



Australian Government  
Department of Agriculture,  
Fisheries and Forestry



# ABARES Insights

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## Snapshot of Australia's agricultural workforce

**Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences**

This snapshot describes Australia's agricultural workforce, providing key information and statistics in one place, using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Census of Population and Housing. It covers where workers live, what industries and occupations they work in, the workforce's mobility, educational attainment and age, and hours worked. To inform about the diverse people and communities that contribute to Australian agriculture, the snapshot also examines the involvement of women, young people, Indigenous people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people with disability in the agricultural workforce.

# Who are Australia's agricultural workers?

The agricultural sector in Australia includes a number of diverse industries. This snapshot defines the sector as<sup>1</sup>:

- Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain Farming
- Fruit and Tree Nut Growing
- Mushroom and Vegetable Growing
- Dairy Cattle Farming
- Nursery and Floriculture Production
- Other Livestock Farming
- Poultry Farming
- Other Crop Growing
- Deer Farming.

According to the Census of Population and Housing, 239,093 people were directly employed in the agricultural sector in 2021 (Table 1), representing 2.0% of all employed people in Australia.<sup>2</sup> The number of people working in agriculture increased by 4.7% between 2016 and 2021.

Agriculture has linkages through the supply chain and interdependence with other sectors of the economy. The broader agricultural workforce extends to agricultural support services, food and beverage manufacturing, fibre manufacturing, wholesale trade, and warehousing and storage services, though there are difficulties in quantifying its size (ABARES forthcoming).

The majority of agricultural sector workers live in rural and regional areas of eastern Australia (Map 1). In 2021, 81% of agricultural workers lived outside a capital city, a slight decrease from 82% in 2016. By industry, this proportion varied from 94% of workers engaged in Other Crop Growing (including sugar cane and cotton) to 42% of workers engaged in Nursery and Floriculture Production.

## Box 1 Australia's agricultural workforce in 2021<sup>3</sup>



**239,093**  
employed, up  
4.7% since 2016



**81%**  
live in regional areas



**68%**  
worked full-time



**33%**  
were an owner/manager  
of an enterprise



**6%**  
lived overseas  
five years before



**50**  
median age (years)



**33%**  
identified  
as female



**25%**  
were under 35 years old



**1.8%**  
identified as Indigenous



**13%**  
were from culturally and  
linguistically diverse backgrounds



**4%**  
aged 65 years and over  
identified as requiring assistance  
with core activities

<sup>1</sup> Industries are categorised using the Australian New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) 2006, Revision 2.0.

<sup>2</sup> Note: The Census is likely to underestimate the contribution of temporary and seasonal agricultural workers (see page 11).

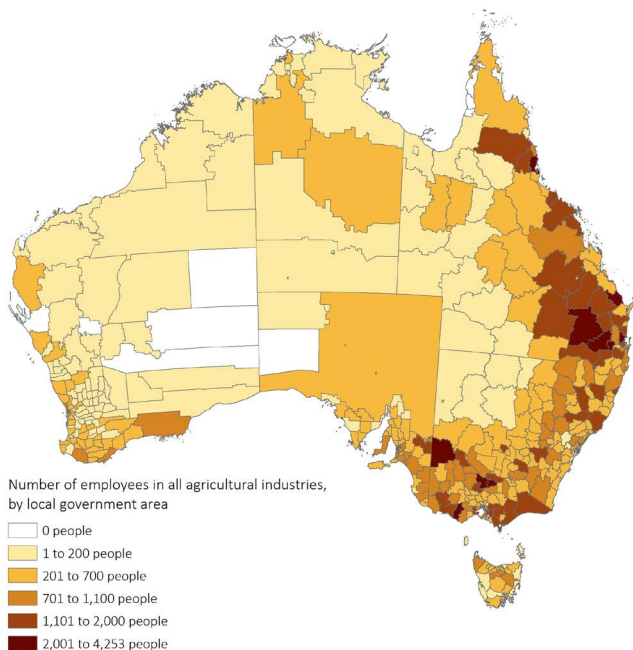
<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, totals used in calculation of percentages include not stated and inadequately described.

**Table 1** Place of residence of the agricultural workforce, 2006 to 2021

| State                        | 2006           | 2011           | 2016           | 2021           |
|------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| New South Wales              | 70,242         | 61,919         | 62,565         | 63,765         |
| Victoria                     | 58,378         | 51,709         | 54,096         | 59,031         |
| Queensland                   | 54,176         | 48,864         | 52,738         | 53,666         |
| South Australia              | 27,846         | 24,966         | 25,436         | 26,709         |
| Western Australia            | 26,409         | 23,037         | 23,998         | 24,823         |
| Tasmania                     | 7,528          | 6,992          | 7,563          | 8,843          |
| Northern Territory           | 1,644          | 1,501          | 1,483          | 1,728          |
| Australian Capital Territory | 379            | 275            | 468            | 508            |
| Other Territories            | 3              | 0              | 28             | 24             |
| <b>Total</b>                 | <b>246,603</b> | <b>219,269</b> | <b>228,372</b> | <b>239,093</b> |

Source: ABS 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021a

**Map 1** Agricultural workforce, by place of residence, 2021

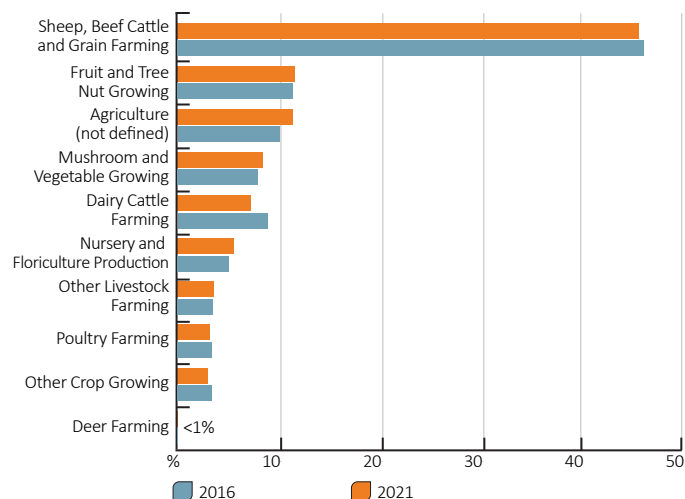


Source: ABS 2021a  
Map compiled by ABARES 2023

## Industry and occupation

In 2021, 46% of all people working in agriculture were employed in Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain Farming, a slightly smaller proportion than in 2016 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Employment by agricultural industry, 2016 and 2021



