



Enrolments and Completions research project

Issues Paper #1





Acknowledgement of Country

HumanAbility acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders – past and present, and recognise their enduring connection to their culture, lands, seas, waters and communities.

Find us online:
humanability.com.au



HumanAbility is a Jobs and Skills Council funded by the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

Project overview

A sustainable pipeline of new, skilled professionals is critical to address the skills gaps and workforce shortages in the care and support sectors. The Enrolments and Completions research project will explore the complex reasons behind the relatively low number of care and support qualification completions in comparison to all other vocational education and training (VET) qualifications.

We will engage with a range of stakeholders, including current and former students, training providers, and industry, to identify factors that influence whether a student completes their training, including instances where non-completion is a deliberate decision based on having already achieved desired outcomes. These insights will inform practical recommendations to support student progression and qualification completion.

This Issues Paper has been developed to set out the background to and purpose of the research. While the project will span all HumanAbility sectors, a proposed case study for particular attention is the disability services sector, within which a relatively large proportion of the workforce is currently unqualified. This characteristic of the workforce – alongside survey data highlighting a split between career professionals and a more temporary, casual cohort who balance working in the sector with other personal responsibilities – makes analysis of completion rates in underlying VET courses especially pertinent. We encourage stakeholder feedback on this potential area of focus, alongside the sharing of other experiences and expertise from the perspective of your related sector/s.

How completing a VET program leads to better income and employment outcomes

For students engaged in the VET system, completing a full qualification is one of the strongest predictors of positive post-study outcomes. Drawing on the VET National Data Asset's 2019-20 subset,¹ a database reporting on over 430,000 students who had participated in nationally recognised VET qualifications, JSA's *Strong and Responsive VET Pathways* report found that full program completion leads to:

- **Greater prospects of finding employment.** A vast majority of completers (84%) were employed after graduating. This represented a 15 percentage point uplift compared to prior to enrolling in a VET program;
- **Positive employment-related incomes.** VET program completers recorded a median subsequent income of \$48,500 (reflecting a median income uplift of \$11,800 compared to before enrolment);
- Strong income support exit rates. 39% of VET graduates who had received income support before commencing study were, two years after completing, no longer in receipt of such support; and
- **Greater likelihood of advancing to higher-level study.** 16% of completers went on to enrol in a higher-level VET program, while 8% advanced to higher education (the tertiary education sector).

¹ Jobs and Skills Australia (2024), [Strong and Responsive VET Pathways: 2019-20 Graduate Outcomes from the VET National Data Asset \(VNDA\)](#).

The findings also indicated that positive outcomes arising from program completion were even more amplified among specific demographic cohorts. First Nations graduates, for example, saw their prospects of finding employment improved by 16 percentage points, while this cohort's median income uplift after completion stood at \$13,000. Among female graduates, post-completion employment prospects rose by 17 percentage points. Twenty-one percent of VET graduates with a disability, meanwhile, went on to enrol in a higher VET qualification.

With such outcomes in mind, concern has arisen across the system about the existence, and implications, of flagging VET completion rates. A series of reports and studies, some released as recently as earlier this year, have explored how training providers can identify students at risk of disengaging from study, create supportive learning environments and structures, and ultimately improve VET completion rates. The issue has also been discussed in detail at conferences and symposia. While valuable and timely, however, these analyses have largely been at a broad, whole-of-VET system level, leaving scope for further research at sector-specific levels. Examples of these broader studies include:

- *The National VET Completions Report*, a key output delivered by the National VET Completions Taskforce.² The Taskforce was established in early 2023, under an initiative led by the South Australian Government, in response to the finding that less than half (47.6%) of students enrolled in a nationally recognised VET qualification end up completing. The report explored factors impacting on learners' decisions to withdraw from or not complete VET qualifications, leading to a series of recommendations, grouped by: learners' purposes for studying; the VET system itself and program delivery; and learner characteristics.
- *NCVER's Student support: Enabling the learner journey study*, which focussed on specific actions, structures, and cultural elements adopted by training providers aiming to improve VET completion rates.³ The 2025 report identified six key elements that facilitate effective student support, including a whole-of-institution commitment to student supports, proactive mechanisms to identify learners at risk of disengaging, and the profound importance of caring experts who can provide continuous, holistic, and individualised support to learners.
- *Laying the foundations: How foundation skills shape VET student outcomes*, also released by NCVER, examined the positive impacts on VET program completions of students' simultaneous engagement in foundation skills units and modules.⁴ Foundation skills programs include those targeted at developing core generalist capacities, such as literacy, numeracy, employability, and digital literacy. The study concluded that foundation skills programs are largely undertaken by two broad cohorts: learners from a language other than English (LOTE) background; and those from a non-LOTE background. It found that students who completed such programs alongside other VET study (a much more common pathway in the non-LOTE cohort) were more likely to complete their other VET program – by up to 1.8 percentage points – and significantly more likely – by up to 5.6 percentage points – to then obtain employment than if they had not participated in a foundation skills program.

² National VET Completions Taskforce (2024), [*National Vocational Education and Training Completions: A Report Produced Through the Secretariat of the National VET Completions Taskforce*](#).

³ National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2025), [*Student Support: Enabling the Learner Journey*](#).

⁴ National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2025), [*Laying the Foundations: How Foundation Skills Shape VET Student Outcomes*](#).

- Several discussions and presentations at recent VET-focussed conferences have also centred aspects of the learner journey that impact on the likelihood of program completions. Talks at the 34th National VET Research Conference in July 2025,⁵ for example, explored the need to revitalise recognition of prior learning (RPL) frameworks (an issue also examined in the National VET Completions Report as a contributing factor in some cases to learner dissatisfaction),⁶ and the importance and value of foundations skills programs (as highlighted in the NCVET report cited above) to enhance ongoing engagement and completion prospects among learners from diverse backgrounds, both in a cultural and educational sense.

