Lan Pham.⁷⁷ Pham's father came to New Zealand during the Viet Nam War on a Colombo Plan scholarship.⁷⁸ A number of Vietnamese who were resettled in New Zealand as refugees, however, later migrated to Australia, attracted by job opportunities and the larger Vietnamese community there.

Fifty years after those first flows of Southeast Asian refugees, New Zealand is one of around 37 countries that take an annual quota of refugees.⁷⁹ In 1987 the government set the number of quota refugees it would receive at 800 per annum, although that number was lowered in 1997 to 750 (plus or minus 10 percent) when the government agreed to cover more of the costs of refugees' transportation to New Zealand. The quota system remains the primary pathway refugees resettle in New Zealand. Following the years-long campaign to 'double the quota' spearheaded by Wellington-based activist and writer Murdoch Stephens against the backdrop of the Syrian refugee crisis, a new quota of 1,500 places per year took effect from mid-2020. Priority continues to be given to refugees from the Asia-Pacific, with 50 percent of the annual intake set aside for refugees from the region.⁸⁰

(CONTINUES PAGE 20)



PROFILE — LINGY AU



Lingy's parents and brother in Stokes Valley, 1979.

Lingy Au

Lingy Au manages the Asia New Zealand Foundation's entrepreneurship programme, facilitating business relationships and connections between entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia and New Zealand.

“This has come full circle for me with my background, where my parents are from, being brought up in New Zealand ... I've found myself being able to pull those two worlds a little bit closer, to bridge those two worlds together.”

Lingy Au

Born in Lower Hutt, Lingy's parents are two of the thousands of Vietnamese refugees who resettled in New Zealand in the aftermath of the Viet Nam War. His family's migration story, however, began a generation earlier, when his grandparents migrated to Viet Nam from the region historically known as Teochew (now Chaoshan) in southern China. “When people ask me where I'm from, I say I'm Vietnamese Chinese,” says Lingy, who still speaks in Teochew dialect with his parents.

Lingy's parents fled Viet Nam in their early twenties with Lingy's oldest brother who was then just one-year-old. “They took everything they could and ran, not knowing where they were going, or where they would end up.” Among the almost two million people who left Viet Nam by boat, Lingy's parents eventually landed in Malaysia where they were taken in by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). “They got lottery picked to come to New Zealand, with a lot of family being spread to other places, like Australia, other places around Asia,” explains Lingy.

Resettled in the Lower Hutt suburb of Stokes Valley, Lingy's family had a Christian volunteer family support them to adjust to life in New Zealand. “I still see black and white and sepia photos of Mum and Dad standing in front of 1980s cars outside their state home at the time.”

While Lingy's parents and grandparents have remained in the Hutt, after graduating from university, Lingy and his four siblings travelled around the world, with some settling in Germany, Australia and elsewhere in New Zealand.

After working in Japan and Germany, Lingy has returned to Wellington with his partner, a first generation Japanese New Zealander. In his current role at the Asia New Zealand Foundation, Lingy helps connect young entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia through the Foundation's Young Business Leaders Initiative, as well as New Zealand entrepreneurs looking to expand to Asia. “This has come full circle for me with my background, where my parents are from, being brought up in New Zealand.”

“The more time I spend working at the Foundation, I've found myself being able to pull those two worlds a little bit closer, to bridge those two worlds together.” ●



Since the early 2000, Myanmar has consistently been one of New Zealand's largest sources of refugees.⁸¹ At present, Myanmar is second only to Syria, with over 2,000 Myanmar refugees resettled under the quota in the past decade.

Myanmar is a hugely diverse country, with more than 100 ethnic groups and innumerable distinct languages. Although the majority of the 54-million-strong population are Buddhists, there are also significant Christian populations and a smaller number of Muslims. Power has typically been concentrated among the Buddhist Burman ethnic majority, but a number of other significant ethnic groups resist 'Burmanisation' and have been engaged in fights for autonomy that date back, in some cases, to independence in 1948.

Civil war, the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, widespread human rights abuses by the Tatmadaw (Burmese army), forced labour, and forced displacement for development and resource extraction⁸² are among the reasons hundreds of thousands of Myanmar nationals have sought refuge outside the country.⁸³

The situation continues to be extremely difficult. After ousting the elected civilian government and seizing power in 2021, widespread opposition and conflict erupted. Ethnic armed organisations are fighting for regional autonomy, while activists and members of the ousted government have formed a government in exile known as the National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG has developed its own military wing, the People's Defence Force, to actively fight the junta.⁸⁴ The United Nations has reported that over 5,000 civilians have been killed while more than three million have been displaced.⁸⁵

The situation is particularly dire in Myanmar's Rakhine state, where the army launched what many have deemed genocide against the state's long-persecuted Muslim Rohingya population in 2017.⁸⁶ Continuing to face violent attacks, over 850,000 Rohingya have been forced to flee over this period.⁸⁷ The Rohingya have been denied citizenship since 1982, with successive governments, and much of the rest of Myanmar's population, viewing them as illegal migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh (which now hosts the vast majority of Rohingya refugees⁸⁸). The Rohingya are believed to be the world's largest stateless population.⁸⁹ The situation within Myanmar and the mass outflow of refugees have prompted calls for more decisive collective responses from ASEAN, with many pointing to ASEAN's principle of non-interference in the affairs of other ASEAN members as a limitation on the bloc's effectiveness.⁹⁰

Myanmar refugees, including those eventually resettled in New Zealand, typically live, sometimes for years, in refugee camps along the Myanmar-Thai border or in Malaysia.⁹¹ Thailand and Malaysia provide asylum for many thousands of these refugees annually, just as they did for their Cambodian, Vietnamese and Lao neighbours during the 1970-1990s. But as neither country is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, life within the camps is severely constrained, although Thailand agreed in August 2025 that refugees formally registered with the Thai government will be legally allowed to work, while many in Malaysia do so informally.⁹²

More than two decades after first receiving refugees from Myanmar, several New Zealand towns and cities have small but significant communities of Myanmarese.⁹³ Former refugees from Myanmar are the largest resettled groups in Nelson, Blenheim and Manawatu, and the second largest in Auckland.⁹⁴ Wellington's Myanmar diaspora now numbers over 1,000.⁹⁵

The Myanmarese diaspora is increasingly diverse. The Myanmar community in Nelson, for instance, which began in the early 1990s, by 2015, comprised of members from all the main ethnic groups and several languages and dialects are spoken.⁹⁶

