

Far North Queensland Aged Care Industry Workforce Development Plan



Ageing
Australia

Acknowledgment of Country

Ageing Australia acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to land, water and the community. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present

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Introduction

The aged care sector in Far North Queensland is experiencing critical workforce shortages, with demand for skilled workers expected to increase significantly as the region's population ages. This challenge mirrors a national trend, with projections indicating a shortfall of 110,000 direct aged care workers across Australia by 2030 if the workforce continues to expand at current rates.¹

Compounding these pressures are recent regulatory reforms and shifts in service delivery models. There is an increasing emphasis on home care, alongside a rising need to support clients living with long-term and complex health conditions such as dementia.

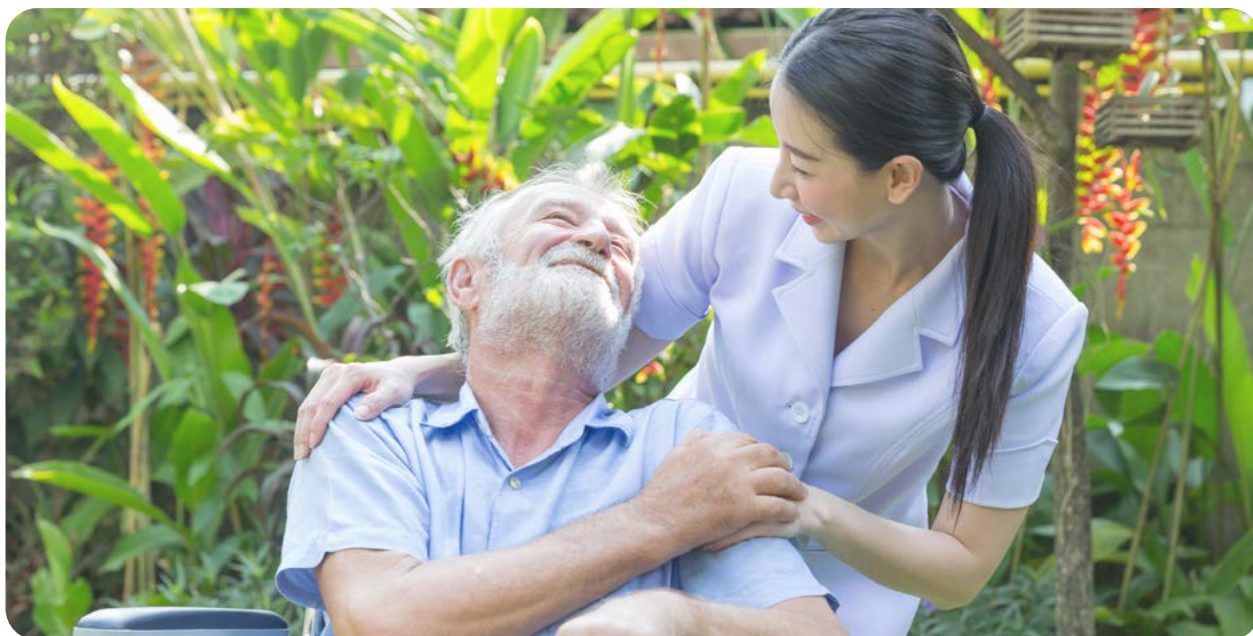
To respond effectively, a coordinated and comprehensive workforce plan is essential. Ageing Australia has partnered with Jobs Queensland (Queensland Government) to lead an industry-driven approach to identifying practical solutions that will expand and strengthen the aged care workforce in Far North Queensland.

The *Far North Queensland Aged Care Industry Workforce Development Plan* sets out targeted actions to address current and future workforce gaps. By focusing on training pathways, recruitment initiatives and retention strategies, the plan seeks to build a sustainable, skilled workforce that can deliver high-quality care and meet the evolving needs of the region's ageing population.

Overview

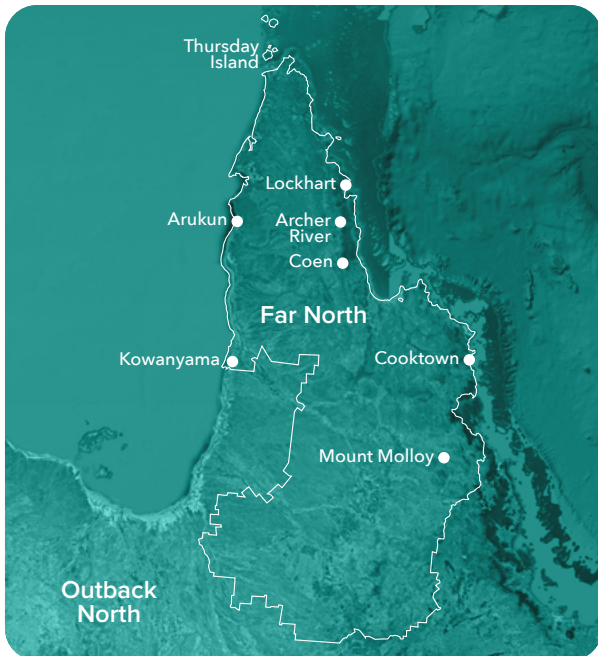
Far North Queensland (FNQ) is a geographically vast and diverse region of Northern Australia with Cairns serving as the primary urban and economic hub.

