



# South Waikato Workforce, Employment and Training Needs Study

South Waikato Investment Fund Trust

November 2025

 **Veros**

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## Executive Summary

South Waikato has a proud history of industry, resilience, and innovation. However, the district's workforce system is under pressure. Many employers are struggling to find the people and skills they need, while young people face complex pathways from school into training and work, often without clear direction, support, or exposure to real job opportunities.

This Workforce, Employment and Training Study was commissioned by SWIFT to take an honest, evidence-based look at these challenges and identify practical actions that can strengthen local pathways, support employers, and build a resilient, future-ready workforce.

Through extensive engagement with employers, schools, tertiary providers, youth organisations, government agencies, and iwi partners, coupled with some data analysis, several consistent themes emerged.

### A workforce system under strain

Local industries are dealing with a combination of pressures:

- A significantly changing workforce landscape with major job cuts across the district.
- Growing shortages in critical trades such as mechanical engineering, fitting and turning, heavy diesel, joinery, and processing.
- An ageing workforce, with some trades averaging workers in their late 50s and 60s, forecasting significant numbers of retirees in the short term.
- Persistent foundational skills gaps, including reliability, communication, and basic literacy and numeracy.
- Low attendance and high NEET rates, reflect high youth disengagement.
- Training that does not fully match industry demand, leaving employers unable to access local trained employees.

These pressures reinforce each other. Employers cannot grow because the workforce pipeline is too thin. Young people are disconnected from local opportunities. Providers struggle to deliver viable programmes. Communities feel the impact of broader change.

### Youth pathways are fragmented and hard to navigate

Schools and kura are doing their best in a challenging environment. But young people often lack:

- Early exposure to workplaces
- Coordinated career guidance
- Access to tasters or hands-on learning
- Support transitioning from school to further training and workplaces
- Support to develop soft skills such as commitment, reliability, and communication, which require a coordinated, holistic approach across home, school, workplaces, social networks, and government support to ensure young people are fully prepared for further training and employment.

These factors contribute to uncertainty, low confidence, and limited awareness of the jobs available locally, including well-paid opportunities they may never have considered.

### Tertiary training provision needs to evolve

South Waikato is deeply reliant on accessible, practical, in-person training. Online-only or distant programmes do not work for many learners, and employers strongly prefer hands-on delivery. However, offering flexibility is also important to cater for all needs.

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At present, there is a clear gap between what industries need and what is locally available. Pūkenga Rau plays a vital role as the district's trades training hub, but delivery is limited and not always aligned with employer demand. Stakeholders expressed strong support for strengthening and expanding local provision, ideally through a flexible, multi-provider model, which was supported by Tertiary providers as well.

### Looking ahead: new skills and new opportunities

The district is shifting economically. While forestry and manufacturing remain important, South Waikato has growing opportunities in:

- Advanced manufacturing
- Processing
- Logistics
- Healthcare and social services
- Digital and tech-enabled work.

These industries require a mix of technical, digital, and transferable skills, in addition to softer skills. Building these pathways locally will help young people stay connected to opportunity and help employers stay competitive.

### Culturally grounded pathways strengthen participation

South Waikato has a comparatively young age profile, with close to 30% of the Māori population aged under 15 and more than 20% aged 15-29. Culturally embedded approaches, led in partnership with Raukawa, iwi, hapū, and Pacific community leaders, are important to strengthening participation, confidence, and long-term employment outcomes.

Stakeholder conversations identified a need for deeper pathway mapping to support culturally embedded workforce planning.

These approaches are not "add-ons". They are central to building a workforce that reflects and strengthens local identity, wellbeing, and aspirations.

### A system-level opportunity for South Waikato

The findings of this study point to a clear opportunity:

**With the right co-ordination, South Waikato can build a local training system that is more connected, more responsive, and better aligned to future workforce needs.**

This requires:

- Closer links between schools, industry, iwi, Government and providers
- Better exposure, support and guidance for young people
- Practical, work-based local delivery
- Strong foundational skills support with wrap around pastoral care during transition periods
- A renewed vision for Pūkenga Rau
- Shared commitment across local partners - industry, council, Government, SWIFT, iwi and community agencies.

### Where this report leads

The sections that follow unpack the evidence behind these themes and outline a path forward. The final chapters present a set of practical recommendations that SWIFT and local partners can consider using to strengthen pathways, support employers, and build a workforce that is confident, skilled, and ready for the future.