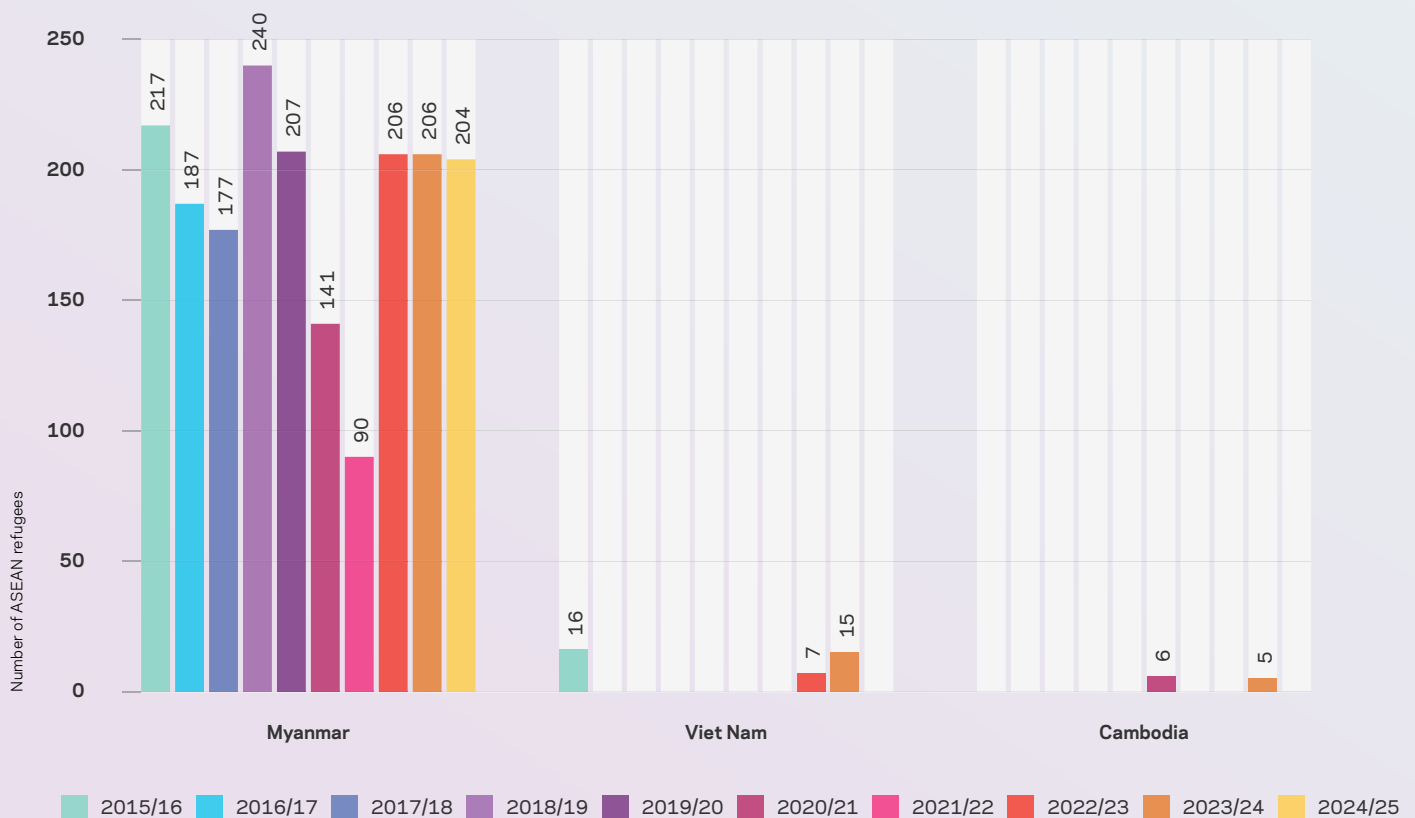


New Zealand's Myanmar community is increasingly politically active, reflecting the deepening ties between the two countries' trade union movements that have accompanied the growing Myanmar diaspora. Wellington-based development organisation UnionAID has partnered with the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar, and the two are currently working on several campaigns and programmes, including the Myanmar Young Leaders Programme.⁹⁷

Similarly, a Myanmar community rally opposing the visit of military junta officials as the ASEAN-New Zealand dialogue meeting in April 2024 was joined by the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (NZCTU) president, Richard Wagstaff.⁹⁸ NZCTU and UnionAID have also supported trade unionists to leave Myanmar and live in New Zealand.⁹⁹

As conflict and ethnic division continue to characterise Myanmar's political landscape, the humanitarian consequences of which have only been exacerbated by the devastating March 2025 earthquake, New Zealand is likely to continue to receive refugees from the country well into the future. ●

Figure 2 — Number of ASEAN refugees arrivals under the quota





Permanent migration from ASEAN countries

When New Zealand became home to thousands of refugees from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s it was a largely bi-ethnic country, dominated by its Anglo-descent majority population. Vestiges of historical anti-Asian sentiment¹⁰⁰ remained in the form of an exclusionary immigration policy and a subsequent absence of significant migration from Asia. Since the early 1990s, however, New Zealand has transformed into a highly multicultural society with one of the highest rates of immigration in the OECD, much of which comes from Asia.¹⁰¹

CHANGES TO NEW ZEALAND'S immigration legislation in 1987 removed a long-held preference for migrants from 'traditional source' countries (primarily the United Kingdom and Ireland), opening up immigration to a much more diverse inward flow than had been the case previously. An emphasis on migrants who could bring skills, capital and entrepreneurship henceforth characterised New Zealand's immigration policy. New immigration policy and law changes in 1991 introduced a points system similar to Canada's and radically increased annual immigration rates.

A significant feature of the post-1991 changes was a dramatic increase in migration from Asia: by 1993, 53 percent of all residence approvals were given to people from Asia;¹⁰² 57 percent by 1994. As Malcolm McKinnon has noted, this new migration flow was 'the first wave of migration dominated by people non-kin to the domestic population since Pakeha displaced Māori as the majority population in the 1850s. It... therefore presented New Zealanders with a conceptual challenge as well as a new experience.'¹⁰³

New Zealand's orientation towards migration from Asia was part of a wider policy of 'Asianisation' of New Zealand's economic links. Sir Don McKinnon, then minister of foreign affairs, set out a strategy to this effect in 1993.

His argument was that the world's economic activity then revolved around three poles — the United States, the European Community and Asia — and that New Zealand needed to be closely associated with one of them. The Asia-Pacific region, he argued, was 'our neighbourhood' and it offered 'excellent economic opportunities'.¹⁰⁴ The domestic manifestation of Asianisation was to be the presence of many new residents and citizens of Asian heritage in New Zealand.¹⁰⁵

High levels of inward migration post-1991 have seen the proportion of the population born overseas rise to almost 30 percent in the 2023 Census, with Asia the most common region of birth among immigrants. The People's Republic of China and India are recorded as the two most common overseas birthplaces after England, while the Philippines is the fourth most common.¹⁰⁶ Over 17 percent of New Zealand's usually resident population are of Asian heritage, compared with less than five percent in 1996.¹⁰⁷ In Auckland, almost a third of the population is of Asian background.¹⁰⁸

While the growth in migration from Asia has typically been driven by migrants from China and India, this is changing with the significant increase in Filipino migrants in recent years, who are by far the largest source of ASEAN migrants to New Zealand. According to Stats NZ, citizens of the Philippines, along with those of India and China, drove New Zealand's net migration gains in the year to January 2025.¹⁰⁹

In fact, the Philippines had the largest percentage increase of any group of overseas born New Zealanders between the last two national censuses, jumping almost 47 percent from 67,632 in 2018 to 99,264 in 2023. The increase between 2013 and 2018 was also significant, with just 37,299 New Zealand residents recorded as born in the Philippines in the 2013 Census.¹¹⁰ The total number of people identifying as being of Filipino ethnicity was 108,297 in the 2023 Census, up from 40,350 10 years prior.¹¹¹



No other Southeast Asian country is included in the 10 most common overseas birthplaces, and growth in New Zealand's wider Southeast Asian population has been modest but not insignificant. If one deducts individuals who identified as being of Filipino heritage from the total number of those who identified as being of a Southeast Asian ethnicity, there were almost 66,900 non-Filipino Southeast Asian individuals recorded in the most recent census. This is a sizable increase from the 37,383 identified in the 2013 Census using the same method.¹¹²

It must be noted, however, that the above figures are likely to be considerable underestimates of New Zealand's true Southeast Asian and Filipino diaspora populations. Relying on self-identification, these findings exclude those who only report their 'ancestral' ethnicities, namely 'Chinese' or 'Indian', both of which have long and significant histories of migration to Southeast Asia. Place of birth, too, is imperfect, as it does not include those of Southeast Asian heritage who are born outside the region.

