

# The role of 'working hostels' in the horticulture sector

by Kaya Barry

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Shared accommodation for Working Holiday Makers at a working hostel in Queensland

*Photo Credit: Kaya Barry*

Almost daily we see news of the impending 'food crisis' due to a lack of migrant labour sources in the agriculture and horticulture sectors. While the debates on who should fill these jobs are focused on getting 'locals' onto farms or [axing the Working Holiday Maker \(WHM\) visa](#), these neglect the communal living arrangements that many migrant farm workers must endure. It is important to understand the way that working hostels influence the migrant worker experience, beyond the provision of basic accommodation.

'Working hostels', much like a 'tourist' hostel, house anywhere from dozens to hundreds of farm workers. In these hostels people live in bunkbed dormitory rooms with shared kitchen, bathroom and laundry facilities. Working hostel accommodation providers almost exclusively target people on a WHM visa. WHMs rely on employers to 'sign off' on their work in order to obtain visa extensions, whereas workers in the other seasonal labour mobility schemes do not. However, as a group of temporary migrants on a variety of visa categories, they share the living conditions in communal hostel accommodation.

Through my [research in Bundaberg, Queensland](#) based on interviews with WHMs, I have found that working hostels play a central role similar to, and sometimes the same as, migration agents in brokering and securing WHM's employment opportunities and visa extensions to accommodation contracts. In this way, accommodation providers are very powerful actors in the management of the agricultural labour done by these migrant workers.

Although WHMs do make up the bulk of residents in working hostels, the sub-standard conditions of communal living are shared by all occupants. In addition, the backpacker archetype of young people from the Global North does not map easily onto these WHMs, who are now a diverse group coming from 44 nations and aged up to 30 years (35 for certain nationalities). As [Beth Orton has recently suggested](#), the high uptake of second and third-year visas from middle-income countries on the subclass 462 WHM visa, despite the pandemic, may indicate that these 'visa

holders are more determined not to lose the opportunity they have been given by returning home early’.

While working hostel providers facilitate employment opportunities, leading to WHM visa extensions, it can be difficult for individuals to speak out about the poor conditions they are living in.

During my fieldwork I heard extensive first-hand accounts of racial discrimination in working hostels where people are sorted into ‘Asian rooms’ or ‘European rooms’. There were reports of different weekly rent rates for certain WHM nationalities who were deemed ‘tidier’ or ‘cleaner’ than others and instances of ‘Islander work teams’ and ‘white work teams’ being organised by hostel managers. Hostels can charge astoundingly high fees for accommodation, anywhere from \$100-260 per week for a bed in a dormitory room shared with up to 24 other people. There is often a lack of reasonable facilities, such as ‘only one kitchen for nearly 150 of us ... so when you come home from work around the same time ... you’re fighting for everything’, as one WHM described. Plus, there are [hidden deductions from wages](#) for transport to and from farms, or for the weekly supermarket trip, compounding the already low-paid or illegal rates that migrant farm workers receive.

Conditions that were already cramped and crowded have been exacerbated by the pandemic restrictions and social distancing. ‘There’s 50 of us here now, so if one person gets the coronavirus, we’re all gonna get it,’ one WHM told me. ‘We try to keep distance, but it’s impossible,’ he said.

A lack of planning and adequate guidelines has led to confusion and a heightened sense of risk for many people living in hostels. The initial [Victorian health advice in April](#) for people in temporary shared accommodation, which includes backpacker hostels and seasonal worker lodges, was:

‘If you are currently in a backpacker hostel, you should regard it as your home for the purposes of the Stay at Home direction. You should avoid spending time in communal areas of the hostel. You may leave the hostel to board a flight out of Australia. Always observe physical distancing requirements within the hostel.’

[Queensland Health guidelines](#) were to assign guests ‘to a ‘household unit’ of no more than four persons’ who will then ‘work, transport and share facilities’, but keep 1.5 metres distance from others at all times.

I spoke with several hostels that had attempted to group people into ‘household’ units, or roster access times to kitchens, bathrooms, and other communal areas. But, with dozens of people coming and going to multiple employment locations, and

no way to adequately distance hundreds of people sharing confined quarters, there was little success.

It is clear that dormitory accommodation is a high-risk environment for disease outbreak, as the world witnessed in [Singapore's migrant dormitories](#) earlier in the year, and in the student dormitories in the United States and United Kingdom more recently.

Media outcry following a [migrant farm worker testing positive in Bundaberg](#) after crossing state borders in June solidified the fear and distrust that many [temporary migrants attest to experiencing](#). These fears are coupled with the reported inconsistencies of state [border passes being denied to non-citizens](#) and the high costs for mandatory hotel quarantine. These factors have contributed to the decision by many WHMs to stay put in their current accommodation and employment, despite the risks and insecurities.

As COVID-19 restrictions continue to loosen and tighten accordingly, the mobility of seasonal work and the accommodation that enables it needs to be part of the debate. Future planning for all seasonal migration schemes must address these interrelated concerns facing a variety of visa holders. It needs to be based on an understanding of how much of a role the working hostel model has become in the creation of exploitative conditions for mobile farm workers.

The importance and value of safe, lively and social spaces for people to reside in needs to be prominent in these discussions. If an outbreak of COVID-19 does occur in a working hostel, the ill-thought out and basic provisions of restricting the number of people in communal areas will be a fruitless effort.

*Read the full article [Momentarily immobile: Backpacking, farm work and hostels in Bundaberg, Australia](#) here.*

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/the-role-of-working-hostels-in-the-horticulture-sector-20201014/>