



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

Pacific Briefing

Summary

- Health care and social assistance was the leading industry of employment for Pacific migrants in Australia.
- Pacific migrants were significantly over-represented in key worker occupations in health (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands), food-related occupations (Vanuatu, Solomon Islands) and transport and construction (New Zealand).
- The number of temporary visa holders in Australia from Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) decreased by over a quarter (27%) during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, there was a rapid recovery in the stock of these temporary migrants in Australia, which has increased to 55% more than the pre-pandemic peak.

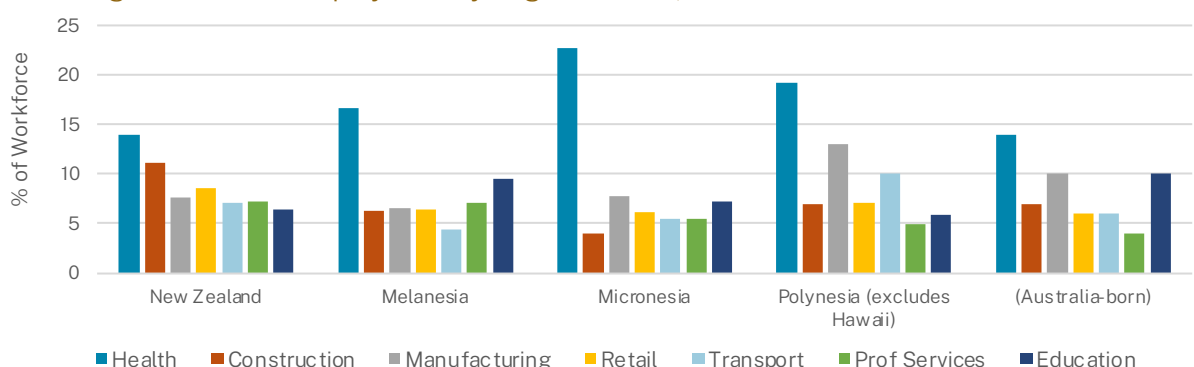
Impact of Covid-19 by Industry

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 migrants from the Pacific across the economy during the employment shocks of the pandemic and before the 2022 recovery of the labour market.

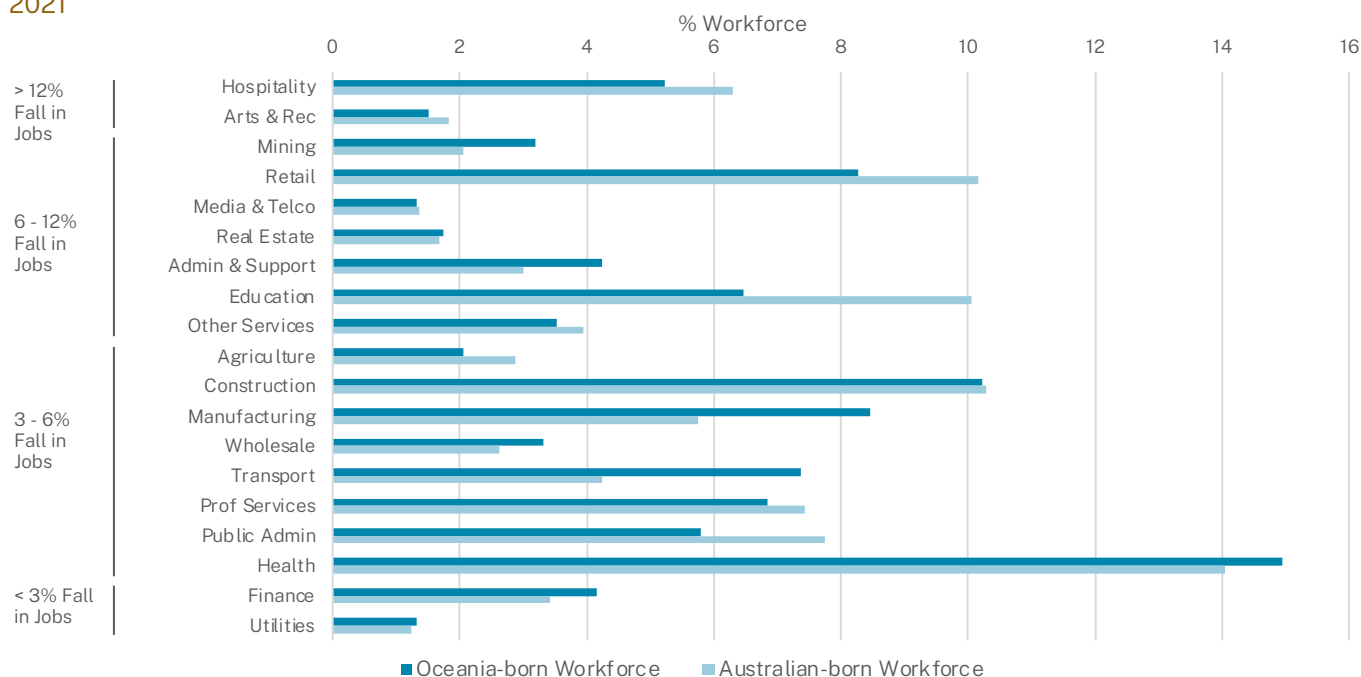
The health care and social assistance sector was the largest industry of employment identified in the census by migrants from the Pacific. Almost a quarter (23%) of migrant workers, 19% of those born in Polynesia and 17% of those born in Melanesia were employed in the sector. The 13% of New Zealand-born workers in the health sector paralleled the employment rates of the Australian-born population.

