

FULL REPORT

**MARTIN
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Advancing pastoral care and needs-based support in the construction and infrastructure sector

CONCO>E
TŪHURA



WAIHANGA ARA RAU
Construction and
Infrastructure
Workforce Development Council

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Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed their time, insights, and resources to this research. The generosity and openness of the individuals and organisations who participated in interviews and shared their experiences were instrumental in shaping the depth and relevance of this work.

Special thanks to Erica Cumming and Zoë Morgan from Waihanga Ara Rau, Construction and Infrastructure Workforce Development Council, and to Katherine Hall from ConCOVE Tūhura for their constructive input and depth of knowledge, which has significantly enriched the thinking and direction of this work. Their expertise and critical reflections helped shape a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in supporting workers effectively.

This report has been prepared for Waihanga Ara Rau and ConCOVE Tūhura by Natalie James and Jessica Molloy from MartinJenkins (Martin, Jenkins & Associates Ltd). Quality assurance and peer review was provided by Sarah Baddeley.

NOVEMBER 2025

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Introduction

Background to the research

The construction and infrastructure sector provides a backbone for Aotearoa New Zealand's economic and social development. It delivers the physical foundations of our communities while providing employment to hundreds of thousands of workers across a wide range of roles. However, the sector continues to face significant challenges: persistent skills shortages, rapid technological change, and an increasingly diverse and often vulnerable workforce. These pressures are not only technical and logistical – they are inherently human.

Despite efforts to grow the workforce, retention remains a critical weakness, particularly among apprentices and early-career workers. This is especially true for Māori and Pacific peoples, who often experience higher attrition rates (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2025). This highlights the important need to rethink how the sector attracts, supports, and retains talent.

There is a growing body of evidence showing that pastoral care and needs-based support are essential to improving workforce outcomes, driving productivity, strengthening engagement, and improving worker wellbeing (MartinJenkins, 2025). Importantly, effective care and support can help ensure that all workers, regardless of background or circumstance, have the opportunity to succeed and thrive.

This report, commissioned by Waihanga Ara Rau and ConCOVE Tūhura synthesises current practices, challenges, and opportunities for embedding pastoral care and needs-based support across the construction and infrastructure sector. The findings presented here are intended to inform employers, sector leaders, policymakers, and training providers about what works and where the gaps are, so that the sector can move forward to ensure that all workers are supported. This report can be read alongside the accompanying Policy Brief, Employer Toolkit, and Industry Capability Roadmap.

While the toolkit and industry roadmap offer targeted, action-oriented tools and recommendations, this report serves as the comprehensive research foundation, bringing together the evidence, insights, and engagement that underpin the wider programme of work. It is designed to stand alone as a synthesis report, while also supporting the practical implementation of improved support systems across the sector.

Documenting our approach

This synthesis report is grounded in a robust, evidence-based methodology designed to compile and reflect the breadth of perspectives and experiences across the construction and infrastructure sector. The approach was not to generate new research, but to systematically compile, validate, and present the evidence that has been gathered by Waihangā Ara Rau, Construction and Infrastructure Workforce Development Council and ConCOVE Tūhura reflecting their leadership in vocational education and workforce development within the sector.

Targeted document review

We undertook a rapid, targeted review of key documents related to the design, implementation, and impact of best practice pastoral care and needs-based support. This included primarily research and insights produced by Waihangā Ara Rau and ConCOVE. In addition, we included relevant documents and resources provided by other sector partners through our engagement process, ensuring a broader view of emerging practices and on-the-ground realities.

Our review focused on identifying what works at an organisational level, what is required at a system level to embed positive practices at scale, and where gaps and opportunities exist for policy and capability development. This review has informed the development of our findings and recommendations, with an emphasis on practical, scalable, and culturally responsive solutions that reflect the needs of both workers and employers across the sector. A full list of the documents reviewed as part of this research has been provided in Appendix 2.

Sector stakeholder engagement

To complement the document review, we engaged directly with stakeholders across the construction and infrastructure sector. This included conversations with 15 individuals representing a diverse mix of employers (both small and large), tertiary education organisations (TEOs), consultants, and policy stakeholders.

The interviews were designed to test the relevance of existing evidence and to surface practical insights from lived experience. Discussions were flexible and participant-led, allowing individuals to highlight areas of particular importance to their roles and contexts. Across all conversations, we focused on exploring the following areas:

- Understanding of pastoral care and needs-based support
 - Participants were invited to define these terms in their own words, reflect on their relevance to the construction and infrastructure sector, and identify the key principles, roles, and responsibilities they associate with effective support.
- Current practice and provision
 - We explored how support is currently delivered within organisations, including who is involved in providing it, the structure and consistency of provision, and the types of support available, particularly for priority groups such as Māori, Pacific peoples, migrant workers, and neurodiverse individuals.

- Critical ingredients for effective practice
 - Stakeholders were asked to describe what they see as the essential components of successful support, what works in practice, and what makes a tangible difference to workers and learners.
- Barriers to implementation
 - We examined both organisational and system-level barriers that may limit the implementation or scalability of effective pastoral care. This included practical, structural, and cultural challenges.
- Mindset shifts and sector readiness
 - Participants were asked to reflect on the broader mindset and cultural shifts that may be needed to embed support practices more deeply and consistently across the sector.
- Future directions and opportunities
 - We invited stakeholders to share their views on where future efforts should be focused, including opportunities for system change, co-design, capability development, and long-term sustainability.

Defining “pastoral care” and “needs-based support”

A working definition of pastoral care, using the Education Code of Practice

To provide clarity and consistency for this project, we developed a working definition of pastoral care adapted from the principles outlined in the Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021. This Code, developed for the tertiary education sector, sets out expectations for ensuring learner wellbeing and safety. While the Code is education-focused, its holistic, learner-centred approach provides a valuable model for understanding support needs in training and employment settings as well.

Drawing on the Code’s holistic and learner-centred approach, we defined pastoral care as *the **structured** and **intentional** support systems and practices that ensure the **physical, emotional, cultural, and educational** wellbeing and safety of workers.*

This definition acknowledges that support must reach beyond academic or technical skill-building, it must also address the broader conditions that enable people to thrive in work, training, and life, including:

- **Wellbeing systems, planning, and practices.** The Code expects organisations to have formal systems, processes, and leadership structures that prioritise the wellbeing and safety of individuals. This includes the development of strategic goals, self-review processes, and meaningful consultation with stakeholders to ensure that wellbeing is embedded at all levels of the organisation.
- **Learner voice, participation, and accountability.** A key principle in the Code is the inclusion of learner voice in decisions that affect them. Organisations are expected to have transparent, accessible mechanisms for feedback, complaints, and dispute resolution. Individuals should feel empowered to raise concerns and participate in shaping the environment they are part of.
- **Safe and inclusive environments.** The Code emphasises that tertiary providers must create learning environments that are physically, emotionally, culturally, and digitally safe, inclusive, supportive, and accessible for all learners.
- **Learner wellbeing.** The Code requires tertiary providers to actively support the physical and mental wellbeing of learners by providing tailored information, monitoring wellbeing, and responding to learners’ needs in a timely and culturally responsive manner.

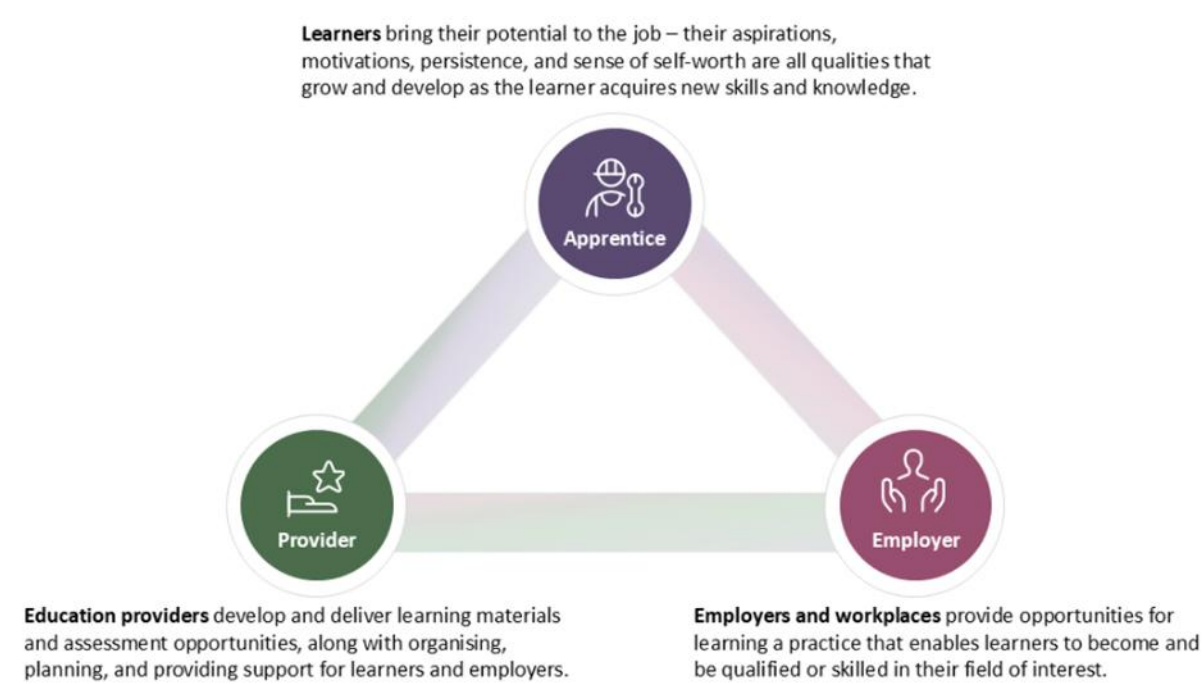
The Code also includes specific protections and responsibilities relating to international learners, recognising the additional challenges they may face when living and studying in a new country. Providers are expected to ensure that international learners are appropriately oriented, supported in their transition to life and study in Aotearoa New Zealand, and aware of their rights and responsibilities. This includes clear communication around immigration and tenancy rights, and access to healthcare and emergency assistance (ENZ, 2021).

To whom does pastoral care apply

Pastoral care is relevant to all workers, supporting wellbeing, retention, and productivity across the entire workforce. However, it plays a particularly critical role in the early stages of a person's career, especially for those in formal workplace-based training arrangements, such as apprenticeships.

Unlike other forms of tertiary education, apprenticeships involve a three-way partnership between the learner, the education provider, and the employer. Learners undertake both off-job theoretical learning and on-job practical training, with the workplace itself functioning as a learning environment. The role of the employer is central: they are not just an employer, but also a trainer, mentor, and critical influence on a learner's success (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Figure 1: The three-way partnership between learner, employer, and education provider



Source: Content adapted from (Alkema, 2020).

Addressing the definitional gap for pastoral care

This tripartite model makes the delivery of pastoral care in these settings more complex. Responsibility is shared across the provider and employer, yet too often no one is clearly accountable for ensuring the learner is supported. This becomes particularly important during transition points, such as the early months of employment, or the shift from structured training into independent work, where data shows churn is high and many workers leave the industry altogether.

While our adapted definition offers a strong foundation, it is worth noting that it defines pastoral care, roles and responsibilities, and standards in an educational setting, not the workplace learning setting. This mismatch presents a gap: without a formal, workplace-specific pastoral care framework, inconsistent implementation and unclear expectations can undermine support effectiveness.

Later in this report, we discuss the implications of this gap and highlight the need for industry and policy stakeholders to develop a clear, practical pastoral care framework tailored to workplace learning settings. Such a framework would guide organisations in building intentional, effective support systems that respond to the diverse and real-world needs of their workforce.

Providing clear, consistent pastoral care isn't just a matter of compliance or welfare, it is good business. As we will go on to discuss, when employers invest in wraparound support, they reduce turnover, retain skilled workers, and improve productivity on the job. In a tight labour market with rising costs and increasing project demands, supporting workers to stay and succeed makes sound commercial sense.

Developing our understanding of “needs-based” support

Unlike pastoral care, the literature reviewed to support this research does not provide an agreed or formal definition for *needs-based support* in the context of workforce development. However, for the purpose of this project, we take it to mean **specific, targeted supports designed to uplift groups whose experiences are not well served by mainstream or universal systems**. This includes Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled workers (including tāngata whaikaha), women, and others who may experience systemic disadvantage in education and employment.

This diversity lens is important, as traditional workplace systems or universal approaches to pastoral care may not adequately serve a heterogeneous workforce and risks reinforcing inequities. Needs-based support offers tailored interventions that recognise people's diverse realities, such as cultural identity, caregiving responsibilities, or past educational disadvantage, and respond accordingly. These structures function as pillars that help level the playing field, enabling workers from underrepresented groups to thrive and contribute fully (Merele & Tolooei, 2021).

This framing aligns with Cabinet Office guidance on needs-based service provision, which emphasises that such services should be grounded in evidence of disparity, not identity alone. Targeted support should respond to demonstrated gaps in outcomes, backed by analysis of why universal systems are insufficient (Cabinet Office, 2024). In this way, needs-based support builds on and deepens the intent of pastoral care. While pastoral care provides a holistic wellbeing framework, needs-based support ensures that equity is actively embedded in practice, delivering the right support, in the right way, to those who need it most.

Challenges facing the construction and infrastructure sector in New Zealand

New Zealand has approximately NZ \$206 billion worth of infrastructure in its future pipeline and over 2,000 initiatives are currently under construction (Te Waihanga, 2025). This pipeline is anticipated to grow significantly over the next 25 years, alongside significant demand for residential and other types of construction (Te Waihanga, 2022). However, as the demand for infrastructure grows, the sector is simultaneously grappling with systemic workforce and productivity challenges that threaten its ability to deliver.

