



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

# THE GREAT MIGRATION

LEAVING OUR CITIES FOR THE REGIONS

REGIONAL MIGRATION SURVEY  
Part II: Current working patterns, future work perspectives

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## ABOUT THE SURVEY

The Future of Work Lab's Regional Migration survey was conducted between October-December 2021. The survey was designed to better understand the five dimensions of migration (intensity, who moves, when, where and why), and how these factors intersect with the way we work now and into the future.

The survey responses were collected through an anonymous survey link, using the Qualtrics survey tool. Over 500 responses were received, however, for data quality purposes this survey uses 416 unique data points.

It should be noted that the report is only concerned with the movement of people from Australian cities to regional areas in Victoria. It does not consider other modes of internal migration such as regional to regional, or regional to city migration.

The regional classifications adopted in this report correspond to the Local Government Areas defined by the Victorian State Government.

This report is the second instalment of three in our regional migration series. A copy of the first report in the Regional Migration Survey series can be found here <https://futureofwork.unimelb.edu.au/regional-migration/>. Enquiries regarding the survey can be directed to the Future of Work Lab by contacting [futureofwork-info@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:futureofwork-info@unimelb.edu.au).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Future of Work Lab would like to thank all those that contributed to the development of the Regional Migration Survey. Special thanks to all the local government leaders, organisations, and individuals that championed the survey by distributing it through their networks.

Front cover photo provided by Hepburn Shire Council.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 has forced us to reimagine the way we're working now and into the future. We know, for instance, that the increase in remote working has enabled many Australians to bring forward their plans of leaving the city in search of a more relaxed regional lifestyle. However, to date there has been very little exploration of how the current shifts in working practices are being experienced by regional movers, and what the implications for regional communities might be.

This second instalment in the Future of Work Lab's *Regional Migration Survey* series, aims to better understand the current working patterns and future work aspirations of people who have migrated to regional Victoria from metropolitan areas across Australia.

In terms of distinct pre- and post-COVID working trends, our survey found that:

- pre-COVID, 81% of people who migrated to the regions were employed, however, post-COVID this jumped to 95%,
- pre-COVID 60% of internal migrants were employed regionally, this dropped to 35% as more regional movers retained ties to metro-based employment,
- pre-COVID, only 12% of respondents lived in households in which both partners were working for a metro-based employer, this number almost tripled to 34% of households post-COVID.

With respect to people maintaining ties to metro-based employment, we found that:

- 53% of respondents were working for a metro-based employer, while 47% were living and working regionally,
- 22% of all households consisted of couples in which both partners were working for a metro-based employer.

Our analysis of remote working trends found that:

- 90% of people who were in metro-based employment were working remotely at least some of the time,
- Over 1 in 5 people surveyed (21%) believed that their job could be done entirely remotely,
- there was strong association between remote working, income, and education, with degree qualified people and those in higher income categories, more likely to be working remotely.

Our survey also found that the increase in remote working had not stimulated a demand for co-working spaces in regional Victoria. Only 17% of regional movers expressed some interest in sharing a co-working space.

In terms of commuting trends, our survey found that:

- 27% of people were commuting to a metropolitan region for work,
- 37% of respondents were living and working in the same regional postcode, minimising the frequency of long commutes,
- on average, the move to regional Victoria had saved workers 4.5 hours p/w in commuting time.

We also asked people a series of questions about their future work aspirations and found that:

- 65% strongly agreed that they would prefer to work from home between 2-3 days per week,
- 66% strongly disagreed with the idea of returning to their pre-COVID working arrangements, and
- 31% of respondents strongly agreed that they would like to end their metro-regional commute to work.

When thinking about their future employment prospects, our survey found that:

- 54% of employed respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed that they were reconsidering their current employment and/or career direction,
- less than a quarter of respondents (23%) agreed that they were actively looking for employment regionally,
- 45% of respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed that there was a lack of suitable jobs for people with their skills/experience in regional Victoria.

The findings of the *Regional Migration Survey* help us to better understand the current working practices and the future work aspirations of people who have migrated from cities to regional areas.

This knowledge is critical to discerning the benefits that might accrue to regional economies from the flow of additional human capital. But it is also essential to safeguarding against the entrenchment of inequality that may be a consequence of wealthier, more professionally mobile individuals migrating to the regions in greater numbers.

The final instalment of the *Regional Migration Survey* series will look more closely at the entrepreneurial proclivity of people who have moved to regional Victoria, and the role internal migration can play in the development of a more equitable regional economy.

# 1. CURRENT WORKING PATTERNS

## EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The majority of survey respondents (88%) who moved to regional Victoria between 2016 -2021 were, or had recently been, employed. Of those who were not in paid employment, most were aged 65 years or older (53%). Regional cities attracted the largest percentage of employed people (92%), compared with 87% of people who moved to rural Victoria, and 80% of people who moved to a peri-urban region.

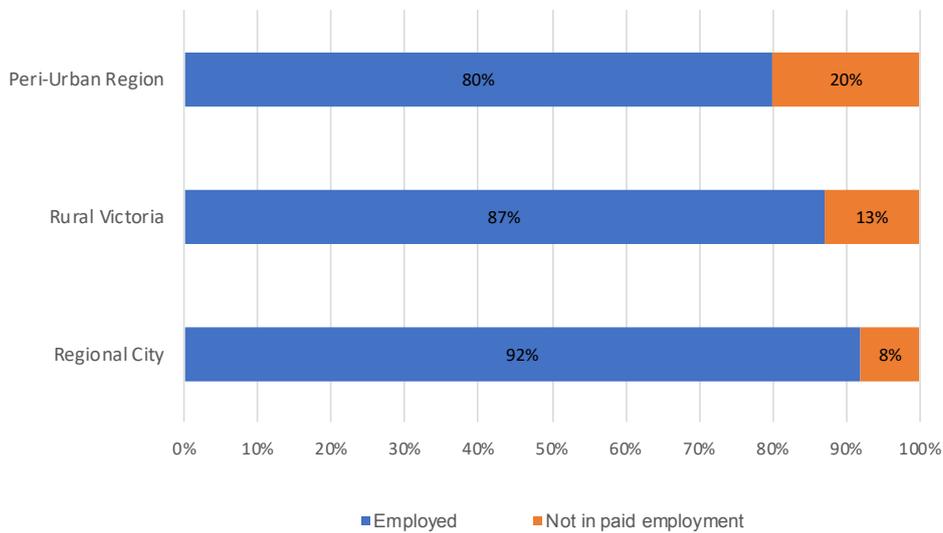


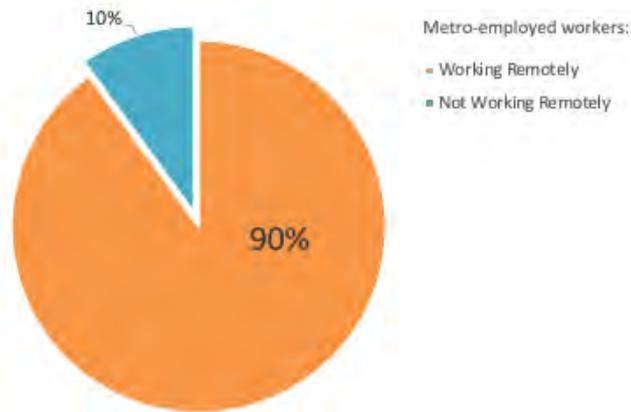
Fig. 1: Employment status and regional migration destination (n=365)

There were some significant differences between the employment status of people who moved to regional Victoria before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, 81% of survey respondents who migrated were employed, however, this increased to 95% post pandemic.

The 14% increase in employed people moving to the regions post-COVID can be explained by two factors: 1) the higher levels of remote working precipitated by the pandemic, and 2) the younger demographic of regional movers. Remote working enabled many employed people to migrate regionally without having to resign from their metro-based jobs. This in turn, enabled a younger cohort of people to move regionally and bring forward their plans to realise their aspiration for a lifestyle change.