The second leading sectors of employment for Pacific migrants varied by sub-region, with 11% of the New Zealand-born employed in construction, 10% of Melanesian-born workers in education and 9% of the Micronesian-born in hospitality. 13% of Polynesian-born workers worked in manufacturing.

Leading Industries of Employment by Region of Birth, 2021



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



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 compares with 47% of Pacific-born workers.

Industries expected to have moderate post-COVID recovery employ 27% of Pacific migrant workers, compared to 22% of Australian-born workers. Notably, a higher percentage of Pacific migrants are employed in transport, finance, administration and support industries.

Workers in the manufacturing industry were heavily affected by COVID-19 lockdowns. This industry employs 6% of Australian-born workers and 8% of Pacific migrant workers. It is expected that there will be a slower recovery in this sector after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three sectors projected as having weaker employment growth are manufacturing, construction, and mining. While 18% of Australian-born workers are employed in workers. Migrants from New Zealand and Polynesia are particularly likely to be employed 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 Pacific migrant population, the health industry has a similar composition with 27 New Zealand-born men per 100 women, 25 Melanesian-born men per 100 women and 22 Polynesian born men per 100 women in the sector. Given that healthcare workers constituted a large proportion of Australia’s key workers during the pandemic, Pacific women were more disproportionately exposed than the population average.

Education was another female-dominated sector that was on the frontlines of national and state government’s response to the pandemic. The sex ratio for Australian-born workers in education was 35 men per 100 women. For New Zealand-born migrants working in education there were 39 men per 100 women and for Polynesian-born education workers there were 44 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 a similar share for the New Zealand-born population (41%). Half of Micronesian-born workers were in the key worker occupations listed above, with 46% of Melanesian-born and Polynesian-born workers in these essential occupations.

Three groups of key workers that were a focus for Australian policy-makers during the pandemic were health-related occupations, food-related occupations and transport and technology.

Health professionals, health and welfare support workers, carers and aides represented 11% of the occupations registered by the Australian-born in the 2021 census. A similar proportion of the New Zealand-born workers were employed as health-related key workers. Migrants from Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) were over-represented as health-related

key workers, with a third (32%) of the workers from Kiribati, and a fifth from the Marshall Islands (19%) and Fiji (18%) in health-related occupations.

Key Workers by Country of Birth	Health	Food
Australia	11%	6%
New Zealand		
Melanesia		
New Caledonia	11%	5%
Papua New Guinea	15%	5%
Solomon Islands	13%	22%
Vanuatu	4%	52%
Micronesia		
Guam	17%	5%
Kiribati	32%	13%
Marshall Islands	19%	0%
Nauru	11%	8%
Polynesia		
Cook Islands	7%	4%
Fiji	18%	3%
French Polynesia	8%	6%
Niue	14%	4%
Samoa	11%	5%
American Samoa	12%	6%
Tokelau	15%	5%
Tonga	15%	16%
Tuvalu	9%	0%

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 particularly important for migrants born in Vanuatu (52%), the Solomon Islands (22%) and Tonga (16%).