The sector faces persistent labour shortages

For over a decade, the construction and infrastructure sector has faced persistent labour shortages, struggling to attract and retain skilled workers (MBIE, 2023). In 2022, the share of construction businesses reporting labour shortages reached its highest level on record (Te Waihanga, 2022).

While many skilled and capable individuals contribute to the industry, their numbers are insufficient to meet the scale of upcoming infrastructure development (Te Waihanga, 2022). 2025 modelling shows that supply falls well short of demand, with an additional 157,490 workers (a 43% shortfall) needed by June 2027 to deliver the forecast demand (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2025).

We are losing experience faster than we are gaining it

Construction and infrastructure workforce supply is characterised by strong attraction and consistently high numbers of new employees, but poor retention and large numbers of workers without significant experience (MBIE, 2024).

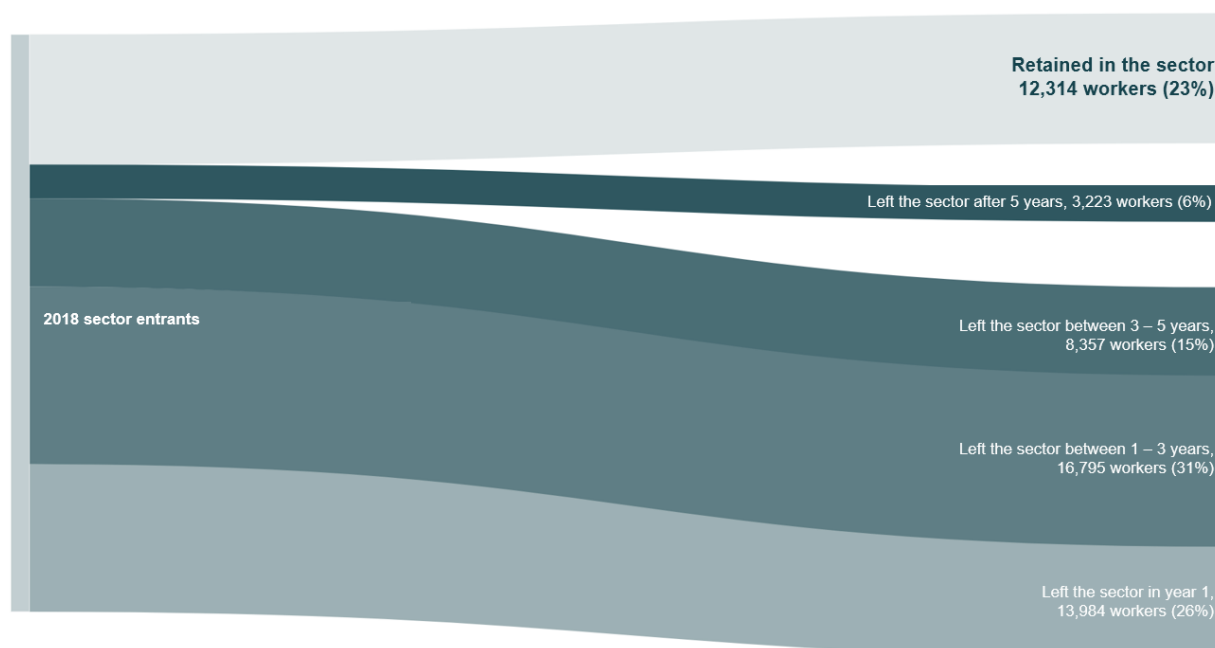
Research shows that workforce shortages are largely driven by an ageing workforce and insufficient training of younger workers. Skills and experience are heavily concentrated among older employees, and as they retire – often earlier than in other sectors due to the physical demands of the job – the industry is losing expertise faster than it can be replenished (Jones, 2023).

Since 1999, the proportion of workers aged 55 and over has doubled, while the share of workers under 30 has steadily declined (Jones, 2023). Data shows that the number of workers aged over 55 dropped by nearly 15,000 between 2022 and 2023. However, rather than increasing to fill the gap, the number of younger workers also declined with those aged 15 to 24 dropping by 3,700 over the same period (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2025). This indicates that the sector is neither attracting nor retaining enough young people to replace those exiting the workforce.

The sector struggles to retain workers – early careers is a crucial point of churn

A large proportion of workers are leaving the construction and infrastructure sector early in their employment journey. Of the cohort of workers who entered the sector in 2018, more than half of these workers left within the first three years of starting their careers. A striking 26% exited in their first year alone. As of 2023, only 23% of the original cohort remain working in the sector (Figure 2). While a small group have stayed long term, it's clear the industry is struggling to retain people beyond the 3–5-year mark (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2025).

Figure 2: Workforce pathways for construction and infrastructure workers entered in 2018



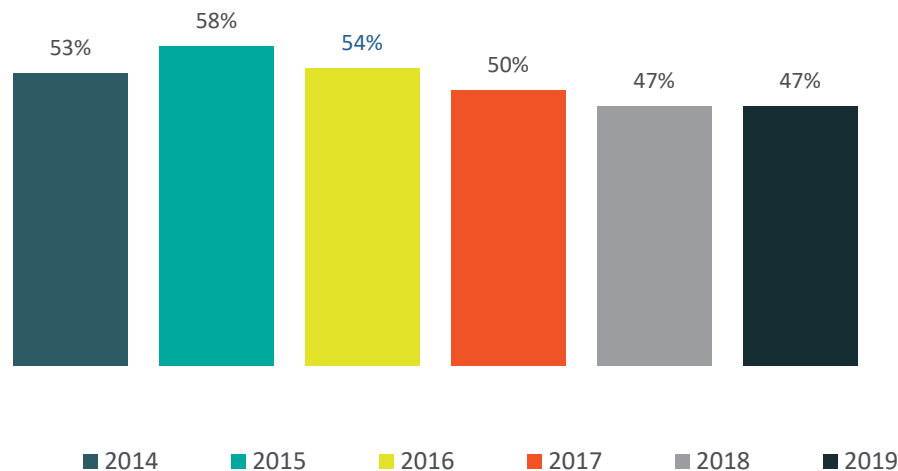
Source: Content adapted from (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2025).

This early attrition is apparent in New Zealand's low apprenticeship completion rates

Stakeholders have expressed strong concerns about low apprenticeship completion and retention rates. In 2023, the number of apprentices completing their qualifications fell by 1.9% compared to 2022, highlighting persistent challenges in supporting learners through to completion (Figure 3).

While the five-year completion rate has remained static at 47% across 2022 and 2023, there are significant disparities across ethnic groups, with Māori and Pacific learners disproportionately less likely to complete their apprenticeships.¹ When comparing completion rates with those of other jurisdictions, such as Australia (NCVER, 2024) and Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024), it is also clear that New Zealand lags behind.

Figure 3: Five-year completion rates of construction and infrastructure apprentices by start year



Source: Content adapted from (MoE, 2024).

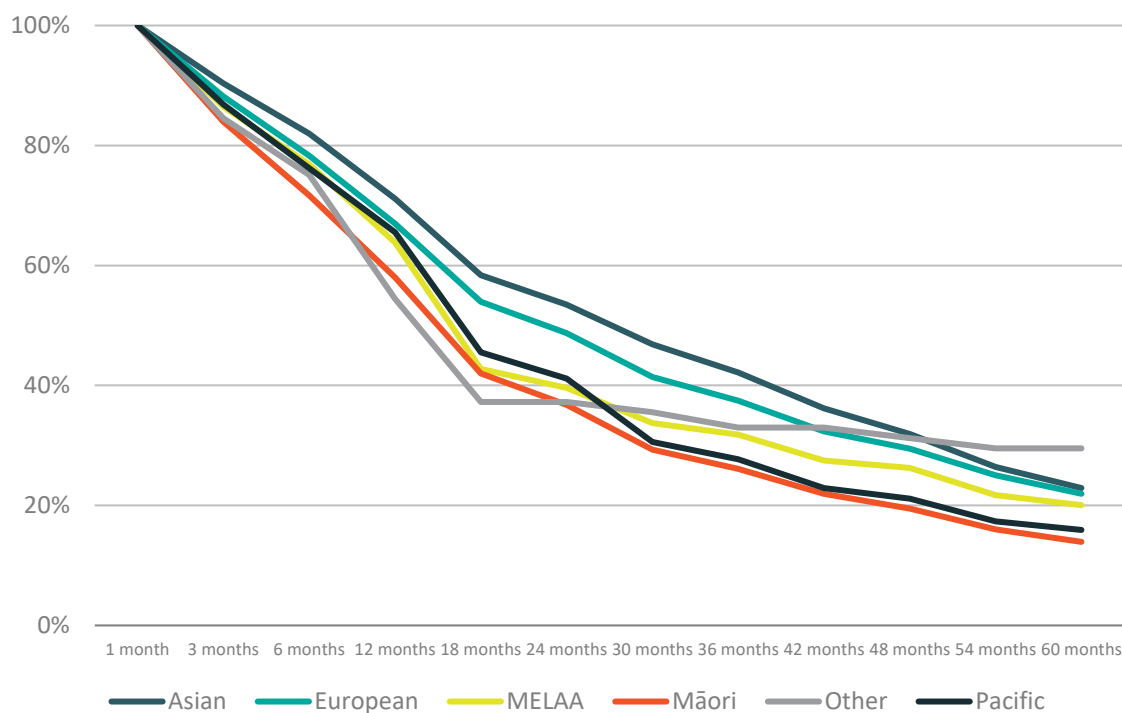
Retention rates appear even lower for workers from diverse backgrounds

When disaggregated by ethnicity, the data reveals significant disparities in long-term retention. While all groups see a decline over time, Māori, Pacific, and MELAA (Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African) workers experience steeper drop-offs compared to other groups. By the five-year mark, only 14% of Māori and 16% of Pacific workers from the 2018 cohort remained in the sector (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2025).

The construction industry's lack of diversity means it's missing out on a significant segment of potential talent. In 2022, women made up just 15% of the workforce (a figure that includes administrative roles) and only 2.6% were in trades. Given equal baseline ability across genders, this suggests tens of thousands of skilled workers are being overlooked (Jones, 2023).

¹ Completion rates by ethnicity: European (48%), Māori (36%), Pacific peoples (36%), Asian (56%), Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African (52%), and Others (57%).

Figure 4: Retention curve for 2018 cohort by ethnicity



Source: Content adapted from (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2025).

This reflects systemic barriers to participation and progression in the construction and infrastructure sector

The lack of retention of diverse groups in the construction sector stems from both societal norms and workplace structures that fail to support inclusion. In 2022, only 37% of civil construction firms reported having initiatives to support diverse on-site workers, dropping further to 32% in 2023. Rigid work hours also present a major barrier, especially for those with caregiving responsibilities – most often women. While societal expectations around unpaid domestic work are not unique to construction, the industry's traditional culture reinforces exclusion by failing to offer flexible hours or childcare support. Only 25% of firms reported having such policies in place, reducing the sector's appeal and accessibility for a more diverse talent pool (Jones, 2023).

Māori are often concentrated in lower-skilled construction roles and face barriers such as limited access to responsive education, low literacy and numeracy, and unclear pathways for career advancement (Samarasinghe & Tepania, 2024). Financial challenges, especially early in apprenticeships, are compounded by balancing cultural obligations with work demands. These issues are further influenced by the ongoing effects of historical racism and colonisation, which continue to impact Māori experiences and opportunities in the sector. These issues are compounded by limited vocational training options and the absence of formal learning structures that support early career development (Samarasinghe & Tepania, 2024).

Pacific peoples also encounter significant barriers, shaped by cultural, educational, and systemic factors. These include limited visibility of Pacific role models in the industry, a lack of alignment between vocational training and Pacific values, and language and literacy challenges that affect performance in formal assessments. Strong practical skills are often not enough to overcome these hurdles, especially when combined with competing family or community obligations (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024).

The construction and infrastructure sector has employed a large number of migrants and since the New Zealand borders opened following COVID-19-related restrictions, there has been an influx of migrant workers to meet sector needs. This long-term reliance on migrants is driven by the lack of experienced domestic workers, and employer preference based on the perception that migrants require less support to become fully productive on-site with lower retention risk (MBIE, 2024).

However, migrants, particularly those for whom English is a second language, face distinct barriers to progression in the construction and infrastructure sector despite being valued for their work ethic and reliability. Many encounter limited access to training and promotion opportunities. Language and communication challenges often contribute to perceptions that they are less suited for leadership roles, making it harder for them to move up the organisational ladder. Although the sector is becoming more open to diverse participation, a conservative and traditional industry culture continues to reinforce structural disadvantages for non-dominant groups (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

An estimated 15–20% of the population is neurodiverse, yet many neurodiverse individuals leave the education system with low self-esteem and limited pathways into stable employment. High levels of anxiety and wellbeing issues are common. The social and economic cost is significant, with unidentified and unsupported dyslexia alone estimated to cost New Zealand \$800 million annually (Martin, 2024).

Stagnating productivity also remains an issue

Despite ongoing growth and investment, productivity in New Zealand's construction and infrastructure sector remains low. The industry is marked by a persistent reliance on traditional building methods, material shortages, inadequate tools, incomplete or changing specifications, poor supervision, and a lack of innovation, all of which contribute to rising costs and poor-quality outcomes (Samarasinghe & Tepania, 2024).

A major factor behind low productivity is the ongoing shortage of skilled labour. Shortages can force companies to rely on temporary or unskilled workers, leading to slower progress, lower-quality workmanship, and increased safety risks. This mismatch also creates a paradox: although the industry reports significant labour shortages, around 25,000 construction workers report wanting more hours. This likely reflects a shortage of *skilled* roles, which limits opportunities for low-skilled workers to contribute meaningfully to projects (Jones, 2023).

