

## Research Insights

# Australians ready to open the ‘fortress’: But there’s still a long way to go

Three out of four Australians are prepared to open borders to vaccinated travellers under some circumstances and most Australians consider widespread vaccination the key to allowing unrestricted travel. However, not enough of us are willing to receive the vaccine. Vaccine acceptance needs to increase substantially for us to see international travel and migration return.

# Are Australians close to resuming international travel?

International travel restrictions to contain the spread of the virus have substantially interrupted the movement of people across international borders. Australia has implemented some of the world's harshest border restrictions, severely limiting entry into the country, and even preventing current residents from leaving. An average of 28,000 international visitors arrived in Australia every day for leisure, study, or work in 2019, roughly contributing to three per cent of Australian GDP (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2020). In April 2020, visitors decreased by 96.8 per cent compared with pre-COVID levels in April 2019. This had a devastating impact on many Australian businesses and caused a sharp fall in the country's economic activity (ABS, 2021). While there is no doubt this cautious approach has saved lives, as the COVID-19 vaccine rollout ramps up worldwide, some Australians have begun

to consider a return to international travel and the opening of Australia's borders.

Opening borders is necessary for Australian society to return to normal allowing people to undertake business travel, go on holidays, reunite with family, and resume migration among other things. Nevertheless, public opinion about borders opening in Australia is diverse and complex.

In the most recent two waves of interviews, the Taking the Pulse of the Nation (TTPN) survey asked Australian residents about their attitudes and opinions towards opening borders to vaccinated travellers. This research presents key insights about how comfortable citizens are about easing international travel restrictions.

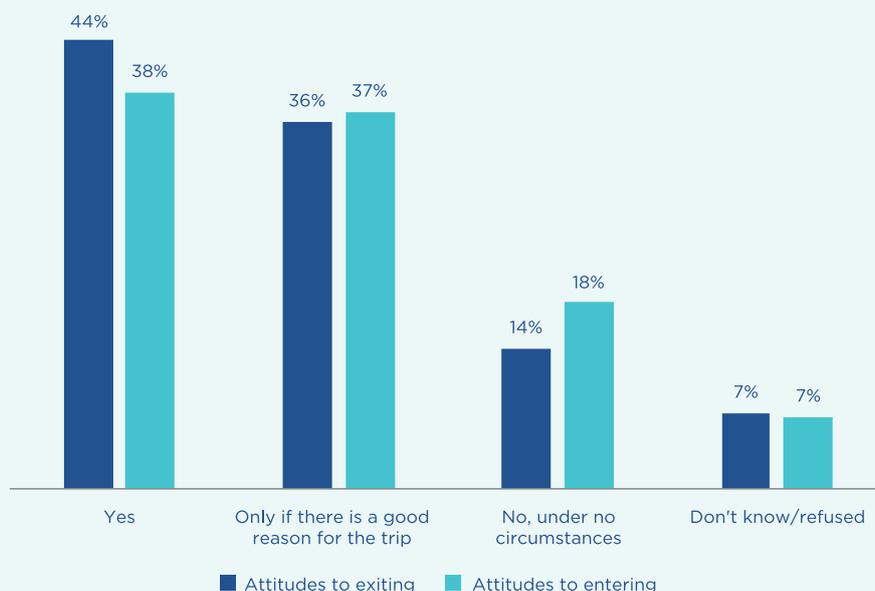
## Key Insights

### 1 Around three out of four Australians are ready to open borders (both exit and entry) for vaccinated travellers

In the past two interviews of the TTPN survey, 38 per cent of the 2,400 respondents said 'yes' to opening borders to vaccinated residents of a country other than Australia. Another 37 per cent of respondents said 'yes, but only if there is a good reason for the trip' (Figure 1). Forty four per cent of the respondents think residents of Australia should be able to exit the country, with

another 36 per cent favouring approval 'only if there is a good reason to do so.' Interestingly, the proportion unwilling to open borders under any circumstances has decreased between the first and third weeks of June from 15 per cent to 13 per cent for exit and from 19 per cent to 17 per cent for entry.

Figure 1: Respondents' attitudes towards borders opening for vaccinated travellers



Notes: Survey question for attitudes to exiting (entering): "If a resident of Australia (of a country other than Australia or New Zealand) has received a COVID-19 vaccine, should they be permitted to travel outside of (to) Australia and New Zealand?"

