

Understanding Pacific communities in Australia: younger or older?



Australian Pasifika Educators Network Executive Committee

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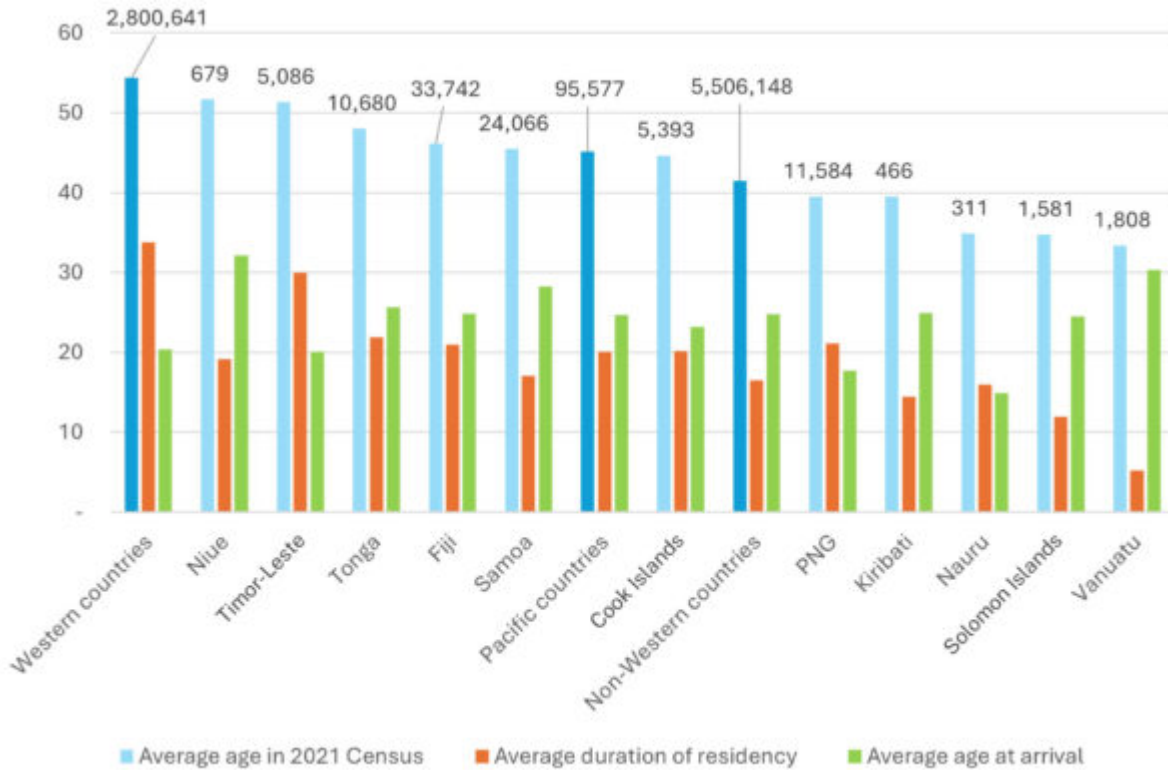
Enhancing regional integration by promoting freer movement in the Pacific has emerged as a compelling strategy for fostering regional prosperity. Yet, the social and economic integration of the Pacific diaspora in Australia — a key destination for Pacific migrants — remains relatively underexplored beyond basic population statistics.

In the first part of [a new blog series](#), we analyse Australian Census data to explore the characteristics of the Pacific diaspora, focusing on age structure. Subsequent blogs will look at labour market outcomes, geographical distribution, gender gaps and the second generation. We limit our focus to people born in independent Pacific states with ancestry from the region (including Fijian Indian) to exclude expatriates' children and we compare Pacific diaspora outcomes with those for migrants from Western and other (referred to as “non-Western”) countries.

Figure 1 shows that the average age within the Pacific diaspora in the 2021 Australian Census is 45, younger than for Western countries (54) but older than for other, non-Western countries (41). Diasporas from Niue and Timor-Leste have an average age of over 50, while those from Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are much younger, averaging just over 30.

Why do differences exist between regions and countries? We explore two factors — duration of residency and age at arrival — to help explain them.

Figure 1: Average age of migrants in the 2021 Australian Census



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Census (2021). Data labels refer to the number of migrants reported in the 2021 Census.

Note: The number of people who reported age at arrival and year of arrival can be much lower. Pacific countries include those mentioned, as well as Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Tuvalu, which report very low numbers. Western countries comprise those in Europe, North America and New Zealand. Non-Western countries are all others (excluding Pacific and Western countries). See the [interactive chart](#) on Tableau.

