



Migrant Key Workers and the Impact of Covid-19 on Mobility in Australia

Europe Briefing

Summary

- Health care and social assistance was the largest sector of employment for European migrants in 2021.
- 40% of European-born workers were in key worker occupations. For migrant workers from Ireland and South Eastern Europe 44% were in key worker occupations, compared to 38% for the UK.
- The number of temporary visa holders from Europe decreased by 71%, from 391,992 in December 2019 to a low of 110,308 in December 2021, before increasing to 178,966 in September 2022.

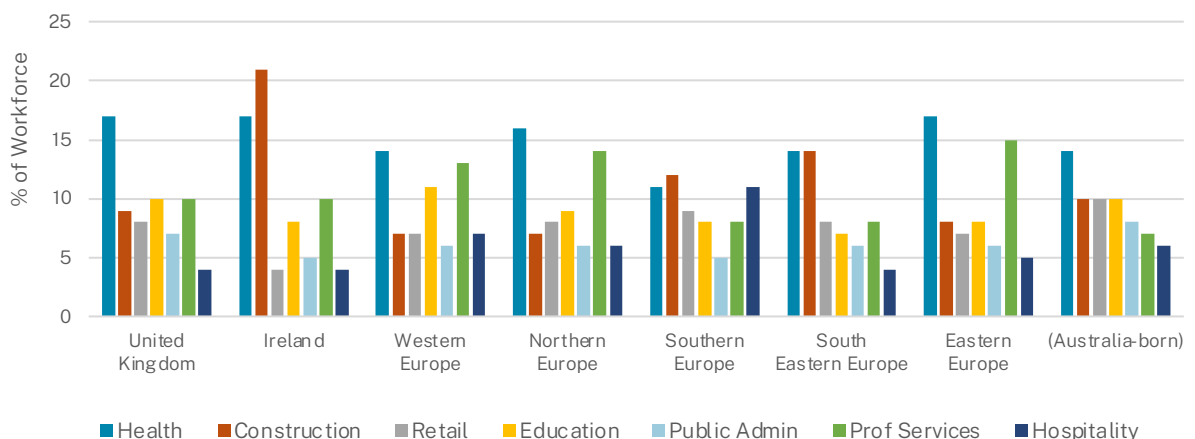
Impact of Covid-19 by Industry

The Covid-19 pandemic reshaped global migration flows and the positions of migrants in Australian society (Guan, O'Donnell and Raymer 2024). As key workers in healthcare, agriculture and food services, migrants were essential to the national response to Covid-19 in Australia. At the same time, the economic shocks of the pandemic had significant impacts on migrants in a range of economic sectors and occupation. Undertaken during the disruptions of state lockdowns, the 2021 Census provides a unique dataset on the distribution of European migrants across the economy during the employment shocks of the pandemic and before the 2022 recovery of the labour market.