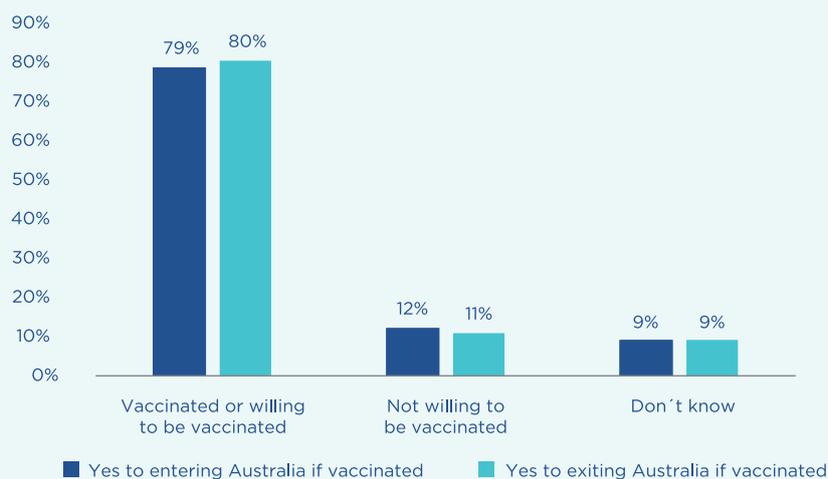
Source: Wave 34 (31 May – 5 June) and wave 35 (14 June – 18 June 2021) of TTPN survey, 2,400 respondents. Results are weighted to ensure representativeness of the population aged 18 and over.

## 2 Respondents already vaccinated or willing to be vaccinated, are significantly more inclined to open borders than those hesitant to get the vaccine

Receiving the vaccine is a crucial indicator of one's willingness to open the border. In the third week of June, among those respondents who were already vaccinated or willing to receive the vaccine, 79 per cent were ready to 'unconditionally' open the border

for entry, and 80 per cent for exiting. Among those unwilling to receive the vaccine, agreement with opening borders is much lower, at around 10 – 12 per cent (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of Australians inclined to open borders by willingness to be vaccinated (18 June)



Notes: See notes from Figure 1.

Source: Wave 35 (14 June – 18 June 2021) of TTPN survey, 1,200 respondents. Results are weighted to ensure representativeness of the population aged 18 and over.

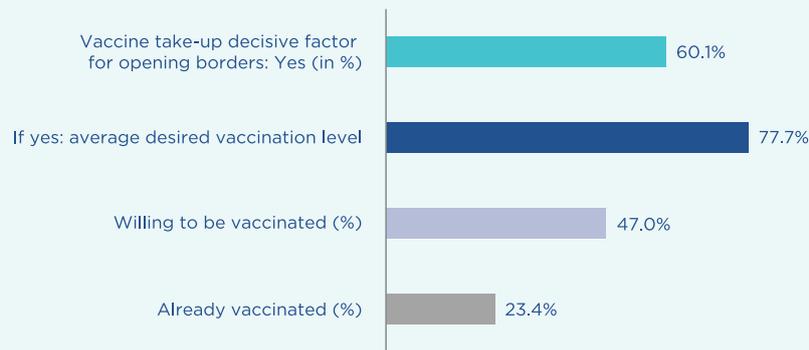
## 3 The COVID-19 vaccination take-up rate is far from what respondents think the government should consider when allowing international travel to Australia without restrictions

Our data reveals that three out of five respondents think that the immunisation level in the population should be a decisive factor when the government decides whether to re-open our borders or keep them closed. Those who agree with this approach, favour a take-up rate of the COVID-19 vaccine of, on average, 78 per cent to allow international travel without restrictions (Figure 3).

However, Australians' willingness to receive the vaccine falls far short of the target they envision.

As of 18 June 2021, around 23 per cent declared to have already received the vaccine, and 47 per cent are willing to have it. The remaining 29 per cent are currently unwilling to receive the vaccine. That means that almost every third person who is currently *not* willing to get vaccinated will have to change their mind for Australians to consider open borders a safe policy option. This requires a large change in public opinion on COVID-19 vaccines and a significant increase in the take-up rate.