The skill shortage in the construction industry extends beyond occasional worker absences or leadership gaps; it impacts overall project efficiency, stability, and progress. Identifying individuals with the right skills and mindset aligned to project goals is increasingly time-consuming. According to research, this shortage is widespread across the industry, affecting roles from entry-level to experienced positions, leading to competition among companies for a limited pool of qualified workers (Samarasinghe & Tepania, 2024).

Between 1970 and 2000, construction productivity stagnated across the board. While vertical construction has since seen a 23% productivity increase, horizontal civil construction has only improved by 5%. If productivity in horizontal construction had kept pace, civil construction prices would be around 10% lower, output would be 5% higher, and labour demand could be 11% smaller today (Jones, 2023).

Researchers conclude that the sector is trapped in a negative feedback loop of low productivity, long hours, and low wages. To meet project deadlines, employers depend on overtime and extended working hours. Yet, research also shows that productivity declines sharply beyond 40 hours per week. This results in fatigue, inefficiency, and diminished output per hour, which in turn reinforces the need for more hours and more workers, deepening the cycle (Jones, 2023).

Pastoral care and needs-based support must be part of the solution

Evaluative evidence supports the link between worker wellbeing and retention

In the construction and infrastructure sector, workers can face a wide range of barriers even outside of formal training, such as transport difficulties, housing insecurity, mental health challenges, and the need to balance study with whānau or caregiving responsibilities. When these challenges go unaddressed, they often lead to disengagement or early exit from the sector (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Evaluations of programmes like *Mana in Mahi*, *Te Ara Mahi*, *Pae Aronui*, and *Māori and Pasifika Trades Training* consistently show that targeted, relational support can be a decisive factor in whether learners complete their qualifications or disengage. Effective pastoral care can resolve issues for apprentices and help them to transition into new roles, particularly where they have not had much work experience in the past or have complex needs. For example, participants in the *Te Ara Mahi* programme who received a higher level and quality of pastoral care, reported a greater range and intensity of positive outcomes (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Comparative analysis of programmes that provide tailored support that addresses individual needs, offers access to mental health resources, and fosters strong support networks can mitigate stress and contribute to enhanced overall wellbeing among workers. Structured support mechanisms, such as mentorship and regular check-ins, play a crucial role in maintaining worker morale and commitment. These interventions correlate with increased retention rates and sustained workforce participation, with apprentices receiving pastoral care significantly more likely to complete their training and remain employed in the sector (Scarlatti, 2023).

The Cook Brothers Academy demonstrates how pastoral care can remove barriers in practice

A key example of this integrated approach is Cook Brothers Construction's Apprenticeship Academy, established in 2020 and supported by a three-year grant from the Provincial Growth Fund (PGF). The programme incorporates pastoral care, mentoring, and structured training support, with the Apprenticeship Development Coach (ADC) coordinating learning plans, facilitating both on-site and off-site training, managing certifications and licenses, and providing ongoing support throughout apprenticeships.

This integrated support model allowed Cook Brothers to address common challenges in the sector, including balancing study and work commitments, health and wellbeing, and skill developments. Independent evaluations and apprentice feedback indicate that the programme's pastoral care components positively influence engagement, retention, and completion rates (ConCOVE Tūhura, 2024).

Investing in pastoral care can deliver strong social returns

The experience of Workforce Central Dunedin (WFCD) demonstrates how integrating pastoral care and needs-based support into workforce development initiatives yields measurable benefits. WFCD was established to address workforce shortages for the New Dunedin Hospital build, but its remit quickly expanded to include a broad range of support services. These services encompassed free onsite health clinics, mental health support through MATES in Construction, regular wellbeing initiatives, and accessible training and induction programmes. The report notes that these interventions were not peripheral, but central to WFCD's ability to deliver outcomes against its employment and training targets (WFCD, 2025).

Stakeholder interviews highlighted that pastoral care and needs-based support contributed to improved worker wellbeing, higher retention, and increased productivity. For example, the provision of health checks, mental health resources, and onsite support reduced absenteeism and facilitated early intervention in health issues. The report quantifies the impact, stating that for every dollar invested, WFCD delivered \$5.04 in value, including both direct wage benefits and broader social outcomes. The presence of independent support onsite was described as a "catalyst" for collaboration and information-sharing, making jobs and opportunities more visible and accessible to jobseekers (WFCD, 2025).

Better support systems can contribute to greater productivity

There is increasing recognition that productivity outcomes are influenced not only by technical skills and infrastructure, but also by the workplace conditions and support systems that affect worker participation, wellbeing, and retention. This is particularly relevant for the construction and infrastructure sector, which suffers from higher rates of suicide and mental health issues compared to the general population or other industries. In New Zealand, the construction industry has the highest proportion of suicides across all sectors. This can be due to personal factors (such as relationships, family violence and financial strain) and work-related factors (such as job insecurity and stress) (Kennerley, Beaton, Knight, & MacGregor, 2025).

A recent NZIER report explored how impaired mental wellbeing affects workplace productivity, highlighting two key impacts: presenteeism and absenteeism. Presenteeism occurs when an employee's mental health hinders their ability to perform effectively while at work, with performance decreasing as mental health challenges intensify. As these challenges worsen, absenteeism becomes more common, and additional impacts arise from staff turnover and the added pressure on coworkers and managers who must compensate for reduced performance (NZIER, 2021).

While this research by NZIER was not focused specifically on the construction sector, its findings remain highly pertinent given the mental health profile of this workforce.

The researchers found that Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) services help to reduce absenteeism by an average of 2.6 days per person annually. However, proactive organisational approaches go further by focusing on building habits, behaviours, and workplace cultures that prevent issues before they arise. In the New Zealand context, the return on investment (ROI) for such organisational approaches is estimated at an average of 5:1, with a range from 2:1 to 12:1. Low-cost initiatives may offer even higher ROI, estimated at 8.5:1, due to their lower costs and the consistent, year-round impact they have on productivity, rather than only during periods of high stress. The authors further stress how the ROI of these initiatives can spillover to have positive economic outcomes as labour productivity increases are empirically linked to increases in real wages in New Zealand (NZIER, 2021).

Inclusion as a pathway to worker engagement and productivity

Research on the construction sector shows that while general diversity policies, such as work-life balance, non-discrimination, and bullying prevention, are relatively common, more targeted support for specific groups remains limited. Groups such as Māori, Pacific Peoples, women, neurodiverse workers, and younger employees often face unique challenges that require tailored responses. Traditional workplace systems, if left unchanged, risk reinforcing inequities rather than addressing them. Support structures must be tailored and sensitively designed and managed to meet the distinct needs of diverse groups, allowing underrepresented populations to fully participate and meaningfully contribute to the workforce (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

Enhancing inclusion is an effective strategy for building workforce resilience in sectors with persistent skills shortages. When properly supported, diverse workers, including women, Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled individuals, and others from underrepresented backgrounds, expand the available talent pool and make meaningful contributions to continuity, innovation, and growth across operations. The research also shows that organisations with mature diversity, equity, and inclusion practices report better workforce outcomes, including higher engagement, improved wellbeing, and stronger performance. These benefits extend beyond individual outcomes and help create cohesive, high-functioning teams (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

Culturally appropriate pastoral care, designed with consideration for a learner's preferences, background, and whānau connections, can also improve engagement and resilience. For example, reconnecting to te ao Māori and whakapapa in a positive, affirming way was a core element of the Pae Aronui programme, helping rangatahi build identity, confidence, and resilience. For many, this connection acted as a protective factor, supporting them through both the challenges of training and the broader pressures of life (MartinJenkins, 2025).

A substantial body of research shows that diversity delivers tangible benefits to organisations, particularly in sectors facing complex challenges and evolving workforce demands. Improved workplace culture, stronger leadership, and greater innovation are among the most reported advantages of diverse teams. Additional benefits include increased profitability, enhanced creativity, stronger governance, and more effective problem-solving. Employees from varied backgrounds bring different perspectives, ideas, and lived experiences, which contribute to more resilient, adaptable, and high-performing organisations. A study cited by the World Economic Forum found that companies with more diverse management teams generate 19% higher revenue from innovation compared to their less diverse counterparts. This highlights the strategic value of diversity, not just as a social good, but as a critical lever for productivity and long-term business success (WEF, 2019).

Realising outcomes requires action at all levels

Opportunities to improve workforce wellbeing and productivity range from practical operational adjustments to ambitious systemic reforms. The evidence base is clear that meaningful progress depends on coordinated efforts across all levels, from small, incremental improvements to bold structural changes. When fully implemented, these changes have the potential to benefit both workers and Aotearoa New Zealand's economic performance (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

What does effective pastoral care and needs-based support look like in practice?

Based on our review of the literature and conversations with stakeholders across the sector, we have identified several core elements of effective pastoral care and support. These approaches reflect what works in real settings to meet the diverse needs of workers.

Trust as a foundational element to pastoral care

Trust is widely recognised as the foundation for effective pastoral care, essential for fostering open communication, early issue identification, and sustained engagement among learners and workers. Across multiple programmes and case studies, trust emerges as a prerequisite for individuals to feel safe raising concerns and accessing support.

Building trust through accessibility, consistency, and rapport

Stakeholders we interviewed noted that open-door policies, where learners feel comfortable approaching any staff member with concerns, foster trust and early issue identification. Leaders who are trained to build rapport play a vital role, particularly for underserved or diverse workers. One stakeholder explained, “It’s building the trust with the learner so that they feel safe to raise their concerns or barriers but also having the [internal] capability to identify what those needs might be if they’re not bringing them to the table.”

The Cook Brothers case study emphasises how “trust is built through consistency”. Apprentices thrive when they feel safe, respected, and supported. In their model, trust is cultivated through regular one-on-one check-ins, open communication, and a culture where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities rather than failures. One apprentice shared, “I know I can talk to my mentor about anything – work or personal – and they’ll listen without judgment.” This environment of psychological safety empowers apprentices to be honest about their challenges, which in turn allows mentors to provide timely and meaningful support (ConCOVE Tūhura, 2024).

Programmes such as *Pae Aronui* and *Te Ara Mahi* focused on developing consistent, trust-based relationships where support providers were reliably available beyond standard hours. Facilitators emphasised that trust-building required a *te ao Māori* approach and ongoing presence from day one, allowing participants to feel safe sharing their needs.

The rōpū under Pae Aronui highlighted that investing time to build trust enabled better coordination of support services, ensuring rangatahi could access help seamlessly without repeating their stories, which strengthened their confidence and sense of belonging (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Trust as a foundation for cultural responsiveness and inclusion

Research highlights that for Māori learners, trust is cultivated through consistent, face-to-face (“kanohi ki te kanohi”) engagement, and the honouring of Māori values and worldviews. A practitioner shared, “When they see you show up, not just once, but again and again – they know you’re serious. That’s when they start to trust” (Samarasinghe & Tepania, 2024). Trust can also be built when employers recognise and honour cultural practices. For example, through the provision of extended bereavement leave, which often receives enhanced loyalty, longer tenure, and additional support from Pacific workers during challenging projects or tough times for the business (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024). This approach requires educators and employers to walk alongside Māori, Pacific, and other culturally diverse workers and create spaces where identity, language, and culture are affirmed (Samarasinghe & Tepania, 2024).

Similarly, supporting neurodiverse learners effectively depends on building trust, which can help overcome stigma and low self-esteem. Trust grows in environments that move from “compliance-based inclusion” to “deliberate inclusion”, valuing neurodiversity as a strength within the workforce. As the report states, “to ensure success in this field there is also a need to shift from ‘they’ to ‘us’ and ‘we’, reinforcing that trust grows when neurodiverse people are seen as integral members of the learning and working community (Martin, 2024).

The importance of clear points of contact

A key feature of effective pastoral care models is the presence of dedicated points of contact. The evidence shows that programmes led by passionate and relatable champions are consistently more successful; their personal investment and ability to build trust contribute to programme longevity and participant retention (Scarlatti, 2023). These support persons or mentors, often experienced industry professionals, maintain regular communication with workers, proactively identify challenges, and help navigate available support resources. This approach not only fosters trust-based relationships but also reduces the burden on workers and others within the organisation, streamlining access to assistance (MartinJenkins, 2025).

At the Cook Brothers Apprenticeship Academy, the Apprenticeship Development Coordinator (ADC) is regarded as the “secret sauce” of the programme’s success. Acting as the central point of contact for all aspects of the apprenticeship, the ADC adds significant value through coaching and support while alleviating administrative and pastoral responsibilities for others within the organisation. By building strong relationships with both apprentices and wider construction teams, the ADC fosters a holistic approach to learning, mentoring, and development. This allows carpenters and site managers to focus on their core responsibilities while still contributing to apprentices’ on-the-job learning in a more manageable and supported way (ConCOVE Tūhura, 2024).

Relatable role models and mentoring relationships

One-on-one mentoring plays a crucial role in supporting sustained engagement by helping workers navigate organisational culture, expand their networks, and receive career guidance. While mentors do not necessarily need to share the same background as their mentees, research highlights the importance of increasing the presence and visibility of diverse individuals in senior leadership roles (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024). Visible and relatable role models, such as female tutors for young women, or Māori or Pacific mentors, can significantly boost engagement by fostering a sense of aspiration (Scarlatti, 2023). As the saying goes “You can’t be what you can’t see.” People can aspire to be something if it’s more relatable and can express themselves in a more authentic way when they receive mentorship that is culturally relevant (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024).

Understanding and responding to individual needs

We heard that effective pastoral care and support systems are critical in helping workers overcome barriers and achieve their full potential. Such support must be tailored to the individual, responsive to changing needs over time, and aligned with each person’s aspirations and circumstances. This means going beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to create personalised pathways that address practical challenges as well as emotional, social, and behavioural needs.