While important, program completion need not always be the focus

While program completion is a strong driver of post-study outcomes, not all students need to achieve this to succeed. Many, for instance, enrol and participate in VET programs intending only to complete some units or modules; such as those required by their current employer or to supplement their existing skill set to seek a specific job they desire. In other cases, as data from NCVET's Student Outcomes Survey (SOS) highlight, students who may initially have intended to complete a full program find their progress partway through is sufficient to land them a job in their chosen industry, making full completion unnecessary, at least at that point in their career. Interestingly, by some measures part-completers are in fact more likely to report positive outcomes than counterparts who successfully completed their programs. In 2024, across all nationally recognised VET programs:

- 77% of qualification part-completers stated they had achieved the mean reason for doing the training (favourably comparing to the 87.4% of completers with the same outcome);
- 29.6% of part-completers gained post-training employment in a different occupation to that covered by the program, yet reported that the training was relevant to them (compared to 28% of completers in the same scenario); and
- Of those employed in the same job as before their training, 51% of part-completers reported having improved skills (compared to 50.7% of completers).⁷

Such findings suggest that while improving completion rates is important in and of itself, a more nuanced approach to understanding how learners engage with the VET system – often by deliberately exercising agency over what they specifically need and can achieve through it – may prove an equally fruitful endeavour. The second bullet point above, for instance, may reflect the fact that some learners deliberately examine the content of parts of certain VET programs in order to tailor their training to align with specific, not immediately relevant, personal opportunities and objectives.

Similarly, the fact that a slightly higher proportion of part-completers (70.3%) were employed before their training than their completer counterparts (69.6%) may possibly indicate that many part-completers intentionally view VET training as a means to improve their current status or skills in

⁵ National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2025), [34th National VET Research Conference Program](#).

⁶ National VET Completions Taskforce (2024), [National Vocational Education and Training Completions: A Report Produced Through the Secretariat of the National VET Completions Taskforce](#), p.27.

⁷ National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2024), [DataBuilder: VET Student Outcomes 2024](#).

industry, rather than providing the impetus to enter the industry in the first place (for example, through the gaining of a full qualification required for entry to a certain workforce).⁸

At the same time, it should be noted that, even if the result of a deliberate decision, part-completion may have unintended consequences later in a student's career. This may include, for instance, difficulty attracting wage rises tied to a worker's level of education and training.

Nonetheless, these nuances in how students engage with the VET system – including also those who move from one program, or even sector of study, to another – have led to VET completion rates being increasingly interpreted and explored in more considered ways. An upcoming study by NCVET (currently in consultation phase), for example, will set out to examine whether different outcomes for learners – such as success finding employment partway through a program – should be more comprehensively quantified in their data dashboards than the current, more binary, 'completed' or 'non-completed' measures. Meanwhile, JSA is in the process of following up on the aforementioned Strong and Responsive VET Pathways report, this time specifically examining outcomes among learners who did not complete their VET program enrolments.

Objectives and purpose of this study

Amongst this broader backdrop of studies and reviews into VET completions, this research project aims to examine the issue specifically focussing on qualifications preparing learners for entry into some or all of the following workforces:

- Aged care and disability services
- Children's education and care
- Human (community) services
- Health
- Sport and recreation

Accordingly, the study will explore the current state of, and identify and spotlight potential strategies to improve, VET completion rates in the training packages under HumanAbility's remit; namely:

- CHC (Community Services)
- HLT (Health)
- SIS (Sport, Fitness and Recreation)

Stakeholder feedback on this Issues Paper will help shape the project's specific direction. Some of the key questions we will seek to answer in the research project include:

- Which sectors, and VET programs, stand to be most impacted by lower than ideal completion outcomes?
- Are there general 'hotspots' along the overall learner journey where the risk of disengagement and dropout are highest, and how might training providers address this?

⁸ Although, due care must be taken when interpreting these data, noting that the specific sector/s of employment prior to and after training is not defined here.

- Can understanding of learners' demographic characteristics (e.g. geographic remoteness, gender, age, cultural background, study load, previous education level, competing work or personal commitments) be used to predict or map when additional support may be needed to raise the prospects of program completion?
- Are completions in HumanAbility sectors higher or lower among those seeking to upskill when already in the workforce (i.e. from lower to higher AQF levels within the VET framework) or among those participating in lower AQF level programs?
- Have initiatives such as Fee-Free TAFE or other incentives driving enrolment growth potentially impacted completion rates?
- What can we learn and adapt from specific strategies or practices training providers already have in place to identify disengagement risks and address them?
- To what extent are non-completions in HumanAbility VET programs occurring without being intended by the learner in the first place (e.g. in cases such as where learners only set out to complete some units or modules for their own immediate needs)?
- Flowing from this, is there a 'reasonable' non-completion rate within certain sectors or training packages, relating to those students who are satisfied with the level of training they have received prior to completing, or who otherwise decide a given program is simply not right for them anymore?
- Related to the above two questions, are there learnings we could gather about specific units or modules more commonly completed by program non-completers? Could these be reshaped into targeted, standalone skill sets or microcredentials?
- Despite the varying levels of student satisfaction at the point at which they discontinue a VET program, are there systemic, longer-term impacts of non-completion (such as on remuneration or professional recognition outcomes) that could be reduced if program completion was encouraged?
- Are there opportunities to better understand how students feel when they do not complete, to reduce the incidence of such a decision becoming a 'dead end'? For instance, could they potentially be redirected to another program (through advice and encouragement about the circumstances under which completed units could contribute as credit), or to another training provider that might offer a more suitable program?