## REMOTE WORKING STATUS

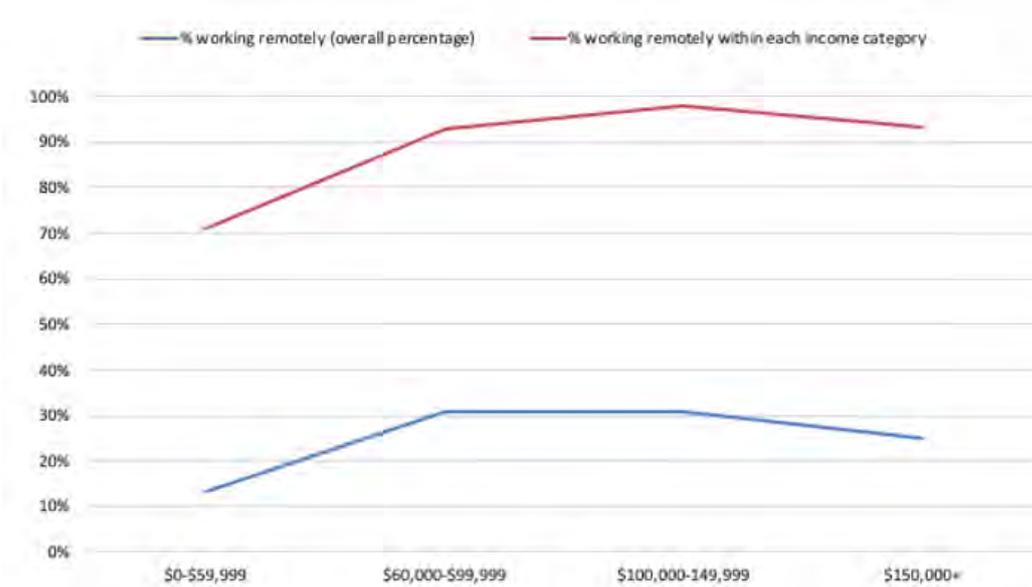
To better understand the relationship between remote working and regional living, survey respondents who were working for a metro-based employer were asked whether they were also working from home. 90% of all respondents who were employed in a metro-based business indicated that they were working remotely at least some of the time. This is significantly higher than the 40% of people estimated to be working from home during the height of the Victorian lockdown in 2021<sup>1</sup>, and illustrates the impact remote working has had on facilitating internal migration to the regions. Only 10% of people who had ties to metro-employment were not working from home at any time.



**Fig. 2: Prevalence of remote working amongst metro-employed workers (n=192)**

The survey analysis also found a association between income and remote working in a metro-based business. As income increased, generally, so too did the percentage of employees that were working remotely within their respective income category (red line below). Those in the lowest income bracket of \$0-59,999 p.a. were the least likely to be working remotely (71%), when compared to those earning \$60,000-99,999 p.a. (93%), \$100-\$149,999 p.a. (98%), and those earning more than \$150,000 p.a. (93%).

Overall, the highest percentage of remote workers were in the two middle-income groups (31% each), followed by the highest income group (25%), and the lowest income group (13%) (blue line below).



**Fig. 3: Percentage of people working remotely for a metro-based business by income (n=182)**

There was also a very clear relationship between education and remote working, with those who were degree qualified or above making up 77% of respondents who were working from home. These findings suggest that regional Victoria is in line with national research that remote working is strongly associated with people earning higher incomes and possessing higher levels of educational attainment<sup>2</sup>. The findings also indicate that remote working also favours those who are in more secure employment; permanent employees made up 71% of surveyed people that were working remotely in regional Victoria.

Recent research from Infrastructure Victoria has predicted that while employment is likely to become more concentrated in metropolitan Melbourne, an increase in working from home will see population growth become more dispersed throughout regional Victoria in the years ahead<sup>3</sup>. Whilst this presents opportunities for a particular class of workers who can reap the benefits of remote working, it is also likely to disadvantage lower paid and less secure workers, as they become priced out of an increasingly competitive regional housing market.

## BELIEFS ABOUT REMOTE WORKING

All working respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of their job that could be done remotely. On average, people believed that 62% of their job could be done working from home. More than 1 in 5 respondents (21%) of believed that *all* of their job could be done remotely, while 16% believed that *no part* of their job could be done working from home.

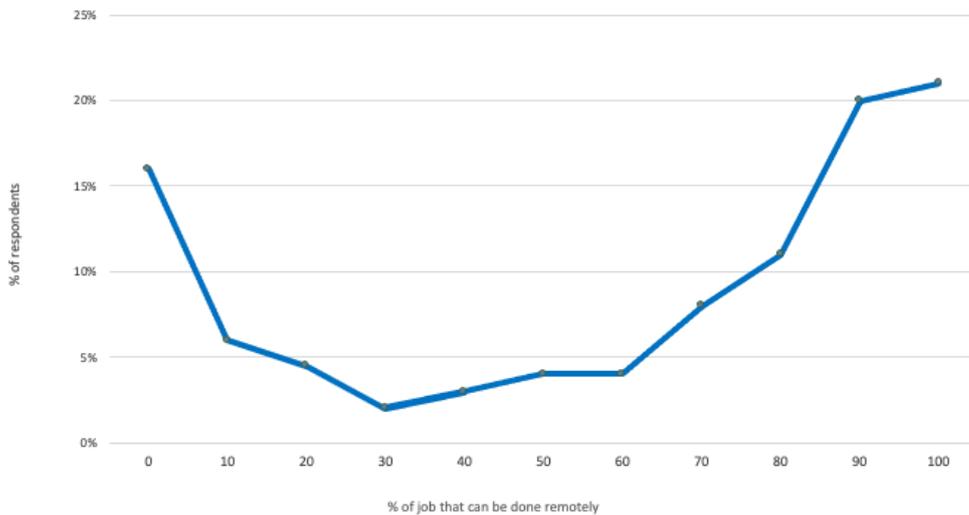


Fig. 4: Percentage of their job that respondents believe can be done remotely (n=365)

On average, people employed on a casual basis rated the percentage they could work remotely much lower than those in permanent roles - 31% as opposed to 69%. This is likely to be because casual employees are more commonly employed in customer-facing or front-line roles.

On average, respondents earning less than \$60,000 p.a. indicated that up to 39% of their job could be done remotely, while those earning over \$100,000 p.a. believed that up to 75% of their job could be done remotely. This is consistent with the expectation that higher income earners will more likely be knowledge workers, who will have greater access to workplace flexibility.

## COMMUTING PATTERNS

Employed respondents were asked whether they were currently commuting to a metro-based workplace. Just over a quarter of respondents, 27%, were currently commuting to a metropolitan region for work, while 73% were not. People were more likely to commute if they were living in a peri-urban region (35%), followed by a regional city (27%), and rural region (24%). Of those people who were commuting, the vast majority (71%) were employed on a permanent basis.