It is not surprising that the Philippines has proved particularly responsive to specific labour shortages in New Zealand. Emigration and remittances continue to play a large role in the Philippines' economy, and the country sustains a large industry dedicated to facilitating labour emigration.

Large disparities between wages in the Philippines and those available in many other countries act as a driving factor in such emigration. Under pressure to protect the interests of Filipinos abroad, the Philippine government has sought to enter agreements with receiving countries that guarantee the proper treatment of Filipino overseas workers. New Zealand signed such an agreement with the Philippines government regarding the recruitment and treatment of Filipino workers in 2008.¹¹³ The two governments signed another arrangement aimed at further boosting the transparency of worker recruitment in 2015.¹¹⁴

Many of those who arrive as permanent migrants are medical and IT professionals, including doctors, nurses, aged carers and dentists. Increasing numbers of Filipino technicians and electricians have also been migrating to New Zealand.¹¹⁵ New Zealand's ageing population has created a demand for workers to meet the health and care needs of older people that cannot be met domestically.

In 2024, almost 43 percent of New Zealand's nurses were trained overseas, up from around a quarter 10 years earlier.¹¹⁶ The Philippines is the largest source of New Zealand's internationally qualified nurses.¹¹⁷

Filipino workers also responded in high numbers to skill shortages in Canterbury following the Christchurch earthquakes which damaged over 60 percent of the buildings in the central business district, along with tens of thousands of homes. Unable to meet the labour requirements of the clean-up and rebuild from the local workforce, Immigration New Zealand sought migrant workers to fill engineering, surveying and project management jobs, as well as trade specialists such as drain-layers, electricians, carpenters, painters, tilers and glaziers.¹¹⁸ Between 2011 and 2020, the Philippines was New Zealand's single largest source of migrant construction workers.¹¹⁹ Fourteen years on from the earthquake, Canterbury is home to the country's largest Filipino population after Auckland, with over 17 percent of Filipinos in New Zealand opting to call the region home (compared to 13 percent of the total New Zealand population).¹²⁰

Another sector in which Filipino workers have become prominent is the dairy industry, which is consistently New Zealand's largest export industry. The New Zealand dairy industry has become increasingly reliant on migrant workers from Asia, and the Philippines in particular, to fill the labour shortfall.¹²¹ These workers are changing the demographics of places like Southland, which is now home to hundreds of second-generation Filipino New Zealanders.¹²² As dairy farmers in the Philippines grapple with the increasing impacts of climate change, this inflow is likely to continue well into the future.¹²³ ●



Temporary workers

Many of the Filipino migrants working as nurses, construction workers and dairy workers in New Zealand have entered New Zealand on temporary work visas, often with the hope of transitioning to permanent resident visas. There is a range of temporary visas introduced over the past two decades, including working holiday schemes, the Accredited Employer Work Visa (which replaced the Essential Skills Work Visa and several other visas in 2022), specific purpose work visas, work to residence visas, horticulture and viticulture schemes, and a family stream that allows partners of citizens, permanent residents, students and work visa holders to work in New Zealand.¹²⁴ As noted in the previous section, international students also have the right to work limited hours during their studies.

THE INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE on temporary labour migrants suggests that such migrants are more vulnerable to exploitation than migrants on permanent visas, or locals. Poor working conditions, low wages, a lack of choice as to occupation, the withholding of visas, and high recruitment charges have been found to be most common amongst unskilled temporary migrant workers, particularly when there are large wage disparities between the home country and the host country, where English is not commonly spoken, and where ethnic or gender inequalities compound wage and skill inequalities.¹²⁵

With the increased reliance on migrant labour in many of New Zealand's key industries, stories of exploitative work conditions have become increasingly prevalent. A 2019 report prepared for the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment found that migrant exploitation was apparent across many of these sectors and that particular sectors exhibit "high levels of specific-forms of exploitation".¹²⁶ For instance, migrant exploitation occurs in the agriculture sector through underpayment and excessive hours leading to injury and exhaustion. In the construction sector migrant exploitation is often enabled by a lack of formal contracts and abuse of 90-day trial periods.¹²⁷

In 2018, the union E tū published a detailed report on the exploitation of Filipino construction workers in Christchurch and Auckland. The report found the workers were consistently paid less than their Kiwi counterparts.

In fact, no Filipino worker interviewed for the report received the average hourly industry wage despite often having considerable relevant work experience. Many experienced illegal pay deductions, uncertain hours, overcrowded living conditions and had large debts to companies that had arranged their New Zealand employment.

Many also expressed a desire to obtain permanent residency but had little hope of doing so due to low wages and high immigration processing costs, as well as employers unwilling to support the process.¹²⁸

(CONTINUES PAGE 26)



PROFILE — NINA SANTOS



Nina Santos portrait, supplied by subject.

Nina Santos

Nina is an Auckland-based solicitor at New Zealand's largest private sector union, E tū. She is also a 1.5 generation New Zealander, having moved to Aotearoa from the Philippines with her parents as a 13-year-old.

“Growing up and witnessing my parents’ and my broader family's challenges as migrants and how Filipino migrants are so vulnerable to exploitation and poor working conditions, really opened my eyes. It drove me to want to make things better.”

Nina Santos

Nina feels privileged to be at the forefront of helping expand legal rights for workers, and migrant workers in particular. “I call it a privilege, because this is exactly why I went to law school,” says Nina.

Nina notes that the most common challenges migrant workers face are the same ones she saw as a child: poor working conditions, exploitative and costly recruitment processes which leave many in debt, and visa conditions tying migrants to an employer. Despite these challenges, Nina explains that many Filipino migrants maintain a sense of ‘utang na loob’ or a ‘debt of gratitude’ once in New Zealand, tolerating their current living situations because they are better than the ones they left behind. Such factors make it difficult for migrant workers to bargain for better conditions and pay.

They also make it difficult for migrant workers to return home. “A lot of Filipino workers’ families rely on them for remittances, and they can’t necessarily go home because they’re in so much debt.”

Nina notes there are also other socio-cultural aspects at play, namely a strong anti-union movement in the Philippines and the prevalence of “red-tagging”, which sees activists and unionists branded enemies of the state. Filipino workers are often hesitant to join unions once in New Zealand due to engrained fears of repercussions.