Growing gaps between supply of and community demand for care and support services have brought the need to secure sustainable pipelines of new skilled professionals into sharp relief. As flagged in HumanAbility's 2025 Workforce Plan, sectors such as early childhood education and care, health, and aged care and disability services face particularly high levels of expected growth in demand for services, with issues including:

- Key health, human (community) services, and aged care and disability services occupations supported by VET qualification pathways are projected to grow considerably by 2034. Projected growth rates over this period include:
 - 31.9% for Aged Care and Disability Carers (ANZSCO #4231)
 - 30.9% for Nursing Support and Personal Care Workers (ANZSCO #4233)
 - 27.7% for Dental Assistants (ANZSCO #4232)
 - 24% for Registered Nurses (ANZSCO #2544)

- 23.3% for General Clerks (ANZSCO #5311)
- 18.7% for Welfare Support Workers (ANZSCO #4117)
- Existing staff shortages, and relatively low rates of intention to stay, among the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce are placing pressure on communities already dealing with service delivery gaps in many parts of the country. These issues are affecting service quality and safety and will only become more acute as policies to reform the system (including expanding universal access to more families) ramp up demand for skilled workers in coming years. Modelling suggests that to meet demand for ECEC services should universal preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds be implemented would require workforce growth of 3% per annum.

The current state of VET completions in HumanAbility’s sectors⁹

This rising demand for care and support services places direct pressure on the pathways through which new, skilled professionals enter the workforce. However, while program enrolments across the CHC, HLT, and SIS training packages continue to rise, the data indicate that the number of program completions, on a year-by-year basis over the past half-decade, have generally stagnated (see Figure 1, below). Considered alongside the anticipated growth rates for related occupations presented above, this raises concerns about the sustainability and replenishment of these workforces in the years ahead.



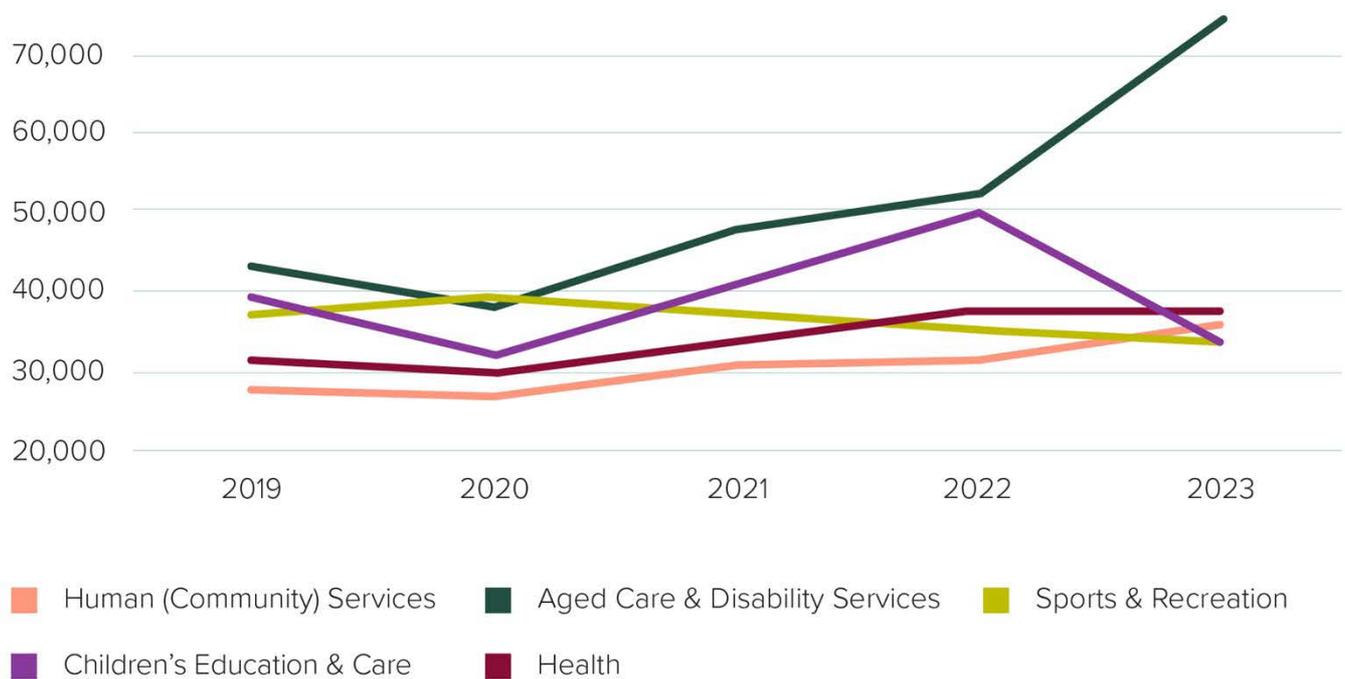
Explainer

Training package: A collection of units of competency, skill sets, and programs/qualifications broadly grouped by industry. HumanAbility’s remit covers the HLT (Health), CHC (Community Services), and SIS (Sports and Recreation) training packages.

VET program: Another term for qualification. Programs sit at different levels, ranging from lower levels such as Certificates I or II, through to Advanced Diplomas.