Source: ABS 2016; 2021a

The most common occupations of those working in agriculture in 2021 were<sup>4</sup>:

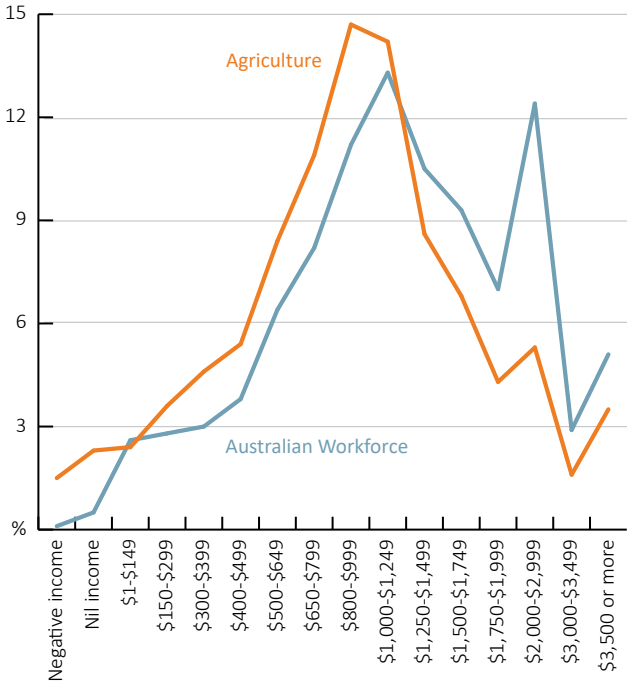
- Managers (55%; 132,574 people) including livestock farmers and crop farmers
- Labourers (26%; 61,890 people), including livestock farm workers, crop farm workers and garden and nursery Labourers
- Machinery Operators and Drivers (5%; 11,336 people)
- Clerical and Administrative Workers (5%; 10,976 people)
- Technicians and Trades Workers (4%; 10,661 people), including gardeners, nurserypersons and shearers.

<sup>4</sup> Occupations are categorised using the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) 2013, Version 1.3.

# Income and work status

In 2021, only 22% of agricultural sector workers earned more than \$1,449 per week, compared with 37% of the general Australian workforce (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Distribution of income, 2021



Source: ABS 2021a

A larger proportion of agricultural sector workers worked full time (68%), which the Census defines as working 35 hours or more per week, compared with the general Australian workforce (59%).

In contrast to the Australian workforce where 84% were employees, 33% of the agricultural workforce were the owner manager of an enterprise and 17% worked as a contributing family member (Figure 3). However, differences in employment status can be seen between agricultural industries, with employees comprising more than 70% of the workforce in Poultry Farming, Nursery and Floriculture Production, and Mushroom and Vegetable Growing.

**Figure 3** Employment status by agricultural industry, 2021

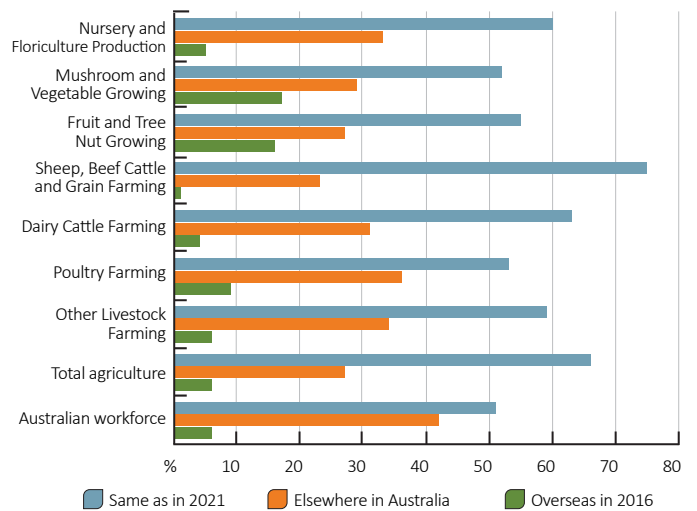


Note: Only selected agricultural industries are shown. Owner managers of businesses with or without employees.  
Source: ABS 2021a

# Mobility and migration

The mobility of the agricultural workforce is lower than other sectors, with 66% of workers living at the same address in 2021 as five years earlier, compared with 51% of the general Australian workforce. Industry differences are apparent with 17% of those in Mushroom and Vegetable Growing living overseas in 2016, compared with 1% of those in Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain Farming, and 6% for the entire agricultural sector (Figure 4).

**Figure 4** Usual address 5 years ago by agricultural industry, 2021



Note: Only selected agricultural industries are shown. People living overseas in 2016 includes people who were born in Australia.  
Source: ABS 2021a

# Education

Agricultural sector workers tend to have lower levels of formal education than the general Australian workforce (Table 2). In 2021, 48% of workers in agriculture had non-school qualifications, up from 43% in 2016. Almost half of agricultural sector workers with a non-school qualification had a certificate as their highest qualification. In 2021, 50% of the agricultural workforce had completed year 12 or equivalent, compared with 71% of the Australian workforce.

**Table 2** Level of highest educational attainment, 2021

|  | % of agricultural workforce | % of Australian workforce |
|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Postgraduate Degree                    | 2                           | 9                         |
| Graduate Diploma/ Graduate Certificate | 1                           | 3                         |
| Bachelor Degree                        | 12                          | 23                        |
| Advanced Diploma/ Diploma              | 9                           | 11                        |
| Certificate                            | 24                          | 23                        |
| No recognised non-school qualification | 49                          | 29                        |