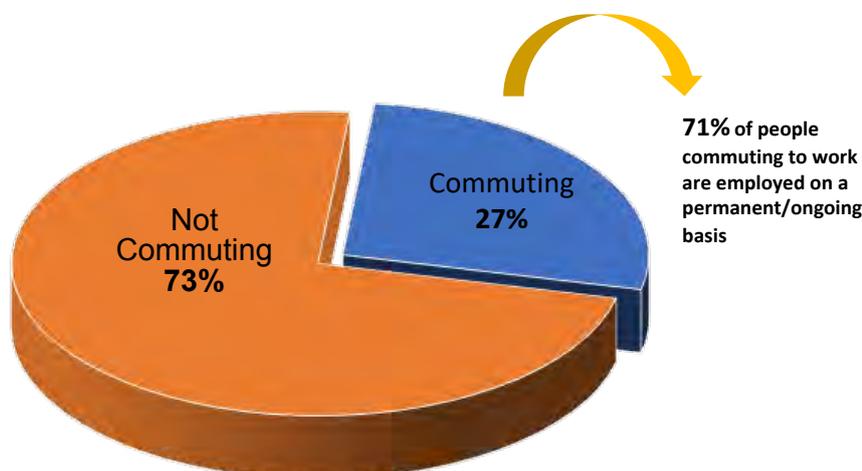
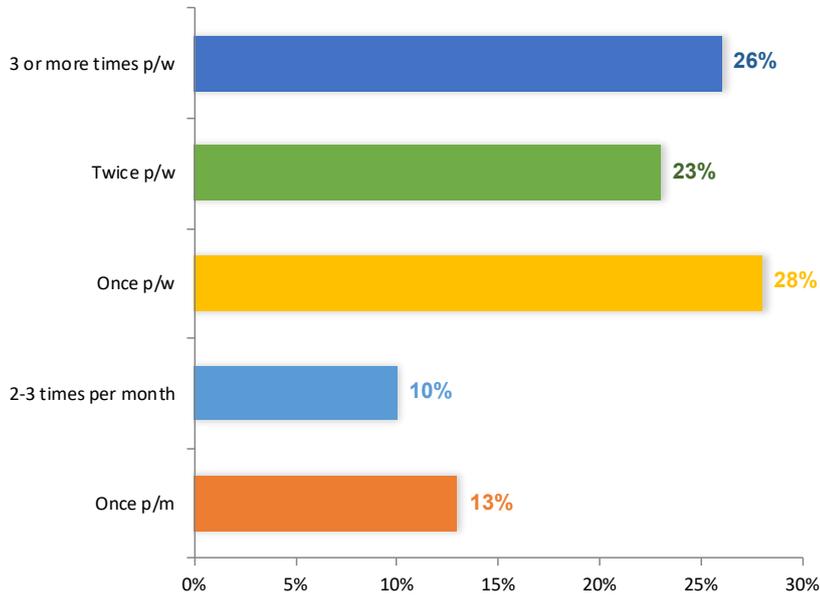


Fig. 5: Prevalence of metro-regional commuting for work (n=365)

In terms of commuting frequency, the survey revealed a very broad range of commuting patterns. 28% of people were commuting to a metropolitan region only *once per week*, 23% of people were commuting *twice per week*, and a further 23% were the least frequent commuters, only venturing into the metro area up to *three times per month*.

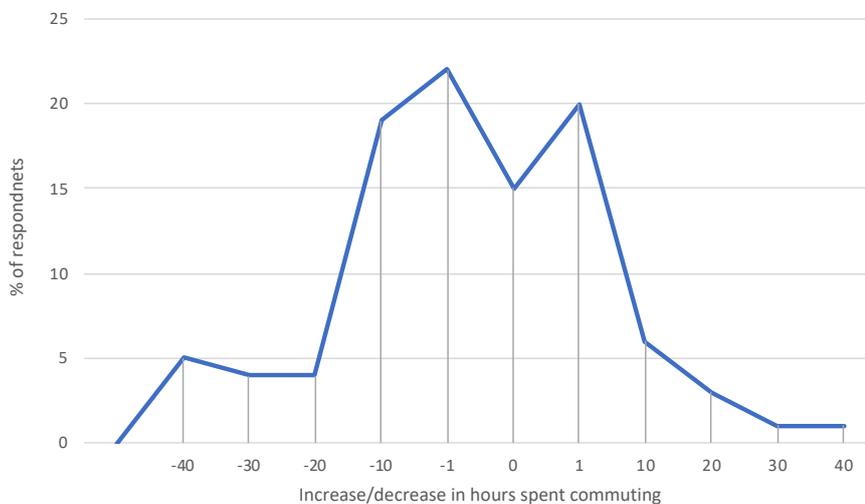


**Fig. 6: Frequency of regional-metro commute for work (n=97)**

Of the more frequent commuters, just over a quarter of respondents (26%), were commuting at least *three times per week*. This seems significant given the survey was undertaken in a period when government restrictions for office-based working were still in place. This finding may be indicative of the higher levels of metro-regional travel associated with those in the construction, trade, and healthcare sectors for whom remote working is largely not applicable.

To better understand the how the move to the regions had impacted people’s commuting patterns, all employed respondents were asked to estimate how many hours their average weekly commute times had increased or decreased since moving regionally. We found that on average, the move to regional Victoria had saved workers 4.5 hours p/w in commuting time.

Overall, 55% of workers reported less time spent commuting, 30% reported an increase in their commute (although the increases were marginal for most people), and 15% of respondents reported that there had been *no change* to their commuting experience.



**Fig. 7: Increase/decrease in time spent commuting (n=365)**

Our analysis indicates a positive correlation between the time spent commuting and the location of employment. Unsurprisingly, survey respondents whose main workplace was based in a metro area were significantly more likely to commute for longer than those whose employment was regionally based.

The survey found that 37% of all employed respondents were living and working within the same postcode in regional Victoria. A further 16% were living and working within a 50km radius, and 28% of people were living between 51-100kms of their workplace. Only 19% of people surveyed were living over 100kms from their main place of work. For those working and living regionally, therefore, there is likely to be a significant lifestyle improvement in terms of time spent commuting and the alleviation of stress associated with city commuting.

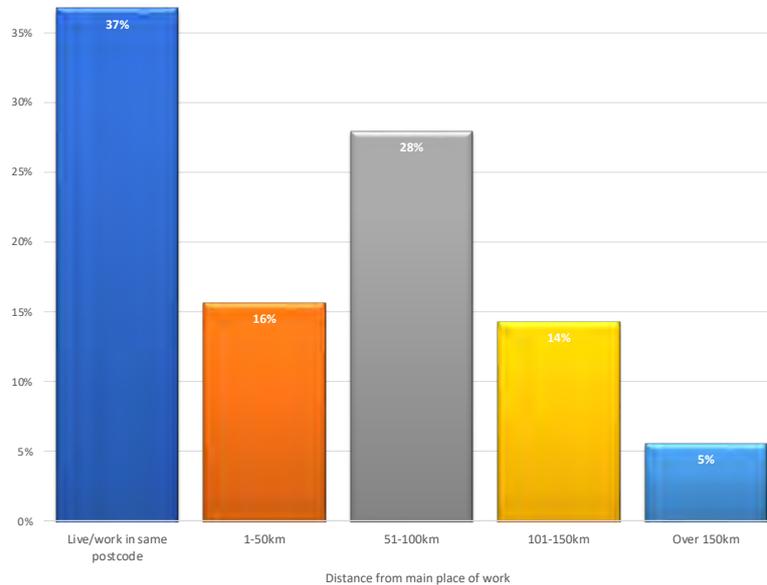


Fig. 8: Distance (km) from main place of work (n=365)

### HOUSEHOLD TIES TO METRO EMPLOYMENT

The survey found that 47% of respondents were regionally employed, while 53% of people remained connected to a metro-based employer. However, the extent of people’s ties to regional employment altered significantly before and after the pandemic. Pre-COVID, 60% of internal migrants were employed regionally but this dropped to 35% as more regional movers worked remotely and retained ties to their metro-based employer. In contrast, the number of people with ties to metro employment increased from 40% to 65% post-COVID.