But Nina is observing change. More and more grassroots groups — such as Migrante Aotearoa and Gabriela Aotearoa — are organising Filipino workers and educating them about their rights. Nina also points to the growing number of Filipino bus drivers involved in the sector’s union movement. “When they band together, they realise that they can actually collectively bargain and win better conditions.”

Going forward, Nina hopes to see changes to New Zealand’s immigration system, improved labour standards, and a stronger crackdown on exploitative recruitment practices. “From a community level there also needs to be stronger investment to support settlement for migrant communities, including culturally appropriate mental health services and stronger union access.” ●



While media reports of nurse exploitation appear less visible than in previous years, stories of exploited dairy workers remain relatively common. In perhaps the most recent high-profile example, a Southland dairy farmer was penalised \$215,000 after failing to pay his Indonesian migrant workers minimum wage or paid leave and illegally deducting wages, among other breaches.¹²⁹ The man lost his appeal in September 2025.¹³⁰ Elsewhere, Filipino dairy workers have spoken out about the prevalence of exploitative conditions, while migrant groups and unions have reported that those who do so are threatened with violence and deportation.¹³¹

While many factors render migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation, however, visas that tie migrants to a particular employer have been identified as a 'key driver' of exploitation in New Zealand and comparable jurisdictions.¹³² To help address this, the government introduced the Migrant Exploitation Protection Work visa in 2021. The visa allows migrant workers who experience exploitation to remain and work (for any employer) in New Zealand for up to six months while their claim is investigated.¹³³ The Worker Protection (Migrant and Other Employees) Bill was introduced in 2022 and enacted at the start of 2024.¹³⁴ There have been numerous reports of Filipino migrant workers accessing the visa, however there are currently no publicly available statistics on the number of ASEAN workers who have utilised the visa.

Reports of exploitation within the Accredited Employer Work Visa scheme, which provides a visa for up to five years to applicants with a job offer from an accredited employer,¹³⁵ were quick to gain traction after its introduction in mid-2022. An independent review initiated by the then-immigration minister in August 2023 found many reports of migrant exploitation but was unable to find a clear picture of the extent of exploitation, which it attributed to MBIE's lack of proper monitoring. Following several tweaks to the scheme in 2024, including to minimum skill and English language requirements, as well as limiting the occupations able to support visas for partners and dependents, the Human Rights Commission launched its own review of the scheme. Drawing on interviews with Filipino, Chinese and Indian workers on the scheme, the commission published a suite of identified problems and recommendations in August 2024. Among these was the call for the end of visas binding workers to a single employer, better settlement packages for recent migrants and a more straightforward legal pathway for workers to pursue compensation.¹³⁶ While the Government has acknowledged the Commission's findings and since made certain changes to the scheme, such as increasing the duration of the visa and reducing the required work experience for lower skilled migrants, the Human Rights Commission has emphasised that such changes do not address the key drivers of exploitation.¹³⁷

The Philippines has also taken action to promote the welfare of its citizens working in New Zealand and the Pacific, opening the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) in Wellington at the end of 2019. At the opening, then-ambassador to New Zealand Jesus Dominigo remarked, "This is a historic and major step forward, as all of the services needed by the Filipino workforce, which normally would be availed of through POLO Canberra, will now be available in Wellington."¹³⁸

In the recent past, New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, which brings workers to pick and pack fruits and vegetables, has also enabled a small but steady number of workers from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand (as well as Taiwan and India), although the focus has primarily been on the Pacific.

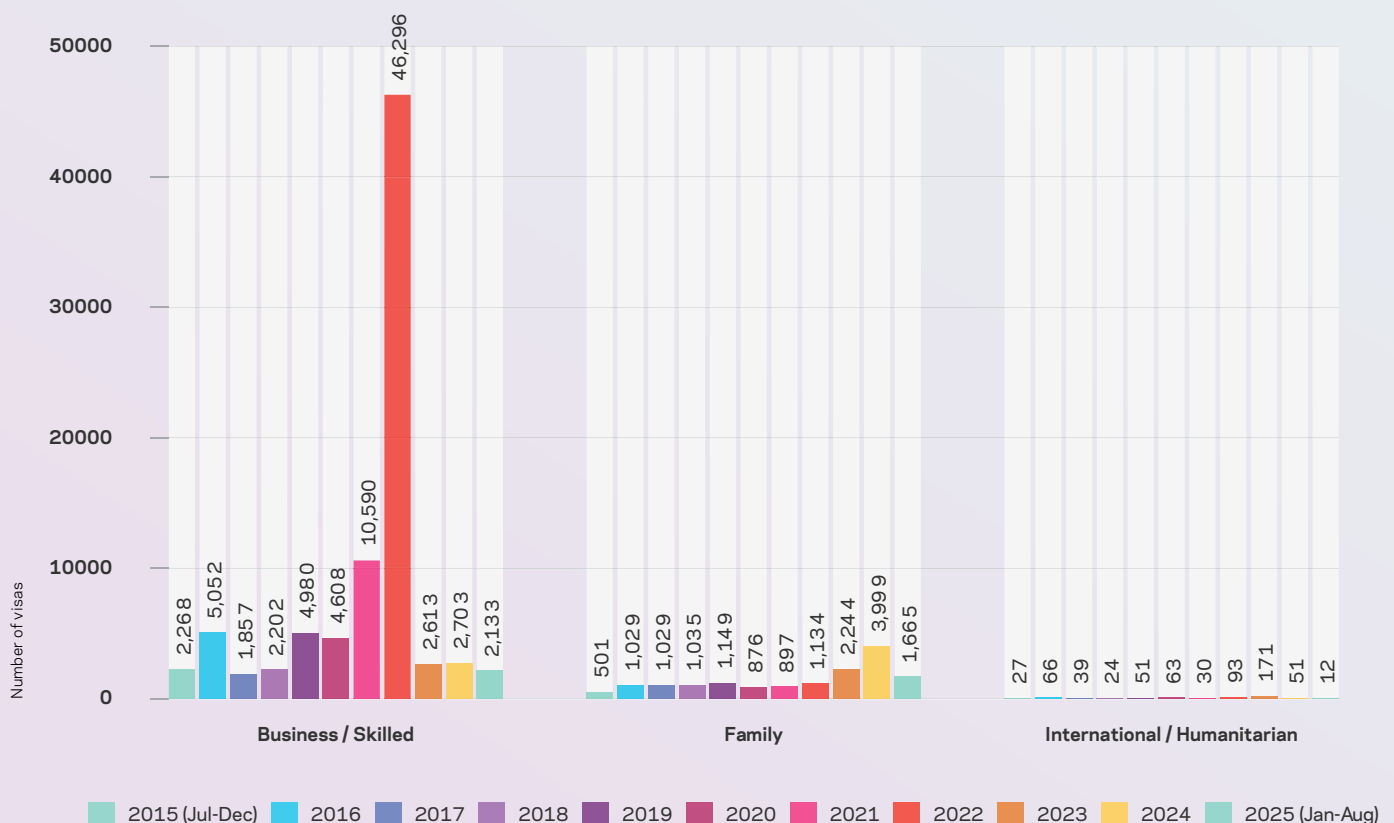


Introduced in 2007, the RSE scheme aims to promote 'circular' migration from New Zealand's closest neighbours. The idea is that workers will come for the picking/packing season, return home for the rest of the year, then, having already been trained and gained experience in the work, return the following year. The cap on the number of RSE workers from Pacific Island countries has been increased several times since its inception, and as a result workers from Asia make up an increasingly small percentage of the scheme's participants (just seven percent in 2023).¹³⁹

