

THE EMPLOYMENT SITUATION OF MIGRANT PROFESSIONALS HOLDING TERTIARY QUALIFICATIONS

■ T. Fred Smith

Data drawn from the 1991 Census show that migrants arriving in Australia between 1986 and 1991 who were tertiary trained with professional qualifications have been far less successful in gaining professional employment than Australian residents, including 20-24 year old recent graduates.

Attention has recently been focused on the employment status of immigrants. A recent report from the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research (BIPR)¹ notes the above national average unemployment rate for immigrants, particularly those from non-English-speaking-background (NESB) countries. Commentators tend to assume that the problem lies mainly with unskilled migrants. However, there is also mounting evidence from the media,² and academic analyses that migrant professionals have also found employment hard to procure.³ The issue is important because of the high intake of migrant professionals during the 1986 to 1991 period and the continuing debate about the merits of drawing skilled workers from overseas.

For a detailed assessment of the situation of migrant professionals by occupation we have to rely on the 1991 Census; customised cross-tabulations from this have only recently become available. A recent study⁴ by the author based on these data examined the employment status of persons claiming qualifications in civil engineering. It revealed that the unemployment rate for civil engineers from NESB countries was four to seven times that for Australian-born civil engineers. However, the unemployment rate for immigrants born in the United Kingdom and Ireland was only slightly higher than that for the

Australian-born. The study also found that just one in three civil engineers from NESB countries were employed in professional, managerial or para-professional occupations, compared with 71 per cent of Australian-born civil engineers.

However, during the preparation of the above study it was found that the information Census respondents gave of their field of qualifications was of limited value in identifying fully-qualified professionals. Many respondents identified themselves as possessing mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and other professional-sounding qualifications yet turned out to be employed in sub-professional fields, usually as tradespersons.

To overcome this problem a further customised matrix was purchased by the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash, this time incorporating level of qualifications (degree, diploma, trade and other) as well as employment status and occupation data. This matrix also allows the differentiation of those who arrived in Australia between 1986 and 1991 from all other residents. The focus of this paper is on the employment experience of those claiming qualifications in selected professional fields who also held tertiary-level qualifications.

The significance of distinguishing between the level of qualifications and the level and nature of employment is illustrated in Table 1 for electrical

Table 1: Employment status of persons claiming electrical engineering qualifications by level of qualification, 1991

	Tertiary ^a	Associate Diploma	Skilled Vocational	Basic	Total
Australian-born and pre-1986 arrivals					
Employed	14 044	7 913	151 219	19 527	192 703
Unemployed	471	381	9 606	1 402	11 860
Total workforce	14 515	8 294	160 825	20 929	204 563
% WF ^b unemployed	3.2	4.6	6.0	6.7	5.8
Arrivals 1986-91					
Employed	2 994	1 279	5 035	2 525	11 833
Unemployed	745	251	1 201	733	2 930
Total workforce	3 739	1 530	6 236	3 258	14 763
% WF ^b unemployed	19.9	16.4	19.3	22.5	19.8
All permanent residents					
Employed	17 038	9 192	156 254	22 052	204 536
Unemployed	1 216	632	10 807	2 135	14 790
Total workforce	18 254	9 824	167 061	24 187	219 326
% WF ^b unemployed	6.7	6.4	6.5	8.8	6.7

^a Higher, postgraduate, bachelors degree ^b Work force

Source: ABS Custom Matrix, Centre for Population and Urban Research. Persons aged 15+ years

engineers. From this table it can be seen that the 18,254 holders of a tertiary qualification represented only 8.3 per cent of the total workforce (219,326) claiming electrical engineering qualifications, compared with the 167,061 holding skilled vocational qualifications who represented 76.2 per cent. Calculations using data drawn from the matrix (not reported in these tables) show that 41 per cent of the tertiary-qualified electrical engineering workforce were employed as professional engineers compared with less than two per cent of those with skilled vocational qualifications.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF PROFESSIONALS

The employment status for selected professionals holding tertiary qualifications is documented in Table 2. These professionals are divided into

immigrants who arrived over the years 1986 to 1991 (subsequently called 'Arrivals') and Australian-born and pre-1986 immigrants ('Residents'). Two points are immediately evident:

1. The level of unemployment for 'Arrivals' was typically six times that for 'Residents'.
2. The level of professional employment for 'Arrivals' was around one half that for 'Residents'.