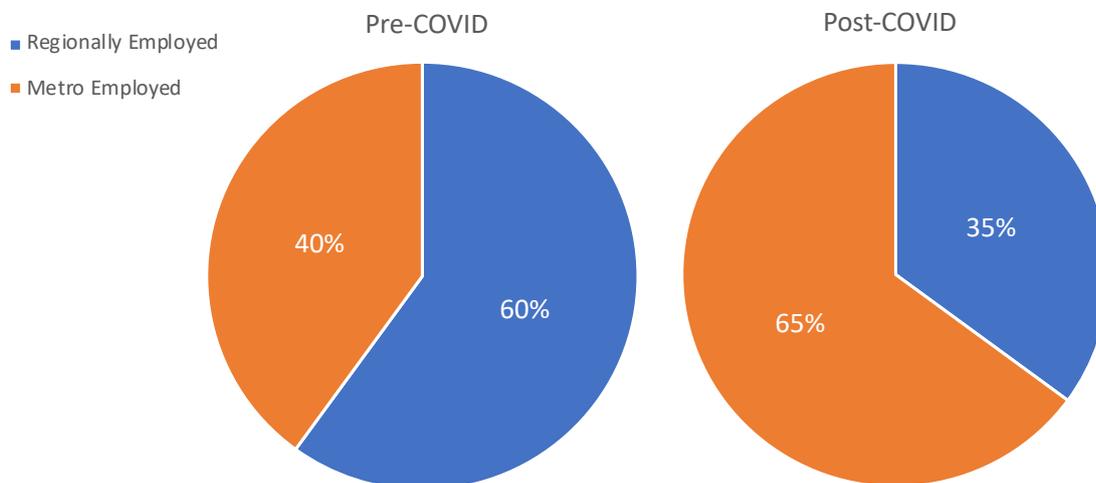
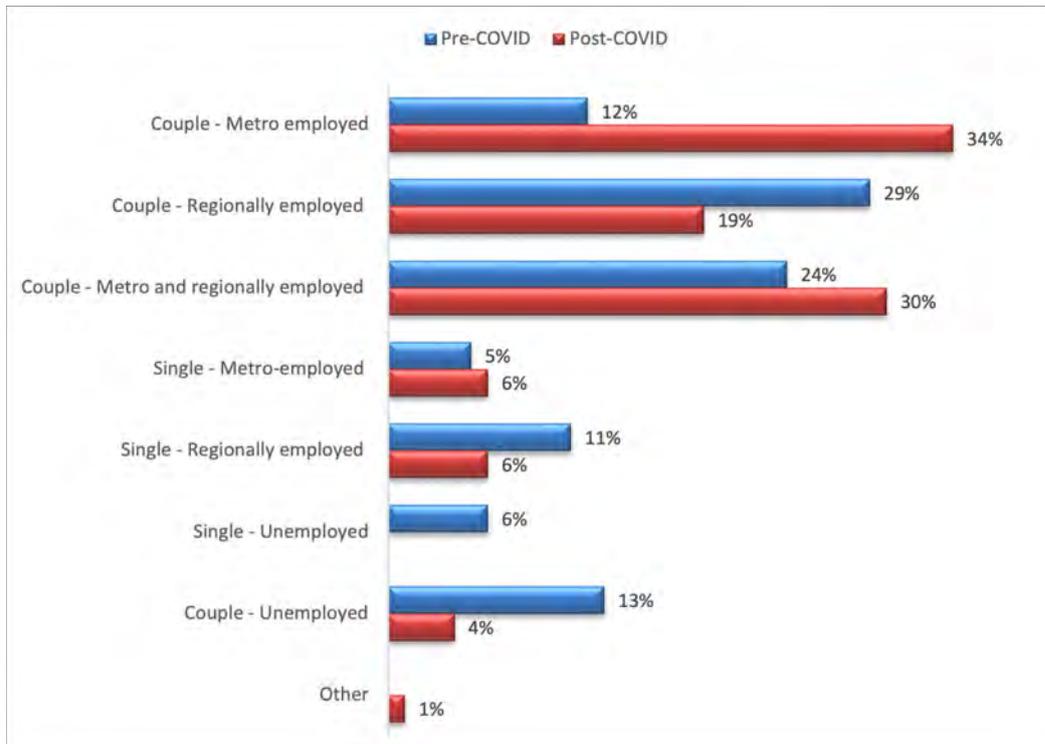


Fig. 9: Location of respondents’ place of work, pre- and post-COVID (n=365)

Although just under half of all working respondents had no ties to a metro-based employer, 22% of all households consisted of couples in which both partners were working in metro-based employment. There were significant differences, however, between households that relocated before and after the pandemic.

Pre-COVID, only 12% of all respondents lived in households in which both partners were working for a metro-based business. Post-COVID this number almost tripled to 34% of households, which suggests a significant increase in dual-income households living in regional Victoria but remaining connected to metro-based employment. There was a corresponding decrease in regionally employed couple households, before and after the pandemic, from 29% to 19%. These findings provide further evidence the impact remote working has had in decoupling employment from the physical workplace, and the extent to which this is changing the employment configuration of regional households.



**Fig. 10: Employment household composition pre- and post-COVID (n=365)**

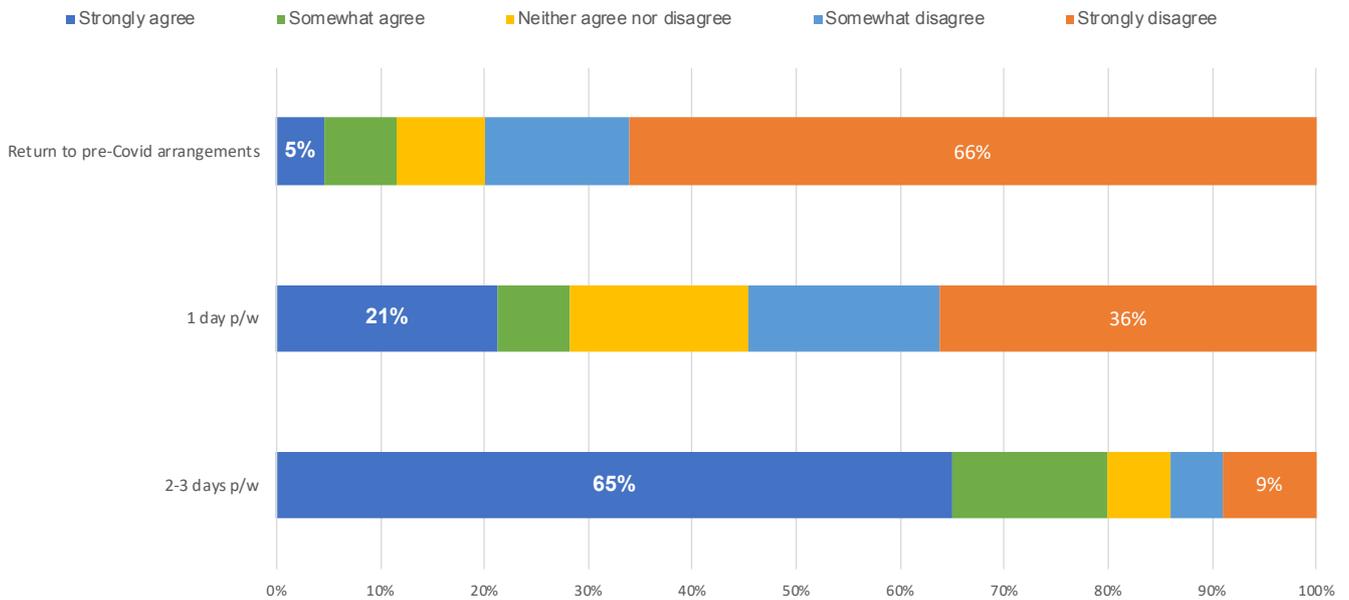
## 2. FUTURE WORK PERSPECTIVES

### REMOTE WORKING PREFERENCES

All survey respondents who currently had ties to metro-based employment were asked about their future remote working preferences. Specifically, people were asked to select how frequently they would like to work remotely in future.

Most respondents (65%) strongly agreed that they would prefer to work from home between 2-3 days per week. These findings echo previous research about worker post-COVID working preferences as well as the remote working transition of many businesses that have pivoted to a 3in/2out model<sup>4</sup>. In contrast, working from home 1 day per week was strongly supported by only 21% of survey respondents.

Most people strongly disagreed with the notion of returning to pre-Covid working arrangements (66%), which demonstrates an overwhelming resistance to reduced flexible working arrangements amongst survey respondents.



**Fig. 11: Future remote working preferences (n=174)**

Respondents were also asked about their expectations regarding the flexibility of their employers when it came to remote working once COVID-19 restrictions had eased. Most respondents, 72%, disagreed either strongly or somewhat that their employers would seek to reinstate pre-COVID working arrangements.

If employers continue to adhere to a hybrid work policy, as the bulk of respondents believe they will, the preference of internal migrants to continue living regionally and working remotely, appears to be a feasible one, at least in the short term.