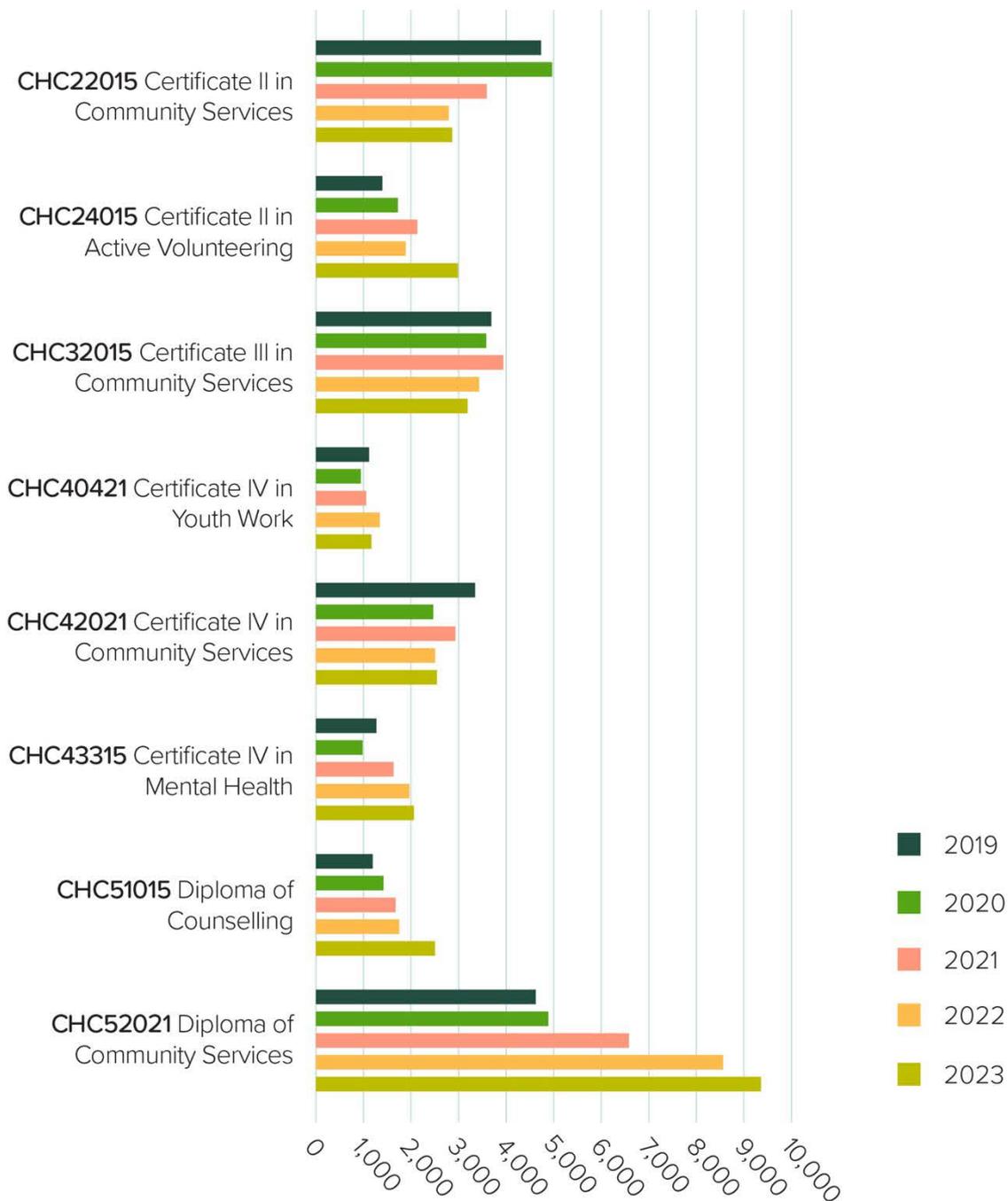
⁹ All data presented in this section are drawn from NCVER’s DataBuilder asset (namely the [Total VET students and courses 2023: Program completions](#) tab), with totals presented in Figure 1 collated according to relevant groupings of VET programs that align with HumanAbility’s sectoral coverage but are not clearly differentiated in the underlying data. For example, Children’s Education and Care, Human (Community) Services, and Aged Care & Disability Services all feature VET programs under the CHC training package.

Figure 1. Total VET program completions by HumanAbility sector, 2019-2023



It is important to note, too, that these overall figures mask program-level developments that risk misleading the impression one can take from the data. For instance, while the trendline for human (community) services program completions suggests sustained if slow growth, analysis of key related programs within this sector of study paints a somewhat more worrying picture. As shown in Figure 2 below, notable growth in the number of completions is only really occurring in higher-level programs likely undertaken by those already in the workforce, such as the Diplomas of Counselling and Community Services. Completions of lower-level qualifications such as the Certificate II and III in Community Services – more targeted at learners seeking entry to the workforce – have largely trended downward or remained stubbornly steady, despite rising enrolments in these programs.

Figure 2. Key selected Human (Community) Services program completions, 2019-2023



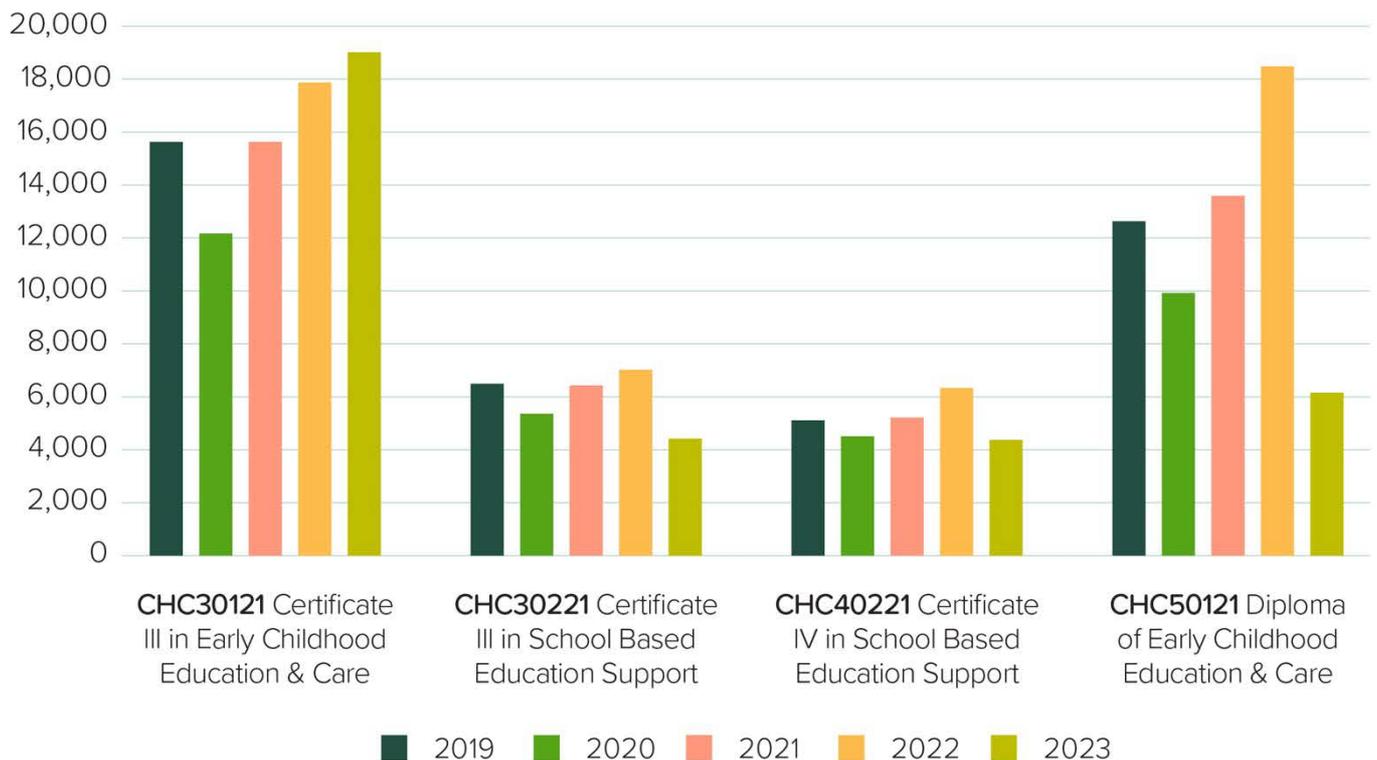
Nuances at program level can also contextualise what appears in Figure 1 as relatively strong growth in completion numbers among aged care and disability services qualifications. In Figure 3, for instance, we can see that with the exception of a sudden spike in 2023 completions of the program dominating learner engagement in this sector – the Certificate III in Individual Support – have effectively remained steady on a year-by-year basis. Once again, understood in the context of the forecast growth of the workforce supported by this particular VET pathway, this points to a need to focus on boosting completion numbers in this particular program.