Source: ABS 2021a

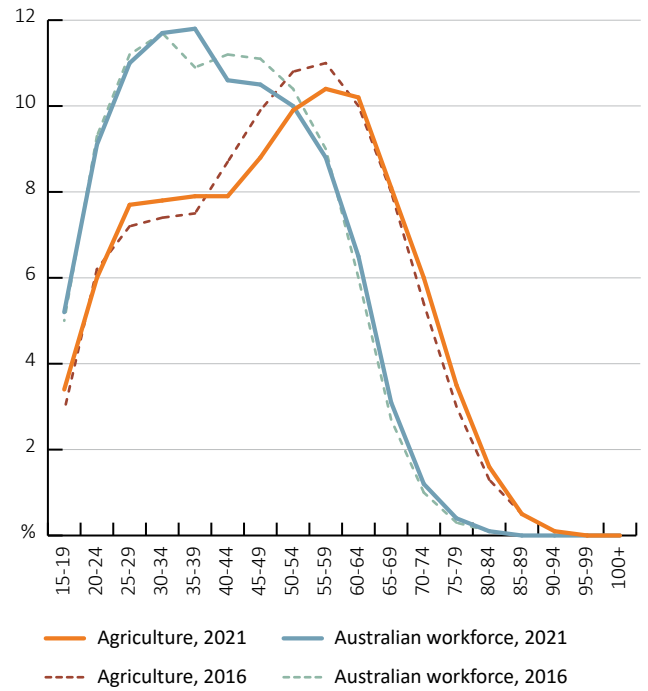
# Age

The median age of agricultural sector workers was 50 years in 2021, unchanged from 2016 (Figure 5). This is older than the median age of the general Australian workforce (40 years in 2021). While the proportion of agricultural workers aged 65 and older increased between 2016 and 2021, from 18% to 20%, so did the proportion aged under 35, from 24% to 25%.



Image: Getty Images/Cultura RF

**Figure 5** Age distribution, 2016 and 2021

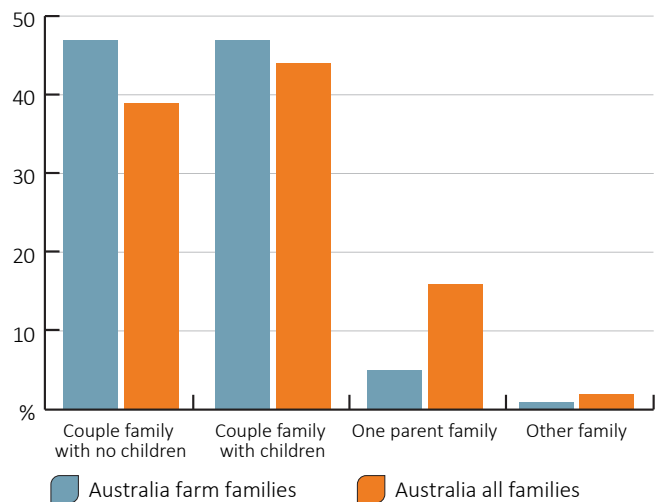


Source: ABS 2016; 2021a

# Farming families

Farming families can be defined as families where at least one person is a farmer or farm manager. In 2021, there were 88,873 farming families of which 47% were a couple without children, compared with 39% for all Australian families. This indicates that many farming families are likely to have older children no longer living at home. One-parent farming families are relatively uncommon (5%) compared with one-parent families for Australia (16%) (Figure 6).

**Figure 6** Farm family household composition, 2021

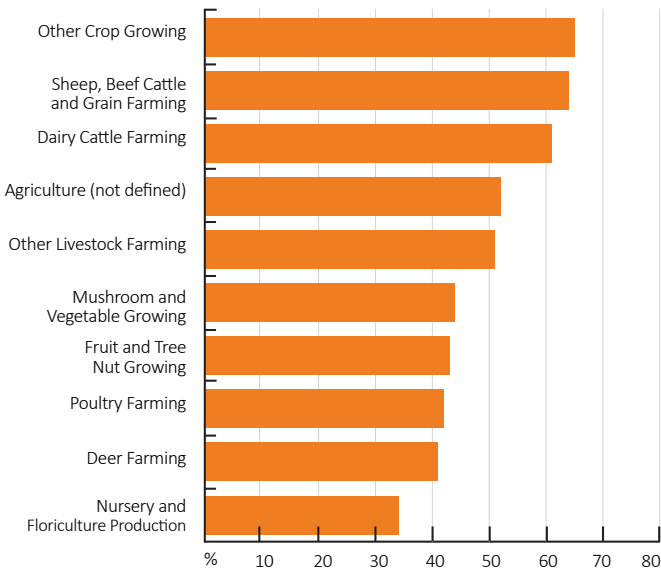


Note: Other family includes groups of related individuals such as brothers and sisters where there is no couple or parent child relationship.  
Source: ABS 2021a; 2023

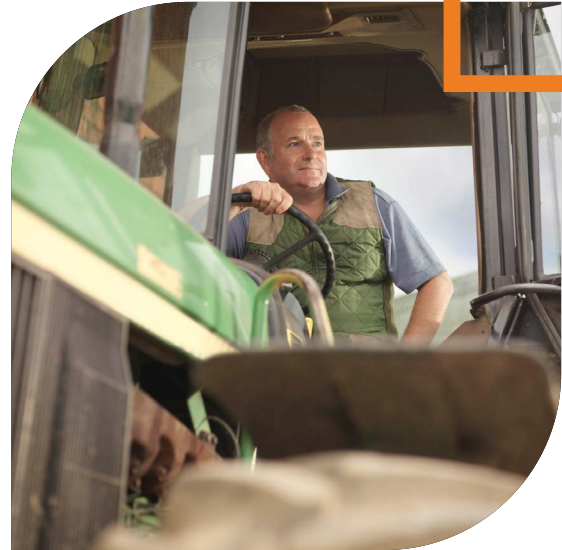
# Hours of work

In 2021, workers employed in Other Crop Growing had the highest median weekly working hours in the agricultural sector (45 hours). The lowest median hours were shared by Nursery and Floriculture Production, Mushroom and Vegetable Growing, Fruit and Tree Nut Growing, and Poultry Farming (38 hours). Over 60% of workers employed in Other Crop Growing, Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain Farming, and Dairy Cattle Farming worked at least 40 hours in a week (Figure 7).

**Figure 7** Employed people working 40 hours or more by agricultural industry, 2021



Source: ABS 2021a



## Box 2 Australia's agricultural workforce and the COVID-19 pandemic

Many parts of south-eastern Australia were in lockdown restrictions during the Census response period in early August 2021. This impacted hours worked for some people as they took leave or were unable to work. While high proportions of people employed in the Arts and Recreation Services (15.3%) and Accommodation and Food Services (12.8%) sectors worked zero hours in the week before the Census, Agriculture was less impacted by the restrictions (Snow et al. 2021), the Census showing that 3.3% of the sector's employees worked zero hours, compared with 3% in the week before the 2016 Census (Table 3).