Beyond Cairns, the region encompasses a mix of remote townships, rural communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, many of which face challenges in accessing services and skilled workers due to distance and limited infrastructure. The region encompasses the Cairns Statistical Area Level 4 (SA4) region and the Far North Statistical Area Level 3 region (SA3). The Cairns SA4 covers five SA3 regions: Cairns – North, Cairns – South, Innisfail – Cassowary Coast, Port Douglas – Daintree and Tablelands (East) – Kuranda (see Figure 1). The Cairns SA4 is located approximately 1700 kilometres from Brisbane's Central Business District (CBD) and 350 kilometres from Townsville's CBD. The geographically larger Far North SA3 region lies to the north, forming Queensland's northernmost area and includes remote communities such as Cooktown, Thursday Island and Weipa (see Figure 2).



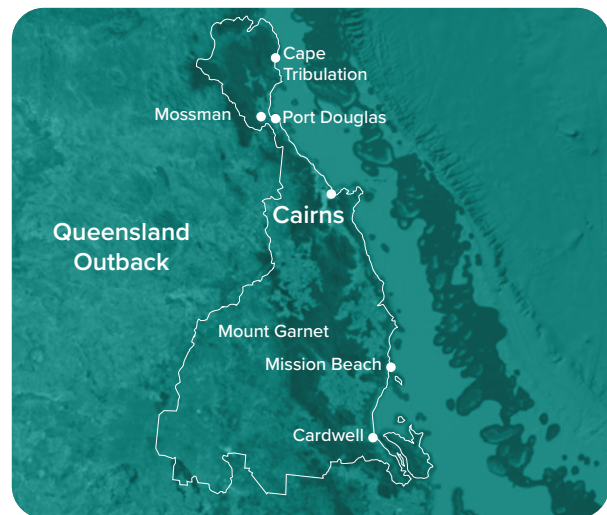
¹ Committee for Economic Development of Australia. (2021). *Duty of care: Meeting the aged care workforce challenge*. Australia: Committee for Economic Development of Australia. <https://www.ceda.com.au/researchandpolicies/research/health-ageing/duty-of-care-meeting-the-aged-care-workforce-chall>; CEDA, (2023), *Duty of care: Aged-care sector running on empty*, Australia: Committee for Economic Development of Australia. <https://www.ceda.com.au/researchandpolicies/research/health-ageing/duty-of-care-aged-care-sector-running-on-empty>

Figure 1: Map of Far North Statistical Area Level 3 (SA3)



Source: QGSO, Queensland Statistical Areas, Level 3 (SA3), 2021 - Far North (ASGC Code 31501)

Figure 2: Map of Cairns Statistical Area Level 4 (SA4)



Source: QGSO, Queensland Statistical Areas, Level 4 (SA4), 2021 - Cairns (ASGS Code 306)

The economy of FNQ is underpinned by key industries including agriculture, aquaculture, tourism, healthcare and mining, with Cairns acting as a major service and transport centre for surrounding communities. While these industries are central to regional prosperity, the dispersed population, seasonal weather events and higher proportion of older residents in regional and remote areas create additional pressures on workforce supply and service delivery.

Agriculture remains a cornerstone of the regional economy, with FNQ renowned for its production of tropical fruits, sugar cane and coffee. Aquaculture continues to grow, supported by favourable climatic conditions and access to essential infrastructure.² In 2021, the Cairns region recorded a Gross Regional Product (GRP) of \$19.9 billion, highlighting its significant contribution to the state's economy.³

These same geographic and demographic factors that shape the region's economy also drive rising demand for aged care services, intensifying existing workforce shortages and highlighting the urgent need for a coordinated, long-term workforce plan.

2 National Institute of Economics and Industry Research. (2025). *Far North Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils, economic profile*. Compiled and presented by economy.id. Findings based on use of NIEIR data. Collingwood: .id informed decisions. <https://economy.id.com.au/fnqroc>

3 Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts. (2025). *Experimental Gross Regional Product estimates*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/department/media/publications/experimental-gross-regional-product-estimates>

Regional population and employment characteristics

Population

In 2021 the population of FNQ was approximately 290,000 and is forecast to grow by 1.4 per cent annually, reaching 368,493 by 2046.⁴ This represents around 3 per cent of Queensland's total population growth over the same period. Migration from metropolitan areas to regional locations enabled by technological advancements allowing remote work, is a key contributor to this growth.⁵

The region is experiencing an overall ageing of its population driven by longer life expectancies and net inward migration.⁶ In 2023, the median age in FNQ was estimated at 40.3 years, an increase of 3.1 years since 2013.⁷ Within the region, the median age in the Cairns SA4 was slightly higher at 41.2 years, while the Tablelands (East) - Kuranda SA3 recorded the highest median age at 46.8 years.⁸ This trend is projected to continue, with the regional median age expected to reach 47.2 years by 2046.⁹

Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples comprise an estimated 15.2 per cent of the population, significantly higher than the national average of 3.8 per cent.¹⁰ Approximately 22.7 per cent of the population were born overseas, with 10.2 per cent from English speaking countries and 12.5 per cent from non-English speaking countries.

Around 5 per cent of the population require assistance with core activities, slightly lower than the Queensland average of 6 per cent. The prevalence of dementia in FNQ mirrors Queensland and national

rates at 0.7 per cent, predominantly impacting Australians aged 60 years and older.