## INTEREST IN CO-WORKING SPACES

Given the increase in remote working, respondents were asked whether they had any interest in sharing a co-working space with others. Our survey found that the appetite for co-working was low, with only 17% of people interested in sharing an office space. A majority of respondents were either satisfied working from home (64%), already had access to an office space that was not in their home (13%), or had other arrangements in place (6%).

It is reasonable to expect that the demand for co-working spaces might increase in regional areas in accordance with population growth and an increase in remote working. However, our findings suggest that there may not be a significant demand for co-working spaces from internal migrants from metro areas. This is likely to be partly explained by the ability of regional movers to reside in larger homes with separate office spaces which comfortably facilitate remote working arrangements.

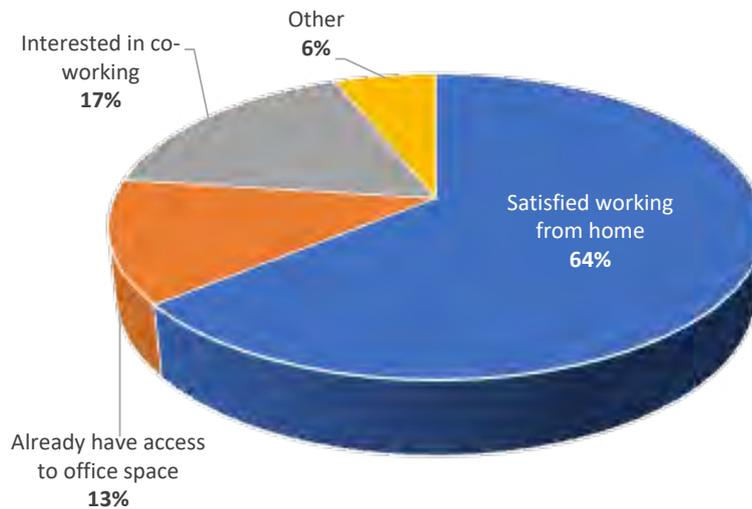


Fig. 12: Extent respondents are interested in co-working spaces (n=174)

## FUTURE COMMUTING PREFERENCES

Survey respondents who were commuting to a metro-based workplace were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: *I would prefer to work closer to home and not have to commute to work*. A majority of respondents either strongly (31%) or somewhat (36%) agreed that they would like to end their metro-regional commute to work. In total, only 15% disagreed with the statement either strongly or somewhat, while a further 18% were neutral.

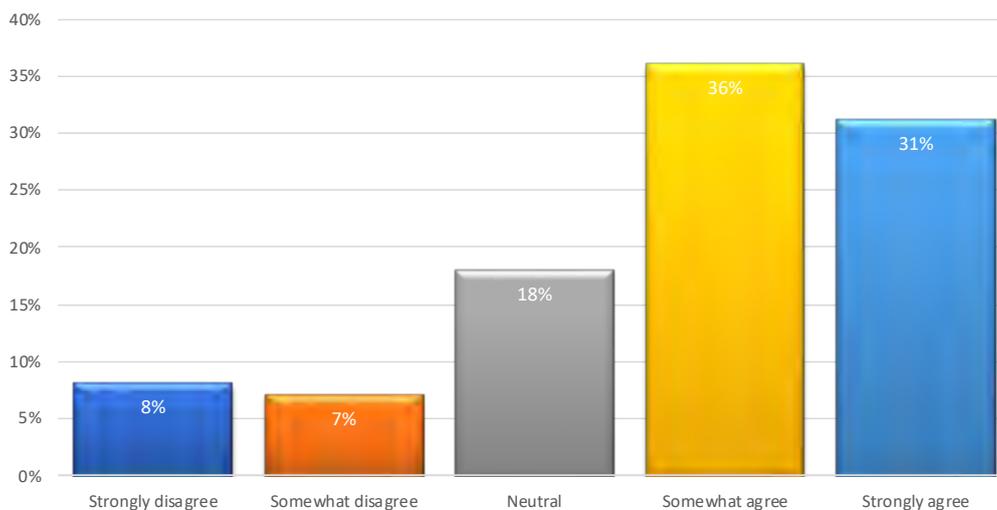


Fig. 13: Extent respondents agree they would like to work closer to home (n=97)

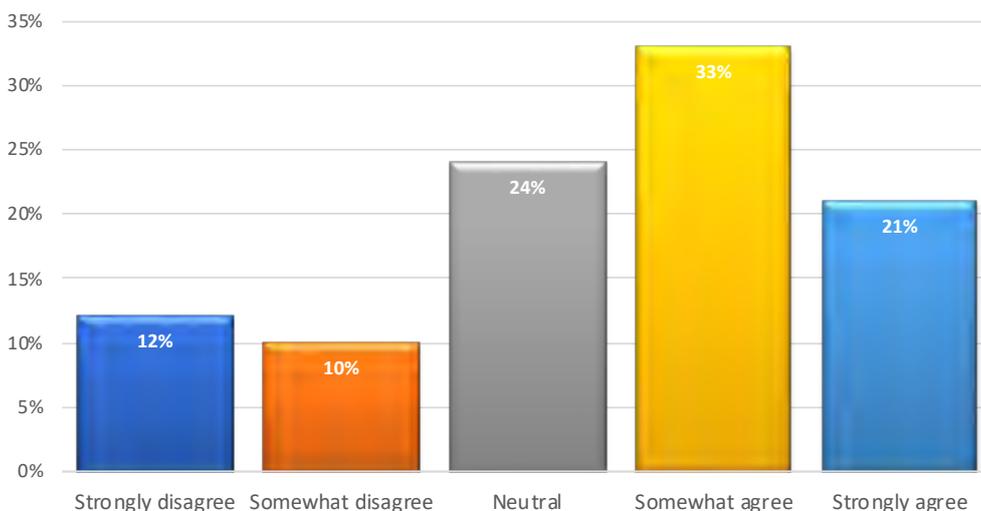
These findings suggest that for just under a third of regional-metro commuters (31%) there is a strong desire to reassess their current working arrangements to minimise their travel time to work. Previous research has shown that people tend to tire of long commutes<sup>5</sup>, so it is feasible that many internal migrants may seek employment closer to home in the future.

Factors including the frequency of commuting, the region people were commuting from, or the length of time people had lived in regional Victoria, made no significant differences to people’s preferences to live closer to their place of work. This may be because the overall small numbers of people commuting to a metro-based workplace (27%) did not present sufficient data to find any conclusive patterns.

### FUTURE EMPLOYMENT CONSIDERATIONS

All working respondents were asked about their future employment aspirations. Specifically, they were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: *Moving regionally has given me an opportunity to reconsider my future employment and/or career direction.*

In total, 54% of respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed with the proposition that the migration to regional Victoria had given them some pause to reconsider their current employment and/or career direction. 22% disagreed with the proposition to some extent, while a further 24% remained neutral.



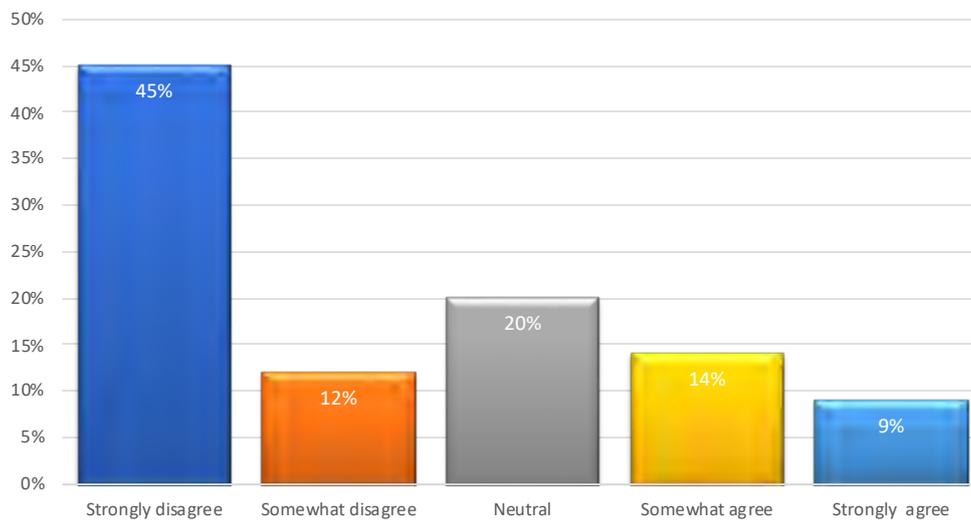
**Fig. 14: Extent to which people have reconsidered their employment/career (n=365)**

People who were not working in a metro-based business were significantly more likely to *strongly agree* with the statement (64%) than those who have maintained employment ties with the city (36%). This finding suggests that those who are currently employed regionally are more inclined to be contemplating alternative employment/career opportunities.