**Table 3** Proportion of agricultural employees worked zero hours by State, 2016 and 2021

| State           | 2016 | 2021 |
|-----------------|------|------|
| New South Wales | 2.8  | 3.4  |
| Victoria        | 3.3  | 3.4  |
| Queensland      | 2.3  | 3.1  |
| Australia       | 3.0  | 3.3  |

Source: ABS 2016; 2021a

# Women in agriculture

Agriculture has been largely dominated by male workers according to Census data. However, women represent an increasing proportion of the agricultural workforce, and the nature of the family farm is that women make significant yet often unrecognised paid and unpaid contributions to agricultural businesses and communities (Alston, Clarke & Whittenbury 2018; Ressia et al. 2022).

## Women agricultural workers

In 2021, there were 79,827 women working in agriculture (33% of the workforce). This was up 7,105 workers from 2016, representing almost two-thirds (66%) of the overall expansion in the agricultural workforce, which increased by 10,721 workers between 2016 and 2021.

Estimates from 2005-06 show that women contributed 33% of all on-farm income and 84% of all off-farm income (Sheridan & Haslam McKenzie 2009). The 2021 Census further reveals that women working in agriculture contributed to:

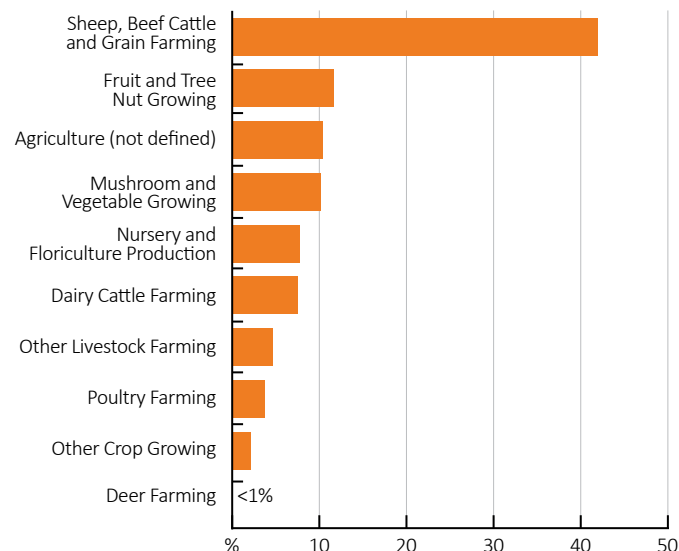
- Household work:** 71% of women working in agriculture indicated they spent five hours or more doing unpaid domestic work in the week prior to the Census. This is 14 percentage points more than the proportion for all women of 56%.
- Volunteer and community work:** 29% of women working in agriculture indicated they spent time doing unpaid voluntary work in the twelve months prior to the Census. This is substantially more than the proportion for all women of 15%, though down from the 36% indicated in the 2016 Census, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, women play a crucial role in farm diversification, for example, in agritourism ventures with serviced accommodation (Medhurst & Segrave 2007; Ecker et al. 2010).

## Industry and occupation

Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain Farming accounted for 42% of women working in the agricultural sector (Figure 8). This is similar to the proportion for all people who work in agriculture.

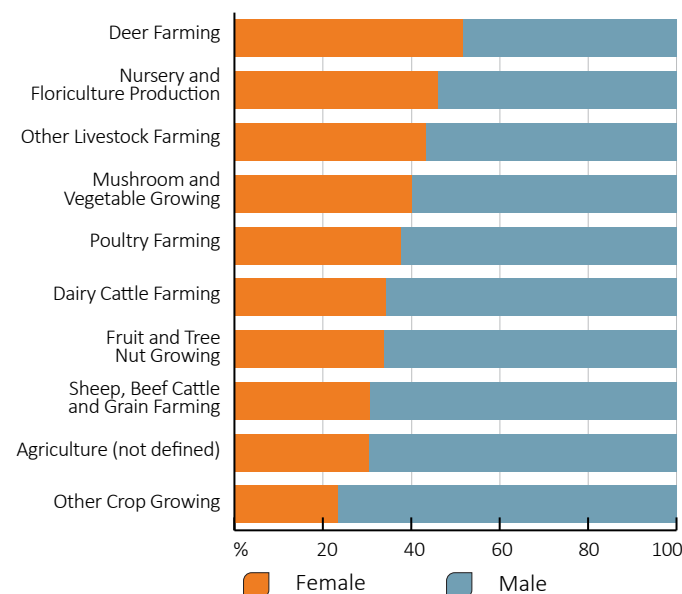
Figure 8 Female employment by agricultural industry, 2021



Source: ABS 2021a

Women represented 31% of the Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain Farming workforce (Figure 9), up from 29% in 2016. Agricultural industries where women represented at least two-fifths of the workforce were Deer Farming (52%), Nursery and Floriculture Production (46%), Other Livestock Farming (43%) and Mushroom and Vegetable Growing (40%).

Figure 9 Gender representation by agricultural industry, 2021



Source: ABS 2021a

Women made up 29% of all managers in the agricultural sector in 2021, compared with 40% in the general Australian workforce. Almost half (48%) of women working in agriculture were employed as managers (Figure 10), down from 52% in 2016. However, their number still increased between 2016 (37,787 female managers) and 2021 (38,275 female managers).

**Figure 10** Female agricultural workforce occupations, 2021

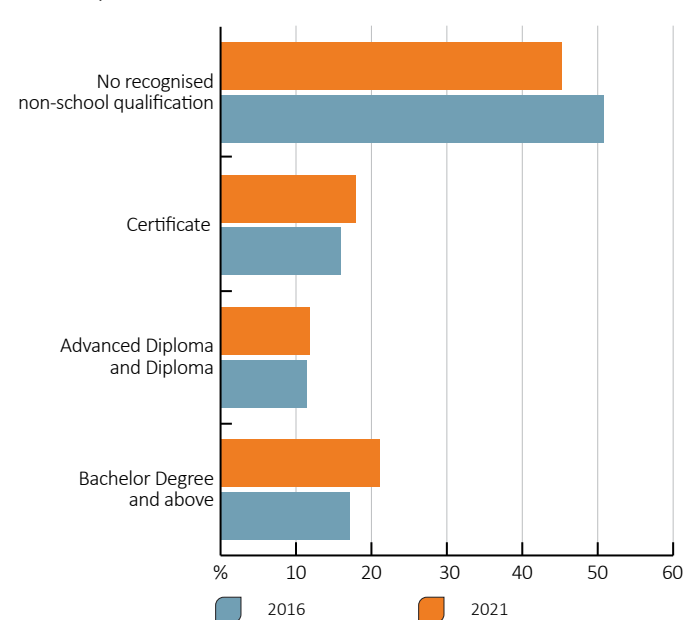


Source: ABS 2021a

## Education

In 2021, the percentage of women working in agriculture with a non-school qualification was 51%, up from 45% in 2016 (Figure 11). This is above the sector's average for all workers of 48%.