Socio-economic disadvantage is more pronounced in FNQ than across the broader Queensland population, highlighting the need for targeted strategies to ensure equitable access to high-quality aged care services.

Most of the Cairns region's population resides in areas classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as Outer Regional Australia. Approximately 1.5 per cent live in areas designated as Remote or Very Remote Australia.¹¹ In the larger Far North SA3, 83 per cent of the population reside in areas classified as Remote Australia or Very Remote Australia.¹²

Employment

As of April 2025, approximately 157,000 individuals were employed in FNQ.¹³ The unemployment rate in the Cairns SA4 region was 3.4 per cent, the eighth lowest among Queensland's 19 SA4 areas and below the state average of four per cent. The Far North SA3 area recorded a higher unemployment rate of 8.4 per cent.¹⁴

Labour force participation rates were 65.4 per cent in Cairns SA4 and 67.3 per cent in the Far North SA3, closely aligning with the national participation rate of 66.9 per cent.¹⁵

4 National Institute of Economics and Industry Research (NIEIR). (2025). *Far North Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils, economic profile. Compiled and presented by economy.id. Findings based on use of NIEIR data.* Collingwood: .id informed decisions. <https://economy.id.com.au/fnqroc>.

5 Regional Australia Institute. (2025). *Regional Movers Index.* Canberra: Regional Australia Institute. <https://regionalaustralia.org.au/Web/Web/Toolkits-Indexes/Regional-Movers-Index.aspx>

6 id (informed decisions). (2023). *2023 Population Forecast Review, Queensland - Cairns SA4 region.* Collingwood: .id informed decisions. <https://home.id.com.au/forecast-review/cairns-june-2023>

7 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024). *Regional population by age and sex, regions of Australia.* Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-population-age-and-sex/2023>

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023). *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.* Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release#data-downloads>

11 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Remoteness Structure, Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Edition 3. Census of population and housing.* Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/australian-statistical-geography-standard-asgs-edition-3/jul2021-jun2026/remoteness-structure>

12 Ibid.

13 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025). *Labour Force, Australia, Detailed.* Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia-detailed/latest-release>

14 Jobs and Skills Australia. (2025). *Small Area Labour Markets. Data compiled and presented by Queensland Government Statistician's Office.* Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.dewr.gov.au/employment-research/small-area-labour-markets>

15 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025). *Labour Force, Australia, Detailed.* Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia-detailed/latest-release>

The aged care industry in Far North Queensland

Youth unemployment in the Cairns SA4 was 9.3 per cent and 12.9 per cent in Far North SA3 (March 2025), indicating a potential pool of young workers who could be attracted to the aged care sector.¹⁶

The FNQ workforce is projected to grow by 4.2 per cent over the five years to 2027-2028. Jobs Queensland forecasts indicate the highest employment growth will occur in:¹⁷

- Health care and social assistance – 12 per cent
- Professional, scientific and technical services – 8.4 per cent
- Administrative and support services – 7 per cent
- Transport, postal and warehousing – 6.3 per cent
- Public administration and safety – 4.2 per cent

Workforce shortages, particularly in aged care, are compounded by an ageing workforce and training gaps.

Business profile

As of 30 June 2024, there were around 26,000 businesses operating in FNQ.¹⁸ Around 26 per cent (6745 businesses) employed between 1 and 4 staff, with Cairns - North SA3 recording the highest proportion at 28 per cent. Port Douglas - Daintree SA3 had the highest proportion of medium-size businesses, with 3.7 per cent employing between 20 and 199 staff.

The construction industry accounted for the largest number of registered businesses in FNQ at 17.3 per cent.¹⁹ The healthcare and social assistance sector included approximately 1727 registered businesses, representing 6.7 per cent of all businesses in the region.

The aged care sector provides a range of services to support older people living in both the community and residential care settings. As of June 2024, approximately 37 aged care providers across Far North Queensland delivered 70 aged care services across home care, multipurpose, residential, restorative and transitional care.²⁰ In addition, 56 providers operated under the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP).²¹

The sector is closely interconnected with other industry sectors that provide essential support to older Australians and aged care service providers, particularly the healthcare, disability and hospitality sectors. These interconnected industry sectors share workforce challenges with the aged care sector. Through industry consultation, representatives from the aged care sector endorsed the industry classifications detailed in Appendix 1 as of particular importance to their sector.

The aged care sector faces strong competition for workers from the healthcare and disability sectors, exacerbated by lower wages, high workloads and limited career progression opportunities. These issues are particularly acute in rural and remote areas. Workforce growth is further constrained by limited availability of social infrastructure such as housing and childcare, presenting barriers to attracting workers to the region.