Figure 3. Key selected Aged Care & Disability Services program completions, 2019-2023



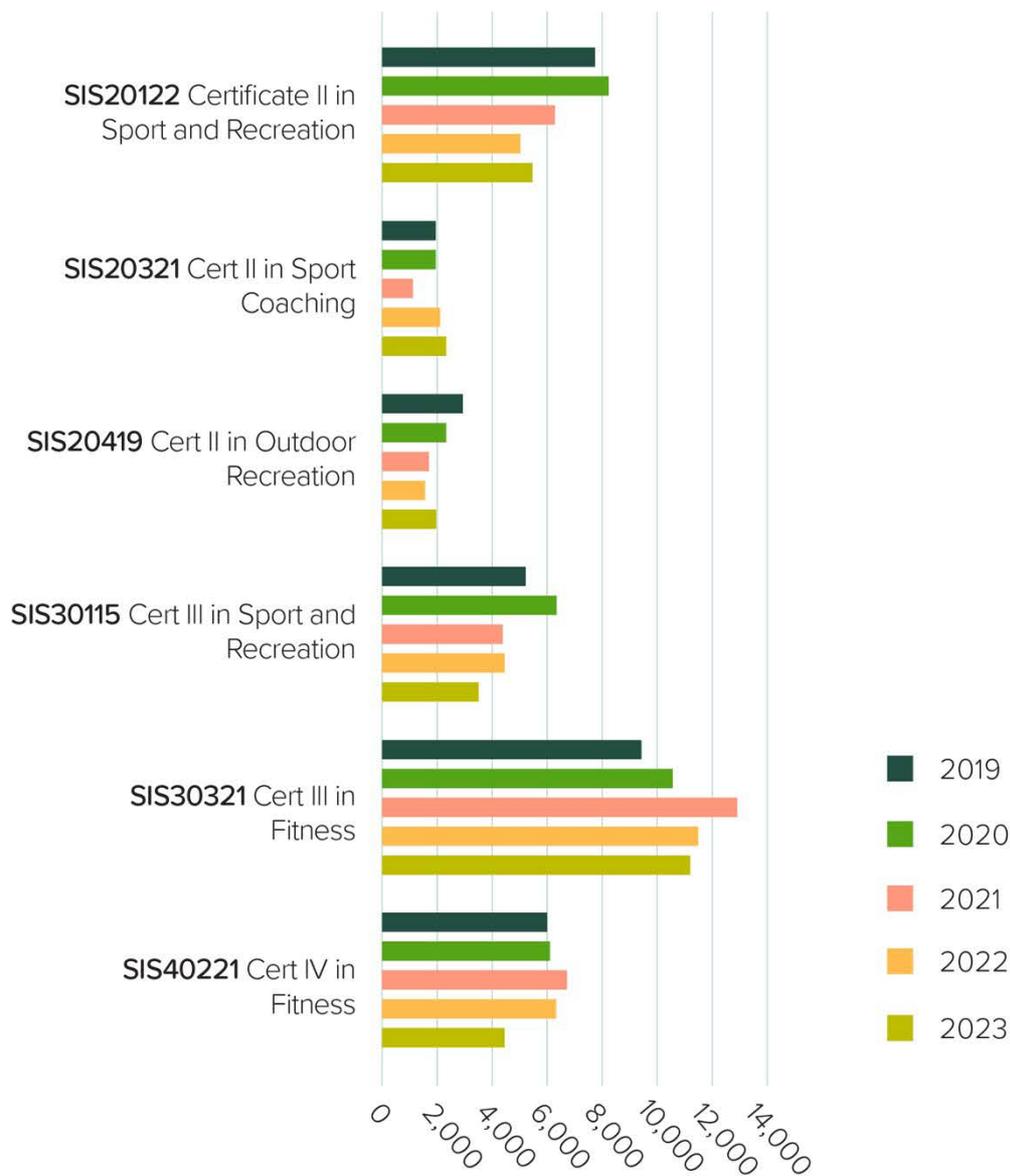
Within the children’s education and care sector, meanwhile, an overall flatlining of completion numbers (notwithstanding a spike in 2022) masks consistent growth in the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care (as shown in Figure 4). This growth has cancelled out a plateauing of completion numbers in the two VET programs responsible for training school-based education aides.