**Figure 11** Educational attainment of female agricultural sector workers, 2016 and 2021



Source: ABS 2016; 2021a

An increasing number of women are achieving qualifications in agriculture, including agricultural science, animal husbandry and wool science. In 2021, 34,029 women working in agriculture had completed a non-school qualification in agriculture, up from 27,384 in 2016 – a 24% rise over 5 years. This compares with an increase of 6% for men working in agriculture holding non-school qualifications in agriculture over the same period.

## Age

In 2021, the median age of women working in agriculture was 49 years, unchanged from 2016. Young women (aged from 15 to 34 years) accounted for 25% of women in the agricultural workforce, up from 23% in 2016, while 19% of women were over the age of 65, up from 18% in 2016.



# Young people in agriculture

In this snapshot, young people are defined as those aged from 15 to 34 years. The contribution of young people to the agricultural sector, either through paid or unpaid work, is central to an innovative and sustainable future for agriculture.

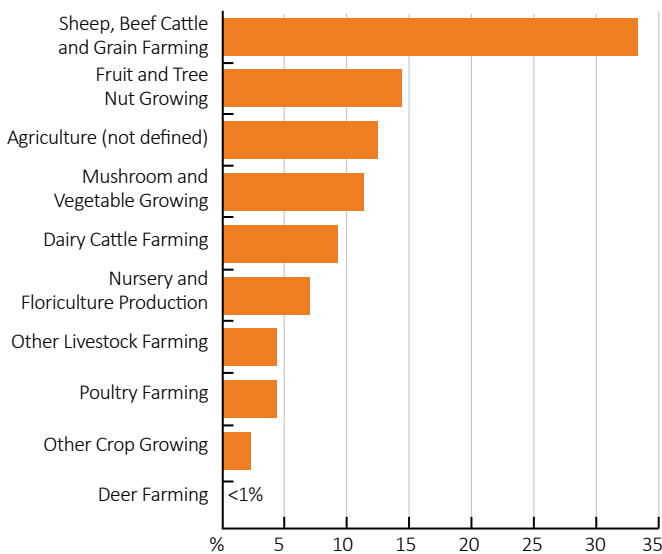
## Young agricultural workers

Young people accounted for 25% (59,590 people) of the agricultural workforce in 2021, up from 24% in 2016. In the general Australian workforce, the proportion of people aged from 15 to 34 years was 37%. Women made up 33% of young agricultural workers, compared with 30% in 2016.

## Industry and occupation

More young agricultural workers (34%) worked in Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain farming than any other industry in 2021 (Figure 12). This compares with 46% of all agricultural workers who worked in this industry.

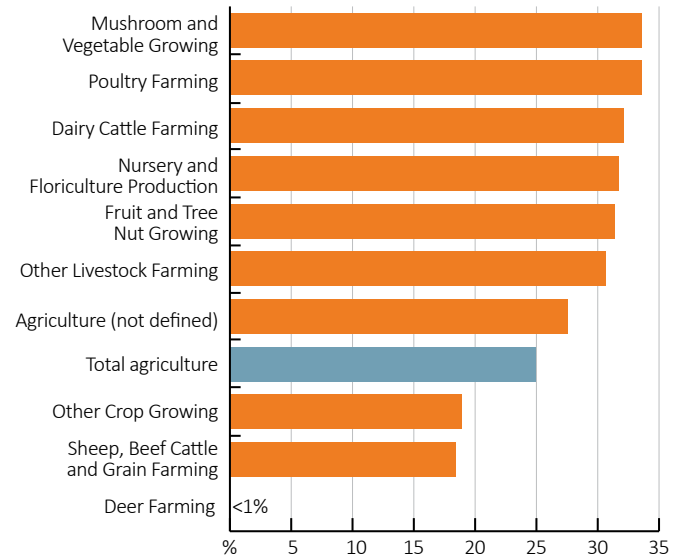
**Figure 12** Young people employment by agricultural industry, 2021



Source: ABS 2021a

Mushroom and Vegetable Growing and Poultry Farming had the highest proportion of young people, with 6,836 and 2,602 young workers respectively, each representing 34% of all people who worked in these industries (Figure 13).

**Figure 13** Representation of young people by agricultural industry, 2021



Note: This chart shows the proportion of young people as a share of the workforce for each industry.

Source: ABS 2021a

By occupation, most young agricultural workers were employed as:

- Labourers (49%; 29,148 people)
- Managers (29%; 17,098 people)

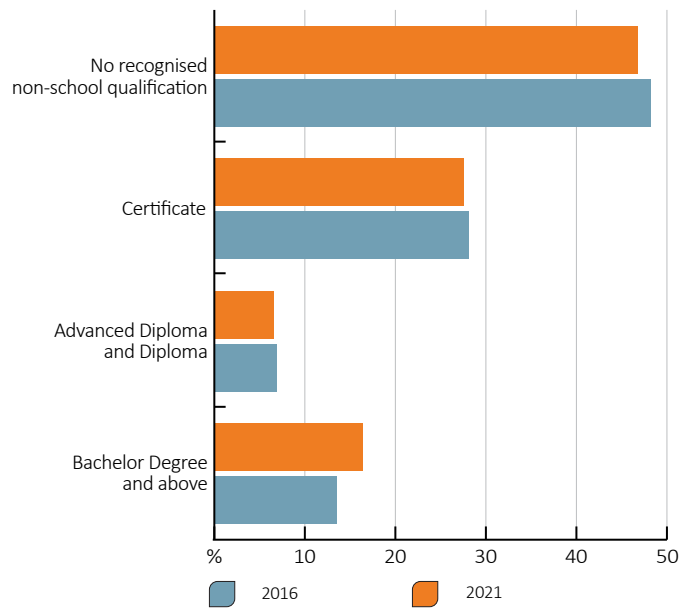
Of the 140,464 people employed as a farmer or farm manager, 18,947 (13%) were aged from 15 to 34 years, the same proportion as in 2016. Of young farmers, the proportion who were female increased from 21% in 2016, to 23% in 2021.