The aged care sector is experiencing a period of unprecedented growth, driven by a significant and ongoing increase in demand for its services by an ageing population. Aged care services primarily support people aged 65 years and older as well as Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 50 and older. Access to government-funded services is subject to an individual needs assessment.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jobs Queensland. (2025). Data portal. *Anticipating Future Skills*. Ipswich: Queensland Government. <https://jobsqueensland.qld.gov.au/anticipating-future-skills/portal>

¹⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024). *8165.0 Counts of Australian Businesses, including Entries and Exits*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/business-indicators/counts-australian-businesses-including-entries-and-exits/latest-release#data-downloads>

¹⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024). *8165.0 Counts of Australian Businesses, including Entries and Exits*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/business-indicators/counts-australian-businesses-including-entries-and-exits/latest-release#data-downloads>

²⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). *Queensland service list, 30 June 2024. Aged care service list: 30 June 2024*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.gen-agedcaredata.gov.au/resources/access-data/2024/september/aged-care-service-list-30-june-2024>

²¹ Australian Government. (2025). *Care Sector Demand Map*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://caresectordemandmap.dss.gov.au/>

Eighteen per cent of the region's population is aged 65 or older and this figure is projected to grow by 1.8 per cent per year.²² The Tablelands (East) - Kuranda SA3 has the highest proportion of residents in this age group at approximately 25 per cent. Growth of the older population is predicted to be fastest in the Cairns SA4 region, where by 2046 the number of residents aged 65 and older will exceed 80,000, an increase of 32,473 people in 25 years.²³

The growing number of older residents is a key factor in aged care planning. In 2021, around 33,000 residents (11.2 per cent) were aged 70 and older and around 10,000 residents (3.3 per cent) were aged 80 and older.²⁴

The region's cultural diversity is also shaping aged care demand and delivery. Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up 12 per cent of the population, with 7.4 per cent of those aged 50 and older identifying as Aboriginal peoples or Torres Strait Islander peoples.²⁵ Among residents aged 65 and older, 26.3 per cent were born overseas and 9 per cent speak a language other than English at home.²⁶ This highlights the need for culturally safe and inclusive aged care services.

Chronic disease, disability and mental health issues are increasing demand for skilled aged care workers, particularly in-home and palliative care services. The diverse and geography dispersed nature of the region presents further challenges for service delivery, especially in rural and remote areas where access to healthcare, aged care and training facilities is limited. The geographical challenges in Far North Queensland are particularly pronounced for community based aged care providers. Service providers struggle to find a local workforce to deliver short care visits, sometimes as little as one hour, while still covering minimum wages, travel time and kilometre allowances. Innovative solutions such as telehealth are essential to address service needs

Government investment in healthcare and social assistance infrastructure is expanding in the region. The aged care sector is expected to benefit from this growth through greater access to health services

for clients and improved skills mobility and career pathways for workers across the broader health care workforce.

Several initiatives are underway to build workforce capability. The TAFE Centre of Excellence in Health Care and Support has been established to deliver innovative training solutions addressing critical skill gaps in health, nursing and community services, with a strong focus on aged care, disability support and mental healthcare. Meanwhile, Health Workforce Queensland in partnership with Northern Queensland Primary Health Network (NQPHN), is supporting workforce sustainability through recruitment and retention of general practitioners, nurses and allied health professionals, alongside upskilling existing workers in high-demand areas.

22 Queensland Governments Statisticians Office. (2023). *Queensland Government population projections, 2023 edition*.

23 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023). *Population Projections, Australia*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/population-projections-australia/2022-base-2071>

24 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024). *Regional population by age and sex, regions of Australia*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-population-age-and-sex/2023>

25 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). *GEN Aged Care Data: Dashboard supplementary tables*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.gen-agedcaredata.gov.au/resources/access-data/2024/august/gen-data-dashboard-supplementary-tables>

26 Ibid.

27 id (informed decisions). (2023). *2023 Population Forecast Review, Queensland - Cairns SA4 region*. Collingwood: id informed decisions. <https://home.id.com.au/forecast-review/cairns-june-2023>

28 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023). *Population Projections, Australia*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/population-projections-australia/2022-base-2071>

Megatrends

The aged care sector is undergoing significant change, shaped by demographic, societal, technological and regulatory forces. These megatrends present both challenges and opportunities for service delivery and workforce development in Far North Queensland:

- a growing, ageing population
- the expanding care economy
- a changing regulatory environment
- technological innovation.

A growing, ageing population

Far North Queensland is experiencing a pronounced ageing of its population driven by longer life expectancies and inward migration.²⁷ Approximately 18 per cent of the region's population is currently aged 65 or older and this proportion is projected to grow by 1.8 per cent annually. The fastest growth is expected in the Cairns SA4 region where the number of residents aged 65 and older is expected to exceed 80,000 by 2046, an increase of 32,473 people in just 25 years.²⁸

Domestic migration is driving population growth in the region. Between 2016 and 2021, 35 per cent of Far North Queensland residents had relocated from elsewhere in Australia, while only 3 per cent had migrated from overseas.²⁹ Net inward migration is positive across all age groups, including those 65 and older, who are most likely to require aged care services.³⁰

This trend will increase demand for aged care services and workforce supply, alongside the social and community infrastructure required to deliver high quality care.

The expanding care economy

Healthcare and social assistance, which encompasses aged care, is the largest employing industry in Far North Queensland, with more than

20,000 workers (16.7 per cent of the workforce).³¹ Employment in this sector is projected to grow by 12.4 per cent over the five years to 2027-2028, significantly outpacing overall workforce growth of 4.3 per cent.³² Growth is driven by workforce demand across a range of sectors including healthcare, aged care and disability care.

The aged care workforce is predominantly female and 43 per cent of nursing and personal care staff are aged 45 years and older.³³ Many of these workers are nearing retirement, which is intensifying the need to attract, train and retain new entrants. Flexible career pathways across health, disability and aged care could help sustain workforce numbers and provide opportunities for workers at different career and life stages.