Figure 4. Key selected CEC program completions, 2019-2023



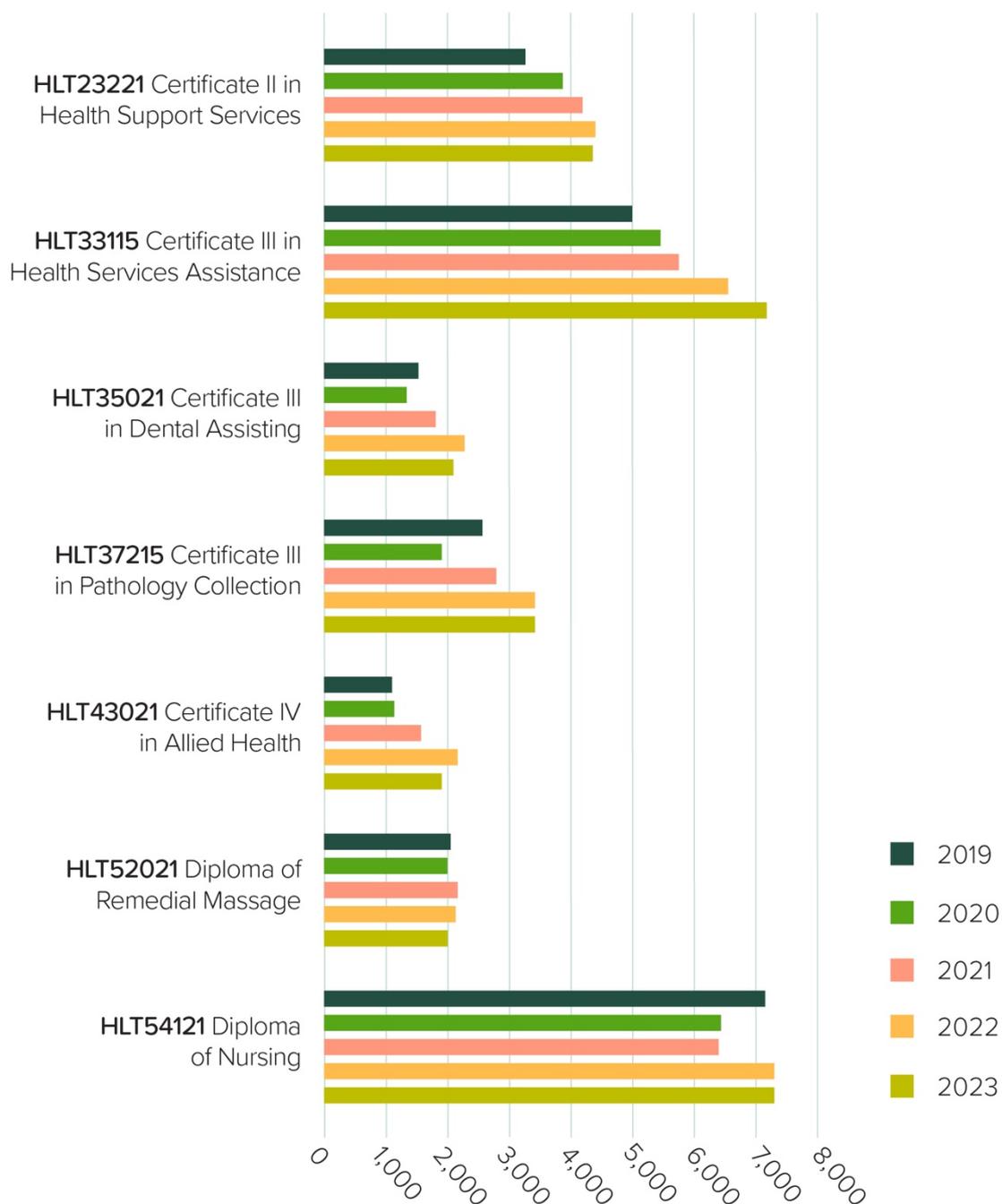
Elsewhere, sport and recreation VET completions have continued to drop per year, with the most popular program – the Certificate III in Fitness – seeing earlier promising growth in the numbers of graduating learners begin to subside (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Selected key SIS program completions, 2019-2023



Completion numbers for health VET learners have followed almost the same trajectory as human (community) services. In health, however, growth has been largely driven at both Certificate III and Certificate IV levels. A positive interpretation of these data is that consistent growth in completion of programs readying learners for entry into a range of diverse roles in the workforce, such as the Certificate III in Health Services Assistance, suggest less urgent attention may be needed here. By the same token, we might ask why the numbers of qualified professionals seeking to upskill to Diploma level are not growing to a similar extent.