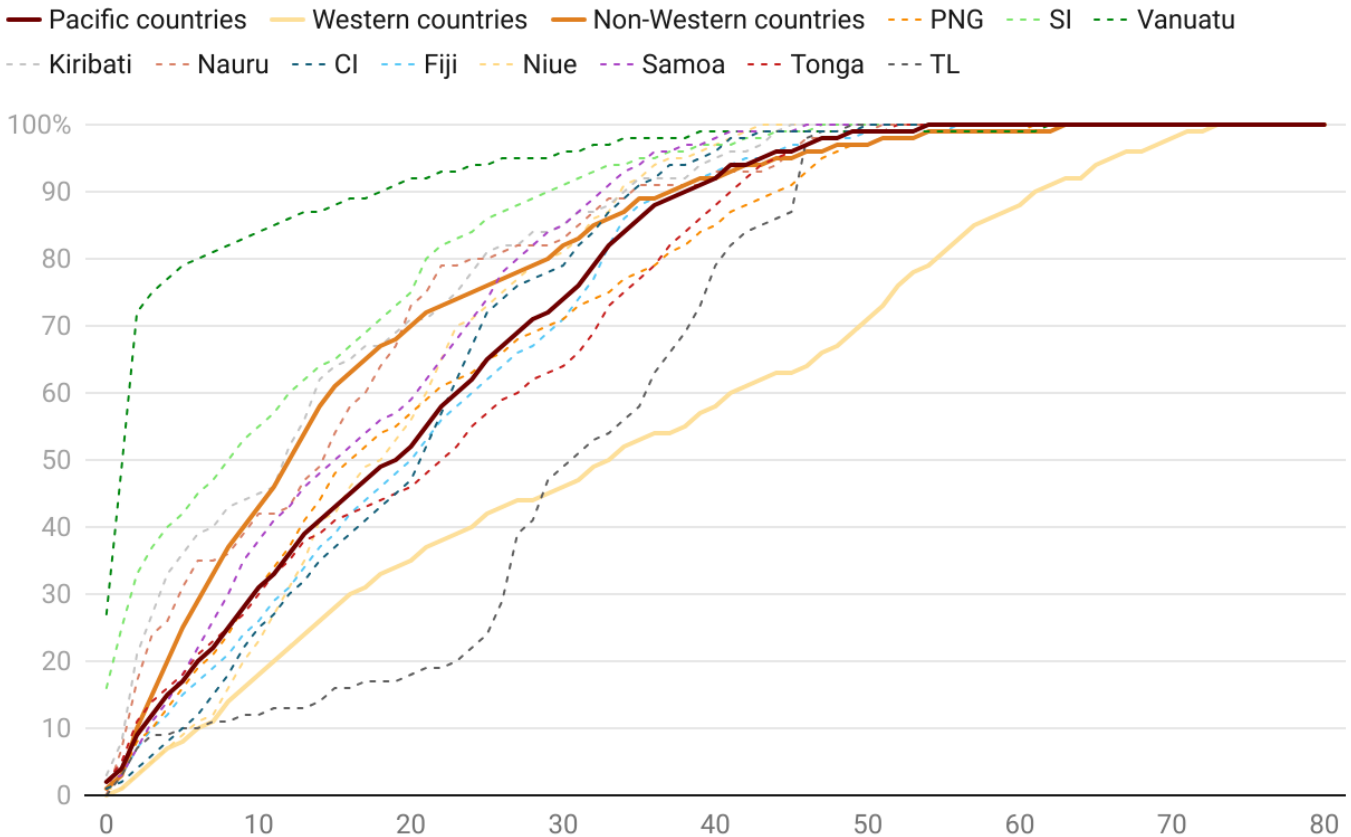
Figure 2 shows that, for the region as a whole, Pacific migrants have moved evenly — that is, at a steady rate — to Australia over the past 50 years. By contrast, migration from non-Western countries has been more recent, and from Western countries less recent.

Arrival patterns are mostly consistent and steady across Pacific countries, but Vanuatu and Timor-Leste are at the two extremes. Vanuatu is a significant source of workers for the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme so Vanuatu’s pattern is shaped by recent inflows of temporary workers who return home after their employment ends. In contrast, Timor-Leste’s arrivals are shaped by historical events, with 80% arriving in Australia before 2000, primarily under humanitarian visas.

Pacific countries with a relatively large diaspora in Australia — Fiji (33,742), Samoa (24,066), PNG (11,584) and Tonga (10,680) — show steady arrival rates over the past 40 years. However, their growth rates have been declining and are now below those of non-Western countries.

Figure 2: Distribution of duration of residency

Horizontal axis indicates the number of years in Australia.