A changing regulatory environment

The introduction of the *Aged Care Act 2024*³⁴ brings new obligations for providers, reinforcing the need for a skilled adaptable workforce. Staff will require training to meet compliance standards and to embed quality and safety across care settings.

In 2021, the report of the *Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety* emphasised the importance of workforce training in cultural safety, dementia care and palliative care. Community expectations are high that providers, government and education partners will work together to raise workforce capability across the sector.

Together, these megatrends and drivers highlight the need for proactive workforce planning in Far North Queensland. An ageing population will increase demand for services, the expanding care economy will intensify competition for skilled workers, technological innovation will require new capabilities and training pathways and regulatory reform will set higher expectations for quality and safety. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated strategy that builds a culturally responsive, technologically capable and sustainable workforce.

29 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Regional internal migration estimates, provisional*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-internal-migration-estimates-provisional/latest-release>

30 *ibid.*

31 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Census of Population and Housing, Working Population Profile – W09. Data compiled and presented by Queensland Government Statistician's Office*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area>

32 Jobs Queensland. (2025). *Anticipating Future Skills Series, Cairns Region*. Ipswich: Queensland Government. https://jobsqueensland.qld.gov.au/_resources/files/pdf/afs-5/cairns-regional-summary-afs.pdf

33 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). *GEN Aged Care Data, 2023 Aged Care Provider Workforce Survey: Report*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.gen-agedcaredata.gov.au/resources/publications/2024/december/2023-aged-care-provider-workforce-survey-report>

34 Australian Government. (2024). *Aged Care Act 2024: Federal Register of Legislation*. <https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2024A00104/asmade/text>

Regional training profile

Technological innovation

Advances in technology are changing workplaces across the economy, offering opportunities to improve efficiency, safety and quality of care. Technological advances are poised to change how age care is delivered and facilitate improvements in the quality of care.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the uptake of telehealth, digital training and automation, trends that are now embedding across the sector.³⁵ Emerging technologies include:³⁶

- assistive technology to support mobility and safety
- electronic health and records management
- robotics for food service, laundry and cleaning
- telehealth to expand access to care
- virtual and online training for the workforce.

While innovation offers benefits, it must be introduced thoughtfully. Not all older Australians find digital solutions accessible and many would prefer face-to-face services such as My Aged Care counters to be available in shopping centres. Successful adoption depends on evidence-based decision making, careful evaluation and sharing of lessons across the sector.

To maximise benefits, the aged care workforce must be technologically proficient. Programs such as the Certificate III in Individual Support (Ageing) already incorporate training in technologies that enhance the quality of care. Regions that embrace technological innovation are more likely to attract and retain workers who want to deliver contemporary, high-quality care.

A sustainable and skilled aged care workforce relies on access to high-quality training and education. Workforce development in regional and remote areas can be challenging due to limited training facilities, which restricts opportunities for individuals to gain qualifications locally. Constrained funding for aged care services in these areas can also reduce the resources available for ongoing staff development.³⁷

In Far North Queensland, aged care training is delivered by institutions such as James Cook University (JCU), TAFE Queensland and local registered training organisations (RTOs) including MiHaven Training and the Royal College of Healthcare.

Courses such as the Certificate III in Individual Support (Ageing) provide an entry-level qualification for personal care workers, while the Certificate IV in Ageing Support equips workers with advanced skills for supervisory positions.³⁸ Online VET courses offered by providers within and outside the region, expand accessibility, although hands-on training remains vital for preparing workers to meet the practical demands of aged care roles.

TAFE Queensland delivers core qualifications in ageing support and also offers a Certificate III in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care, reflecting the importance of culturally responsive training in the region. JCU provides nursing and allied health programs with a strong rural and remote focus, ensuring graduates are well equipped to meet the health and aged care needs of Far North Queensland communities.³⁹

In 2023, the Human Welfare Studies and Services field of education recorded the highest VET enrolment levels in the region, highlighting strong community interest in care-related pathways.⁴⁰ While most enrolments were in non-apprenticeship and non-traineeship programs, traineeships remain particularly valuable. Students undertaking aged care traineeships show higher completion rates and are more likely to transition directly into aged care roles. This underscores the importance of structured, work-integrated learning pathways in building workforce capacity.

35 Aged Care Research and Industry Innovation Australia. (2023). *About technology in aged care*. South Australia: Aged Care Research & Industry Innovation Australia. <https://www.ariia.org.au/knowledge-implementation-hub/technology-in-aged-care/about-technology-in-aged-care>

36 hello leaders. (2023). *Incorporating more technology into your service or facility*. Australia: Hello Leaders Australia. <https://helloleaders.com.au/article/incorporating-more-technology-into-your-service-or-facility>

37 Committee for Economic Development of Australia. (2023). *Duty of care: Aged-care sector running on empty*. Australia: Committee for Economic Development of Australia. <https://www.ceda.com.au/researchandpolicies/research/health-ageing/duty-of-care-aged-care-sector-running-on-empty>

38 TAFE Queensland. (2025). *Courses, Aged Care*. Brisbane: Queensland Government. <https://tafeqld.edu.au/courses/study-areas/education-and-community/community-services/aged-care>

39 James Cook University. (2025). *Explore JCU study areas and find your course*. Townsville: James Cook University. <https://www.jcu.edu.au/b/study-areas>

40 National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), *DataBuilder*

Consideration should therefore be given to increasing completion rates through improved candidate selection, raising awareness of the sector realities prior to enrolment and expanding traineeship opportunities.