Figure 6. Key HLT program completions, 2019-2023

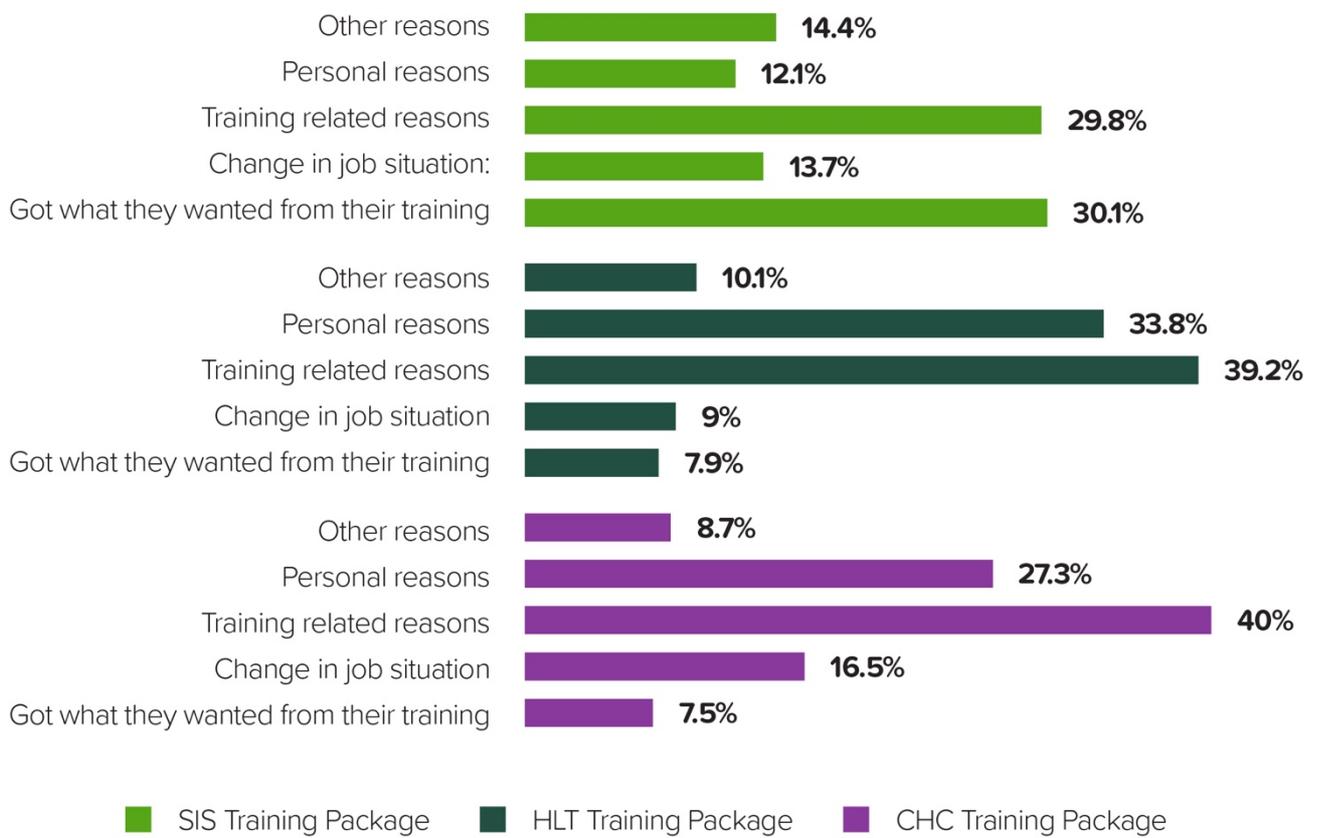


Findings from the Student Outcomes Survey¹⁰

NCVER’s Student Outcomes Survey provides some valuable insights into why learners may complete or fail to complete programs. It should, however, be noted that its relatively small sample size means its results cannot reliably be extrapolated to the wider learner population. That said, Figure 7, below, indicates that the primary reason learners are not completing their programs differs across training packages under HumanAbility’s remit.

¹⁰ Data presented in this section are drawn from customised NEVER data requested by HumanAbility.

Figure 7. Main reason for discontinuing, % by training package



Under the CHC and HLT training packages, for instance, ‘training related reasons’ was cited most often by non-completers. While this option also ranked highly among former SIS students too, it is noteworthy that in the case of that particular training package ‘got what they wanted from their training’ ranked marginally higher – and almost four times more likely than among compatriots in CHC and HLT. One potential explanation may be the relative lack of formal prerequisites for industry entry in several of the most popular occupations in the health, fitness and recreation sectors – rendering full completion of VET programs not as critical as in other sectors under HumanAbility’s responsibility.

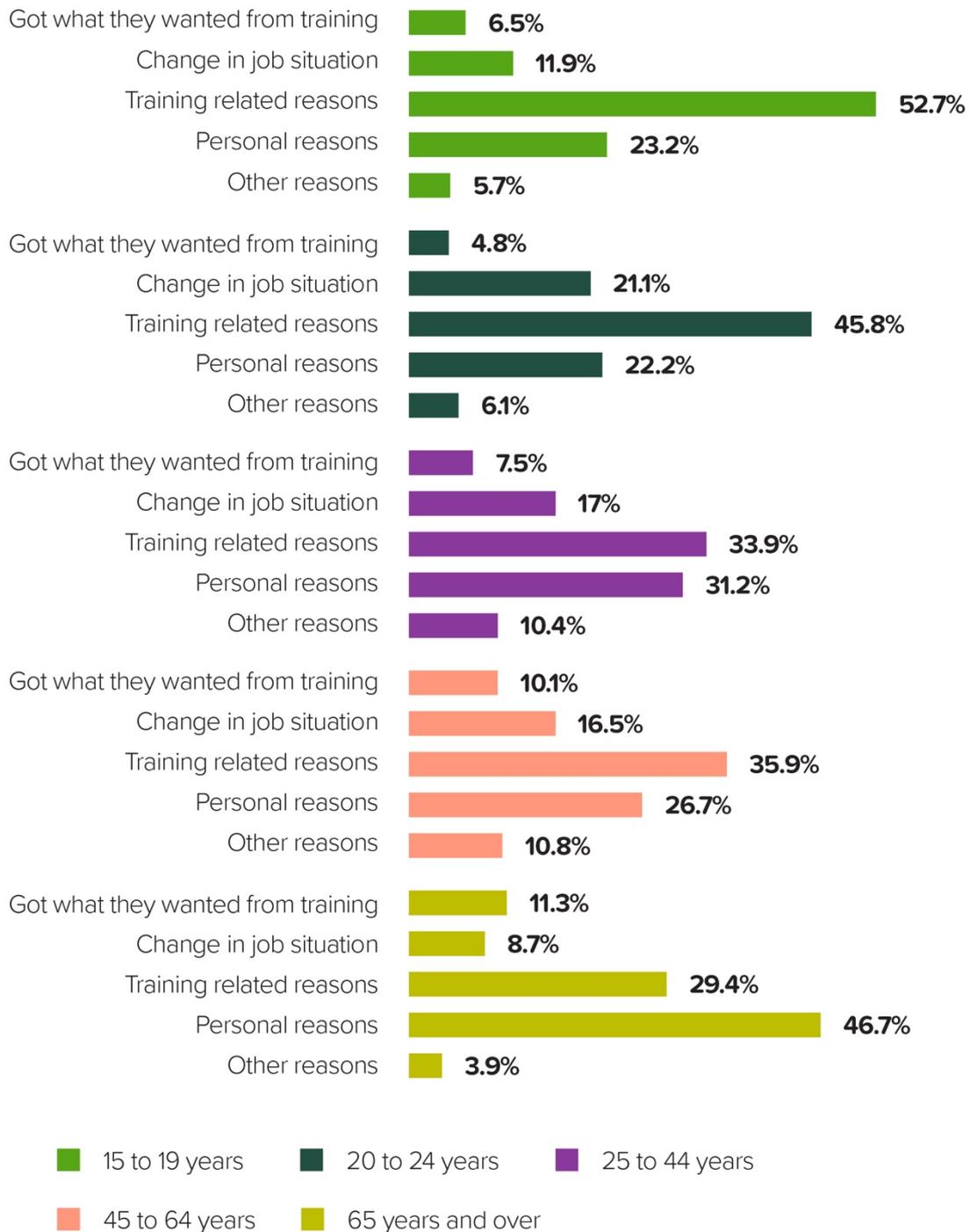
Demographic profiles of different training packages’ learner cohorts may also be a factor. For example, a skew towards younger learners in the SIS training package (reflecting the popularity of some programs in senior secondary VET curricula) may potentially explain why ‘personal reasons’ – which can often include the balancing of training with responsibilities typically arising later in life, such as raising children – was less than half as likely to be cited as the main reason for discontinuing than among CHC and HLT non-completers.