Another group of temporary migrants in New Zealand come via working holiday visas, under which young people aged 18-30 (35 for a few select countries) from 45 countries can work for 6-12 months while they are on holiday in New Zealand. Some of the ASEAN countries receive an annual quota of visas: Malaysia (1,150 six-month visas); Philippines (100 12-month visas); Singapore (200 12-month work exchange visas); Viet Nam (200 12-month visas); and Thailand (100 12-month places). People on these visas are permitted to work for up to 20 hours per week.¹⁴⁰

As mentioned above, however, those on temporary visas do not always return home when their visas expire. ASEAN International students and those on temporary visas often go on to stay in New Zealand on a long-term basis. The response to Covid-19 also saw the government approve a one-off residence visa for approximately 165,000 workers already in New Zealand on certain temporary visas working in healthcare, the primary industries and construction.¹⁴¹ The decision saw dramatic surge in approvals of residency visas for Filipinos, with almost 47,000 visas approved in 2022 and over 10,000 in 2021, compared to around 4,600 in 2020.¹⁴²

Figure 3 — Number of Filipino business/skilled residence visa accepted



Source Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.



Largely excluded from migration to New Zealand by immigration laws that gave preference to British settlers, Southeast Asian migrants have only arrived in New Zealand in significant numbers since 1991, but over the past three decades have transformed New Zealand's demography. Filipino is now New Zealand's eighth largest ethnic group, and Tagalog one of the country's fastest growing languages.¹⁴³ New Zealand's aging population and push factors within the region, mean migration from the Philippines, both permanent and temporary, is likely to continue at a significant rate for the foreseeable future. Ensuring migrants have safe and positive experience while in New Zealand will only become more important, at both the individual level and when it comes to New Zealand's bilateral relationships with the countries of ASEAN. ●

“Many Filipino migrants maintain a sense of ‘utang na loob’ or a ‘debt of gratitude’ once in New Zealand, tolerating their current living situations because they are better than the ones they left behind. A lot of Filipino workers’ families rely on [these jobs] for remittances, and they can't necessarily go home because they're in so much debt.”

Nina Santos

New Zealand and ASEAN at 50

**Relations and Relationships:
50 years of people movements from ASEAN countries to New Zealand**

Irregular migration from ASEAN countries

“While concerns about New Zealand as a destination country for human trafficking have only recently gained broader public attention, the New Zealand government has long recognised the issue as a very important one in the region, and that countries such as Indonesia bear an enormous economic and social cost from being both a source and a transit country for irregular migrants.”



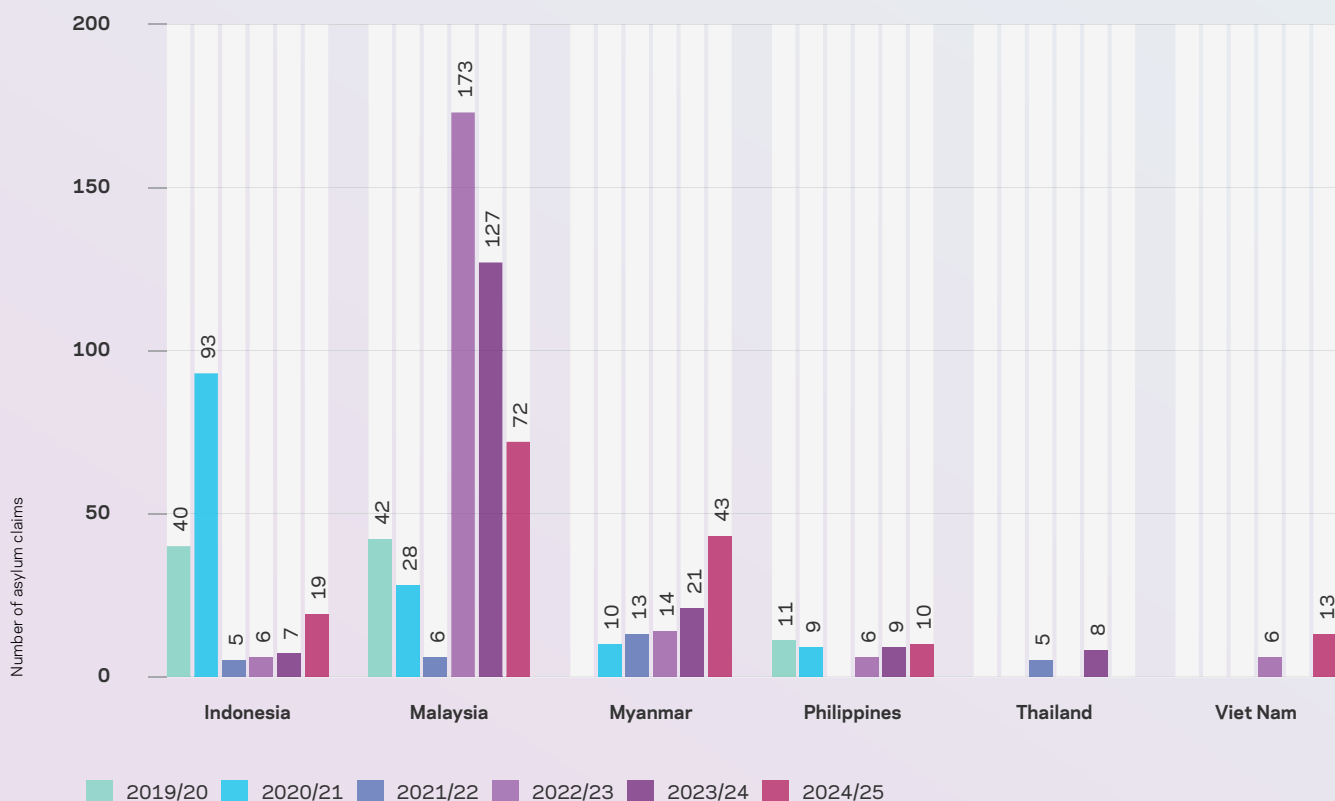
Irregular migration from ASEAN countries

As noted in the background section, Southeast Asia is a hub of irregular migration. New Zealand, however, has had only limited experience with irregular migration from the ASEAN region or, for that matter, any region. Most of those who have an irregular migration status in New Zealand have arrived legally but subsequently breached the terms of their visas.

THERE HAS, HOWEVER, been a significant spike in people claiming asylum once in New Zealand since 2023, with 2,345 claims in 2023/24 and 2,270 in 2024/25. This is compared to a yearly average of 460 claims across the nine years prior. While this surge is driven mostly by Chinese, Indian, Sri Lankan and Pakistani nationals, there has also been a recent notable uptick in applications from citizens of Malaysia and, to a lesser extent, Myanmar. Individuals from Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam have also claimed asylum in New Zealand over the past three years.¹⁴⁴

Despite the surge in applications, the number of total approvals has only increased marginally, with just 253 claims approved in 2024/25 and 144 approved the year prior. While 127 Malaysian individuals claimed asylum in 2023/24 and 179 in the previous year, just seven were approved across the two years. Myanmar and Filipinos were the only other ASEAN nationalities to have had any asylum claims approved since 2014/15.¹⁴⁵

Figure 4 — Number of ASEAN asylum claims



Source Immigration New Zealand.