UnitingCare Queensland's personal carer traineeship program

UnitingCare Queensland's personal carer traineeship program demonstrates how targeted investment in traineeships can strengthen the workforce. Since its launch in February 2022, BlueCare, UnitingCare's aged care division, has enrolled more than 475 trainees in the Certificate III in Individual Support. The program has delivered high student retention rates (70 per cent), reduced recruitment costs and improved staff engagement.

The program is underpinned by strong organisational commitment, robust partnerships with preferred RTOs and a collaborative model that integrates teams across the organisation. Regular check-ins with training partners, supervisors and trainees support quality outcomes and continuous improvement. This case study highlights how well-designed traineeship programs can build capability, retain staff and ensure aged care services are equipped to meet rising demand.

CheckUP Australia's Health Gateway to Industry Schools

The Queensland Government's Gateway to Industry Schools program builds partnerships between schools and industry to help young people acquire the knowledge, skills and attributes needed to participate effectively in the state's economy. Within this framework, the Health Gateway to Industry Schools project delivered by CheckUP funded by the Department of Trade, Employment and Training, focusses on raising awareness of careers the health sector, including aged care. The project provides students with opportunities to explore the diverse roles available in health and community services and to gain practical, work-related experiences. By highlighting aged care as a rewarding career pathway, the initiative strengthens the future workforce pipeline and supports regional employers in meeting growing demand.

School-based VET programs

School-based VET training plays an important role in the region, with strong participation in food and hospitality, sport and recreation and tourism. However, enrolments in human welfare studies and services, a key pathway for aged care, remain low compared to the sector's significant contribution to regional employment. The Health Gateway to Industry Schools program (GISP), delivered by CheckUP funded by the Department of Trade, Employment and Training (DTET), is helping to address this gap by raising awareness of careers in health and aged care among school students.

Challenges remain, including issues with confidentiality agreements and driver licence requirements that limit student participation, particularly in community care roles. Despite these constraints, school-based VET presents an important opportunity to build interest in aged care among younger cohorts. Emerging programs should be closely evaluated to ensure they maximise opportunities for school students while balancing sector requirements, client and student welfare.

Workforce diversification

A sustainable aged care workforce in Far North Queensland must reflect the region's demographic, cultural and life-stage diversity. The sector is predominantly female, with a significant proportion of workers aged 45 years and older, many approaching retirement. This demographic shift highlights the need to attract and retain younger workers to sustain the future workforce.

To ensure workforce sustainability it is important to highlight the range of opportunities available in the sector to the broad community including younger workers, men and parents returning to work after maternity or caring leave. Workforce diversification also encompasses people with disability, semi-retirees and career changers who bring valuable experience and life skills. Flexible work arrangements, part-time roles and supported return-to-work pathways are key strategies for retaining these groups and expanding workforce capacity.

Cultural diversity is a critical consideration. Far North Queensland has a substantial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, alongside residents born overseas and people who speak a language other than English at home. A culturally diverse workforce supported by training programs that strengthen cultural capability, is important to delivering respectful, tailored and inclusive care. First Nations workers unique technical and sociocultural that enhance service accessibility and the quality of care, complementing the contributions of non-Indigenous their colleagues.

It is highly desirable that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples be provided with opportunities for employment by aged care providers in the region. A barrier to this arises from Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples being significantly overrepresented in the criminal justice

system due to systemic disadvantage, historical trauma and discriminatory practices within legal systems. Standard criminal history screening processes can inadvertently exclude qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates from aged care roles, despite their valuable cultural knowledge and community connections. Given that 15.2 per cent of Far North Queensland's population identifies as Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islander people, and 7.4 per cent of those aged 50 and older are from these communities, culturally sensitive screening processes are essential to avoid perpetuating workforce exclusion while maintaining safety standards. A nuanced approach that considers the context of offences, time elapsed, rehabilitation efforts and community support can help ensure Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples have equitable access to aged care employment opportunities.

To future-proof the workforce, initiatives should focus on attracting workers from diverse cultural backgrounds and maintaining a strong focus on cultural competency and inclusivity in training and professional development. Attracting younger workers is important to grow the workforce and address anticipated retirement rates, ensuring workforce stability. Cultural capability and awareness must reflect the breadth of diversity in the region and be inclusive of people living with disability and members of the LGBTIQ+ community. While embracing diversity, it is important for cultural competencies to include mainstream Australian culture which is meaningful to many clients.

By broadening the scope of workforce diversification, Far North Queensland can build a resilient, adaptable and skilled aged care workforce that meets the needs of its ageing and culturally diverse population.

Ageing Australia's Aged Care Is the Place to Be! was designed to attract individuals at the beginning of their career to entry level roles in the aged care sector. The program offered an introduction to aged care and helped participants explore whether to pursue a career in the sector. The program worked with young individuals (15 – 24 yrs), Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people.

Building the business ecosystem

Evolving workforce skill requirements.

The aged care workforce in Far North Queensland is experiencing shifts in skill requirements due to demographic, regulatory, societal and technological changes. These evolving needs must be addressed through targeted training and professional development to ensure a sustainable, high-quality workforce. Key drivers include:

Adaptability to regulatory changes

The implementation of the Aged Care Act 2024 introduces new obligations and conditions for providers. The workforce must be equipped to understand and implement these changes to maintain compliance and uphold high standards of care.