## Purpose, Scope and Approach

### Purpose

South Waikato is facing a combination of workforce challenges and opportunities. Employers are calling for people with strong foundational skills, technical capability, and a willingness to learn. At the same time, young people are working hard to navigate complex pathways into training and employment. Local training provision has shifted in recent years, creating uncertainty about the future of in-person delivery and the sustainability of key facilities such as Pūkenga Rau.

SWIFT commissioned this study to build a clear picture of what the district needs now and into the future. The purpose of this work is to:

- Understand the workforce and skill requirements across South Waikato's key industries
- Explore the experiences of employers, schools, young people, and training providers
- Assess the alignment between training supply and industry demand
- Examine the role and future potential of Pūkenga Rau as a local hub for hands-on learning
- Identify practical actions and partnership opportunities that can strengthen pathways
- Provide SWIFT and local partners with an evidence base for decision-making.

This is a strategic study. It focuses on system-level insights, long-term workforce needs, and opportunities to strengthen coordination across schools, industry, iwi, social services, and tertiary providers.

### Scope

The scope of the study is centred on four core areas:

#### 1. Workforce needs

Identifying the current and emerging skill requirements across South Waikato's major industries, including technical trades, process manufacturing, forestry, logistics, food production, environmental services, and community care.

#### 2. Training and education pathways

- Understanding how people move (or don't move) from school into training, employment, and progression, and examining barriers that limit participation.
- As part of this the study also sought to engage with kura kaupapa to better understand transition gaps and the reasons some students disengage from pathways despite being engaged at school. Guidance was obtained from Raukawa on how to approach this engagement appropriately. While a planned workshop with senior students and school leadership could not proceed due to time constraints within the schools, a survey was distributed to senior students. Engagement was limited, with eight responses received across three schools. This leaves an ongoing gap in understanding these pathways, that warrants further exploration.

#### 3. Tertiary provision and the role of Pūkenga Rau

Assessing:

- Current courses delivered locally
- Alignment with industry needs
- Fit-for-purpose considerations
- Opportunities for multi-provider delivery models

- How Pūkenga Rau can support future workforce development

#### 4. System gaps, opportunities, and solutions

Identifying:

- Where pathways break down
- Where employers struggle to access skills
- Where young people and adults lose momentum
- What a more coordinated, responsive system could look like

#### Out of scope

This study identifies system pressures and opportunities for workforce development and provides an evidence-based set of strategic recommendations to support future planning. Detailed implementation, investment modelling, and operational delivery sit outside the scope of this report and are considered a next phase of work.

## Methodology and engagement

This study is grounded in local engagement and a mix of qualitative and quantitative information.

### Engagement with employers

Direct conversations were held with 22 businesses across manufacturing, forestry, engineering, food production, retail, education services and community services. In total we spoke to 28 entities including schools and Government agencies. These discussions focused on:

- Workforce needs
- Recruitment challenges
- Training experiences
- Skill gaps
- Future industry direction
- Retention and succession

These insights form a central pillar of the findings.

### Engagement with schools and kura

We engaged with three secondary schools/kura to understand:

- Exposure to vocational learning
- Careers guidance
- Student aspirations
- Transition supports
- Challenges with attendance, engagement, and readiness

A small student survey helped capture youth perspectives.

### Engagement with tertiary providers

Conversations were held with:

- Toi Ohomai | Te Pūkenga
- Wintec
- Te Wānanga o Aotearoa

These covered:

- Current and future delivery in South Waikato
- Model constraints and opportunities
- Barriers to local programme viability
- Potential for shared delivery at Pūkenga Rau

### Engagement with iwi and community

Raukawa, youth organisations, and community service providers shared views on:

- Cultural and whānau-based learning
- Barriers to access
- The importance of identity, wellbeing, and support
- Opportunities to build culturally grounded workforce pathways

These perspectives inform later recommendations.

### Engagement with Council and Government

We also engaged with MoE, MSD and South Waikato District Council (SWDC) to understand their roles in delivering support and perspectives on current challenges.