Addressing practical needs and setting workers up for success

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of addressing practical barriers early to set workers up for success. This includes ensuring foundational needs such as correct equipment, uniforms, PPE, literacy, numeracy, health, transport, and even access to food are met before training begins. One stakeholder shared, “Before they actually do any trades programmes, the majority of our initial work is pastoral care, ensuring that they’ve got their correct equipment, uniform, all the health and safety PPE.”

Testing for literacy, numeracy, and learning difficulties, and responding effectively to these, is often identified as a key area for pastoral care. Previous examples of support have shown measurable impact. For instance, apprentices who received targeted literacy support were more confident, made faster progress in their learning, and demonstrated improved study habits and increased ability to complete learning tasks independently.

To complement these supports and meet learners where they are, providers are also adapting the mode of delivery. Te Pūkenga–BCITO has integrated digital tools into its training approach, including the MyBCITO platform. This toolkit enables apprentices to connect with training advisors, upload evidence of their work, complete quizzes, and access learning resources at their own pace, offering flexible, on-demand support that complements face-to-face engagement and supports diverse learning needs (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Other practical supports identified by stakeholders include helping learners obtain driver licences, often a critical requirement for employment, as well as providing access to job-specific training and endorsements, such as forklift operation, tracks, rollers, and heavy vehicle licences. Beyond technical skills, support also extended to areas that improve day-to-day stability and readiness for work.

This included budgeting advice, technical support, managing conflict both in and outside the workplace, covering travel and accommodation costs, and offering essential training such as first aid and health and safety (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Support must also allow for everyday flexibility, such as providing time off when needed. One interviewee reflected on a recent experience with a team member going through a period of grief: “I gave them sick pay. Um, just little things like that,” they said, noting that these small acts of flexibility went a long way in helping the person cope and also built trust and a stronger relationship between employer and employee.

Supporting transformational growth through holistic support

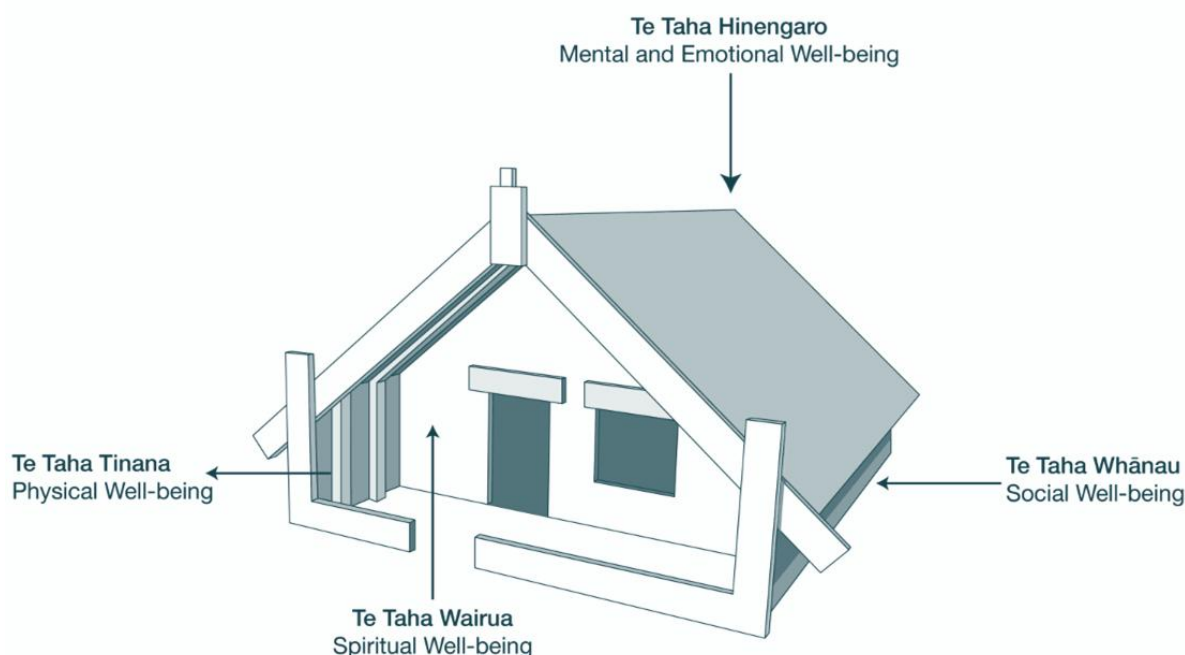
It is evident that the provision of practical support to workers, to remove barriers, can be transformational in itself. However, we also heard that effective pastoral care models must extend beyond practical elements to include transformational support. While practical care focuses on compliance, health and safety, and administrative responsibilities, transformational support addresses the emotional, social, spiritual, and behavioural needs that help workers develop fully, both personally and professionally.

Holistic pastoral care is comprehensive and wraparound, aiming to ensure individuals are in a good mental, physical, and emotional state to engage effectively with learning and work. As one interviewee noted, “If you really, really look at what pastoral care is offering, it’s making sure that someone is in a good place at home, at work, in their mind, and physically to receive information and accept it and to use it to make decisions in the future.”

Models such as Te Whare Tapa Whā² offer a holistic model of wellbeing that is often cited in the literature as a valuable guide for the dimensions of pastoral care. The model emphasises the importance of balance across four dimensions of health: taha wairua (spiritual well-being), taha hinengaro (mental and emotional wellbeing), taha tinana (physical wellbeing), and taha whānau (family and social well-being) (Te Awhi Jones, Fieten, Te Kuini Jones, & Takuira, 2024).

2 Developed by leading Māori health advocate Sir Mason Durie in 1984, the model describes health and wellbeing as a wharenui (meeting house) with four walls (Te Awhi Jones, Fieten, Te Kuini Jones, & Takuira, 2024).

Figure 5: Māori health: Te Whare Tapa Whā model



Source: Content retrieved from (Te Awhi Jones, Fieten, Te Kuini Jones, & Takuira, 2024).

While professional assistance remains important, stakeholders emphasised that the everyday acts of care that support workers to be holistically well often have the most profound and lasting impact. This holistic and transformational approach to pastoral care not only supports workers' immediate needs but also fosters resilience, belonging, and growth, contributing to long-term wellbeing and success.

As a stakeholder reflected, "If you provide that kind of care, you may be contributing to better productivity... stave off time off work or complete absence from work for a more serious illness." Programmes like "Mates in Construction" also support social cohesion and mental health beyond their primary focus on suicide prevention.

Embedding such care within workplace cultures requires commitment, resources, and a willingness to go beyond compliance, reflecting a deeper understanding of the whole person (Te Awhi Jones, Fieten, Te Kuini Jones, & Takuira, 2024).

Adapting support to meet changing needs over time

Stakeholders emphasised that effective pastoral care must be both flexible and responsive, adapting to the changing circumstances of individuals over time. For example, the needs of a new apprentice differ markedly from those of someone in their third or fourth year, or a worker juggling family responsibilities. As one interviewee explained, "Their ability to cope with the first six months... all of their external factors come into play... That is different to the year three or four apprenticeship where they're now getting at a stage where... they might be starting a new family." However, just because needs evolve with time doesn't mean they become less important – support remains critical at every stage.

While Māori are a diverse and dynamic population, research suggests that Māori do have some distinctive approaches to learning within the workplace.

Ako: The concept that recognises the knowledge that both teachers and learners bring to learning interactions and affirms the value of collective learning approaches.

Whakapapa: Connections through whakapapa are vitally important to Māori and firmly connect learners to their iwi, hapū, and marae, as well as their own cultural heritage, which they bring with them into the learning environment.

Whanaungatanga: The concept of maintaining and fostering relationships that emphasise the importance of togetherness and the co-operative nature of learning.

Whānau: The interconnected nature of whānau and the responsibilities that flow between learners and their wider whānau.

Tuākana-tēina: The concept of mentoring relationships is closely linked to traditional whānau practice and is particularly useful and relevant within workplace settings.

Kanohi ki te kanohi: Face-to-face engagement is an important mechanism for developing trust and sharing information between individuals and groups. It is seen as the most effective method for engaging learners and whānau (Kerehoma, Connor, Garrow, & Young, 2013).

Culturally grounded and responsive support models

Evidence from our review highlights the importance and effectiveness of embedding diverse worldviews into models of support for workers. Researchers have stressed a need for culturally responsive training approaches and environments, and for the inclusion of cultural values in all aspects of support, training, and leadership development.

Supporting Māori workers to thrive

Pastoral care for Māori is most effective when it is whānau-centric, culturally grounded, and holistic – embedding tikanga Māori, involving whānau in support processes, and providing regular kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) engagement. Regular check-ins outside of project settings demonstrate genuine interest in employees' growth and foster a culture of continuous development (Samarasinghe & Tepania, 2024).

Integration of whakapapa are shown to foster belonging, engagement, and success (Te Awhi Jones, Fieten, Te Kuini Jones, & Takuira, 2024). In practice, this involves supporting individuals to reconnect with their marae, hapū, and iwi as a way of strengthening identity and understanding their place in the world. This culturally grounded approach not only enhanced participants' sense of pride and mana but also reinforced a sense of community and social cohesion (MartinJenkins, 2025).

One of the lessons from the Ako Whakaruruhau project was that when Māori apprentices were grouped together on the same project, they reported being happier, facing fewer challenges, and achieving greater success. Over time, the apprentice coordinator intentionally focused on clustering Māori apprentices, which had a noticeable positive impact on outcomes. These groupings created strong peer support networks, where apprentices encouraged one another and shared experiences. In many cases, natural tuākana-tēina (older-younger) relationships emerged, with more experienced apprentices stepping into informal mentoring roles (Savage, 2016).

Our research also highlighted the importance of specific, relationship-based strategies to support the upskilling of Māori individuals into high-skill roles. Effective approaches include initiating regular one-on-one sessions with potential candidates, engaging in open and heartfelt conversations about leadership aspirations, and fostering loyalty through personal investment. Creating space for individuals to voice their long-term career goals and leadership ambitions is considered crucial, as is encouraging ongoing dialogue about upskilling (Samarasinghe & Tepania, 2024).

Our engagement with Māori support providers revealed a powerful insight: the approaches that most effectively support Māori, such as holistic, whānau-centred, and relationships-based care, actually benefit everyone in the workplace regardless of background. When organisations invest in trust-building, provide wraparound support for practical, emotional, and cultural needs, and foster a real sense of belonging, these strategies elevate the experience and outcomes for all employees. In this sense, doing pastoral care well for Māori can create an environment where everyone can thrive.

Supporting our Pacific workforce

Effective pastoral care for Pacific workers is grounded in culturally affirming, relational, and community-oriented approaches. Successful strategies for Pacific peoples are those that engage the whole person, not just as a worker, but as a member of a wider āiga (family), church, and community network. Career decisions for many Pacific workers are shaped by collective expectations, so support models that include and engage families and communities are more likely to gain traction and lead to sustained outcomes (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024).

There is a need for organisations to actively build cultural competency, foster inclusive environments, and adopt a zero-tolerance approach to bias and discrimination. Misunderstandings can occur when cultural norms such as humility or silence are misinterpreted as disengagement or lack of ambition. Workplace relationships that prioritise face-to-face engagement, *Talanoa* (open, respectful dialogue), and *Teu le Va* (nurturing sacred relationships) help to build cultural safety and ensure Pacific workers can open up about what support might be required (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024).

Flexibility is another key success factor. Pacific learners often juggle significant family, church, and community responsibilities. Training and support models that accommodate these realities are important for enabling continued participation and success. Additionally, many Pacific workers bring strong practical capabilities but may face barriers with written or oral assessments due to language or cultural differences. Simplifying assessments by using plain, industry-relevant language and contextualised, project-based tasks can better capture their skills and knowledge and support achievement (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024).

Effective care for migrant workers where English may be a second language

Migrant workers and those with English as a second language are a significant and growing part of the construction and infrastructure sector. Migrant workers are often seen as committed and hardworking, but face barriers to promotion due to communication skills, language proficiency, and stereotypes about their ability to perform in supervisory or managerial roles (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

The evidence suggests that effective support requires a multipronged approach, starting with language and literacy assistance tailored to the needs of ESOL learners. Some organisations offer group and one-on-one literacy and numeracy support, specifically funding ESOL assistance and engaging providers such as Literacy Aotearoa. Study group facilitators are often selected for their backgrounds in ESOL and learning disabilities, enabling them to identify and support learners who need extra help. Support is delivered through multiple channels, including face-to-face, online, and phone, so learners can choose what works best for them.

However, best practice also includes raising awareness of diverse communication preferences, embedding collaboration skills in learning and development, and training managers to lead diverse teams. These strategies help ESOL and migrant workers feel more included and able to contribute. Pastoral care must also address safety, wellbeing, and cultural disconnect. Language barriers in high-risk environments can increase vulnerabilities, creating both safety hazards and stress. Ensuring multilingual signage, bilingual support, and culturally sensitive safety communication helps mitigate risk and build trust (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

Furthermore, many migrant workers face emotional strain resulting from isolation, family separation, and visa uncertainties. Providing mentoring, flexible leave, community connections, and culturally attuned care can address these pressures. This kind of support not only lifts morale but enhances retention and wellbeing across the sector (Berl, 2021).

Increasing the cultural capability of organisations

Effective pastoral care requires organisations to develop their cultural capability to recognise and respond to diverse worker backgrounds, rather than expecting individuals to simply fit into existing workplace norms. Interventions that focus solely on “fixing” learners often perpetuate deficit thinking, such as lowered expectations and blaming the individual, which undermines achievement and inclusion. Instead, organisations must actively cultivate environments that respect and integrate diverse cultural perspectives. The focus should be on lifting the cultural capability of the employer to help overcome the dissonance between them and their diverse workforce (Savage, 2016).