In 2021, 84% of young people working in agriculture classified their employment status as employee (compared with 93% in the general Australian workforce), representing 43% of the sector's employees. A further 5% of people aged 34 years or less listed their status as contributing family worker, making up 8% of the sector's contributing family workers.

## Education

In 2021, 51% of young agricultural sector workers had a non-school qualification, up from 48% in 2016 (Figure 14). This is higher than the sector's average for all workers of 48%.

**Figure 14** Educational attainment of young agricultural sector workers, 2016 and 2021



Source: ABS 2016; 2021a

## Indigenous people in agriculture

The term 'Indigenous' refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. An Indigenous person is someone who:

- is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person
- is accepted as such by the community in which they live, or formerly lived (AIATSIS 2023).

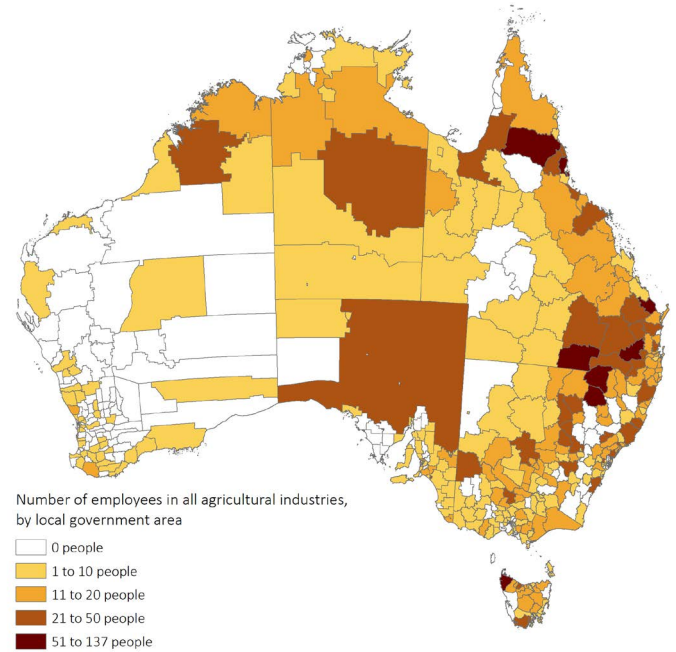
### Indigenous agricultural workers

In 2021, 1.8% of people directly employed in the agricultural sector identified as Indigenous (4,333 people). Of this total, 28% were women compared with 33% for non-Indigenous agricultural workers.

### Location of workers

In 2021, 90% of Indigenous people who worked in the agricultural sector lived in regional and remote areas compared with 58% of all Indigenous people. As can be seen in Map 2, a relatively large concentration of Indigenous agricultural workers lived in north central New South Wales, southern and far north Queensland, and north-west Tasmania.

**Map 2** Indigenous agricultural workforce, by place of residence, 2021

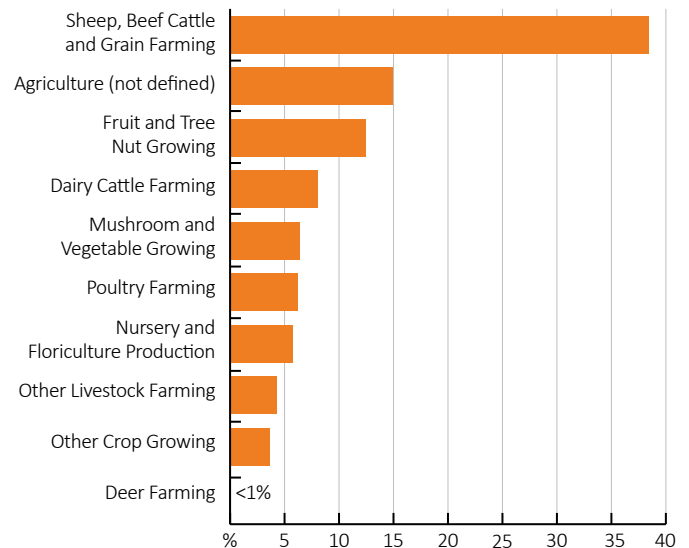


Source: ABS 2021a  
Map compiled by ABARES 2023

### Industry and occupation

Just under 40% of Indigenous agricultural sector workers in 2021 were employed in Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain Farming (Figure 15).

**Figure 15** Indigenous employment by agricultural industry, 2021



Source: ABS 2021a

Indigenous people make unique contributions to agriculture that are not captured by official statistics (Barnett et al. 2022). One area in particular is the burgeoning 'bush foods' industry which was estimated to have a farm gate value of \$21.1 million in 2019-20 (Laurie 2020). Indigenous people are involved at all stages of bush foods production, from wild harvest and cultivation of native produce, through to food processing and

cultural tourism that shares bush food knowledge (Woodward, Jarvis & Maclean 2019).

Most Indigenous agricultural workers were employed as:

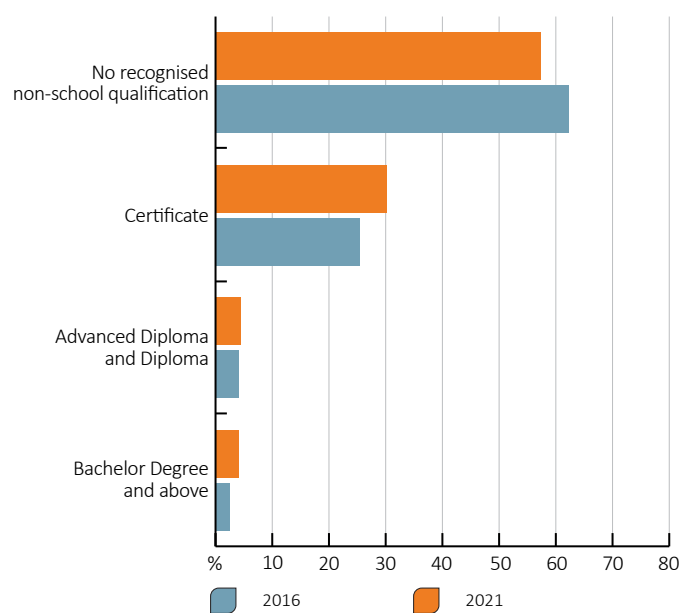
- Labourers (53%; 2,020 people)
- Managers (31%; 1,347 people).