Community engagement and home-based care

With a growing preference for ageing in place, there is increasing demand for staff capable of delivering home-based care. This requires adaptability, independence and professional judgement to maintain care standards outside traditional residential settings.

Digital health technologies

The Australian Government *Aged Care Data and Digital Strategy 2024–2029*⁴¹ aims to modernise and better connect aged care services through data and digital innovation. Technologies such as telehealth and digital care management systems are transforming service delivery, particularly in remote areas. Training in emerging digital tools enhances workplace efficiency, reduces administrative burden and frees time for direct care.

Interdisciplinary collaboration

Collaboration among allied health professionals, nurses, primary care providers and support staff is critical to delivering seamless, high-quality care across service settings.

Person-centred care

Person-centred care values the identity, culture, abilities and life experiences of each individual. Far North Queensland's culturally and linguistically diverse population, including a significant number of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, requires a workforce trained in culturally safe, inclusive and respectful care practices.

Specialised care skills

Increasing numbers of care recipients require specialised care in areas including chronic disease management, dementia care and palliative care. Workforce training must reflect these needs to ensure comprehensive, tailored care.

Ongoing professional development

Continuous professional development is essential for maintaining workforce competence and adapting to evolving care standards. Leadership and management capability is equally critical. Programs such as the Leadership Accelerator provide opportunities for both emerging and experienced leaders to enhance their skills.

Opportunities for workplace growth and innovation

- Flexibility of workforce roles – Modifying and integrating roles such as combining food service responsibilities with personal care duties, can enhance job variety, worker engagement and continuity of care, particularly for clients with dementia.
- Skills and training – Co-development of micro-credentials and training pathways (including for ancillary staff), strengthens workforce capability and awareness of aged care career opportunities.
- Innovation and technology - Expanding telehealth, assistive technologies and AI applications can improve service delivery, support ageing in place and reduce administrative workload. Technologies may also assist workers with language barriers or limited digital literacy.
- Innovative pathways to attract staff – The growing prevalence of family carers offers opportunities to recognise their skills and provide pathways into paid aged care roles within the aged care sector.

41 Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, (2024), *Aged Care Data and Digital Strategy 2024–2029*, Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/aged-care-data-and-digital-strategy>.

Workforce development strategies

Far North Queensland’s aged care sector faces unique workforce challenges, including geographic dispersion, an ageing population and diverse community needs. The following strategies have been developed to build a sustainable, skilled and inclusive workforce. Recommendations are classified as high, medium or low priority based on stakeholder input and regional needs.

Priority 1: Attracting and retaining the aged care workforce.

Raising awareness of career opportunities in aged care is critical to growing the workforce. Roles in aged care should be promoted by highlighting the meaningful nature of the work and the alignment with values such as compassion, empathy and respect for dignity. Recruitment strategies should target both younger workers to address an ageing workforce and mid-career entrants who bring life and care experience. Geographic challenges should be addressed by supporting accommodation, local services and lifestyle appeal in the region.

Recommendation	Actions	Existing funding / programs	Priority
1.1 Increasing community awareness of aged care roles	A: An industry led promotional campaign highlighting aged care as a growing sector offering long-term, meaningful employment. Emphasise opportunities for both young adults and mature workers focussing on roles in the region.		High
	B: Create an enjoyable online self-assessment tool to help individuals identify suitable roles.		Medium
1.2 Maximise attraction and retention of workers in FNQ	A: Develop a 'gateway to employment in Far North Queensland' that connects graduates of vocational training programs with local employment opportunities in aged care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TAFE Centre of Excellence- applied research grants Industry Skills Solutions (ISS) Age Care Working Group, DTET HumanAbility Earn While You Learn (EWYL) Research project 	High
	B: Advocate for increased availability of housing and childcare places for aged care workers relocating from metropolitan or interstate areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aged Care Capital Assistance Program, DHDA 	Medium
1.3 Promote and develop school-based VET pathways	A: Expand school-based VET opportunities in aged care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gateway to Industry Schools Program CheckUP - Health NDS - Community Services Deadly Start - Education2Employment VET in Schools 2026 	High
	B: Evaluate school-based VET training and implement practices that responsibly maximise training opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gateway to Industry Schools Program 	Medium
1.4 Increase workplace flexibility	A: Raise awareness among aged care providers of technological solutions and rostering practices that improve workplace flexibility and retention.		Medium

Priority 2: Enhance service delivery in regional and remote areas.

The dispersed geography of FNQ poses significant challenges for aged care delivery, particularly in rural and remote communities. Innovations such as telehealth and mobile care services are essential to improve service coverage where local providers are limited. Challenges also exist in access to training by workers in regional and remote areas.

Recommendation	Actions	Existing funding / programs	Priority
2.1 Attract aged care workers to regional areas.	A: Advocate for government supported financial incentives (i.e. salary loadings or tax concessions) for aged care workers to undertake placements in regional and remote areas of FNQ.		High
	B: Expand distance and virtual training opportunities to improve accessibility for the regional and remote workforce.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TAFE Centre of Excellence Health Care and Support 	High

Priority 3: Building a diverse and inclusive sector

The cultural diversity of Far North Queensland underscores the importance of delivering aged care services that are inclusive and culturally safe. A culturally and socially diverse workforce improves trust, engagement and service quality.