Lessons from the Ako Whakaruruhau project demonstrate that supporting organisational culture change, rather than trying to change the worker, can lead to meaningful outcomes. The project developed resources to foster a positive learning environment for Māori apprentices by integrating mentoring practices and raising awareness of the importance of cultural knowledge on-site, especially place-based or situated learning. Supported by Ngāi Tahu, the ongoing partnership between the employer (Hawkins) and iwi enabled culturally authentic events and strengthened relationships. Over time, this approach contributed to a significant positive shift in the organisation’s culture (Savage, 2016).

Building community and leaning into local support networks

Building community in the workplace

Alongside formal and external support, we heard about the importance of building a sense of community within the workplace. Regular, low-pressure opportunities for connection, such as shared meals, monthly toolbox meetings, or informal check-ins, can strengthen relationships and improve team culture. Simple practices, like starting a group chat or running a shared BBQ, help foster a sense of belonging and keep communication open. While these social structures may seem minor, they can help to reduce isolation and support mental wellbeing.

Peer-to-peer support is another valuable tool. We heard of some organisations supporting or encouraging participation in specific peer networks, such as women's groups, Pacific staff collectives, or online communities for apprentices. In addition to creating belonging, peer networks can also help workers learn how to recognise signs of struggle in themselves and others. As we heard from one stakeholder "If we can teach them what to look out for, where to go, how to deal with it, how to find help, and how to identify a mate that might be struggling and help them, then you're actually creating a process of change through help-seeking and help-offering."

Working with whānau and community networks

In some cases, employers rely on relationship-based approaches to support their workers. For Māori-owned businesses in particular, pastoral care often operates as a whānau-to-whānau model, where responsibilities for support is shared across the organisation and extended family to create effective systems of care, where issues can be addressed early and compassionately (Te Awhi Jones, Fieten, Te Kuini Jones, & Takuira, 2024). As one provider explained, "we are able to get in their homes and get the support ... from their grandparents, their parents, their siblings". Another employer shared an example of simply calling an apprentice's mother to check in on them during a period of grief – a small act that made a meaningful difference.

Leveraging referral pathways for specialist support

While local networks and internal support can address many day-to-day challenges, more complex issues, such as mental health, housing insecurity, substance use, or legal concerns, often require external intervention. In these cases, strong referral pathways become critical. Employers and training providers who build relationships with local service providers are better equipped to connect workers with the right help, at the right time.

In practice, this can look like partnering with health providers, social service agencies, or iwi organisations to deliver targeted support (MartinJenkins, 2025). Group Training Schemes and training providers also often have dedicated pastoral care staff and support systems in place, which can be a valuable resource for employers, especially small businesses who may not have these capabilities internally.

Some programmes have found success by co-locating services directly within training or work environments. For example, Workforce Central Dunedin offers on-site access to medical checks, haircuts, and counselling for workers on the Dunedin Hospital construction site, helping remove logistical and financial barriers to care. Others bring in external agencies to provide support on-site. As one training provider explained, "We do not have counsellors in house. We refer external, and then those agencies bring the support into our campuses... so the students are in their safe place, in their safe environment, and in their comfort zone."

Challenges to implementing best practice on the ground

The construction and infrastructure sector faces persistent challenges that hinder the effective implementation of best practices around pastoral care and needs-based support. Deeply embedded cultural norms, capability gaps among employers and workers, and systemic barriers combine to create a complex environment where meaningful change is difficult to achieve without further intervention.

Limited understanding of the importance of pastoral care and needs-based support

A key mindset shift required in the sector is reframing pastoral care and needs-based support as a strategic investment, not an added cost, time burden, or compliance obligation. Many employers, especially small businesses, carry concerns about the immediate impacts on productivity or profitability. Questions like “how much time and money is this going to cost?” reflect a common tension between short-term pressures and long-term workforce development.

“The concern about putting food on the table and keeping your workers in work next year limits their incentive or interest in paying for or letting workers take time away from work to continue to develop their skills... which probably leads to higher attrition rates.”

To enable this shift, a clear value proposition is essential. It must explicitly link pastoral care and needs-based support to tangible business outcomes such as improved productivity, enhanced retention, and a stronger workplace culture. As one stakeholder noted, “If you invest in your one or two... people you want to develop, your likelihood that they will stay with you and develop as part of your business is increased.”

We also heard that this requires a degree of long-term thinking about the future of the business and its people. Employers need to move past the fear that investing in their workforce is wasted if they leave and instead focus on the long-term value of developing and supporting them.

Disconnect on what it means to be an employer in a training context

The research has highlighted a common disconnect: many employers view apprentices as “employees first, apprentices second” with immediate labour needs taking precedence over structured training and support. Others noted that some employers are unaware of their full responsibilities in the training

process, believing that off-site courses will cover all learning requirements, when in fact, much of the training and pastoral support should occur on the job (Allen + Clarke, 2024).

We also heard that too often, support is seen as something that happens “elsewhere”, either outsourced to training providers or specialist providers, rather than embedded in the day-to-day workplace experience. While the evidence is clear that one of the key characteristics to programme success is the provision of individualised mentoring, many programmes lack individualised navigation support and mentoring (Smyth & Mischewski, 2025).

Cultural norms and resistance to inclusion

Despite gradual progress, the construction and infrastructure sector remains shaped by long-standing cultural norms and behaviours that present significant challenges to inclusion, equity, and worker wellbeing. In the literature, the sector is widely described as male-dominated and “macho” with behavioural expectations and workplace norms that can be unwelcoming for people from diverse backgrounds (Merele & Tolooei, 2021).

One challenge at the forefront of this discussion is unconscious bias. For example, there are common perceptions that Māori are primarily suited for practical labour tasks and if individuals aspire to pursue a career in leadership within the industry, they face another set of biases. When this occurs, it risks disengaging potential future leaders in the industry (Te Awhi Jones, Fieten, Te Kuini Jones, & Takuira, 2024). Another stakeholder described persistent attitudes that construction is “not for women”, with some workers and even leaders expressing scepticism or resistance to female participation. “There’s plenty of people on construction sites that don’t think females should be on construction sites and don’t make it easy for them just to do their job like anyone else... I’ve seen it within our own company and had to deal with it” (Dr Angeli-Gordon, 2024).

The construction sector is sometimes described as “hard-nosed” or resistant to new ideas, particularly those related to diversity, inclusion, mental health, and pastoral care. Wellbeing, mental health, and pastoral care can be seen as optional extras rather than a core element of a productive and sustainable workforce. We heard that this mindset can lead to reactive rather than proactive approaches to support, where action is only taken after a crisis has occurred. This resistance is often seen as generational, with a “rite of passage” mentality remaining prevalent, where senior workers expect younger entrants to endure the same hardships they did. As one interviewee noted: “There’s still a traditional old school... group out there that we still sort of do have to deal with and that’s kind of a generational change, and that is getting better I think.”

The undervaluing of transferable skills

Transferrable skills – often referred to as soft, behavioural, or interpersonal skills – are undervalued in the construction and infrastructure sector. These skills include capabilities such as communication, collaboration, conflict resolution, and adaptability, as well as broader competencies like self-management, punctuality, reliability, and workplace problem-solving. The research highlights that these capabilities are not given the same emphasis or recognition as academic or technical skills. In

educational settings, the systemic focus on university-entry subjects often drowns out the development and validation of practical, work-ready skills.

Where they are acquired through life experience, community roles, or on-the-job learning they are rarely acknowledged or formally recognised (ThinkPlace, 2024).

This can be especially problematic for women and minority groups, who may rely more on these skills for navigating workplace dynamics (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021). In Pacific communities, for example, leadership qualities such as empathy, humility, relationship-building, and consensus-based decision-making are highly valued and deeply embedded from a young age. However, these skills are often overlooked or misunderstood in formal workplace settings, partly because they are acquired through family and community roles rather than through formal qualifications (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024).

We also heard that even when done well, the skills required to deliver effective pastoral care, such as empathy, active listening, guidance, and emotional support are similarly undervalued in the sector. Many practitioners go above and beyond to provide holistic support, yet the emotional labour and expertise involved is rarely recognised or rewarded within formal performance or career progression systems. There are growing calls within the industry to formally recognise expertise in pastoral care and transferable skills, with some stakeholders suggesting these could be reflected in qualification pathways and professional development frameworks. As one participant observed: “If you could be an absolute expert in your craft... having that culture of that development... surely there must be something in the qualifications area to recognise that next level.”

Employer capability is a key area for improvement across several critical areas

Low awareness about workforce diversity and what is needed to provide effective support

A significant barrier to improving pastoral care and worker support in the construction and infrastructure sector is the limited capability and awareness among employers. We heard that employers and industry leaders lack understanding of their future workforce and the skills and resources required to support them effectively. “It’s clear to me that employers aren’t, by and large, understanding their future workforce. They’re not necessarily organising themselves around, you know, the needs of that workforce.”

The sector’s diversity efforts tend to focus narrowly on gender and cultural awareness, often overlooking other critical dimensions such as neurodiversity, disability, and sexual orientation. For example, while conditions like dyslexia are relatively well-understood, broader neurodiversity remains poorly recognized and supported across many workplaces (Martin, 2024). One study found that 59% of businesses had no initiatives to support employees from diverse backgrounds, and even those with some initiatives, they tended to be informal or ad hoc. Small businesses (less than 20 employees) and specialist trades tended to score lower in terms of diversity maturity, largely due to resource constraints and entrenched cultural norms (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

Biculturalism and engagement with Māori culture is a particular weakness across the sector. Many organisations see Māori as “not a separate group” and believe everyone should be treated the same, which leads to resistance or inaction. The lack of understanding can lead to a strong expectation for new hires to assimilate into existing workplace cultures, and there is a widespread lack of clarity and confidence about how to engage with Māori culture and Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

A focus on technical competencies over transferrable skills has in part contributed to capability gaps within leaders and managers, who can be ill equipped to support and manage people from different backgrounds (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021). We heard that this creates a fear or reluctance to having difficult conversations and encouraging workers to address issues directly, rather than avoiding them. This lack of confidence can lead to avoidance and unresolved issues, rather than leaning into pastoral care and effective worker support.

Difficulties finding and navigating pastoral care services and support for employers

We heard that it can be difficult to navigate what educational materials, guidance, and resources are already available. Many employers are overwhelmed by the sheer number of resources available and often do not know where to start or how to access them. Toolkits, online platforms, and printed materials may “sit in a drawer” unused unless there is active guidance and engagement. We also heard that when these resources come from recognised and credible industry bodies, there is a greater chance that employers will engage.

Employers, particularly SMEs, often lack visibility of, and access to, the support services available to them and their workforce. Without clear referral pathways or on-site navigational support, many are unaware of the mental health, counselling, and financial assistance options that exist. While external agencies may offer specialist services, employers frequently do not know where to look or how to connect their workers to the right help. As one participant noted, “There definitely needs to be some more information and more readily available resources out there for all industry.” Another reflected, “We had no idea that [industry representative group] offered counselling services or a way into counselling services. So that was brilliant.”

The interviews also highlighted that getting timely access to mental health professionals is difficult and expensive, and that talking therapy or counselling does not work for everyone. In these cases, more advanced psychiatric support may be required, further complicating navigation of support systems.

Formalising and codifying best practices

While many employers express support for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, a significant challenge lies in translating this informal endorsement into formalised and actionable frameworks. Research shows that although approximately 80% of surveyed industry leaders acknowledge the importance of DEI, only a small fraction have established formal business cases, measurable objectives, or reporting mechanisms to drive progress (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

Similarly, within training organisations, there are a range of highly effective practices carried out by some training advisors, but these practices are not always implemented (Allen + Clarke, 2024).

The absence of clear strategies, policies, and procedures hinders the ability of organisations to secure sustained commitment, allocate resources toward achieving diversity and inclusion goals, and systematically reflect on practice to identify areas for improvement. There is an opportunity for industry and government to set stronger expectations, provide guidance, and enable knowledge-sharing across the sector. Identifying and codifying highly effective practices into formal policy is likely to be an efficient and practical approach for employers to improve the overall experience of workers (Allen + Clarke, 2024).

Worker capacity for self-advocacy and building resilience

While much of the focus on pastoral care capability has centred on employer responsibility, it is equally critical to consider the capability of workers themselves – particularly their ability to identify their needs, understand their rights, and advocate for appropriate support. Central to this is the concept of worker agency and the capacity for individuals to act independently, make choices, and advocate for their own wellbeing. However, in practice, workers may lack the tools, knowledge, or confidence to exercise this agency effectively. They may not be fully aware of the extent of their rights or how to access support to meet their goals (Allen + Clarke, 2024).

The research highlights the power imbalance between workers and employers, especially when attempting to voice personal or sensitive needs. One report referenced the experience of a woman with a dynamic health condition who shared that while her employer encouraged open dialogue, seeking help still required disclosing personal information, which demanded significant courage. She observed widespread apprehension among her peers about speaking up, despite the openness of the workplace (All is for All, 2024).

Worker voice can be especially limited among groups who are underrepresented in the industry, such as Māori. While Māori workers often enter the workforce, limited access to mentorship, the lack of culturally responsive support, and systemic bias within employment and training systems can limit potential for self-advocacy (Te Awhi Jones, Fieten, Te Kuini Jones, & Takuira, 2024).

