

# Hopes for open borders dashed by job hesitancy

**Travel gap** The chasm between desire and reality is stark.

Tom McIlroy and Fiona Carruthers

Australia's COVID-19 vaccination rates remain well below levels at which large sections of the community would support easing border restrictions, with new research showing 75 per cent want overseas travel to resume for the fully vaccinated.

As the rollout effort gains pace, 60 per cent of respondents to a University of Melbourne study said unrestricted travel should be permitted once full vaccination rates reach nearly 80 per cent.

But the Melbourne Institute study – based on the views of 24,000 people – found not enough people are willing to get a jab, and vaccine acceptance needs to increase substantially for travel and migration to restart.

It found 44 per cent think Australians should be allowed to leave the country, with another 36 per cent approving only where there is a good reason to do so.

While respondents said take-up should be 79 per cent before international travel restarts, willingness to receive a vaccine falls well short. Only 24 per cent said they had received shots, and 47 per cent are willing to get one. The remaining 29 per cent are unwilling to receive the vaccine.

Almost every third person unwilling to get vaccinated would need to change their mind for Australians to consider open borders a safe policy option.

"Our study reveals Australians are willing to open international borders, and Australia needs a road map to safely participate in relations with the globe while minimising COVID-19 health risks," lead author Esperanza Vera-Toscano said.

"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."

The findings come as lockdowns and border closures spread again, as the vaccine rollout passed 7.32 million doses yesterday.

Deborah Long, owner of Weston Cruise and Travel in Canberra, has had her first vaccine shot, with the second due in August. "I couldn't get mine fast enough," she said.

As a top-tier travel agent living in



**The situation is a nightmare. It no longer feels like we're living in a first world country.**

Deborah Long, Weston Cruise and Travel owner, above PHOTO: JAMILA TODERAS

Australia's only landlocked jurisdiction, she cannot understand why the nation isn't racing to get vaccinated.

"By the time Sydney had more

restrictions on Friday, I'd already spent long days on Wednesday and Thursday rearranging the travel plans of five clients – most with holidays booked in the

vicinity of \$30,000 to \$40,000," she said. "Canberra borders NSW, and Melbourne and Sydney are our main transit airports, so every single time either of those cities go into a new lockdown or up their restrictions, it hugely impacts Canberra, even though we are COVID-free with no community transmission."

"The situation is a nightmare. It no longer feels like we're living in a first world country," Ms Long said. It is made even worse by the fact she has had to scale down employees from more than four to 1.5. In 2019, her agency won Best Travel Agency Group, awarded by the Australian Federation of Travel Agents (AFTA).

Travel agents have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 meltdown, and have repatriated \$7 billion in refunds and credits from airlines, hotels and tour operators for Australian consumers who had booked through Australian travel agents over the past year. AFTA estimates there is still \$3 billion outstanding.

Accor Hotels Australasia boss Simon McGrath is fully vaccinated and, while the company is pro-choice when it comes to vaccination, he is keen to promote the jab. "It's not for us as a company to insist our staff get the jab; that would be for the government to mandate," he said.

"I think Australians are starting to understand it's about getting the shots to keep the community, not just yourself, safe. To that end, the whole country needs to get vaccinated, unless of course there is a pressing medical reason someone can't have a shot."