Between 2016 and 2021, the number of Indigenous managers working in agriculture increased by 58%.

## Education

Indigenous agricultural sector workers tend to have lower levels of formal education than the average for all workers in the agricultural sector. In 2021, 35% of Indigenous agricultural workers indicated they had completed year 12 or equivalent, while 39% had completed non-school education, most of whom had certificate level qualifications (Figure 16). This compares with 32% who had non-school qualifications in 2016.

**Figure 16** Educational attainment of Indigenous agricultural sector workers, 2016 and 2021



Source: ABS 2016; 2021a

## Age

Indigenous workers tend to be younger than other agricultural sector workers. In 2021, the median age of Indigenous agricultural workers was 38 years, compared with 50 years for the entire agricultural sector. Young Indigenous people (aged from 15 to 34 years, inclusive) accounted for 44% of Indigenous people employed in agriculture.

# Cultural and linguistic diversity in agriculture

Australia's population includes many people who were born overseas or have a parent born overseas and speak a variety of languages. Together, these groups of people are known as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) populations (ABS 2021b).

It is a personal judgement whether people identify themselves as being from a CALD background. This snapshot uses 'language spoken at home' as an indicator of a CALD background, a method which captures both first- and second-generation Australians.<sup>5</sup>

## Agricultural workers from CALD backgrounds

People from CALD backgrounds represented 13% (31,874 people) of the agricultural workforce in 2021.<sup>6</sup> This is up from 11% in 2016. Immigrant communities have played a central role in the development of Australia's agricultural sector, especially in horticulture, filling labour shortages and introducing new agricultural commodities and practices, innovation and knowledge transfer (Collins, Krivokapic-Skoko & Monani 2016).

The Census is likely to underestimate the contribution of temporary and seasonal agricultural workers such as Temporary Skill Shortage visa holders, Working Holiday Makers and participants in the Pacific Island Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, because:

- not all are in scope for specific point-in-time data collections such as the Census
- they may be unable to complete data collection forms because of language and literacy barriers
- they may not be identified in official records because of their undocumented status (Howe 2021).

In 2021, women from CALD backgrounds:

- represented 42% of all CALD people employed in agriculture
- represented 17% of all women employed in agriculture, up from 14% in 2016
- were more likely to be employed as labourers (58%) than non-CALD women (23%).

The most common languages spoken at home by agricultural sector workers from CALD backgrounds in 2021 were:

- Mandarin (12%)
- Vietnamese (9%)
- Punjabi (7%)
- Italian (6%)
- Khmer (4%).

<sup>5</sup> Based on the 2021 Census question 'Does the person use a language other than English at home?'

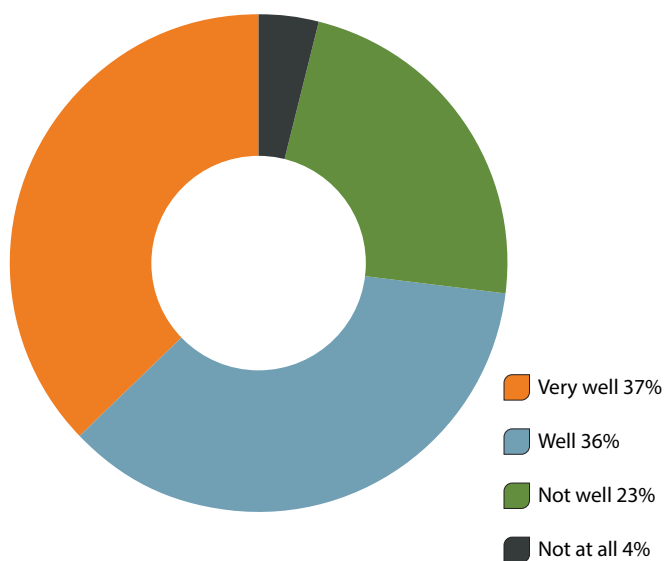
<sup>6</sup> This includes Australian Indigenous language speakers.

This entails a significant change from 2016 when those speaking Italian at home made up 11% of CALD agricultural workers, behind only those speaking Mandarin (12%).

### English proficiency

In 2021, most agricultural sector workers from CALD backgrounds were proficient in English, with 73% of workers reporting that they spoke English well or very well (Figure 17). Further, CALD agricultural workers may not be literate in their native language, which can affect their ability to access written information in their native language about, for example, the agricultural sector, natural resource management, business management, regulations and employment opportunities.

**Figure 17** CALD agricultural workforce proficiency in English, 2021

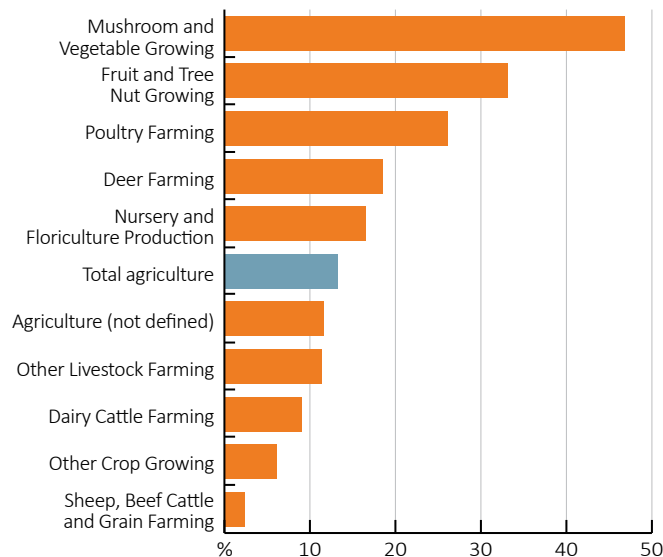


Note: Total used in calculation of percentages excludes English proficiency not stated.  
Source: ABS 2021a

### Industry and occupation

CALD workers were most represented in horticulture and specifically Mushroom and Vegetable Growing and Fruit and Tree Nut Growing, where they made up 46% and 33% respectively of all agricultural workers in these industries (Figure 18).