Stakeholders consistently identified resilience as a critical capability for workers but stressed that it must be understood as more than an individual trait. Rather, resilience is a collective and teachable quality that can be nurtured across systems, workplaces, and generations. As one stakeholder explained, if workers are taught what to look out for, where to go for help, how to support others, and how to both seek and offer assistance, this creates a process of change that empowers not only individuals but entire communities. This approach fosters a ripple effect: one that strengthens worker capability today, while building the conditions for a resilient workforce in the future.

The same stakeholder connected resilience to broader concepts of autonomy and agency. They noted that true resilience involves creating space for individuals to explore and develop their own sense of self-direction. In this way, supporting worker resilience is inseparable from building environments across the workplace, sector, and system that promote voice, agency, and empowerment.

Limited capacity within the sector

Providing individualised, wraparound support for every learner (“cohorts of one”) is resource-intensive. Employers, especially small and medium-sized businesses, often face challenges balancing operational demands with the time and cost of supporting worker needs (MartinJenkins, 2025). We heard that concerns about lost productivity, the financial burden of training, and competing priorities can make it hard to justify the investment. There is also a perception that employers have to do everything themselves and that there is a lack of support for them to do pastoral care well (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Training providers face similar pressures. Training advisors themselves report difficulties offering adequate support due to high caseloads and limited time. Increased responsibilities, such as conducting multiple site visits, delivering assessments when needed, and maintaining strong relationships with both apprentices and workplace trainers, can quickly overwhelm capacity (Allen + Clarke, 2024). As one stakeholder observed, “[Our organisation] has a sophisticated understanding of learner support but struggles with resource constraints and the volume of demand, indicating the need for separate organisations to provide support services.”

Reluctance to invest in worker support, particularly if the risk of attrition is high

This can lead to a risk-averse culture, where some employers avoid taking on apprentices or trainees altogether, especially if there is concern that the trainee may leave before delivering a return on investment. An entrenched belief that “training someone who leaves is a wasted investment” discourages support for learner mobility, even when such mobility benefits the wider sector.

The research argues that the mental models of employers (and training providers) must recognise the potential to facilitate system-wide workforce, as opposed to the development of trades or company-specific workforce. This can be mutually reinforcing, as it is likely that employers will “gain” workers referred to them at the same rate that they “lose” those who are referred away (Allen + Clarke, 2024). In effect this has the potential to de-risk investment in supporting workers and enabling their professional and personal growth, as it will have wider benefits for the system. This change over time, researchers argue, can help all businesses gain access to an increasingly large, competent, motivated, and passionate workforce (Allen + Clarke, 2024).

System gaps to embedding best practices across the sector

While there are examples of organisations focusing primarily on training initiatives aimed at shifting individual attitudes, evidence suggests that capability-building alone is insufficient; lasting progress also requires systemic changes to address policy, structural, and funding barriers across the sector (WEF, 2025).

Pastoral care is not well defined in workplace contexts

Existing definitions are grounded in an educational context

While pastoral care is a well-recognised concept in education settings, its definition and delivery in the work-based learning settings or to employees outside of the tertiary education context remains unclear and inconsistent.

The Code places the responsibility for wellbeing on tertiary education providers. However, this model was designed for institutional learning environments and does not translate easily into the realities of workplace-based learning. As one stakeholder noted, “the pastoral care code... was written for Polytechs that have classrooms and maybe some accommodations on site... we sort of have to bend a little bit just to make [it] work for work-based learning”. It feels like trying to fit “a round peg into a square hole”.

While the Code applies to tertiary learners, many workers in the construction and infrastructure sector do not fall within this definition. This includes workers who are in non-apprentice roles, those upskilling on the job, or those from migrant, casual, or subcontracted backgrounds. These individuals may face equal or greater risks to wellbeing but are not covered by the regulatory or institutional mechanisms designed for learners. This creates a significant policy and practice gap.

Ambiguous, unclear roles and responsibilities risk leaving workers unsupported

Formally, the training provider's advisor is seen as the primary pastoral caregiver in apprenticeship settings. However, in practice, their effectiveness can be limited by work-based learning providers not always enabling training advisors to adequately support their apprentices; training advisors not always

having the capacity to adequately support their apprentices and employers; the frequency of visits; and the scope of their responsibilities (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Meanwhile, apprentices spend most of their time with their employers, who are often best placed to notice wellbeing challenges, but are not explicitly assigned pastoral responsibilities under the Code. The Code of Good Practice for New Zealand Apprenticeships outlines expectations around mentoring, training, and communication but stops short of defining the employer's role in learner wellbeing and support (MartinJenkins, 2025).

This lack of clarity across the tripartite relationship – learner, employer, training provider – creates confusion and fragmentation in how pastoral care is delivered. It can be unclear whether the responsibility for an apprentice's wellbeing sits primarily with the training provider or the employer. As a result, support systems tend to rely heavily on individual initiative and informal relationships, rather than structured or shared accountability. This misalignment increases the risk that learners, particularly those with greater or more complex needs, may fall through the cracks (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Limited system coordination at multiple levels

Sector fragmentation and the challenge of engaging small firms

The construction and infrastructure sector is characterised by a high degree of decentralisation, with a predominance of small firms. 72% of construction firms are sole traders and 84% have fewer than four employees (MBIE, 2024).

Stakeholders described a sector where firms operate independently, often competing for contracts and talent rather than working together to address systemic challenges such as retention, wellbeing, and workforce diversity. The prevalence of subcontracting further disperses responsibility and risk, making it harder to implement coordinated solutions or share best practice. As a result, initiatives that could benefit the sector as a whole struggle to gain traction beyond individual firms or projects.

We also heard of the particular difficulties engaging with SMEs, who often lack the time, resources, or incentives to participate in sector-wide initiatives. This is compounded by the fact that many SMEs are focused on immediate business survival and delivery, leaving little capacity for longer-term workforce planning or collaboration. As a result, even well-intentioned sector initiatives can struggle to reach or influence many firms.

Disconnect between industry and the education sector, secondary education in particular

The research highlights a persistent lack of coordination between the secondary education (and often classroom based tertiary educators) and industry sectors, which undermines the ability of vocational pathways to effectively support young people's transitions into work. Stakeholders described a mismatch in expectations, language, and priorities, with schools and teachers often lacking current, relatable industry experience, and employers holding limited understanding of how education systems

operate. This disconnect contributes to fragmented programme design, misaligned pathways, and variable quality in vocational education and training (Allen + Clarke, 2024).

Employers reported that young people are not adequately prepared for workplace expectations, while educators noted the difficulty of keeping pace with rapid industry change or integrating relevant workplace skills into curriculum given constraints. These structural barriers are compounded by weak information flows between training providers and employers, as well as variability in the capacity of training advisors to build the strong relationships needed to identify and respond to learner support needs (Allen + Clarke, 2024).

Need for greater strategic coordination at the policy level

A lack of strategic coordination across government agencies is limiting the system's ability to embed and sustain pastoral care at scale and ensure cohesion in development and delivery (Martin, 2025). In our interviews, stakeholders pointed to siloed responsibilities and fragmented investment in workforce initiatives, which result in disjointed support for both employers and workers. These gaps in coordination make it difficult to deliver consistent, needs-based pastoral care across the lifecycle of a learner or worker.

The absence of a unified national strategy has created ambiguity around which agency or entity is responsible for ensuring that pastoral care is integrated into workforce development. We heard that support mechanisms are often constrained by departmental mandates or tied to specific outcomes (such as six months in employment), rather than being designed to provide continuity of care through transition points. This can lead to people falling through the cracks just as they are beginning to stabilise in work. The discontinuation of sector-wide strategic entities, such as the Construction Sector Accord (and ConCOVE Tūhura), further exacerbates these issues, leaving the sector without a clear mechanism for addressing cross-cutting problems like low retention, leadership capability, and the development of smaller firms (MBIE, 2024).

Funding gaps and inconsistencies

Lack of stable, long-term investment in pastoral care for key parts of the system

We heard that successful pastoral care models and wraparound support services often remain dependent on time-limited or project funding. Despite positive outcomes from many locally led or community-based initiatives, maintaining these efforts remains a challenge. The recent closure of the Māori Trades and Training Fund in June 2025 is one such example. Although the programme enabled providers to deliver valuable wraparound support and apprenticeship opportunities, its discontinuation has left delivery partners without resourcing and has introduced uncertainty about the sustainability of similar initiatives. Some organisations have continued to support apprentices despite the funding cut, but they noted this is not viable in the long term.

The evidence raises concerns about the possibility that reduced funding for apprenticeships more generally would lead to increased costs to employers, risks that training for industries with smaller volumes of apprentices would reduce or end, and the need for certainty around funding levels and

models. Employers invest significant time and resources into apprenticeship training, with one estimate valuing the cost of their commitment at \$10,000–\$50,000 per apprentice. Opportunity costs are the largest component (88%) associated with time spent on pastoral care (17 hours per month on average) and engagement with training activities (4.8 hours per month for supervisors on average) (Smyth & Mischewski, 2025).

Funding for apprenticeships remains fragmented across a range of programmes and agencies, resulting in duplication and a lack of strategic alignment. Over time, multiple initiatives have been “bolted on” to address specific problems in the system, rather than coordinated as part of a cohesive funding strategy. Currently, only two core programmes provide dedicated apprenticeship support, alongside nine others that offer broader employment and skills development incentives, although many are either scheduled to end or have already ceased (MartinJenkins, 2025).

While some funding is targeted, such as through MSD’s employment support for unemployed individuals, there is a broader lack of sustained, strategic investment in targeted workforce development initiatives. This includes support for career changers, wellbeing initiatives, and training initiatives for underrepresented groups. For example, outside of programmes for jobseekers, there is limited support to help women, disabled people, or Māori and Pacific peoples enter and thrive in construction and infrastructure roles (Jones, 2023). Recent research argues that current funding and delivery models often perpetuate inequity by failing to adequately support underserved learners (Smyth & Mischewski, 2025).

There is acknowledgement that while the private returns of training are substantial, without government intervention in the market through funding, regulation of qualifications, and public institutions to provide training, the external benefits of transferrable skill acquisition are less likely to be produced (Smyth & Mischewski, 2025). International examples point to more targeted approaches. In Victoria and Tasmania, governments have introduced fully subsidised training and tailored entry pathways for women and First Nations people. These initiatives are designed not only to address skill shortages but also to stimulate sector growth through inclusive employment. Such examples demonstrate how targeted, equity-focused funding can help address structural gaps in workforce development, while contributing to broader social outcomes (Jones, 2023).

Difficulties scaling investments beyond the programme level into “process”

Regional and local governments have funded a number of small-scale schemes designed to improve outcomes for construction education in their region, stimulate the local economy, and improve local employment. Such schemes offer the opportunity for innovation and to meet local or regional objectives (Jones, 2023).

However, we also heard about the challenges of scaling local programmes or pilots, which often remain isolated due to their funding dependencies. As one interviewee observed, “programmes are only as successful as the funding that supports them”, and when funding ends, “the programme often cannot continue”. This limits the potential to embed improvements into the everyday operation of the system. Without a shift in focus from programme delivery to sustained process change, innovation risks remaining siloed and temporary.

A coordinated approach is required to incorporate the lessons from successful pilots, disseminate this knowledge to other regions, and scale up the processes to a national level where appropriate (Jones, 2023). Our stakeholders argued that this means shifting from programme-based approaches to process-based, system-level change. Embedding best practices and values at the top would allow benefits to trickle down and support all learners, not just those in targeted groups.

Strategy, outcomes, and evidence gaps

Challenges defining and measuring outcomes

Despite growing recognition of the importance of pastoral care in apprenticeship and vocational education systems, there is currently no overarching strategic approach to its design, funding, delivery, or evaluation. The responsibility for workforce development and, by extension, worker support and aspects of supporting protection of minimum employment rights, is fragmented across multiple government agencies, each with differing mandates, perspectives, and definitions of success. The Ministry of Education prioritises educational achievement; Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment focuses on economic productivity and employment relationships; and the Ministry of Social Development targets benefit reduction and social development. While all these aims are legitimate, their divergence contributes to policy fragmentation and weakens the coherence of pastoral care as part of a system-wide approach to workforce readiness (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Additionally, the metrics currently used to assess programme performance tend to be narrow. For example, completion rates remain a primary performance indicator, yet these tell only part of the story. Outcome measures should also include post-study employment success, job retention, and alignment between training and real-world industry requirements. These more nuanced outcomes are where pastoral care has the greatest potential impact, particularly for workers from equity groups or those facing systemic barriers to sustained employment (Jones, 2023).

We also heard that detailed information on the practices and needs of SMEs is especially limited, making it difficult to design targeted support. Evidence on the impact of funding streams is also insufficient, as many pilots and short-term projects are evaluated against programme goals, not system outcomes, and lessons are often lost when funding ends.

Furthermore, there are gaps in diversity and inclusion data, a lack of longitudinal tracking of individual career progression, and inconsistent measurement of wellbeing and pastoral care outcomes (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021). This fragmentation and lack of coordination in data collection and sharing across the sector hinders the ability to build a comprehensive picture of needs, gaps, and opportunities.

Incentives are poorly aligned to completion and retention outcomes

Current incentive structures within New Zealand's apprenticeship and vocational education systems are not consistently driving the behaviours or outcomes they are intended to promote. Financial incentives, such as fixed payments to employers for taking on apprentices, are widely used to encourage participation and offset perceived training costs. However, their impact on improving the quality of training and support remains limited (MartinJenkins, 2025).