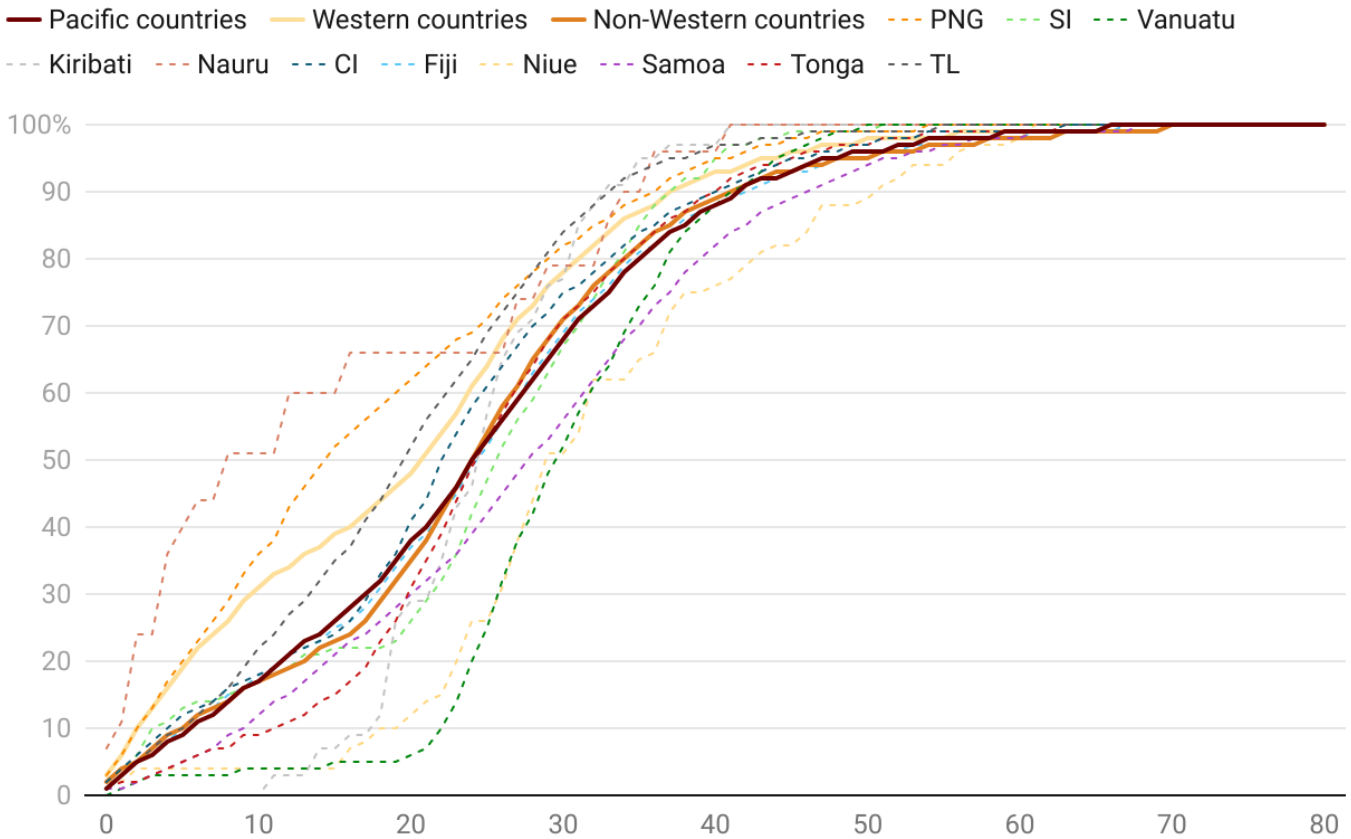


Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Census (2021) • Created with Datawrapper

Another factor is the age of migrants upon arrival in Australia. There is less variation across Pacific countries in average age of arrival than current age. Migrants from Niue have the highest average age at arrival (34), partly due to a relatively high proportion migrating after age 50 (over 10%), which skews the average for their small diaspora. Niue is a tiny country and most Niueans who wanted to leave did so long ago. All Niueans have New Zealand passports and can migrate to Australia easily. Samoa also has a relatively high arrival age because many Samoans migrate to New Zealand first before relocating to Australia. Migrants from Nauru and Papua New Guinea have lower arrival ages. Many arrived as children: 51% of Nauruan and 33% of Papua New Guinean migrants to Australia were between 0 and 9 years old on arrival (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Distribution of age at arrival

Horizontal axis indicates the age at arrival.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Census (2021) • Created with Datawrapper

To summarise, while there are interesting national differences, the average Pacific migrant is younger than the average Western migrant (45 vs 54) because, even though they arrive older (25 vs 20), the former has lived in Australia for much a shorter period (20 vs 34 years). By contrast, the average Pacific migrant is older than the average non-Western migrant (45 vs 41) because although they both arrive at the same age (25), the former has been in Australia for longer (20 vs 16 years).

Subsequent blogs in this series will further explore the unique characteristics of the Pacific diaspora within the broader Australian context.

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Disclosures:

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