

# Time for Change: Visa Reform for Indonesian Visitors to Australia

Position paper on the immediate need for visa reform to drive enhanced social, political, trade and cultural relationships with Australia's closest neighbour.



INDONESIA  
INSTITUTE

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## About Us

*The Indonesia Institute is a Western Australian based NGO (Non-Government Organisation) that was founded in November 2010 by Ross B. Taylor AM, a former WA Commissioner to Indonesia and past National Vice President of the Australia-Indonesia Business Council.*

*Our institute has adopted the following core objectives to:*

- *Improve Indonesian – Australian relations at social, business, cultural and political levels.*
- *Act as a think tank, to identify and communicate key insights into the issues affecting the Indonesia – Australia relationship.*
- *Promote cultural, social, & community activities between Indonesia and Australia, and build trade and commercial links and opportunities.*
- *Lobby governments in Indonesia and Australia on matters relating to bilateral relations.*
- *Act as a commentator or respected voice on issues relating to Indonesian – Australian relations.*
- *Facilitate linkages between people and organisations in Indonesia and Australia.*
- *Assist sustainable “sister-state” relationships between Indonesian Provinces and Australian States and Territories.*
- *Develop and maintain close relations with the Indonesian Ambassador, the Embassy, Indonesian Consul-Generals and Consulate Offices wherever possible.*
- *Provide Indonesia and Indonesians with a voice in Australia to generate an improved understanding of Indonesia.*

*We are active in promoting Indonesia-Australia relations both in our home state, throughout Australia and in Indonesia. We have strong and extensive linkages with like-minded organisations in Indonesia and also work closely with other Indonesia-Australia organisations such as the Australia Indonesia Business Council (AIBC), the Australia-Indonesia Youth Association (AIYA), Indonesian Consul-General in Perth, WA, ICCWA, the Australia Indonesia Association, the Australia Indonesia Centre, Balai Bahasa Indonesia Perth, the Australia Indonesia Institute DFAT, ACICIS and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.*

*Current Directors: <https://indonesia-institute.org.au/our-team/>*



**Introduction:**

This paper outlines how current visa requirements for Indonesians impede tourism, family visits, business and trade between Australia and Indonesia, and recommends solutions.

**Current Situation:**

Indonesia is Australia's closest neighbour, a stable democracy, and is critical to Australia's future – it will overtake the Australian economy in market value by 2030. But efforts to build trade and investment ties with this enormous and growing economy are undermined by Australia's visa regime.

Indonesian visa applicants are placed in a higher risk category than smaller ASEAN economies (for example Malaysia and Singapore). This higher threshold will have – long term, serious negative repercussions for Australia: we will not be able to maximise the intent of the IA-CEPA, build trust levels between our two countries, or drive social, political, economic and education ties.

Within this document, we acknowledge that within the visa system, risk management still needs to be built into the processes to ensure Australia is attracting genuine tourism, business, education and family visitors to Australia. However, in light of the IA-CEPA, it is time to reassess how we manage applicants from Indonesia.

Specific problems include:

- **Visa backlog:** currently over 600,000 visas still to be processed (some pending 12 months or longer), with no clarity on when visas will be decided, even though the Australian Government has taken application fees. The Indonesia Institute is aware of specific cases where repeat Indonesian tourists with direct family in Australia have been approved; however others they are travelling with are still waiting for an answer, leaving the group unable to travel.
- **Visa processing times:** We are aware of cases of high net-worth Indonesian families who studied in Australia and were regular travellers to Australia, choosing to go to Europe instead, as their Australian visa was approved too late for their intended travel dates.

- **Negative perceptions:** Visa delays have a negative economic impact and fuel a negative perception of Australia in Indonesia. These examples highlight that the visa system is not fit for purpose between Australia and Indonesia.
- **Lost tourism:** Indonesia's middle class has been growing faster than any other group and accounts for 52 million Indonesians (World Bank, 2020). In 2019, over 9.1 million Indonesians travelled abroad, and Australia only received 2.16% of those tourists (based on Tourism Australia's performance numbers).

### ***Why Australia Needs to Change the Approach to Visas for Indonesians:***

Traditionally Australia has put Indonesian travellers into a high-risk category. But we need to recognise that Indonesia has changed – it's a powerhouse economy of the future (hitting top 4 globally by 2050), with a growing middle class who have discretionary spending, are educated, in stable employment and have no intention of staying in Australia longer term.

Similar to Australia, the Indonesian middle class want to travel regularly as part of their lifestyle. Australia is on its doorstep; however, we make it extremely challenging from a cost and application process for travellers to enter the country. This is in stark contrast to the government's aspirations to grow trade, investment and tourism out of Indonesia into Australia. Trade and tourism promotional campaign success can only be judged by an increase in visitor numbers into Australia, and if there are barriers to visas, it is pointless to spend taxpayer money on these campaigns.

### ***Reform options:***

As part of any visa reform for Indonesia, it is essential to look at which streams of visitors pose the least risk, have genuine reasons for visits to Australia and should be encouraged to visit: family visitors, regular tourists and those who have previously studied in Australia and have long term connections.

We should examine how other developed countries treat Indonesia. At the very least, we should treat Indonesian visa applicants on a similar basis to applicants from Malaysia, Brunei or Singapore, which has a streamlined application process and a \$20 visa fee vs the \$150 fee for Indonesians and 16 pages of questions on a PDF document, some inappropriate, culturally insensitive or outdated. One model to compare and investigate would be the visa-free application with Japan, given that it

is a developed economy, not dissimilar to Australia  
([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_000498.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_000498.html)).

**Recommendations:**

1. Guaranteed refunds for current applicants who wish to withdraw visa applications, in light of enormous delays
2. Create a transparent visa application system with online self-monitoring of the process
3. Commission a report into the latest technology that can fast-track visa applications and expedite repeat visa applicants using AI/predictive analytics.
4. Cheaper visa application fees for Indonesians and faster processing times commensurate with community expectations (eg. Canada's processing times are approximately 2 weeks).
  - a. At a minimum, processing times for Indonesian applications should be in line with neighbours like Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore.
  - b. As part of the review, Home Affairs should examine visa application processes in countries that have the highest number of Indonesian visitors; Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Japan.
5. Online visa applications with fast-track for applicants who:
  - a. Have family connections to Australia.
  - b. Have travelled multiple times as tourists to Australia with no breach of visa requirements.
  - c. Indonesian tourist visa applications from individuals who have studied in Australia.
  - d. Indonesian business visitors who meet minimum requirements and are travelling to Australia for business purposes either independently or in conjunction with a trade mission, business event or conference.
6. Create an advisory committee on visas for Indonesian visitors to Australia. Indonesia Institute would like to be part of this type of initiative to support and influence a better model for Australia.

## **Summary**

The future of the Indonesia-Australia trade, tourism and business relationship is highly dependent on the ease of travel. We require a significant change in our mindset from seeking a transactional relationship with Indonesia to building long-term partnerships that will allow the strengths of both nations to be used to develop a win-win outcome. This will only be achieved if Australians and Indonesians get to know each other better and more deeply. A transactional approach may work for some countries, but not with Indonesia.

We urge immediate and far-sighted reforms, as recommended, to be adopted as a matter of priority.

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