The length of time that respondents had been living in regional Victoria did not appear to be a significant factor in whether people were reconsidering their future employment/career. However, employed people over the age of 65 were significantly more likely to *disagree* with the proposition overall, which is unsurprising given their proximity to exiting the paid workforce.

We also asked respondents the extent to what they agreed with the following statement: *I am considering leaving my current job and am actively looking for employment regionally.* Responses to this question were very mixed. In total, 57% of respondents either *strongly* or *somewhat disagreed* with this statement, while only 23% agreed to some extent. A further 20% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Overall, these responses suggest that while a significant number of the employed population had given some consideration to their future employment or career since moving regionally, only a small percentage (9%) had actively taken steps in this direction.



**Fig. 15: Extent to which respondents agree that they are actively looking for work regionally (n=365)**

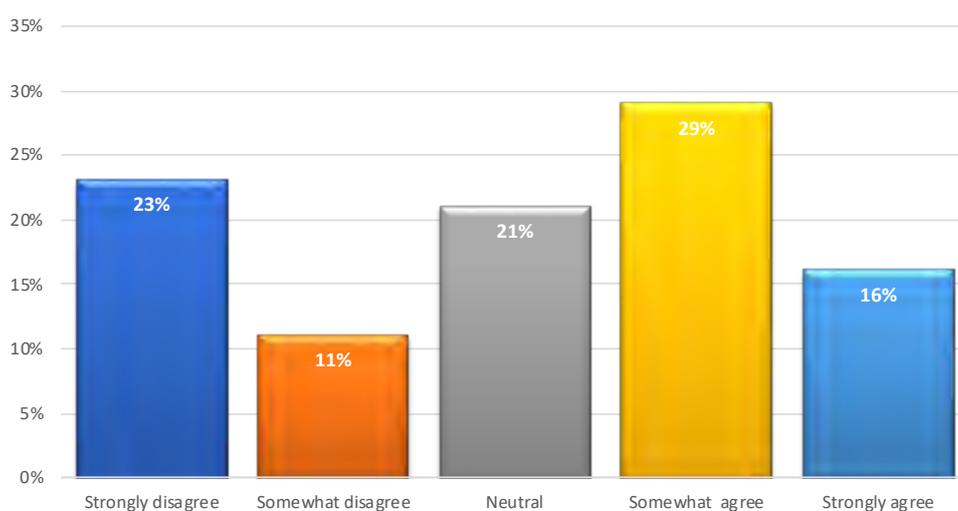
People who were self-employed were the least likely to agree and most likely to disagree with this statement. This finding may suggest that people who were self-employed prior to moving regionally, are likely to continue pursuing their business interests after their migration to the regions.

Finally, we asked people about their perceptions regarding regional employment opportunities. Specifically, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: *I would like to work regionally but there is a lack of suitable jobs for people with my skills/experience.*

The findings for this question were quite varied across the response categories. In aggregate, 45% of respondents either *strongly* or *somewhat* agreed with the statement, while 34% *disagreed strongly* or *somewhat*. A further 21% remained *neutral*.

Respondents in the lowest income bracket (<\$60,000 p.a.) were most likely to *strongly disagree* with the statement, which suggests that there is a perception amongst this income group that there are sufficient job opportunities commensurate with their skill level.

Of those who strongly agreed that there was a lack of suitable jobs in regional Victoria, the vast majority were employed in a metro-based business (78%). The result was similar for those who somewhat agreed with the statement, with 66% of these respondents having ties to a metro-based employer.



**Fig. 16: Extent respondents agree that there is a lack of jobs in regional Victoria (n=365)**

These findings suggest that people who remain connected to metro-based employment possess stronger perceptions about the lack of suitable work opportunities available to them in regional Victoria. These perceptions remain despite significant growth in professional and managerial roles in regional Victoria when compared to pre-COVID levels – 39% and 26% growth respectively<sup>6</sup>.

Perceptions about the availability of adequately skilled employment did not differ significantly based on when an individual migrated to regional Victoria, suggesting that individuals who moved in 2016 held similar views to those who migrated more recently. This may be an indicator that there is an ingrained perception about the availability of highly skilled employment in regional Victoria when compared to the city. While this perception is accurate in terms of absolute numbers, it does not reflect the more recent trend which has seen the rate of regional job vacancies outpace that of cities<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

#### AGE

Survey participants represented a broad age spectrum, however, there were significantly fewer people aged 24 and younger (3%) when compared to those aged 60 years of age and older (21%). The highest single category was people aged 35-39 years (16%), while 30–44-year-olds comprised 43% of the overall survey population. Age data was not available for two respondents.

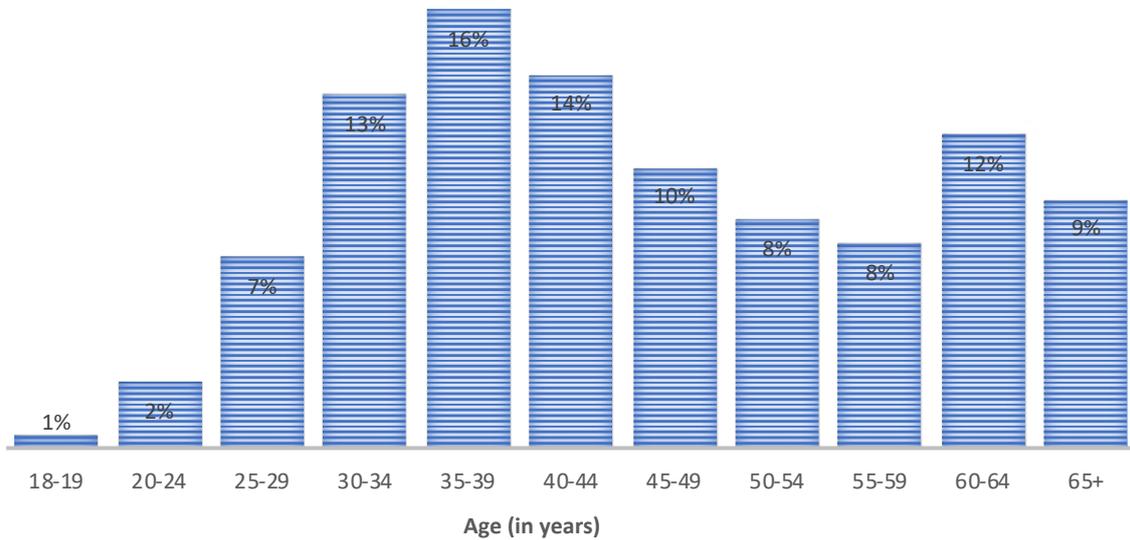


Fig. 17: Age of survey respondents (n=414)

#### GENDER

The majority of survey participants identified as female (65%), with 32% identifying as male, and 1% as non-binary. A further 2% selected to not disclose their gender.