Mobility and Temporary Migration

Migrants from New Zealand represented 97% of temporary visa holders from the Pacific in Australia during 2019 and 2020. In September 2019 there were 685,171 Special Category visa-holders in Australia which are reserved for New Zealand citizens. This fell to under 660,000 in September 2020 and remained at that level until June 2022. Whilst there has been a rapid recovery to 680,045 Special Category visa-holders by September 2022, during 2021 and 2022 the Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have doubled



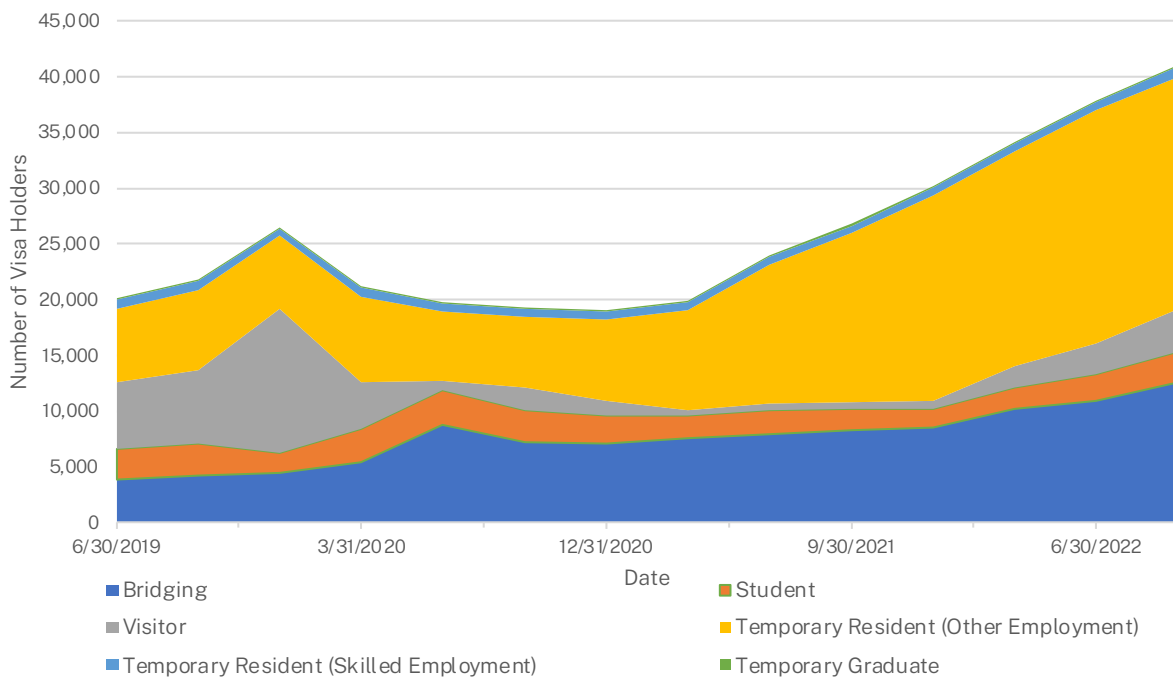
their share to 6% of the region’s temporary visa holders in Australia.

From the December 2019 to December 2020, the number of Pacific SIDS temporary visa holders in Australia fell by 27% from 26,655 to 19,234. Since December 2020, the number of Pacific SIDS temporary visa holders in Australia has increased by 114% to 41,203 people. This is 55% higher than the pre-pandemic peak.

The makeup of temporary visas held by Pacific SIDS migrants has also changed. In December 2019, Visitor visas comprised 48% of temporary visas held by people from this region. Additionally, 25% were Temporary Resident (Other Employment) visas and 17% were Bridging visas. At the pandemic trough, 38% were Temporary Resident (Other Employment), 37% were Bridging visas and 13% were Student visas. In September 2022, 51% of temporary visas held by Pacific migrants were Temporary Resident (Other Employment) visas, 30% were Bridging visas and 9% were Visitor visas.

The rise in Temporary Resident (Other Employment) Visas and Bridging Visas are two clear implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on temporary visa types held by Pacific migrants in Australia. However, most visa types have are now held by more people than pre-pandemic. Only Visitor visas are yet to return to their pre-pandemic levels. While seasonal variation of visitor visas may partially explain this, the number of Visitor Visas from the Pacific region in September 2022 was 42% lower than the number of visitor visas from the region in September 2020. This reveals the uneven dynamics and persisting frictions in the migration-mobility continuum that shape movements from the Pacific to Australia (Gamlen 2020).

Pacific Mobility by Visa Category during the Covid-19 Pandemic 2019-2022



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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