For example, in the case of electrical engineers, the unemployment rate for 'Residents' was 3.2 per cent compared with 19.9 per cent for 'Arrivals'. Furthermore, whereas 45.8 per cent of 'Residents' were employed as professional engineers only 23.2 per cent of 'Arrivals' were so employed. The difference in the level of professional employment for 'Residents' and 'Arrivals' is increased if account is taken of the number of engineers who have

Table 2: Employment of selected professionals with tertiary qualifications, 1991

Qualification	Workforce			Unemployed %	Employed in profession	
	Employed	Unemployed	Total		No.	%
Australian-born and pre-1986 arrivals						
Civil Engineering	12 430	535	12 965	4.1	7 680	59.2
Electrical Engineering	14 044	471	14 515	3.2	6 653	45.8
Mechanical Engineering	8 534	431	8 965	4.8	3 684	41.1
Nursing	31 070	791	31 861	2.5	20 506	64.4
Law	32 346	721	33 067	2.2	21 741	65.7
Medicine	37 804	364	38 168	1.0	31 296	82.0
School teacher	135 865	3668	139 533	2.6	86 796	62.2
Arrivals 1986-91						
Civil Engineering	1 609	605	2 214	27.3	694	31.3
Electrical Engineering	2 994	745	3 739	19.9	866	23.2
Mechanical Engineering	1 616	518	2 134	24.2	466	21.8
Nursing	1 988	180	2 168	8.3	1 379	63.6
Law	1 553	245	1 798	13.6	550	30.6
Medicine	3 166	496	3 662	13.5	1 972	53.9
School teacher	3 827	751	4 578	16.4	1 513	33.0

Source: ABS Custom matrix, Centre Population and Urban Research. Persons aged 15+ years.

moved into administrative and managerial positions. In the case of electrical engineers, another 17.7 per cent of 'Residents' were employed in management/administration compared with 8.4 per cent of 'Arrivals'.

Only in the case of nursing was the level of professional employment for 'Arrivals' close to that for 'Residents'. It is assumed that this reflects the extent of targeted recruitment programs directed at attracting overseas nurses to Australia to fill specific vacancies.

There is also a relatively high level of employment in medicine of 'Arrivals' with tertiary-level medical practitioner qualifications. Nevertheless, the 53.9 per cent of the medically qualified 'Arrivals' who were employed as doctors compares poorly with the 82 per cent employment level of

'Residents'. The control imposed by the Australian Medical Council (AMC) on the number of foreign trained doctors accredited for registration probably explains this situation. Prior to the recent tightening of the entry rules covering doctors, a significant number were able to enter Australia without first having passed the AMC written examination. Many of these doctors have since had difficulty in passing this examinations, especially given the annual quota of 200 now placed on the number allowed to pass, and the fact that only about 50 per cent of these pass the subsequent clinical test at their first attempt.

Given the low level of professional employment for 'Arrivals', it is of interest to review where else they are employed. A significant share were in blue-collar operative and labouring

Table 3: Professionals with tertiary qualifications employed in operative and labouring occupations, 1991

Qualification	'Residents'		'Arrivals'	
	Number	% Workforce	Number	% Workforce
Civil Engineering	174	1.3	194	8.8
Electrical Engineering	121	0.8	262	7.0
Mechanical Engineering	227	2.5	265	12.4
Nursing	596	1.9	168	7.7
Law	244	0.7	143	7.9
Medicine	157	0.4	295	8.1
School Teacher	1 669	1.2	511	11.2

Source: ABS Custom Matrix, Centre for Population and Urban Research. Persons aged 15+ years.

occupations, in most cases at ten times the level for 'Residents' (see Table 3).

Thus a clear picture emerges of recently arrived migrant professionals having a significantly higher level of unemployment, and under-utilisation of their professional qualifications compared with Australian-born and long-term migrant residents.

COMPARATIVE PROGRESS OF RECENT AUSTRALIAN GRADUATES AND 'ARRIVALS'

The high level of unemployment of new graduates in engineering has been a topic of concern in recent years. It has been highlighted annually by the data published from the Graduate Destination Survey of the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA). This issue is explored in Table 4 which details the employment status for Australian-born, and pre-1986 arrivals, in the age group 20 to 24 years. The levels of unemployment and professional employment for new graduates in Nursing, Law, Medicine and School Teaching are essentially identical with the overall 'Resident' workforce. (See Table 2.) In the case of engineering graduates the rate of unemployment is higher than for all 'Residents'. But it is significantly

below the 24.4 per cent of civil engineering graduates, 13.2 per cent of electrical engineering graduates and the 20.7 per cent of mechanical engineering graduates reported to be seeking full-time employment in the GCCA survey of 1990 graduates as of 30 April 1991.

The employment situation for 20 to 24 year old 'Residents' is therefore not as bleak as suggested by the GCCA survey. As Table 4 indicates, even those entering fields hard hit by the onset of the recession in 1990, including engineers, for the most part were employed as professionals by the time of the Census in mid-1991. This may reflect the longer period between graduation and the Census date than the four to five month period between graduation and the GCCA survey date.