**Figure 18** CALD representation by agricultural industry, 2021



Note: This chart shows the proportion of CALD workers as a share of the workforce for each industry.  
Source: ABS 2021a

In 2021, 77% of CALD workers in agriculture were employees (compared with 85% in the general Australian workforce), reflecting their prevalence in relatively labour-intensive agricultural industries. A further 15% were the owner manager of an enterprise and 6% were contributing family workers. By occupation, the majority of CALD persons working in agriculture were employed as (Figure 19):

- Labourers (50%; 15,787 people)
- Managers (33%; 10,641 people).

**Figure 19** CALD agricultural workforce occupations, 2021

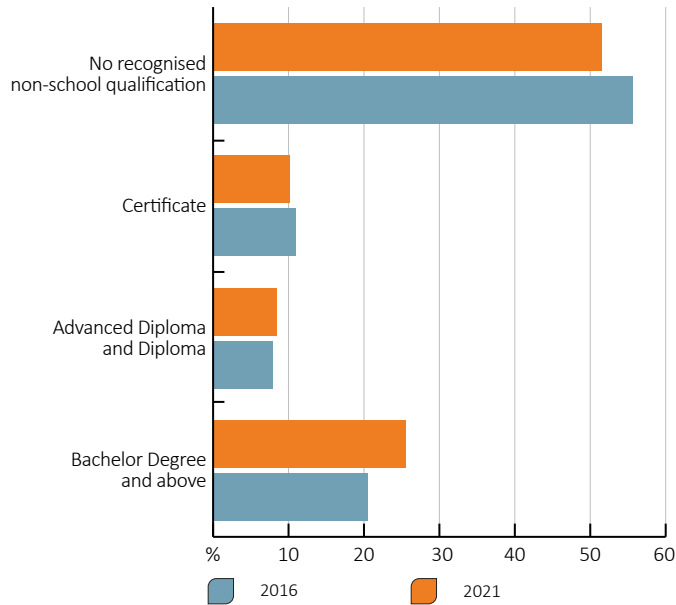


Source: ABS 2021a

## Education

In 2021, 44% of CALD people who worked in the agricultural sector had a non-school qualification (Figure 20), which is an increase from 39% in 2016. This is slightly lower than the agricultural sector average of 48%.

**Figure 20** Educational attainment of CALD agricultural sector workers, 2016 and 2021



Source: ABS 2016; 2021a

## Age

In 2021, CALD workers tended to be younger than other workers in agriculture. The median age of agricultural sector workers from CALD backgrounds was 38 years, compared with 50 years for the entire agricultural sector.



## People with disability in agriculture

The 2021 Census collected information about a person's need for assistance with one or more of the core activities of self-care, mobility and communication because of a long-term health condition (lasting six months or more), a disability or old age. In the agricultural sector, awareness is increasing of the capacity of people with disability to work in the sector, often with the support of carers and adaptations which enable their inclusion.

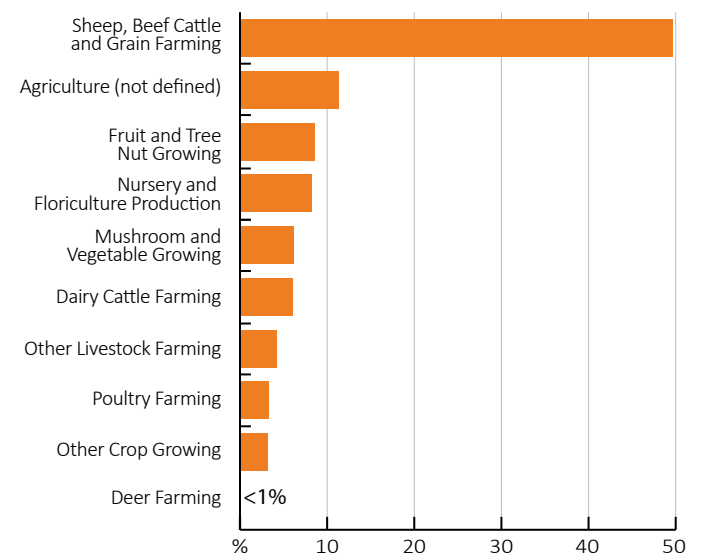
### Agricultural workers with disability

People with disability comprised 1.6% (3,766 people) of the agricultural workforce in 2021 (compared with 1.0% of the general Australian workforce), up from 1.3% in 2016. Women represented 31% of agricultural workers with disability compared with 33% of agricultural workers without disability.

### Industry and occupation

Almost half of agricultural workers with disability worked in Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain Farming (Figure 21), comprising 1.7% of all agricultural workers in this industry. The industries with the highest proportion of workers with disability were Nursery and Floriculture Production (2.3%) and Other Livestock Farming (1.8%).

**Figure 21** People with disability employment by agricultural industry, 2021



Source: ABS 2021a

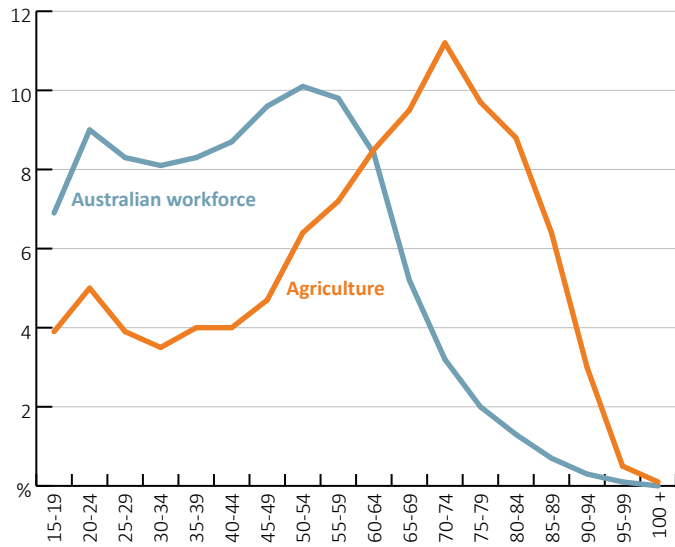
By occupation, most agricultural workers with disability were employed as:

- Managers (59%; 2,230 people)
- Labourers (25%; 944 people).

## Age

Of agricultural workers with a need for assistance, 16% were aged under 35 years compared with 32 percent for the general Australian workforce. At the other end of the age spectrum, 49% of agricultural workers with disability were aged 65 years and older compared with just 12% for the Australian workforce (Figure 22).

**Figure 22** Age distribution of agricultural sector workers with disability, 2021



Source: ABS 2021a



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