The spike in asylum applications across nationalities have prompted speculation that New Zealand's asylum application system is increasingly seen as ripe for exploitation by those looking to extend their stay in New Zealand.¹⁴⁶ A scam involving around 160 Indonesian and Malaysian asylum seekers made headlines in 2022 after the application details bore striking similarities to one another, including sharing the same lawyer. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, however, told media that scams of such scale are rare in New Zealand.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, the fact that just a fraction of asylum claims are ultimately approved suggests claiming asylum is not a viable path to longer term residency.

New Zealand has yet to experience a mass arrival of asylum seekers by boat, and while future likelihood remains low, the Government passed the Immigration (Mass Arrivals) Amendment Bill in May 2024, extending the length of time people arriving by boat can be detained while their cases are considered.¹⁴⁸ The stated purpose of the Act is to enable the government to respond in an "orderly and safe manner" to a large-scale arrival of irregular migrants (defined as groups of 30 or more), protect the human rights of those migrants, and hold those responsible for people smuggling and trafficking to account.¹⁴⁹

Human trafficking remains a major concern in Southeast Asia and is an area of growing concern in New Zealand. While there were just six official investigations between 2018 and 2020, there were 236 investigations in the two years to October 2024.¹⁵⁰

As advocates have noted, these numbers are likely just the "tip of the iceberg", with many victims afraid to report abuse.¹⁵¹

At the end of 2024, reports emerged of between 30 and 50 Filipino migrants trafficked to New Zealand under deceptive conditions and subjected to death threats should they report the abuse.¹⁵² Despite the spike in investigations, New Zealand has heard just four prosecutions relating to human trafficking since 2015, the most recent in 2020.¹⁵³ In response, the Government announced in August 2025 changes to the Crimes Act 1961 to better facilitate the prosecution of human trafficking.¹⁵⁴

While concerns about New Zealand as a destination country for human trafficking have only recently gained broader public attention, the New Zealand government has long recognised the issue as a very important one in the region, and that countries such as Indonesia bear an enormous economic and social cost from being both a source and a transit country for irregular migrants.

New Zealand is an active participant in regional attempts to address people smuggling and human trafficking, particularly through the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime. Co-chaired by Australia and Indonesia, the Bali Process is a regional, multilateral process that works to raise regional awareness of human trafficking and people smuggling and to facilitate cooperation among member states in dealing with the causes and consequences of irregular migration. All of the ASEAN countries are members, along with 35 other countries, the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and UNHCR.

New Zealand and Viet Nam co-chair the Bali Process Working Group on the Disruption of People Smuggling and Trafficking in Persons Networks. The most recent Joint Period of Action Plan notes that the group is currently focused on supporting member states to implement legal frameworks and policy measures to combat human trafficking and exploitation.¹⁵⁵ As part of the group's efforts to facilitate practical cooperation, in 2024, the group convened officials from around the region to devise a range of responses to simulated people smuggling scenarios.¹⁵⁶ The need for close cooperation between New Zealand immigration and justice officials and their Southeast Asian counterparts is only likely to grow. ●



PROFILE — HAFSAR TAMEESUDDIN



Hafsar Tameesuddin portrait, supplied by subject.

Hafsar Tameesuddin

Hafsar Tameesuddin came to New Zealand as an Rohingya refugee in 2019 and is the current co-secretary general of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN). But her migration story and work as a refugee advocate and activist long predate her arrival in New Zealand.

“I really felt very powerless and hopeless. I said, ‘Okay, you either do something or you can just feel powerless.’”

Hafsar Tameesuddin

As an ethnic Rohingya, Hafsar was born stateless, making travel from her hometown to the Myanmar capital difficult. Relying on networks of smugglers, Hafsar was eventually able to make her way to the Thai border. “At the border of Thailand and Myanmar, there is a small, little river that you can cross, and then sneak into Thailand,” explains Hafsar.

Without the proper documents and fearful of being caught by local police, Hafsar spent two years in Thailand unable to find an organisation where she could seek asylum. Anxious that she’d wasted two years in limbo, Hafsar eventually got wind of an opportunity through a relative to make her way to Malaysia. After nine years in Malaysia as a UNHCR mandated refugee, Hafsar was finally resettled in New Zealand in 2019.

After completing her social work degree in New Zealand, Hafsar is now studying a public policy master’s and working full time in the refugee advocacy space, something she first got involved with while in Malaysia. Alone and unable to contact her family as violence erupted in Myanmar’s Rakhine state in 2012, Hafsar was spurred into action. “I really felt very powerless and hopeless. I said, ‘Okay, you either do something or you can just feel powerless.’”

Her activism has continued since arriving in New Zealand, working for organisations like Changemakers and the APRRN. Following the 2021 coup in Myanmar, Hafsar and a group called Democracy for Myanmar campaigned for an additional thousand refugees from the country to be resettled in New Zealand. While the campaign wasn’t ultimately successful, that hasn’t deterred Hafsar from petitioning for the creation of a new sub-category within New Zealand’s annual refugee quota for LGBTQI+ refugees, among other issues.

Hafsar remains hopeful local communities will continue to step up to support more refugees from Myanmar. “The majority of New Zealanders are very passionate and kind. It just takes a bit of awareness and knowing what is happening, giving visibility to these very vulnerable communities.” ●

New Zealand and ASEAN at 50

Relations and Relationships:

50 years of people movements from ASEAN countries to New Zealand

Tourists and other short-term visitors from ASEAN countries

“While New Zealand’s tourism industry remains in recovery mode, and visitors from Australia, the United States, China, the United Kingdom and India are currently New Zealand’s largest source countries of short-term visitors, the government is looking to grow the proportion of Southeast Asian visitors.”



Tourists and other short-term visitors from ASEAN countries

Up until Covid-19, short-term overseas visitor arrivals to New Zealand tended to follow two major trends. First, for all categories of visitor except tourists there was a steady rise, particularly among those visiting friends and relatives in New Zealand.

FOR TOURISTS, HOWEVER, growth was exponential aside from serious dips during the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s and the 2008 global financial crisis. Those visiting friends and family were quicker to return to New Zealand and numbers are nearing their pre-Covid-19 levels. Holiday makers were initially slower to resume travel but have rapidly increased over the past three years and have since overtaken those visiting friends and family, although they are still lagging their pre-pandemic levels.¹⁵⁷ The number of people travelling to New Zealand for business purposes also increased sharply between 2022 and 2023, but is also yet to catch up to pre-Covid-19 numbers.¹⁵⁸

Travel from ASEAN countries has followed these broad patterns. Much of the short-term flow of people to New Zealand from ASEAN countries is accounted for by movements from five countries: Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia (Figure 5 on page 34).