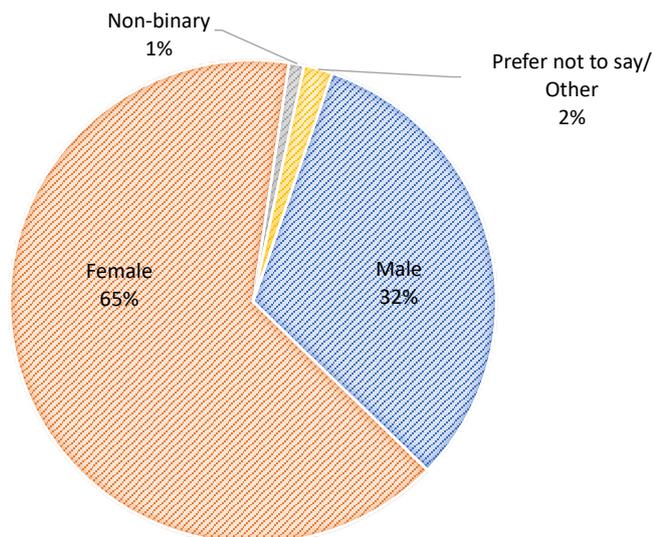


Fig. 18: Gender of survey respondents (n=416)

## INCOME

33% of survey respondents earned less than \$60,000 p.a. and at least 26% of the survey population was earning under the annual median income of \$51,389 p.a.<sup>8</sup> Those aged 65 and older were disproportionately represented in the lowest income category, with 78% earning less than \$60,000 p.a. and 79% of people within the lowest income category were women.

Overall, 60% of respondents were earning less than \$100,000 p.a. and 34% of the survey population earning over \$100,000 p.a. Only 10% of females were in the highest income category, as compared with 24% of males.

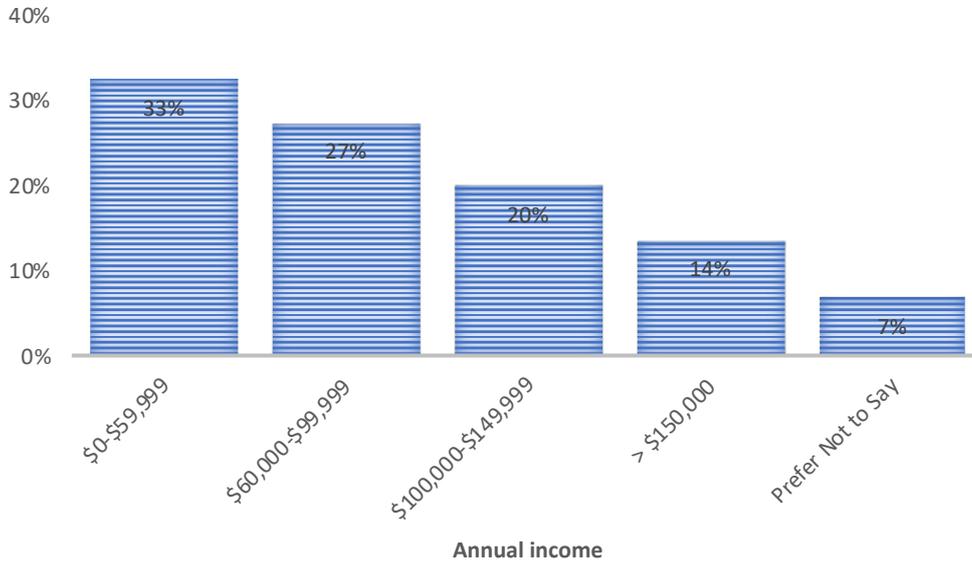


Fig. 19: Annual income of survey respondents in the previous financial year (n=416)

## OCCUPATION

88% of the surveyed population was currently (or recently) employed. Of these, the majority were employed as professionals (66%), followed by clerical/administrative workers (11%), and managers (10%). The remaining categories consisted of community/personal service workers (6%), sales workers (3%), technician/trade workers (2%), and labourers (1%).

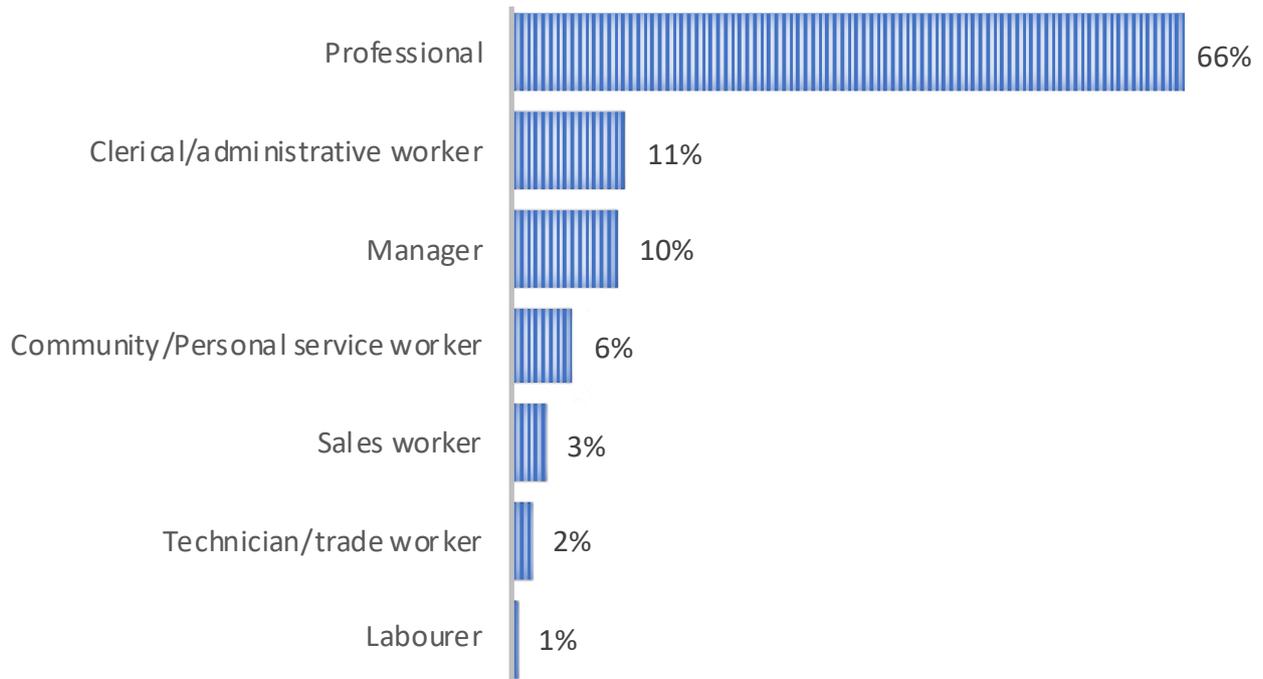


Fig. 20: Survey respondents by occupational group (n=365)

Respondents who were in the occupational group *professionals*, were more likely to be in the \$100,000-\$149,999 income category. Those identifying as *managers* were more likely to be in the highest income group.

## EMPLOYMENT INDUSTRY

The largest segment of the survey population came from the Education and Training sector (20%), followed by Healthcare and Social Assistance (15%), and the Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (13%). Females were more likely to be employed in the *Education and Training* and *Healthcare* sectors than men, while males were more likely to be employed in *Public Administration and Construction*.