However, international evidence suggests that such incentives typically have only a marginal effect on increasing the overall number of placements and should be carefully designed and evaluated to avoid unintended consequences (MartinJenkins, 2025). In the New Zealand case, there is evidence that financial incentives like the Apprenticeship Boost have been misused by some employers, who have enrolled apprentices without providing them with any meaningful training or support. This highlights the potential for perverse behaviours, particularly given the lack of monitoring and accountability mechanisms associated with this funding (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Several interviewees suggested that incentive schemes like Apprenticeship Boost could be significantly more effective if they were tied to measurable indicators of quality and impact, such as attainment rates, learner satisfaction, or demonstrated infrastructure to support worker wellbeing. As one participant said, “If you want to change employer behaviour, you have to tie the money to something measurable. Right now, there’s no check on whether the support is actually happening.” Stakeholders agreed that there was a missed opportunity to use funding as a lever for better outcomes.

There remains untapped potential to embed pastoral care in the broader design of the system

While vocational education is an important entry point into the workforce, a narrow focus on formal training pathways risks missing the broader systemic shifts needed to embed pastoral care throughout the construction and infrastructure sector. If pastoral care is to be consistently provided across the construction and infrastructure sector, it must be embedded through the institutional levers that shape organisational behaviour, such as training systems, funding mechanisms, and procurement policy.

Removing barriers to industry training and pastoral care provision

The research speaks to the need for incentives to employers in sectors to participate in training that can improve their capability to provide culturally responsive and inclusive pastoral care. For example, funded training sessions for employers on neurodiversity and inclusive hiring practices can foster environments where neurodiverse employees feel supported and understood (Martin, 2024).

The construction and infrastructure sector is characterised by a large number of small firms, many of which do not offer formal training. High levels of workforce mobility and limited internal capacity mean that individual firms may be reluctant to invest in structured support, particularly when benefits such as improved retention or productivity are not immediately realised.

In response, some stakeholders have proposed the introduction of an industry training levy to pool resources for shared workforce development initiatives. Similar mechanisms exist in other sectors and jurisdictions and are designed to overcome coordination failures where individual firms may underinvest in training or pastoral care. For example, Northern European models are more centralised, offering greater investment and employer contributions via levies (Smyth & Mischewski, 2025). In New Zealand, a levy could be used to fund shared or centralised support functions, such as mentoring and induction programmes, regional or roving pastoral care roles, and access to wellbeing services (MBIE, 2024).

In Singapore, they are building a lifelong learning strategy, focused not just on incentivising the individual, but on businesses as well. It is argued that this push for workplace transformation and deepening capabilities in needs-based support would therefore be a useful proposal for other governments to consider (Martin, 2024).

Procuring for social outcomes

Public procurement, particularly in infrastructure, is another area where broader workforce and social outcomes can be influenced. In practice, some contracts include requirements related to the hiring of local workers, provision of training, or employment of jobseekers. However, pastoral care is often not explicitly included or tracked. As a result, expectations around support may be inconsistently applied or deprioritised. As one stakeholder noted, “When pastoral care is not written into the contract, it’s not prioritised on site.”

Initiatives like Ngā Puna Pūkenga and Jobs and Skills Hubs offer promising examples of how procurement requirements can be tied to ongoing support for workers, leading to stronger retention and social impact. For example, 80% of participants in Ngā Puna Pūkenga remained in employment for at least two years, demonstrating the effectiveness of placing pastoral care at the centre of workforce design (MBIE, 2024).

However, to be successful, stakeholders emphasised the need for clear and measurable outcomes frameworks that go beyond traditional project KPIs; explicit requirements for worker wellbeing, mentoring, or support infrastructure; monitoring and reporting mechanisms to track delivery and impact; and support for contractors to build internal systems and capability. Without these, there is a risk that pastoral care becomes a “tick-box” exercise, rather than a genuine commitment.

In 2022, the Australian Apprenticeships Incentive System (AAIS) was introduced to transition away from the short-term COVID-19 response measures and to simplify the incentive structure.

For employers in priority sectors, this includes a hiring incentive per apprentice. The Australian Government also funds non-financial support through seven Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (ASSN) providers.

These providers are responsible for signing-up apprentices, ensuring the apprenticeship arrangement is genuine and appropriate, and both the employer and apprentice understand their roles and responsibilities.

They also provide mentoring, counselling, and pastoral care for both parties, including relationships with specialist providers for referral.

The effectiveness of these changes on the Australian apprenticeship system is yet to be determined, but there may be lessons learned for the New Zealand context in the future (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Clearer accountability mechanisms to support quality

When it comes to public funding, there are limited formal mechanisms in place to incentivise or hold employers accountable for delivering pastoral care or investing in their own capability to deliver (through training for example). Currently, employer responsibilities are often implicit rather than explicitly codified, and there are few levers within the system to consistently reinforce expectations or consequences. General employment standards (such as those related to health and safety) provide a baseline level of compliance, but do not extend to the broader dimensions of pastoral care or needs-based support. As a result, many aspects of apprentice experience remain unregulated, and highly dependent on the individual values or capacities of employers and supervisors.

However, the research highlights some divergent views on where responsibility for worker outcomes should lie. While many agreed that supporting employers to build internal capability is important, others emphasised that employers must also be held accountable for the environment they create. However, there is little support for a highly centralised or compliance-heavy approach, with the research cautioning against introducing formal audit mechanisms, suggesting they may not be proportionate or practical in the New Zealand context (MartinJenkins, 2025).

International examples show a range of approaches to employer oversight. In Ireland, Authorised Officers (AOs) are responsible for assessing employer capability before apprentices can be hosted, and for monitoring on-the-job training quality throughout the placement. In the Netherlands, employer accreditation is required through an independent foundation, with ongoing checks to ensure the training environment meets minimum standards. These approaches integrate both front-end approval and back-end monitoring, offering potential models for more structured accountability (MartinJenkins, 2025).

In the New Zealand context, the challenge is to find an appropriate balance between enabling employer participation in apprenticeship programmes and ensuring that support for learners is not compromised. This may involve clarifying employer expectations, increasing transparency around learner outcomes, and developing proportionate mechanisms to identify and address poor practice when it occurs.

Recommendations: improving industry capability and embedding sector change

To achieve meaningful and lasting improvements in pastoral care and needs-based support, the construction and infrastructure sector should lead with clear commitment and coordinated action. This requires strengthening employer capability, embedding supportive practices into everyday workplace culture, and promoting sector-wide shifts in mindset and behaviour.

The following recommendations focus on empowering employers with the knowledge, skills, and external support when required, to embed pastoral care as a strategic priority. They also highlight the need for leadership and collaboration across the sector to normalise these practices and sustain continuous improvement.

Positioning pastoral care and needs-based support as a strategic investment

This research highlights entrenched mindsets across the construction and infrastructure sector that hinder effective pastoral care and needs-based support. A key shift is reframing these supports as strategic investments rather than costs, time burdens, or compliance tasks. We heard that many employers, especially SMEs, tend to focus on short-term impacts, asking, *“How much time and money will this cost?”* To shift this mindset, it's essential to clearly communicate the link between worker support and improved business outcomes such as retention, productivity, and workplace culture. Effective communication of these benefits can drive behavioural change.

Recommendations to build employer capability

1. Increase employer awareness of the financial and social benefits of effective pastoral care and needs-based support, particularly for SMEs in the construction and infrastructure sector. This could include:
 - a. Sharing practical, real-world examples, such as case studies and success stories to show how other businesses have implemented worker support successfully and the tangible outcomes they have achieved as a result.

- b. Presenting evidence-based data and insights, including research findings and measurable outcomes that demonstrate the long-term return on investment in areas like retention, productivity, and workplace culture.

Recommendations to embed system change

- 2. Identify opportunities to elevate pastoral care and needs-based support as a strategic priority. This might include:
 - a. Embedding these concepts as core pillars in workforce development strategies, sector plans, and industry standards.
 - b. Encouraging industry associations and sector leaders to champion the importance of pastoral care and needs-based support.
- 3. Invest in ongoing research to strengthen the evidence base for effective pastoral care and needs-based support.
 - a. This research should be purposefully aligned with building the business case and demonstrating how these approaches contribute to improved workforce outcomes and long-term organisational performance.

Redefining the workplace as a site of pastoral care

Findings from the research suggest a need to broaden how the workplace is understood, from being seen solely as a site of labour to a place that supports learning, development, and pastoral care. Support for workers, particularly apprentices, is often viewed as the responsibility of external providers rather than something integrated into everyday workplace practices. Complexities in the tripartite relationship contribute to a lack of clarity around who is responsible for pastoral care support. These dynamics are more pronounced in small businesses, where capacity is limited.

Establishing a clearer, shared understanding of what effective pastoral care looks like in workplace settings, along with defined roles and responsibilities, can help strengthen support for both employers and workers in on-the-job learning environments.

Recommendations to build employer capability

- 4. Promote practical examples of effective practice, using real-world case studies and leadership modelling to demonstrate what good looks like in workplace-based pastoral care.
- 5. Leverage credible sector voices, including respected employers, industry leaders, representative organisations, and training providers, to promote key messages and encourage wider buy-in and sector reach.

Recommendations to embed system change

- 6. Work with employers and training providers to develop a flexible, worker-centric framework for pastoral care tailored to workplace-based settings, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities across employers, workers, and training advisors.
- 7. Work with employers and training providers to develop a responsive operating model that:
 - a. Formalises protocols with employers that outline expectations around coordination, engagement touchpoints, and shared responsibilities.

- b. Allows training advisors to flex caseloads based on learner needs.
- 8. Model and normalise contracting practices that reflect the needs of a diverse workforce. This could include developing guidance around requirements for site amenities, wellbeing services, and the inclusion of social outcomes in reporting mechanisms.

Valuing people beyond the job they do

The research highlights that many employers in the construction and infrastructure sector face challenges in cultural capability, particularly in relation to New Zealand's bicultural context. Many employers have limited understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles and the specific needs and aspirations of Māori workers. This extends to a broader need for greater awareness of the experiences of migrant workers, neurodiverse individuals, and other underrepresented groups. Ingrained biases and hesitation to fully acknowledge structural inequities can also limit inclusion and equitable participation.

These challenges create barriers that may prevent the sector from fully embracing biculturalism and diversity, which can affect workforce wellbeing, engagement, and sector innovation. Building cultural capability remains essential. Addressing these areas will help foster a more equitable, supportive, and productive sector that values people beyond the roles they perform.

Recommendations to build employer capability

- 9. Develop "short burst" cultural competency, diversity, and inclusion learning modules to be integrated into existing training programmes and site inductions.
- 10. Develop training or initiatives to support employers to develop equitable, growth-oriented performance practices, including goal setting, feedback, and progression pathways that respond to diverse worker needs.
- 11. Partner with iwi, Pacific and migrant communities, and neurodiversity advocates to develop culturally responsive, needs-based awareness and training initiatives where they do not already exist.
- 12. Showcase leadership and success stories from people of diverse cultural, gender, neurodiverse, and social backgrounds, with a view to:
 - a. Broaden perceptions of who belongs, who leads, and what success looks like in the sector, to help workers see new possibilities for themselves and encourage employers to recognise talent from all backgrounds.
 - b. Demonstrate the business value of increased diversity, by highlighting examples where diverse teams have driven innovation, improved performance, or delivered measurable benefits to organisations.

Recommendations to embed system change

- 13. Support, strengthen, and grow affinity groups within large firms and across SMEs via industry forums. This could include:
 - a. Encouraging the formation and sustainability of networks for Māori, Pacific peoples, women, neurodiverse workers, and other communities where they do not already exist.

- b. Use industry forums to connect workers to these groups, increase participation, share best practices, and amplify their impact across businesses of all sizes.
- 14. Establish industry initiatives to understand and monitor emerging workforce shifts to inform capability plans and strategies. This could include:
 - a. Establishing mechanisms to regularly track and analyse changes in workforce demographics, including age, cultural diversity, neurodiversity, and migration patterns.
 - b. Using these insights to anticipate future needs and inform employer capability-building and support strategies.

Normalising open conversations

The research highlights employer capability as a key area for improvement in advancing effective pastoral care and worker support across the construction and infrastructure sector. Many employers face gaps in areas such as mental health and wellbeing literacy and inclusive leadership. They also often struggle to navigate available support systems, both in developing their own capability and knowing where to refer workers when additional help is needed. This underscores the need to strengthen capability across the sector, equipping employers with the knowledge, tools, and support systems to better recognise and respond to the pastoral care needs and challenges faced by their workforce.

Recommendations to build employer capability

- 15. Promote existing leadership and train-the-trainer programmes and resources, with a focus on tailoring content to the construction and infrastructure context and improving visibility and uptake among employers, particularly SMEs.
- 16. Develop or strengthen existing training programmes and micro-credentials in mental health and wellbeing literacy. This might include positioning them as both professional development opportunities and components of formal qualifications. For instance:
 - a. Explore ways to embed foundational mental health and wellbeing literacy into early training and induction processes to build awareness, normalise help-seeking, and support peer-to-peer care from the outset of their careers.
 - b. Provide targeted upskilling for employers and supervisors to build confidence in recognising wellbeing challenges, having supportive conversations, and connecting workers to appropriate support.
- 17. Create and promote a dynamic, region-specific directory of local health, wellbeing, and community support services, tailored for use by employers and workers.
- 18. Explore initiatives to support workers in understanding their rights, the supports available to them, and how to advocate for themselves in the workplace.

Recommendations to embed system change

- 19. Engage regularly with SMEs to identify evolving barriers to investing and participating in professional development initiatives and develop flexible delivery models to ensure initiatives are accessible and practical for businesses of all sizes.

20. Explore opportunities to create, strengthen, or scale infrastructure that enables employers to access wraparound support services through a single, navigator-type contact, either based on job sites or within local communities.
21. Identify unmet specialist support needs at the regional or community level, particularly in areas with high construction activity or known workforce vulnerabilities and establish connections with relevant providers or agencies best placed to respond.
 - a. This could include mental health services, addiction support, housing and financial services, and cultural or community-based organisations.
 - b. Regional networks should be maintained in partnership with local stakeholders to ensure support is responsive to changing needs, and accessible to both employers and workers on the ground.