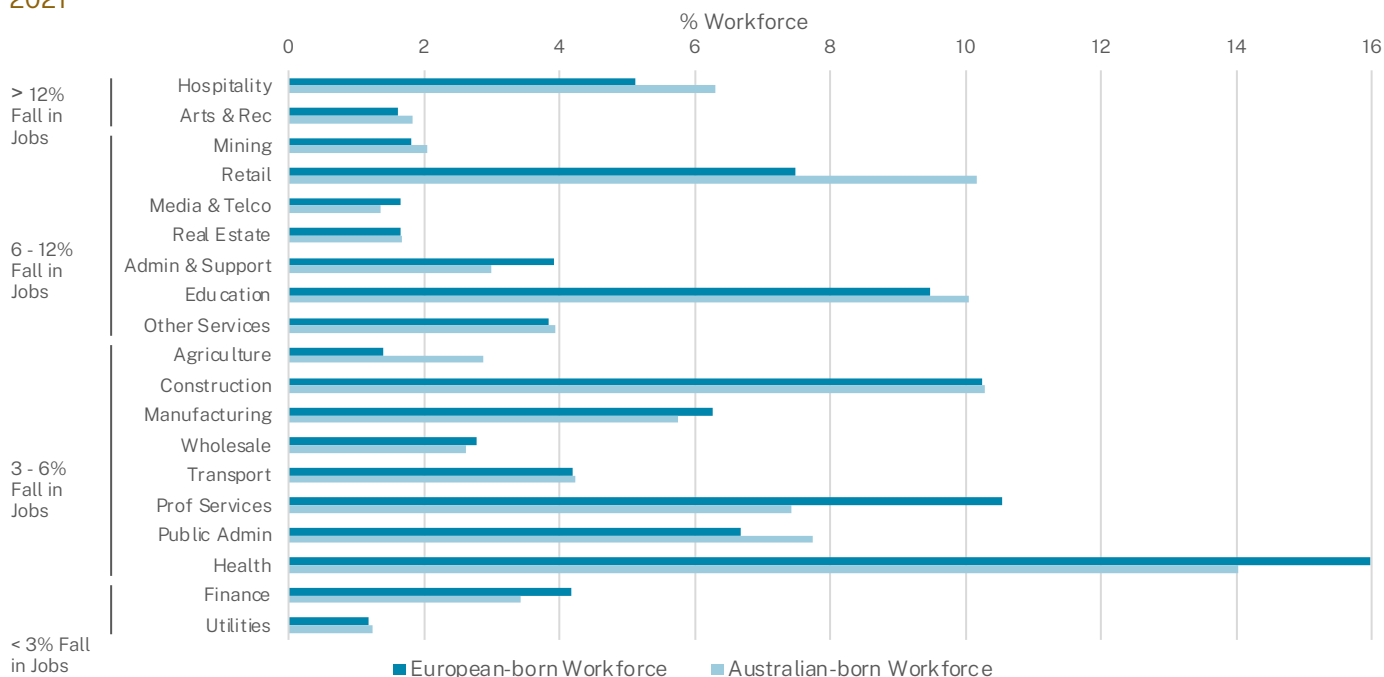
The health care and social assistance sector was the largest industry of employment identified in the census by migrants from Europe. Taken together a quarter of European-born migrants are employed in health (16%) and construction (10% of the European-born workforce respectively). This parallels these industries share of the Australian-born workforce.

Other significant sectors of employment for the European-born population in Australia were in professional services and education. These varied by region with migrants from Eastern Europe, Northern Europe, Western Europe, the UK and Ireland over-represented in professional services

Leading Industries of Employment by Region of Birth, 2021



Impact of Covid-19 and proportion of population employed across Australian industries, 2021



compared to the Australian-born population. In contrast those born in Southern Europe (12%), South-Eastern Europe (14%) and Ireland (21%) had a strong share of their workforce in the construction industry.

European-born migrants are under-represented in the hospitality and retail industries compared to the Australian-born workforce. However for migrants born in Southern Europe, they are almost twice as likely as Australian-born workers (6%) to be employed in hospitality (11%). These regional variations in Industries of employment had significant implications for migrants given the varied and changing economic Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Workers employed in hospitality and recreation industries were the most likely to lose work during the first months of the pandemic (ABS 2021). Hospitality was particularly affected by travel restrictions and subsequent state lockdowns.

Six of Australia’s employment sectors, including health, education, professional services, retail, hospitality and public administration, were expected to recover strongly following the pandemic (Wood 2021). While 56% of the Australian-born workforce are employed in these industries, this is paralleled by 55% of European-born workers.

Industries expected to have moderate post-COVID recovery employ 24% of European migrant workers, compared to 22% of Australian-born workers. Notably, a higher percentage of European migrants are employed

in finance, administration and Information, media and telecommunications industries.

Three sectors projected as having weaker employment growth are manufacturing, construction, and mining. European-born participation in these industries parallels the rates of Australian-born workers, with construction representing the largest share (10%) of the workforce in these industries.

Gender and the Covid-19 Crisis

At the national level, female-dominated economic sectors, including retail, hospitality, education and health and social assistance industries, were the most negatively impacted by the pandemic. Women workers were also more exposed than their male counterparts to casual or precarious employment and a greater burden of unpaid care during the pandemic (Wood 2021).

