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Tom Wilson · Jeromey Temple ·
Peter McDonald · Ariane Utomo ·
Bianca Brijnath

The Changing Migrant Composition of Australia's Population Past, Present and Future



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Past, Present and Future


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Tom Wilson 
Melbourne School of Population
and Global Health
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Jeromey Temple 
Melbourne School of Population
and Global Health
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Peter McDonald 
Melbourne School of Population
and Global Health
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Ariane Utomo 
School of Geography, Earth
and Atmospheric Sciences
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Bianca Brijnath 
Division of Social Gerontology
National Ageing Research Institute
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

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Chapter 1

Introduction



Abstract International migration plays a major role in shaping Australia’s demography, economy and society, and is often the subject of public and political debate. Yet surprisingly few studies have considered how the migrant composition of the population could change in future decades. This chapter introduces our study, which looks at the possible future population of Australia’s population in terms of its birthplace composition, and some of the implications of those changes.

Keywords Population projections · Country of birth · International migration · Demographic transition · Australia

Australia’s contemporary demography, society and economy owes a great deal to international migration. In 2020, an estimated 7.65 million residents, representing 30% of the population, were born outside Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Over the decade of the 2010s, about half a million largely young, well-educated and healthy immigrants arrived on average every year, while a little more than half that number emigrated annually. Following international convention, immigration in Australian official statistics is defined as the movement of people to Australia for a year or more, while emigration is the movement of people away from Australia for a year or more. Australia experiences substantial net international migration gains, which—until the recent pandemic-related drop in international migration—averaged 216,000 per year during the 2010s (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

International migration is regularly the subject of public debate, media commentary, and political decisions in Australia. Migration and population growth are commonly amongst the top issues of concern in the community (Essential Research, 2020). Each year the Australian Government announces the number of places available in the following year’s Migration Program (skilled worker and family permanent migration) and Humanitarian Program (refugee permanent migration) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). The Federal Government also monitors and regulates temporary immigration, which includes international students, working holiday-makers, and temporary workers. The current federal government has a Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs. Newspapers and television shows are keen on hosting debates about population and immigration.

Researchers in Australia investigate a wide range of topics associated with international migration, including demographic trends and patterns (Raymer et al., 2018), labour force integration (De Alwis et al., 2019; Parr & Guo, 2005; Rajendran et al., 2020), the nexus between education, employment, and migration as in the case of international students (Robertson, 2011), education and employment outcomes of migrants (De Alwis et al., 2019), English language abilities (McDonald et al., 2019), fertility (Abbasi-Shavazi & McDonald, 2000, 2002), health and welfare (Brijnath et al., 2019; Khlat et al., 1992), and housing experiences (Easthope et al., 2017; Ting et al., 2018). It is surprising then that more attention has not been paid to Australia's future demographic diversity in the context of high international migration flows.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) periodically prepares projections of Australia's population overall, and specific projections of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. However, it does not publish projections by birthplace or ethnic group. Prior to our research project, the most recent study on the future of Australia's population origins was published about 20 years ago. Gibson et al. (2001) presented projections of Australia's older population from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds from 1996 to 2026 under the assumption of no international migration. Earlier work includes that of Price (1996) who prepared projections of Australia's population by birthplace and "ethnic strength" from 1991 to 2025. In some other countries, national statistical offices or academic researchers periodically prepare projections of the birthplace and/or ethnic composition of their populations, including Dion et al. (2015) for Canada, Edmonston et al. (2002) for the US, Hollmann and Kingkade (2005) for the US, Lanzieri (2011) for countries of the European Union, Rallu (2017) for France, Statistics Canada (Morency et al., 2017), Statistics New Zealand (2017), Statistics Norway (2018) and the US Census Bureau (2018). Although the UK Office for National Statistics does not prepare ethnic group projections, the Greater London Authority does so on a regular basis for London (Greater London Authority (GLA), 2020), and academic researchers have created ethnic group population projections covering the whole UK (Coleman, 2010; Lomax et al., 2020; Rees et al., 2016).

This Springer Brief looks ahead to see how international migration might shape Australia's population composition over the coming decades. It presents projections of Australia's resident population by country (or global region) of birth from 2016 to 2066, updating and extending work presented earlier (Wilson et al., 2020, 2021a, 2021b). We focus on birthplace rather than ethnic group for three reasons. First, ethnicity is partially a social construct, and difficult to objectively operationalise. Its meaning changes in response to migration, kinship patterns, and other social and cultural trends. All humans have an ethnicity, although those who belong to a majority ethnic group may not see themselves as being 'ethnic.'¹² Consequently, ethnicity may be self-identified, identified by others, and linked to specific behaviours with a particular ethnic group. Second, Australia has good quality and a long time series of demographic statistics on the birthplace of individuals and their parents but limited data on ethnicity (except for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, and a census question on ancestry that is not clearly defined). Third, for many aspects of service provision, policy, and planning, country of birth is a useful

variable. It is closely associated with language and culture (Temple et al. 2021), which impacts on the provision of government and private sector services such as health care (Clarke & Ispording, 2017; Ji et al., 2019), health promotion (Kelaher et al., 1999; Taibi et al., 2019), aged care (Kendig & Russell, 1998; Radermacher et al., 2009; Warburton et al., 2009), family services (for example, family violence services, see Pruitt et al., 2017), and employment and settlement services (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Correa-Velez et al., 2015; Wulff & Dharmalingam, 2008).

Projecting the birthplace composition of Australia's population allows us to consider the long-run demographic development of the country. Over the last few decades Australia has exhibited many (but not all) features of the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, 2014), including below-replacement fertility, less marriage, more non-marital fertility, and net international migration gains, along with more individualism, greater gender equality, and a wider range of lifestyles. It has not, however, experienced natural decrease. Coleman (2006, p. 401) has argued that many western countries are experiencing a third demographic transition in which, "the ancestry of some national populations is being radically and permanently altered by high levels of immigration of persons from remote geographic origins or with distinctive ethnic and racial ancestry, in combination with persistent sub-replacement fertility and accelerated levels of emigration of the domestic population". To a large degree a transition of this nature has been gradually occurring in Australia for many decades, but to a greater extent from the final years of the twentieth century. It has been facilitated by the removal of the racially-restrictive White Australia Policy in the 1970s (Jupp, 1995), a shift towards privileging skills in the selection of permanent migrants, and the introduction of temporary migration visas in the 1990s, which brought increasing numbers of temporary workers and a rapid rise in the number of international higher education students studying in Australia (Hugo, 2006), especially from China and India.

These developments occurred in the context of broad-level global economic and political change. Czaika and de Haas (2014) conclude that global international migration patterns have become more geographically skewed in recent decades, with migrants from non-European countries moving to a smaller number of key immigration countries, including Australia. They suggest that migration trends and patterns have been affected by economic development (providing more people with the resources to emigrate), the lifting of emigration restrictions in the former communist bloc, the weakening of ties between former colonies and ruling countries, fewer racial restrictions on immigration, increasingly global labour markets, and improvements in technology. Historical migration developments are discussed further in the overview of Australia's migration trends and population development in the following chapter. The data and assumptions used in our birthplace projections are then outlined in Chap. 3, while the results of the projection scenarios are presented in Chap. 4. The implications of the projections are discussed in Chap. 5, while Chap. 6 presents profiles of all 48 birthplace populations included in our modelling.

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