Figure 3: What level of vaccination people want to open borders vs how many people say they are vaccinated or willing to be vaccinated



Notes: Survey questions included in this Figure: i) "Should the government consider the take-up rate of the COVID-19 vaccine in Australia to decide when to allow international travel to Australia without restrictions?" ii) "What percent of the Australian population should be vaccinated before international borders open up?" and iii) "Are you willing to have the COVID-19 vaccine? (Yes/No/I have had it already)"

Source: Wave 34 (31 May – 5 June) and wave 35 (14 June – 18 June 2021) of TTPN survey, 2,400 respondents. Results are weighted to ensure representativeness of the population aged 18 and over.

## 4 Australians' views on quarantine restrictions are becoming less strict over time

Between the first and third week of June, our respondents have become more likely to indicate that quarantine should not be required upon arrival, and self-isolation or even unrestricted entry into the community should be allowed.

During the first week of June, 54.3 per cent of those who agreed on 'conditional' travel, preferred that residents from other countries quarantine in a hotel or government-regulated facility upon their arrival. This rate, however, decreased by seven percentage points by the third week of June. We saw a corresponding increase in respondents who consider self-isolation at home or direct entry into the community acceptable.

If an Australian resident returns home, most respondents think they should self-isolate at home after they arrive – again, with an increasing trend since the first week of June (from 43.0 per cent to 46.8 per cent). Respondents seem aware of the high expenses associated with hotel quarantine, particularly for Australian residents returning home. Results show a two percentage point increase in the share of respondents willing to allow free movement of travelers with no restrictions in place (Figure 4). All results seem to indicate that respondents are keen to ease travel restrictions.

Figure 4: Conditions on entering or returning to Australia



Notes: Survey questions included in this Figure: i) "Should the government consider the take-up rate of the COVID-19 vaccine in Australia to decide when to allow international travel to Australia without restrictions?" ii) "What percent of the Australian population should be vaccinated before international borders open up?" and iii) "Are you willing to have the COVID-19 vaccine? (Yes/No/I have had it already)"

Source: Wave 34 (31 May – 5 June) and wave 35 (14 June – 18 June 2021) of TTPN survey, 2,400 respondents. Results are weighted to ensure representativeness of the population aged 18 and over.

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## The percentage of Australians willing to open the borders to international travel has increased in Victoria, ACT, Western Australia and South Australia

TTPN data show stark differences across States and Territories in the percentage of those willing to open borders to international travel, and these differences have increased over the last month. On 18 June, only 28 per cent of Tasmanians and 38 per cent of Queenslanders were inclined to allow the exit of vaccinated Australians compared to 52 per cent and 48 per cent in Western Australia and South Australia, respectively. In all four states, this gap is larger than it was in the first week of June. Interestingly, Victoria has witnessed a significant increase in the share of respondents willing to open the borders to non-Australians, despite facing its fourth lockdown.

Residents of the ACT, Western Australia and South Australia also show a growing interest towards allowing vaccinated non-Australian residents to enter the country.

## Ready to re-engage with the globe? A vaccination rate increase can stop our isolation from the world.

In 2020, Australia successfully put in place a number of measures geared towards successfully controlling COVID-19. Rigorous testing, efficient contact tracing, strict lockdowns, but also severe international border closures certainly contributed to low COVID-19 case numbers in the country. In May, the Australian Government's annual budget suggested that Australia will not resume international flights until the middle of 2022. However, the downside of this strategy is that it could leave the country isolated and at a disadvantage compared to other regions where rising vaccination rates are accelerating reopening plans and strengthening economic recoveries while learning to co-exist with the virus.

Our study reveals Australians are willing to open international borders, and Australia needs a roadmap to safely participate in relations with the globe while minimising COVID-19 health risks. Serious efforts are still required to change attitudes towards vaccination in the population or we face the risk of the rest of the world leaving us behind.

# Further Information

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## Datasets

These results have been drawn from Taking the Pulse of the Nation – Melbourne Institute’s survey of the impact of COVID-19. The aim of the weekly survey is to track changes in the economic and social wellbeing of Australians living through the effects of the coronavirus pandemic whilst adapting to various changes in Federal and State government policies.

The survey contains responses from 1,200 persons, aged 18 years and over. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population.

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