Elevating transferable skills as core to industry success

The research highlights that transferable skills, such as communication, empathy, and problem-solving, are undervalued in the sector, often overshadowed by technical qualifications. This gap not only affects the resilience and success of workers, particularly women and minority groups whose culturally embedded skills are often overlooked, but also limits recognition for employers and supervisors who provide essential pastoral care and emotional support.

These perspectives point to a broader opportunity to not only support industry to build capability, but also to embed pastoral care into professional development and recognition structures. This could include the use of micro-credentials, tailored leadership development frameworks, and organisational quality assurance models that formally recognise the importance of pastoral care and the expertise required to do it well.

Recommendations to build employer capability

22. Develop and promote initiatives that elevate the importance of transferable skills in workplaces by showcasing leaders who exemplify these capabilities, with a focus on:
 - a. Demonstrating how communication, empathy, problem-solving, and relational leadership contribute to effective team performance, worker wellbeing, and business outcomes.
 - b. Using real-world success stories to illustrate the link between strong pastoral care, transferable skills, and sustainable organisational success, encouraging employers to prioritise and value these skills in their leadership and workforce development.
23. Explore screening tools and industry-wide guidance for the recruitment of site supervisors, mentors, and team leaders with responsibilities for worker wellbeing.

Recommendations to embed system change

24. Ensure industry workforce strategies and career frameworks reflect the importance of transferable skills.
25. Explore and implement ways to publicly elevate and recognise transferable skills as essential industry capabilities that contribute to overall success and wellbeing. This could include:

- a. Relabelling the role of training advisors as “learning navigators”, affirming the mana, influence, and relational leadership these roles hold in supporting learner success.
- b. Introducing recognition mechanisms, such as quality marks or badges, that formally acknowledge leaders who demonstrate excellence in the transferable skills that support effective pastoral care.
- c. Promoting formal awards and peer-nominated recognition programmes to celebrate leaders who exemplify outstanding pastoral care and transferable skills, inspiring wider cultural change.

Building a culture of growth and learning

The research suggests that many organisations lack consistent systems for reviewing, documenting, and improving pastoral care and worker support practices. Where policies and expectations do exist, they are often informal or outdated. This makes it difficult to replicate good practice within businesses and across the wider sector and can lead to uneven experiences for workers.

Embedding a culture of continuous learning, rather than relying on one-off initiatives, can help shift pastoral care from a reactive obligation to a proactive, strategic practice. This includes recognising that investment in the systems and infrastructure needed to support workers benefits the sector as a whole, even if individual businesses do not retain those workers long term. Achieving this shift requires a stronger focus on self-review and reflection, clearer outcome measures, and more coordinated infrastructure to drive ongoing improvement at both organisational and system levels.

Recommendations to build employer capability

- 26. Develop and promote guidance on the core policies, self-review processes, and formal documents employers should have in place to support workers.
- 27. Work with employers to develop a comprehensive self-assessment tool that enables employers to review their own pastoral care practices, identify areas for improvement, and track progress over time.
- 28. Promote a sector-wide narrative that positions investment in people as a long-term gain for the industry, emphasising that supporting growth, even when it results in worker movement, contributes to a more resilient, capable workforce.

Recommendations to embed system change

- 29. Establish minimum industry expectations or templates for pastoral care and inclusive workforce practices and documentation, particularly for smaller employers without HR infrastructure.
- 30. Evaluate and share the impact of new initiatives to support sector-wide learning, enable scaling of effective models, and reinforce the narrative that worker support is a strategic investment, not a cost.
- 31. Develop and implement a consistent outcomes framework that defines what industry-wide success looks like for pastoral care and needs-based support (beyond apprenticeship completion), worker wellbeing, workforce stability, and productivity.
 - a. Use this framework to monitor progress and drive continuous improvement across the sector.

Recommendations: strengthening system enablers

While responsibility for pastoral care and workforce wellbeing primarily rests with industry, the research has also highlighted areas where increased government intervention could play an enabling role. In cases where there is strong evidence of market failure or an overwhelming social and economic return on investment, targeted public intervention can stimulate sector change, reduce long-term costs, and enhance productivity.

Government's unique position allows it to align incentives, set strategic direction, and invest in shared infrastructure that would be difficult for individual businesses or training providers to establish alone. The following opportunities are presented not as directives, but as potential areas for deeper partnership and coordinated action between government, industry, and training providers.

Supporting clearer frameworks and accountability mechanisms

A lack of clarity around what constitutes good workplace-based pastoral care and who is responsible for delivering it remains a barrier to consistency and quality across the sector. While employers are central to delivering support, a shared framework of expectations would help clarify responsibilities, lift standards, and ensure consistency across diverse training and employment settings.

There is an opportunity for government to support industry to develop a flexible, workplace-specific pastoral care framework that is owned by industry but aligned with public systems and infrastructure.

Government can play a critical enabling role by:

- Formally recognising and supporting the workplace-specific pastoral care framework in terms of its legal status and accountability mechanisms.
- Embedding these expectations into existing public funding systems, such as apprenticeship support, workforce development funding, and regional skills programmes. For example:
 - A portion of the Apprenticeship Boost Initiative could be tied to specific conditions or expectations regarding pastoral care and needs-based support.

Strategically aligning incentives to workforce outcomes

Despite growing recognition of the importance of pastoral care, the research highlights a lack of alignment between government's workforce objectives and the mechanisms used to drive outcomes. There is untapped potential to better use key system levers, such as procurement, policy and regulation, and funding to reinforce expectations around worker support and wellbeing.

Government can take a more strategic role by:

- Working with industry to elevate pastoral care and needs-based support within workforce development strategies and develop measurable outcomes to track the impact of public and private interventions.
- Exploring how procurement levers can be used to incentivise improved access to pastoral care, particularly on publicly funded projects.
- Identifying where targeted incentives, such as training levies or co-investment models, could maximise employer participation in workforce development initiatives that embed pastoral care.

Scaling infrastructure and capacity where needs are clear but unmet

While some employers and regions have developed effective pastoral care models, many lack the resources to do so. We heard that capability among employers remains low in several key areas. Stakeholders also noted that funding for wraparound support services is often fragmented and short-term, making it difficult to provide sustainable support or scale successful models across the sector.

Government can support scale and sustainability by:

- Investing in the expansion of effective, place-based support models, such as Jobs and Skills Hubs or on-site navigators, particularly in regions with persistent workforce challenges.
- Supporting industry-led initiatives to develop micro-credentials and training in wellbeing literacy, mental health, and relational leadership.
- Supporting industry-led peer support networks and affinity groups.
- Partnering with local stakeholders to identify and fill service gaps, particularly for mental health and culturally specific needs.

Investing in the evidence base

Ongoing research and evaluation are essential to identifying what works, where investment delivers the strongest returns, and how public money can be spent most effectively.

Government can support this by:

- Commissioning or supporting longitudinal research on the impact of workplace-based pastoral care on retention, productivity, and sector stability.
- Sharing insights across agencies and with industry to inform policy and practice.
- Co-investing with industry in pilot initiatives, with clear evaluation criteria and pathways to scale.

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Appendix 1: Summary of recommendations

The table below presents the recommendations that have been identified through our research and further developed as part of the gap analysis process. Each recommendation links explicitly to pastoral care and needs-based support in the construction and infrastructure sector. These have also informed the development of the accompanying industry capability roadmap that sits alongside this insights report.

Table 1: Summary of recommendations

Strategic priority	Focus	Recommendation
Positioning pastoral care as strategic	Employer Capability	1 Increase employer awareness of benefits via case studies and evidence-based data. ³
	System Change	2 Embed pastoral care as a core pillar in workforce development strategies, sector plans, and industry standards.
		3 Encourage industry leaders and associations to champion pastoral care.
		4 Invest in ongoing research aligned to building a strong business case for pastoral care.
Redefining workplace as site of care	Employer Capability	5 Promote practical examples and leadership modelling of good workplace pastoral care including the particular care of those on vocational learning pathways.
		6 Use sector voices to champion pastoral care and increase buy-in.
	System Change	7 Develop a flexible, worker-centric pastoral care framework with clear roles and responsibilities including for those between providers, learners, and employers.
		8 Formalise coordination protocols between employers and training providers; enable flexible training advisor roles. ⁴
		9 Model contracting and site practices that support diverse workforce needs.

³ This recommendation is also referenced in the Cook Brothers Academy case study (ConCOVE Tūhura, 2024).

⁴ This recommendation is also referenced in other ConCOVE resources, including Tui Tuia, which explores interventions into the VET Kaiako and training advisor system (Grant, 2024).

Strategic priority	Focus	Recommendation
Valuing people beyond their job	Employer Capability	10 Develop short cultural competency and inclusion learning modules integrated into training and inductions.
		11 Support employers in equitable performance management, goal setting, feedback, and progression pathways that respond to diverse needs
		12 Partner with iwi, Pacific and migrant communities, and neurodiversity advocates to develop culturally responsive awareness and training initiatives.
		13 Showcase leadership and success stories to broaden inclusion and highlight business benefits of diversity.
	System Change	14 Support and grow peer support groups and networks via industry forums.
		15 Establish initiatives to monitor workforce demographic shifts to inform capability strategies. ⁵
Normalising open conversations	Employer Capability	16 Promote leadership and train-the-trainer programmes tailored to sector needs. ⁶
		17 Strengthen mental health literacy training; embed in early career development.
		18 Develop region-specific support service directories for employers and workers.
		19 Explore initiatives to support worker agency, including in understanding their rights, available supports, and self-advocacy in workplaces. ⁷
	System change	20 Engage SMEs to identify barriers and design flexible training models.
		21 Explore navigator-type infrastructure for employers to access wraparound support services on-site or locally. ⁸
		22 Identify and fill regional specialist support gaps (mental health, addiction, housing, cultural).

⁵ ConCOVE is currently undertaking work (as part of their ConstructTrend: Vocational Workforce Survey project) to provide WDCs and education providers with better workforce insights, including enhanced inclusion of Māori, Pacific people, and women in data.

⁶ Also referenced in ConCOVE's Tui Tuia report (Grant, 2024).

⁷ Also referenced in A Theory of Change for a Bystander culture in the New Zealand construction and infrastructure sector.

⁸ The recommendation to establish a national network of navigators is also referenced in (Smyth & Mischewski, 2025).

Strategic priority	Focus	Recommendation
Elevating transferable skills	Employer Capability	23 Promote the importance of transferable skills with leadership examples and success stories.
		24 Develop recruitment screening for employers and guidance for supervisors and mentors.
	System Change	25 Reflect transferable skills in workforce strategies and career frameworks.
		26 Publicly recognise pastoral care skills through role rebranding, quality marks, and awards.
Building culture of growth and learning	Employer Capability	27 Provide guidance and tools for self-review and pastoral care policy development.
		28 Develop self-assessment tools to track pastoral care practices and improvements.
		29 Promote the narrative of investment in people as a long-term industry gain.
	System Change	30 Set minimum industry expectations and documentation templates, especially for SMEs.
		31 Share impact evaluations to scale effective models and reinforce pastoral care as strategic investment.
		32 Develop an outcomes framework to monitor and improve pastoral care and workforce wellbeing across the sector.

Appendix 2: Primary sources for the document review

The table below lists the key reference documents reviewed for this project, which have been drawn upon and synthesised throughout this report.

Table 2: Document review sources

Source	Title
ConCOVE	Appreciating and supporting neurodiversity
ConCOVE	Civil construction: a requirement for a robust and reliable training pipeline
ConCOVE	VET in schools: discussion document
ConCOVE	Where's the front door? Entry points analysis
ConCOVE	Cook Brothers Academy Case Study
ConCOVE	He Ruku Hohonu: Māori in carpentry education
ConCOVE	Strengthening support for apprenticeships
ConCOVE	Te Maru o Hine Theory of Change
ConCOVE	Work-based trainers support
ConCOVE	Investigating training advisors in work-based learning in the C&I sector
ConCOVE	The place of micro-credentials
ConCOVE	Skills standards
Waihanga Ara Rau	Best practice guidelines: 8 tips for responding to discrimination
Waihanga Ara Rau	Best practice guidelines: Flexible work mini-guide
Waihanga Ara Rau	Best practice guideline: Gender affirmation at work
Waihanga Ara Rau	Best practice guideline: Keep it decent - active bystander intervention guidelines
Waihanga Ara Rau	Best practice guideline: keep it decent - guidelines for safe and respectful workplaces
Waihanga Ara Rau	Best practice guideline: Menopause mini guide
Waihanga Ara Rau	Inclusivity poster: how to be disability inclusive - kaimahi
Waihanga Ara Rau	Inclusivity poster: let's be disability inclusive - industry
Waihanga Ara Rau	Inclusivity poster: let's be disability inclusive - training provider
Waihanga Ara Rau	Inclusivity poster: Proud to be inclusive - training provider
Waihanga Ara Rau	Inclusivity poster: Keep it decent
Waihanga Ara Rau	Inclusivity poster: Stand up, step in

Waihanga Ara Rau	Pastoral care workforce development plan (WDP) review
Waihanga Ara Rau	Kaitaka Paepearoa: Māori WDP Full plan
Waihanga Ara Rau	Unleashing Pacific Talent
Waihanga Ara Rau	Disability Action Plan
Waihanga Ara Rau	Māori Matters Online Resource
ConCOVE	Diversity and inclusion gap analysis
ConCOVE	Diversity and inclusion road map
ConCOVE	The funding of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