Visitors from Singapore, consistently the largest ASEAN source country of visitors (and the 10th largest source of short-term visitors to New Zealand), are primarily in New Zealand on holiday (43,780 in the year ending July 2025),¹⁵⁹ although significant numbers also come to visit friends and family (7,871 in the year to July 2025) or as business travellers (3,969 in the year to July 2025). Tourism is also the number one reason for Malaysian and Thai travellers, with visiting friends and relatives a distant second reason.

One key development over the past decade is the growth in visitors from the Philippines. While there were 12,944 visitors from the Philippines in the year ending July 2015, there were 31,415 in the July 2025 year, making it the second largest ASEAN source country.¹⁶⁰ It is also the only ASEAN country where the numbers of tourists and short-term visitors to New Zealand are higher than they were pre-Covid-19.¹⁶¹

While New Zealand's tourism industry remains in recovery mode, and visitors from Australia, the United States, China, the United Kingdom and India are currently New Zealand's largest source countries of short-term visitors, the government is looking to grow the proportion of Southeast Asian visitors. As part of the government's current goal of doubling the value of tourism exports by 2034, Tourism New Zealand has been funded an additional \$6 million to market New Zealand as a destination in Southeast Asia and India, as high-potential emerging markets.¹⁶² In July 2025, Tourism New Zealand took local tourism representatives and operators on a promotional roadshow across Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore.¹⁶³



With ASEAN's projected GDP growth of almost five percent in 2025,¹⁶⁴ increased family ties between New Zealand and ASEAN, and low-cost carriers such as Vietjet introducing additional direct flights between New Zealand and ASEAN cities,¹⁶⁵ there is good reason to believe that tourism flows from Southeast Asia to New Zealand will increase in the near future.

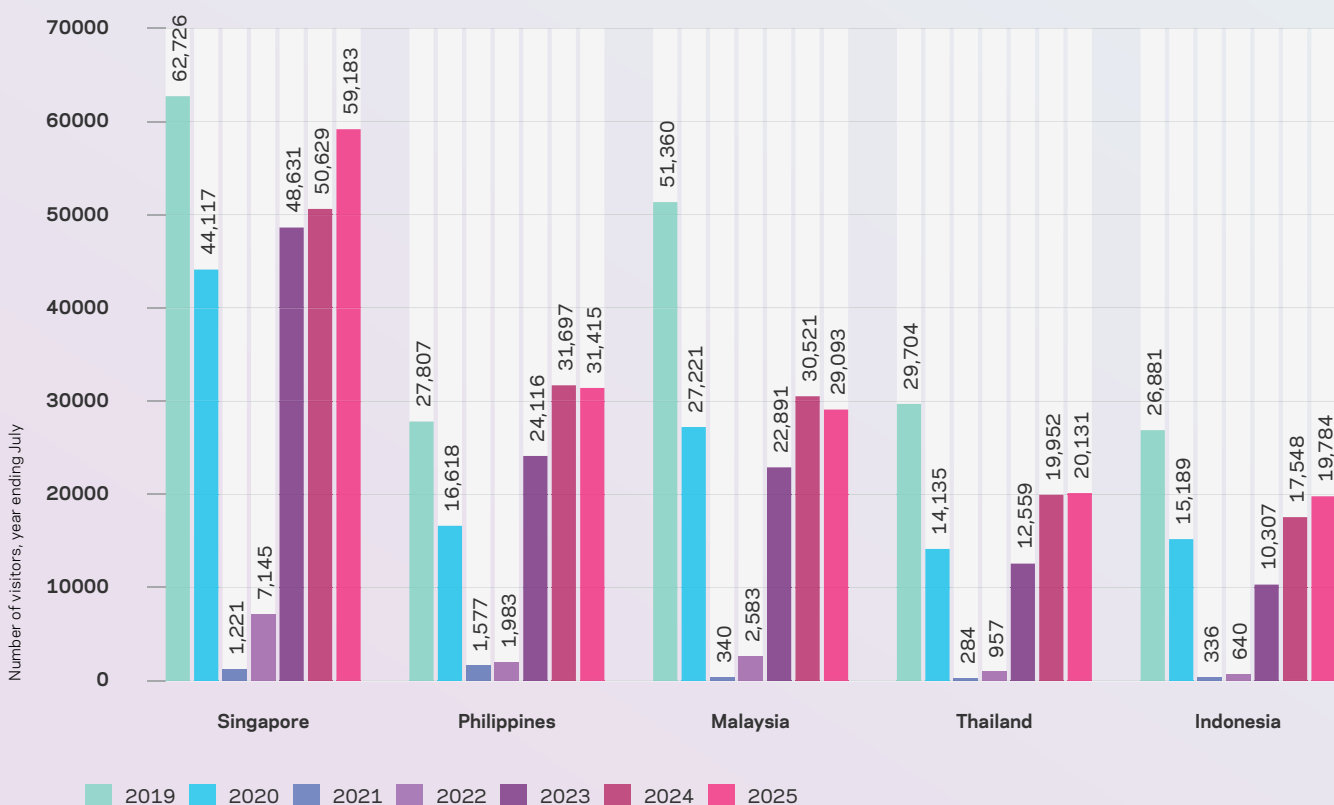
Of course, such growth will not be one way. In fact, the year to June 2025 saw a record number of New Zealand residents make trips to Asia. Visits to the region were up 20 percent from the previous year (totalling 730,200) and were facilitated by a six percent increase in direct flights between New Zealand and Asia.

Holidays were the main reason for travel, with Indonesia proving the most popular Asian country for New Zealand-resident holiday makers (with 82,800 visits), followed by Japan (62,200), Thailand (33,400) and China (32,800).

Indonesia was also the country that saw the biggest increase from the year before, with an additional 27,700 New Zealanders making the trip compared to the year prior.¹⁶⁶

New Zealand residents visiting family and friends in Asia were also up eight percent from the previous year, with the Philippines the third most popular destination after India and China.¹⁶⁷ ●

Figure 5 — ASEAN tourists and short-term visitors to New Zealand



Source Stats NZ.

New Zealand and ASEAN at 50

Relations and Relationships:

50 years of people movements from ASEAN countries to New Zealand

Looking ahead

“Whether New Zealand will see increased movement — both short-term and permanent — from other ASEAN countries depends on a number of factors. One of these is the continuation of Southeast Asia’s economic growth.”



Looking ahead

Given its comparative geographical proximity and its combined population of approximately 700 million, it is perhaps surprising that the levels of people movement from the ASEAN region have not been much higher. In comparison with migration from China and India, for example, levels of permanent and temporary migration from the ASEAN countries remain low, as do student and tourist numbers. The notable exception to this is the Philippines, and significant migration to New Zealand has only been relatively recent.