Health is the leading sector for women’s employment In the Australian economy. The sex ratio of the Australian-born health workforce is 25 men per 100 women. For the European migrant population, the health industry has a similar composition with 22 Northern European-born men per 100 women, 24 Eastern European-born men per 100 women, 25 South-Eastern-born men per 100 women, and 27 Irish-born men per 100 women in the sector. Sex ratios for the UK and Western Europe are 33 men per 100 women, and for Southern Europe are 35 men to 100 women. Given that healthcare workers constituted a large proportion of Australia’s key workers during the pandemic, European-born women were similar to

Australian-born women in their role on the frontlines of the pandemic.

Education was another female-dominated sector that was on the frontlines of the governmental response to the pandemic. The sex ratio for Australian-born workers in education was 35 men per 100 women. There were similar female-dominated sex ratios for the European sub-regions, except for the UK (48 men per 100 women) and Western Europe (51 men per 100 women).

Migrant Key Workers

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in countries identifying a range of occupations as key workers that were essential to their societies. Based on European Commission guidelines, researchers defined 17 occupation groups as key workers which enabled comparison across the OECD (Fasani & Mazza 2020). Covering a range of skills and sectors these included cleaners, teaching professionals, personal care workers, agricultural workers, transport workers, ICT professionals and engineers.

Categorising Key Workers in Australia

Applying Fasani & Mazza (2020) to ABS (2022b)

Health Professionals
Health and Welfare Support Workers
Carers and Aides
Farmers and Farm Managers
Food Trades Workers
Farm, Forestry and Garden Workers
Food Preparation Assistants
Skilled Animal and Horticultural Workers
Road and Rail Drivers
Mobile Plant Operators
Design, Engineering, Science & Transport Professionals
ICT Professionals
Engineering, ICT and Science Technicians
Education Professionals
Construction Trades Workers
Construction and Mining Labourers
Machinery Operators and Drivers
Machine and Stationary Plant Operators
Cleaners and Laundry Workers

Based on these occupation categories, one third (36%) of Australia's key workers in 2021 were born overseas. The above occupations represented 40% of employment held by the Australian-born population and that is paralleled by the European-born population (40%). European-born key workers were over-represented as design, engineering, science and transport professionals and in ICT occupations.

Key Workers by Country of Birth	Health	Food
Australia	11%	6%
United Kingdom	13%	4%
Ireland	14%	2%
Western Europe		
Austria	11%	4%
Belgium	11%	4%
France	7%	7%
Germany	12%	4%
Luxembourg	10%	0%
Netherlands	11%	5%
Switzerland	12%	5%
Northern Europe		
Denmark	10%	4%
Finland	14%	4%
Iceland	7%	3%
Norway	14%	2%
Sweden	11%	3%
Southern Europe		
Italy	7%	9%
Malta	8%	6%
Portugal	8%	4%
Spain	10%	4%
South Eastern Europe		
Albania	8%	9%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	10%	2%
Bulgaria	10%	2%
Croatia	8%	3%
Cyprus	8%	4%
North Macedonia	7%	4%
Greece	8%	5%
Moldova	13%	3%
Romania	13%	2%
Slovenia	11%	4%
Montenegro	9%	3%
Serbia	9%	2%
Kosovo	7%	3%
Eastern Europe		
Belarus	12%	2%
Czechia	13%	4%
Estonia	7%	6%
Hungary	11%	3%
Latvia	11%	2%
Lithuania	9%	3%
Poland	14%	2%
Russia	11%	2%
Slovakia	11%	3%
Ukraine	13%	3%



Health professionals, health and welfare support workers, carers and aides represented 11% of the occupations registered by the Australian-born in the 2021 census. For Finland, Ireland, Norway and Poland, 14% of their migrant workers were in health key worker occupations.

Food-related key workers included farmers, farm managers, food trades workers, farm workers, forestry workers, garden workers, food preparation assistants, skilled animal workers and horticultural workers. These occupations represent 6% of the Australian-born workforce. Food-related key worker occupations were 9% of the occupations recorded by Italian and Albanian migrant workers.