It is also clear that recent 'Resident' graduates were far more attractive to employers than were 1986 to 1991 'Arrivals' (see Table 2). In the case of the engineering professions, more than half of the recent 'Resident' graduates were employed as engineers by 1991, compared with 20 to 30 per cent of 'Arrivals'.

This conclusion also applies to 'Arrivals' aged 20 to 24. It could be thought that new graduate 'Arrivals'

would have had better employment prospects than 'Arrivals' overall, particularly as a number of them probably obtained their tertiary qualification in Australia. However, the data in Table 4 for 1986 to 1991 arrivals aged 20 to 24 years in 1991 show there was no significant difference between new graduate 'Arrivals' and the overall group of 'Arrivals'. It is also to be noted that the 20 to 24 year olds represented approximately half of the tertiary-qualified 'Arrivals'.

FACTORS SHAPING 'ARRIVALS' EMPLOYMENT DIFFICULTIES

This is not the place to explore this issue in depth. Undoubtedly the onset of the recession in mid-1990 was important in limiting 'Arrivals' employment opportunities. But in the case

of the three engineering categories, an additional factor was the scale of their addition to the Australian workforce. By Census time 1991, these 'Arrivals' had added 17.1 per cent, 25.8 per cent and 23.8 per cent respectively to the tertiary-qualified civil engineering, electrical engineering and mechanical engineering workforces. These very large additions occurred over the five year intercensal period 1986 to 1991 when the level of professional employment actually decreased. Furthermore, during this period the number of Australian trained graduates in engineering was also increasing.

CONCLUSION

A review of the employment status for selected professionals holding tertiary qualification based upon 1991 census

Table 4. Employment of selected professionals with tertiary qualifications, 1991, 20 to 24 years old

Qualification	Workforce			Unemployed %	Employed in profession	
	Employed	Unemployed	Total		No.	%
Australian-born and pre-1986 arrivals						
Civil Engineering	874	88	962	9.1	692	71.9
Electrical Engineering	1 269	92	1 361	6.7	751	55.2
Mechanical Engineering	709	89	798	11.1	433	54.3
Nursing	9 975	269	10 244	2.6	7 670	74.9
Law	10 485	235	10 720	2.2	7 621	71.1
Medicine	10 801	116	10 917	1.1	9 098	83.3
School Teacher	46 188	1 267	47 455	2.7	32 200	67.9
Arrivals 1986-91						
Civil Engineering	754	301	1 055	28.5	299	28.3
Electrical Engineering	1 577	421	1 998	21.1	417	20.9
Mechanical Engineering	769	236	1 005	23.5	224	22.3
Nursing	1 073	88	1 161	7.6	801	69.0
Law	714	107	821	13.0	259	31.5
Medicine	1 762	257	2 019	12.7	1 107	54.8
School Teacher	1 522	314	1 836	17.1	600	32.7

Source: ABS Custom matrix, Centre Population and Urban Research

data reveals a level of unemployment for the 1986 to 1991 arrivals that was approximately six times that of Australian-born and pre-1986 immigrants. Furthermore, the level of professional employment for these new arrivals was typically one half that of longer-term residents.

The inability of professional immigrants to secure professional employment commensurate with their qualifications places in question the wisdom of a skills-based selection criterion for immigrant entry which does not take into account market demand. On the other hand, the good record of younger 'Residents' in gaining professional employment

suggests that they can provide the skills and qualities Australian employers require. This conclusion supports the case for focusing Australia's recruitment of its skilled manpower needs from domestic sources.

References

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COMPETITION FOR TERTIARY ENTRANCE: THE MONASH EXPERIENCE

■ Bob Birrell

What has been the outcome of the increased competition for places in tertiary education since 1990? Enrolment data for Monash indicate which birthplace origin groups have succeeded and suggest the reasons for this success.

It is well known that the children of post-World-War-Two migrants have done well in gaining access to tertiary education and professional employment. A number of studies have shown that, on average, these children have a higher rate of high school completion and tertiary entrance than the children of Australian born parents.¹ A measure of this achievement is that it applies to migrant communities from non-English-speaking rural backgrounds from Southern Europe, as well as to those from the UK, Germany and other Western European societies. For example, in the Greek and Italian

communities there have been high levels of educational and occupational mobility between the immigrant generation and their children born in Australia.

The circumstances of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were conducive to this success story. Ample employment opportunities enabled immigrant parents to establish a firm economic foundation from which to launch their children through the education system. At the same time, the rapid expansion of the public high school and university system provided a ladder of opportunity for these children.