Factors by learners’ age

Broadly speaking, across all three HumanAbility training packages ‘training related reasons’ are more prevalently cited as a contributing factor behind non-completion among learners aged in the 15-24 years brackets, steadily decreasing in prominence as learner groups age. In CHC, for instance, this element was named by 52.7% of non-completer respondents aged 15-19 and 45.8% of those aged 20-

24. A similar situation is evident in HLT programs, where, according to the SOS data, ‘training related reasons’ account for 47.3% of non-completions by 15–19 year-olds and 51.5% of those aged 20-24. At a high level, such findings may suggest that the transition from a senior schooling to a VET training environment may be causing more issues for learners than currently considered; potentially giving cause to explore specific strategies to alleviate associated stressors, uncertainty, or tensions.

Figure 8. Reasons for discontinuing (CHC training package)



Potential project directions

HumanAbility invites stakeholders to consider the findings and research questions presented in this Issues Paper to suggest potential areas of focus the project may take, including whether specific sectors or qualifications warrant greater attention. Contributions and feedback are invited by 17 September 2025.

Insights garnered from this process will inform the composition of consultations set to occur between September and November 2025, including consideration of specific learner, training provider, industry, and other expert cohorts.

While the project will reach out to stakeholders and explore perspectives from across all HumanAbility's sectors, an initial proposed focal point is the disability services sector and its underlying VET programs:

- The NDS Workforce Census reveals that the sector employs a large proportion of unqualified workers (around 35%). Providers continue to report widespread recruitment difficulty, especially for qualified support workers.
- Over three-quarters of new recruits (i.e. those with a tenure of less than one year) hold no relevant qualification, suggesting that many may already be working in the sector while completing a relevant VET program.
- Given the significant growth in forecast demand outlined earlier in this paper, it is imperative that the pool of skilled, qualified disability services workers continues to grow, particularly given the lack of entry barriers in some parts of the sector that may discourage or do not always necessitate formal training.
- Many workers in the sector have diverse motivations and intentions. While some see it as their vocation – becoming the backbone of the workforce; capable of complex support, as well as mentorship of colleagues – others may be passing through the sector in more casualised, non-specialist roles, perhaps while transitioning between other careers or juggling personal commitments such as caring for their own loved ones. This diversity has clear implications for VET program outcomes, in turn raising questions about whether cohorts providing short-term but valuable labour may benefit from alternative short-form or skills-sets based offerings; drawing on content from larger programs such as the Certificate III in Individual Support or the Certificate IV in Disability Support.

If this sector was selected as a case study – again noting that the key research questions presented earlier in this paper would also be applied to all other HumanAbility sectors – possible specific lines of inquiry include:

- How many learners are already working in disability roles while enrolled in qualifications versus those who enter the sector after course completion?
- Might we be able to map the interaction between study, 'life' and work pathways, and how this affects motivation, retention, and career progression?
- Can we identify and differentiate student cohorts based on their likely long-term engagement in the sector versus temporary participation?

- Can we design testable strategies to better support both groups (working learners and non-employed students) to reach successful VET program completion and workforce retention?
- Build a localised evidence base to complement national data and inform practical improvements to wrap-around and student and employer supports.
- How does concurrent employment (e.g. part-time disability work) affect likelihood of VET completion?
- What 'life' conditions make completion more or less likely? And what supports can ameliorate these issues?
- How do motivations and trajectories differ between workers who are studying and students who later become workers?
- Which learner cohorts are most likely to become long-term skilled workers?
- Can employer or system interventions be tailored to these different groups to improve completions and career retention?

Next steps

As outlined above, we welcome feedback, thoughts, and suggestions on the specific directions this research project may look to take in its upcoming phases. We would appreciate responses to our feedback short form being submitted by 17 September 2025.

Consultations – including workshops and one-on-one interviews – will occur between September and November 2025. This phase will inform the development of a second Issues Paper, presenting findings drawn from analysis of stakeholder insights and, in turn, a short paper presenting mapping of key factors across the learner journey in HumanAbility's sectors.

Recommendations for how training providers may increase rates of completion will then be prepared, before being tested and refined with experts across our sectors, with final recommendations planned for release in June 2026.



HumanAbility

www.humanability.com.au