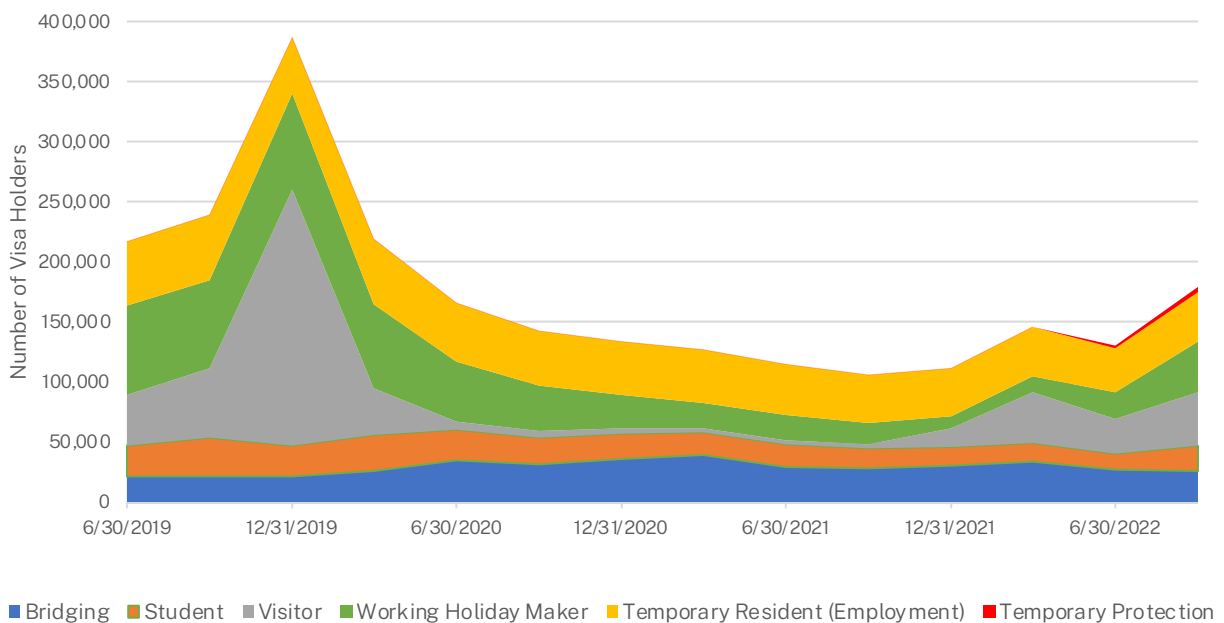
Mobility and Temporary Migration

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic there was a steep decrease in the number of temporary visa holders from Europe in Australia. The number of European visas holders peaked in December of 2019 at 391,992 before decreasing by 71% to a low

of 110,308 in September of 2021. This decrease was sharpest immediately during the first six months of the pandemic, before continuing to steadily decrease each quarter until September of 2021. Despite the overall decline in European visa holders in Australia, the number of Europeans holding Bridging visas throughout 2020 and 2021 remained at or around pre-pandemic rates. Similarly, the number of European Temporary Resident (Employment) visa holders only declined 28% compared to the 71% decline in total European temporary visa holders.

Since the second half of 2021, the number of visa holders for most visa categories has increased, with the exception of Temporary (Employment) and Bridging visas, which have been stable at around 40,000 and 30,000 visa holders respectively since June of 2021. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there has been a rapid increase in Temporary Protection visa holders from under 10 European migrants in all of 2020 and 2021 to 4,448 Europeans in September 2022.

European Mobility by Visa Category during the Covid-19 Pandemic



Sources:

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022a), Census of Population and Housing, 2021; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022b) ANZSCO - Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), “A year of COVID-19 through payroll jobs and wages statistics”; Home Affairs (2022), BP0019 Number of Temporary visa holders in Australia at 2022-09-30; F. Fasani & J. Mazza (2020), “Immigrant key workers: Their contribution to Europe’s COVID-19 response”; A. Gamlen (2020), “Migration and mobility after the 2020 pandemic: The end of an age?”; D. Wood et al. (2021), “Women’s work: The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Australian women”; Q. Guan, J. O’Donnell and J. Raymer (2024), “Changes in International Migration to and from Australia During the COVID-19 Pandemic”.

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