WHETHER NEW ZEALAND will see increased movement — both short-term and permanent — from other ASEAN countries depends on a number of factors. One of these is the continuation of Southeast Asia's economic growth. Migration scholars have long observed that increases in economic development are frequently associated with increases in migration as 'a certain threshold of wealth is necessary to enable people to assume the costs and risks of migrating'.¹⁶⁸ We might expect, therefore, economic development in some of the ASEAN countries to lead to greater levels of emigration. If this happens, ASEAN's youthful population may become a more important source of immigrants to New Zealand than is the case at present, particularly if, as some analysts predict, ageing in China leads to that country becoming a migrant-attracting rather than migrant-sending country.¹⁶⁹

Migration flows are also, however, determined by prior migratory networks and traditions, as well as historical linkages with and economic opportunities in potential receiving countries. These traditions do not exist at present in New Zealand for most ASEAN countries, with the already noted exception of migration from the Philippines, the example of which demonstrates that, once established, migratory flows can increase rapidly. In the short term at least it seems likely that the largest source of immigrants to New Zealand from the ASEAN region will continue to be the Philippines, whose education system provides more highly qualified, English-speaking graduates than can be absorbed in its domestic economy. The education systems of a number of other ASEAN countries have some way to go before they produce a similar number of graduates with the skills and qualifications New Zealand is looking for.

Economic development is also likely to lead to growing demand for tertiary education among ASEAN's young population, while the growth of the middle classes in the more developed ASEAN economies will likely increase tourism numbers from the region. New Zealand is well positioned to meet some of these demands but must be mindful of domestic challenges — such as high living and housing costs — that may deter would-be tourists and international students.

Irregular migration is likely to continue to be a feature of the ASEAN region for several decades to come. In addition to existing push factors, such as economic inequality, political instability, poor governance and limited human rights protections, the region is also one of the world's most vulnerable to climate change, something likely to exacerbate existing irregular flows.

In fact, climate-related migration is already being seen in many Southeast Asia countries, prompting ASEAN to call for a 'step change' to 'integrate and scale action to address climate change and human mobility together'.¹⁷⁰ The issue has the potential to increase the demand that countries such as New Zealand share the costs of dealing with irregular migrant flows. New Zealand also has a role to play in assisting with capacity-building and adaptation assistance.

As yet the international community has not developed a legal or policy approach for the protection of those forced from their homes by factors such as climate change and extreme poverty. ASEAN seems likely to be heavily affected by both the causes and consequences of forced migration in the coming decades.

Of course, Covid-19, the closing of borders and its social and economic 'long tail' remind us that travel and migration can be ruptured by events that feel unthinkable until they occur. Such uncertainties and variables limit our ability to predict and forecast migration trends and developments. They are also ultimately a reminder that travel and migration, and the connections and relationships such movements facilitate, cannot be taken for granted. ●



PROFILE — SAMSON PHOMMACHACK



Samson Phommachack (Centre) and his first cousins (Left) Mrs Phonemamy Sengchan (Right) Miss Bounthaem Sengchan at Prime Minister Luxon's Event In Laos PDR Oct 2024.

Samson Phommachack

At the time of the 40th ASEAN-New Zealand anniversary, Laotian New Zealander and entrepreneur, Samson Phommachack, noted his longer-term desire to contribute to the work being done by young entrepreneurs in Laos. Ten years on, Samson is doing that and then some, fostering ties between the two countries as well as among the next generation of leaders.

“I feel like it's important, in terms of my responsibility — having had such great opportunities in New Zealand — to make way and to open doors for others...”

Samson Phommachack

As a current executive committee member of the ASEAN New Zealand Business Council, Samson co-led a delegation of New Zealand business to Laos in October 2024, which included attending the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit (ABIS) and hosting a reception event with Prime Minister Luxon. Being able to speak fluent Laotian and maintaining regular visits to the country meant Samson was uniquely placed to help forge new ties. “It was great to be part of that event and not only host our prime minister but also gather together alumni who studied in New Zealand as well as businesspeople,” reflects Samson.

The trip took place during Laos’ year as ASEAN chair. Samson says he was proud to be in Laos, seeing the country showcase its transformation to over 1,000 visitors. “The infrastructure and the way that they ran it really held up. Laos hosted this really well. There would have been some apprehension or nervousness as to how this would go with such a large volume of people visiting.”

Back in New Zealand Samson is focused on supporting the next generation of New Zealanders of Southeast Asian heritage to step into leadership roles. “I feel like it's important, in terms of my responsibility — having had such great opportunities in New Zealand — to make way and to open doors for others,” says Samson. Samson and the ASEAN New Zealand Business Council are already working on initiatives to support young people gain experience and be part of the conversations in board rooms. Led by Samson, the council will launch an initiative in early 2026.

He is also eager to maintain and grow the community connections sewn by earlier generations of Laotian New Zealanders. Samson and several other first and second generation Laotian New Zealanders organised Wellington's inaugural Boun Pi Mai Festival in 2024 to celebrate the Lao New Year. The festival surpassed expectations, with over 250 attendees and successfully returned in 2025. Having outgrown its original venue, the group plan to involve Wellington's other Southeast Asian communities in future events.

Over the next 10 years, Samson hopes to see more movement of people from the smaller ASEAN countries to New Zealand, noting that those in the less developed ASEAN countries often do not have access to the travel opportunities of — and face greater travel barriers than — their wealthier peers. While Samson is not sure what the solution is, he points out that the changing landscape of international education and rising incomes are likely to bring with it new opportunities and possibilities. ●



Conclusion

IN THE EARLY years of New Zealand's relationship with ASEAN, virtually all of the work of building mutual trust, deepening understanding and strengthening relations with ASEAN was carried out by officials.

Outside New Zealand's military engagements in the region, peoples of the ASEAN countries and New Zealand had little contact and even less understanding or experience of the other. Indeed, in 1975 the vestiges of British colonial thinking continued to obscure the view that formal relations between New Zealand and Southeast Asia might benefit from informal relationships between their peoples.

In the first quarter of the 21st century, however, 'people movements' or, more accurately, the people who move, are seen to be a central driver of the multiple ways in which New Zealand engages with the region.

In quantifiable ways they contribute to New Zealand in the form of their skilled and unskilled labour, the student fees they pay and the money they spend as tourists and visitors. In unquantifiable ways their presence contributes intellectual, linguistic, religious, cultural, artistic, literary, musical, sporting and culinary richness to New Zealand's society.

But the combined energies, wisdom, experiences, resources, creativity and emotions of the tens of thousands of ASEAN people who now enter New Zealand annually, for short- and long-term periods, is a powerful, dynamic and unpredictable force for moving relations forward. Careful planning is required to facilitate the creative potential of relationships developed between New Zealanders and people from ASEAN countries.

A first step is for New Zealand to identify the factors that are likely to contribute to the chances of people from ASEAN countries having positive experiences in New Zealand. Several such factors have been identified in this report: efforts to ensure that international students continue to receive high-quality education and associated services, as well as the opportunity to engage meaningfully with New Zealand students; strong governmental efforts to prevent the creeping advance of exploitative work situations for temporary labour migrants, particularly those who use recruitment agencies from their home countries; vigilance in maintaining the integrity of New Zealand's immigration processes; and, most importantly, respecting the intrinsic worth of individuals and their experiences.

In all of this New Zealand has at least one great advantage: its legal framework is based on respect for the rights of the individual, a legal norm that is not only fiercely protected by an independent judiciary but also translated into a deeply held cultural norm. This belief in the intrinsic value of the individual, beyond that individual's economic or social worth, underpins New Zealand's reputation as a safe and peaceful country and acts as a drawcard for migrants and visitors to this country. It can also act as the metric by which policies designed to facilitate people movements from ASEAN countries might be measured. If we get this right, the rest will more easily follow. ●



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