Recommendation	Actions	Existing funding / programs	Priority
3.1 Enable culturally competent and inclusive care	A: Develop and deliver an industry led program to increase Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Island people in aged care roles, undertaken collaboratively with stakeholders (including Aboriginal Controlled Services).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations 	High
	B: Develop web-based resources to connect Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people to employment opportunities in aged care.		High
	C: Aged care providers to promote widespread uptake of training in cultural awareness, competencies and inclusive care across the workforce.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cairns Regional Jobs Committee and Cairns Chamber of Commerce, Cultural Awareness Handbook. Reconciliation Action Plans, Reconciliation Australia. 	High
	D: Ensure aged care worker screening processes are sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. 	High
	E: Explore the use of AI translation tools to assist workers for whom English is a second language.		Medium

Priority 4: Addressing workforce training needs.

Effective workforce training is fundamental to delivering high-quality, person-centred care. Strategies focus on improving the relevance of VET programs, raising qualification levels, addressing skills gaps and developing leadership and management capability.

Recommendation	Actions	Existing funding / programs	Priority
4.1 Improve workplace relevance of VET training	A: Advocate for enhancements to Certificate III in Individual Support (Aged Care) and Certificate IV in Aged Care to increase the immediate work relevance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HumanAbility: Individual and Disability Support Qualifications: Implementation Review TAFE Centre of Excellence Health Care and Support 	Medium
4.2 Raise the training level of aged care workers	A: Industry led support for PCWs to complete VET training relevant to their role, including government supported TAFE training and remote or virtual training for workers in regional areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fee-Free TAFE TAFE Centre of Excellence Health Care and Support 	High
	B: Advocate for expansion of Fee-Free VET training to Registered Training Organisations located in regional and remote areas that have an established record of high quality training.		High
	C: Promote pathways for aged care workers to pursue nursing qualifications.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aged Care Nursing Scholarships (ACNS) Program, DHDA. 	High
	D: Aged care providers to offer financial incentives for completion of VET training, such as pay-point progression.		High
4.3 Address identified skills gaps	A: Determine the viability and feasibility of using accredited skill sets (micro-credentials) to extend the roles of PCWs, ENs RNs into allied health areas of physiotherapy and podiatry under supervision of allied health providers.		High
	B: Increase the uptake of training in specialist areas of care including chronic illnesses, dementia management, mental health and palliative care, leveraging existing programs where possible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dementia Australia 	High
	C: Upskill care givers in assistive technologies supporting mobility, communication and daily activities, improving efficiency in administrative tasks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	Medium
	D: Identify and reduce barriers to the utilisation of technological innovation in aged care service delivery, including telecare models of care delivery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	Medium
4.4 Develop tools to support leadership and management	A: Develop and disseminate a model business process for high quality traineeship programs.		High
	B: Provide training in social media to highlight good news stories and undertake recruitment.		High
	C: Increase accessibility for the aged care workforce to evidence-based practices in aged care delivery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ARIIA Innovation Capability Program 	Medium
	D: Promote opportunities for aged care leaders to undertake leadership training.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ageing Australia Leadership Accelerator and Foundational Leadership Programs, Ageing Australia 	High

Priority 5: Building the auxiliary workforce.

Auxiliary roles, including administration, catering, cleaning, maintenance, transport and pastoral care are essential to delivering high-quality aged care services. Providing exposure and training opportunities for these roles helps attract and retain workers.

Recommendation	Actions	Existing funding / programs	Priority
5.1 Support training programs for auxiliary staff	A: Increase educational and training opportunities for auxiliary staff, including VET work placements (e.g. trainee Chefs).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service and Creative Skills Council (SaCSA) Culinary Skills for Aged Care Food Service. • TAFE QLD 	Medium



Appendix 1

Industry code and name	ANZSIC subcategories	ANZSIC subcategories	Tasks/Activities
	860 Residential care services	8601 Aged care residential services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodation for the aged operation • Aged care hostel operation • Nursing home operation • Residential care for the aged operation
	879 Other Social Assistance Services	8790 Other Social Assistance Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult day care centre operation • Aged care assistance service

Acknowledgement

Ageing Australia in partnership with Jobs Queensland would like to acknowledge the support of the Industry Advisory Group. The Advisory Group was established to support the delivery of this industry-led workforce plan that describes short, medium and long-term strategies for developing a skilled workforce capable of meeting the growing workforce demand over the next three to five years and ensure delivery of high-quality care in the years to come.

The primary objective of the Advisory Group was to provide Ageing Australia with advice to help guide the project and provide industry endorsement of project deliverables to meet industry's needs and expectations. The AG consisted of representatives of:

- Bolton Clarke
- Northern Queensland Primary Health Network
- CheckUP Australia
- St Johns Community Care
- Freestone Associates
- TAFE Centre of Excellence
- Health Workforce Queensland
- Uniting Care QLD
- Independent Living Support Association
- Wunun Consultancy Pty Ltd
- James Cook University

We thank them for their time and industry expertise.

Our thanks is also extended to the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (ECCQ) and stakeholders that attended the ECCQ Diversity and Inclusion Forum in Cairns on 13 August 2025. Stakeholders in attendance were consulted regarding workforce challenges, opportunities and solutions in the region to inform development of this workforce plan.

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<https://employment.agedservicesworkforce.com.au/regionalworkforceprogram>