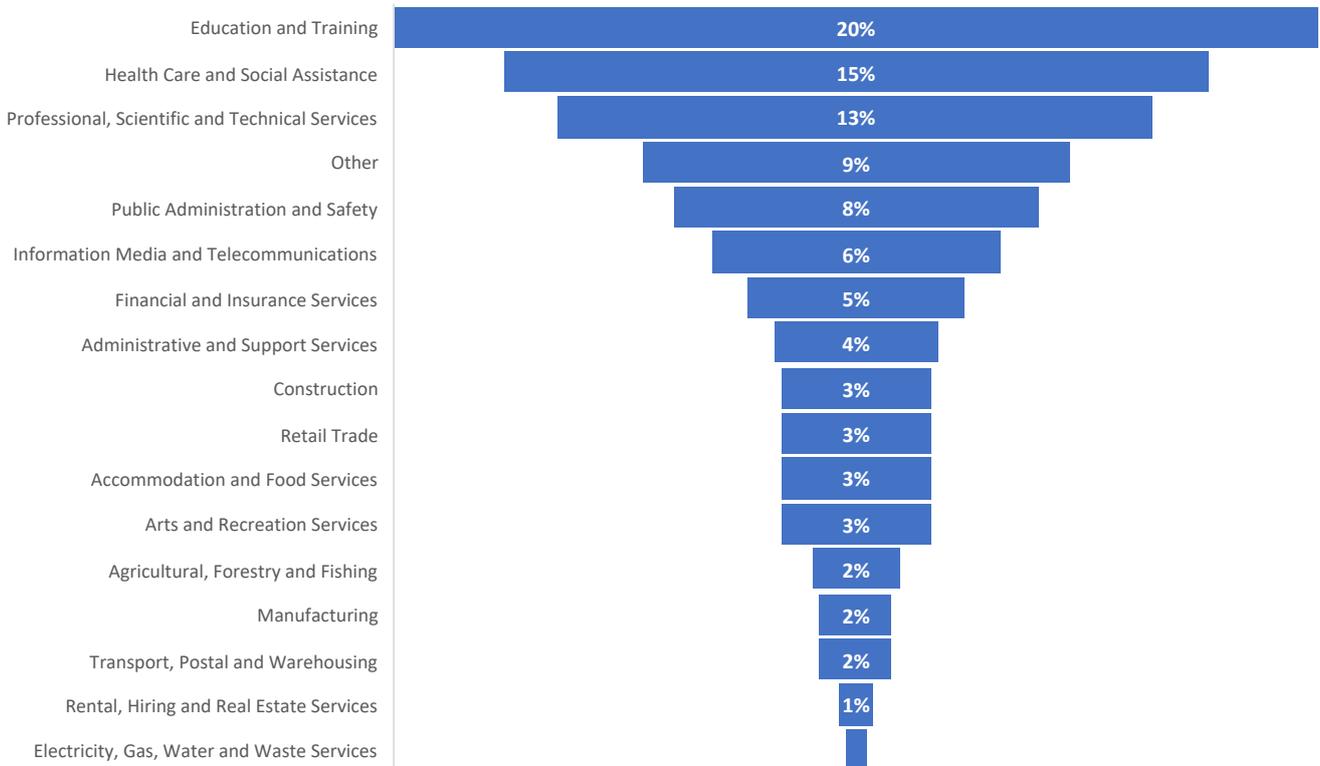


Fig. 21: Survey respondents by industry (n=365)

## EMPLOYMENT TYPE

The survey population consisted of a significant proportion of people employed in a permanent or ongoing role (56%). This was followed by people who were self-employed (15%), and those employed on a fixed-term basis (13%). Casual employees made up 8% of respondents, and 6% were employed part-time.

People who were employed on a casual or part-time basis and those who were self-employed, were significantly more likely to be earning under \$60,000 p.a. Unsurprisingly, people employed in permanent/ongoing roles were more likely to be earning over \$100,000 p.a.

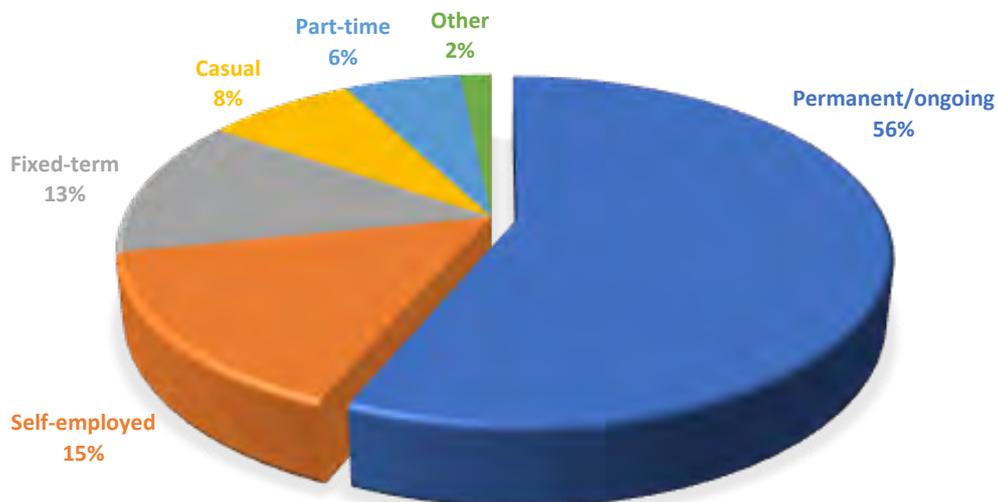


Fig. 22: Survey respondents by employment type (n=365)

## EDUCATION

The survey respondents reflect a highly educated population, 69% of whom had attained a degree or higher qualification. This exceeds the national average of 50% by a considerable margin<sup>9</sup>.

Females were more likely to have attained a post-graduate education, and males an undergraduate education. Males were also significantly more likely to have a secondary school certificate as their highest educational attainment.

There were some notable migration patterns with regards to education. Survey respondents who were diploma-qualified were more likely to have moved from an outer Melbourne area and settled in rural Victoria. People who had attained a vocational qualification were more likely to have settled in a peri-urban region, while people with an undergraduate degree were more likely to settle in a regional city.

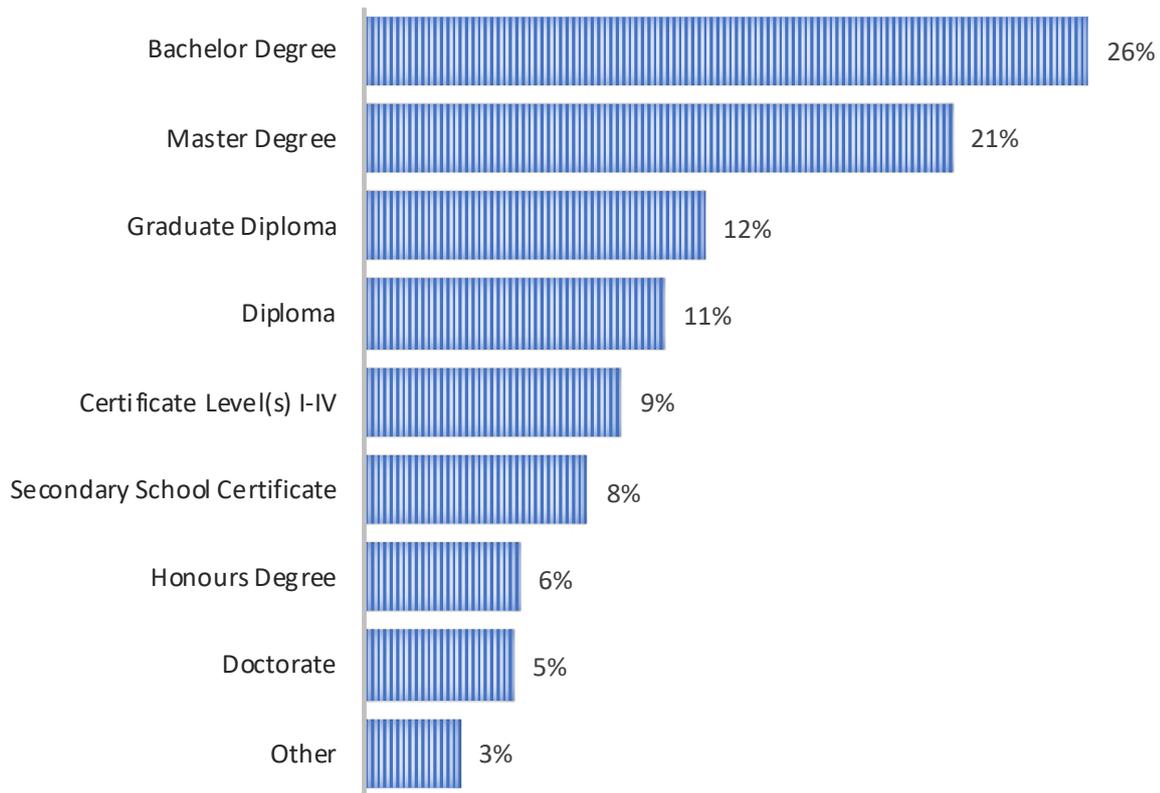


Fig. 23: Survey respondents by highest educational attainment (n=416)

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