Covid-19 and migration systems in transition

100,000+

COVID-related international and internal travel restrictions were put in place over the course of the first year of the pandemic.

For many migrants, restrictions on movement and changing entitlements to access labour markets, social protections and basic rights over the pandemic may have worsened.

The systems of migration regulation in the UK, Australia and China were already experiencing considerable change and pressures prior to COVID-19, but in quite different ways.

Temporary migrant worker schemes established by government had grown over the last decade, creating concerns over the creation of precarious labour force deprived of citizenship rights.

The long-established hukou system of internal migration had been loosened over recent years especially for Tier 3 and Tier 2 cities allowing greater social inclusion of internal migrants.
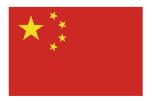
Following Brexit, a new points-based work-visa system was being planned and implemented.

Covid19 has reinforced many of the risks and uncertainties faced by migrants, with evolving systems of migration often worsening these risks.

Changes were introduced rapidly at the start of the pandemic, with a nationalistic discourse within parts of the government and the media emphasising that Australian workers should have a "first go at jobs". Those on temporary working visas in Australia were specifically excluded from being recipients of stimulus payments and benefits.

Many social assistance schemes prior to COVID were only available to those with local household registration (hukou), meaning millions of migrant workers fell outside of protection. Some emergency assistance packages did seek to explicitly focus on migrants, yet those in informal employment remained largely uncovered.

Measures put in place were not equally accessible to all. Migrant workers were much more likely to be found in informal employment, and not able to access furloughing through their employer. Migrants faced challenges and risks from the EU Settlement scheme. Risks associated with this process were pushed down to the individual. English language and digital skills provided considerable barriers, particularly for vulnerable groups.

In the face of changing systems of migration regulation and immigration control, migrant support groups were increasingly important.

Whilst the nature of migration regulation is quite different in the three countries, there are some common vulnerabilities and risks for migrants as a result of complex and rapidly changing migration systems.

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