### Data and document analysis

Alongside local engagement, the study reviewed:

- Demographic data
- Workforce and qualification statistics
- Education performance data
- Neet, attendance, achievement, and transition indicators
- Existing local and regional strategies
- National reforms affecting tertiary and vocational delivery

### Workshop attendance

Three open workshops were offered and publicly promoted through SWDC and SWIFT channels, but uptake was limited. Employers indicated a preference for one-on-one conversations at their workplace. This led to richer, more specific insights and ultimately strengthened the quality of the evidence base.



## Limitations

This study aims to provide a strategic view of South Waikato's workforce system. As such:

- The findings are based primarily on qualitative engagement and local data.
- Student survey responses were limited (eight participants) and should be interpreted as indicative only.
- Some data was provided on the condition it is not directly referenced, as it represents internal interpretations or analyses; this information has been used to inform insights without compromising confidentiality.
- These limitations do not affect the validity of the broad themes and insights, which were consistently reinforced across stakeholders.

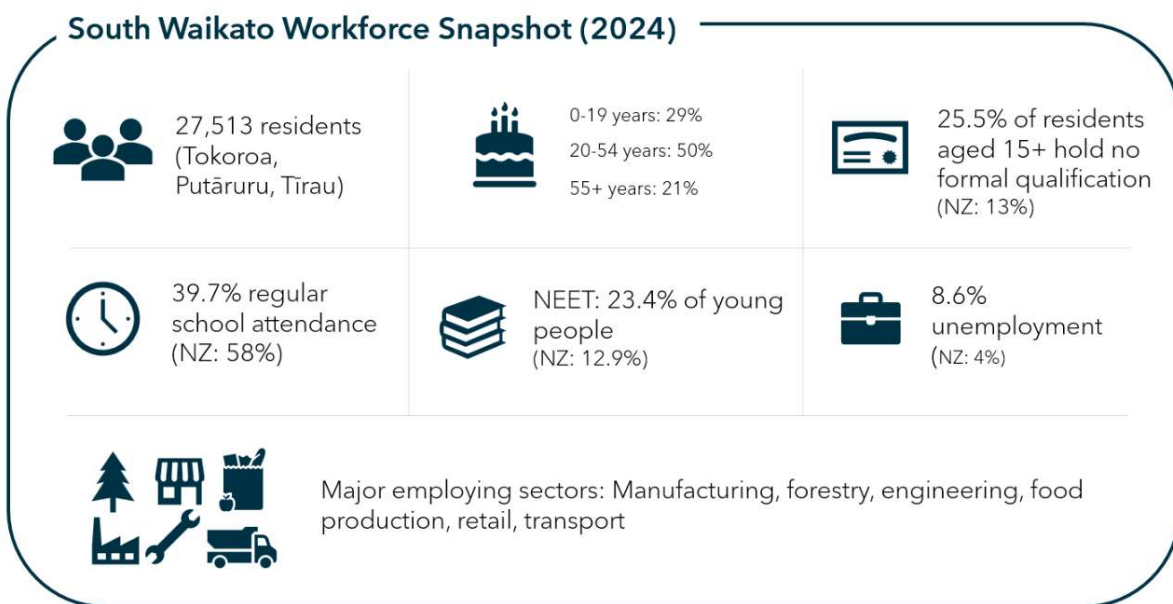
## South Waikato Context

South Waikato is experiencing significant demographic, economic, and workforce change. These shifts are reshaping local labour supply, training needs, and the pathways available to young people and adults. Understanding this context is essential for designing an effective, locally responsive workforce development approach.

South Waikato District is located in the central North Island, bordered by Hamilton to the northwest, Tauranga to the northeast, Rotorua to the east, and Taupō to the south. The district’s main towns, Tokoroa, Putāruru, and Tīrau, are connected by State Highway 1, providing efficient access to Hamilton (1 hour 10 minutes) and Auckland (approximately 2 hours 20 minutes). This central location influences commuting patterns, regional labour mobility, and access to tertiary providers. While many residents travel outside the district for work or training, others face constraints due to transport, cost, or distance.

### South Waikato at a glance

South Waikato District is home to a diverse and resilient community with strong manufacturing, timber processing, forestry, and engineering roots. These legacy industries remain important, alongside food production, logistics, retail, and social services.



*South Waikato’s workforce is young, diverse, and shaped by strong manufacturing, timber processing, forestry, and engineering sectors but faces significant challenges with qualifications, school attendance, and youth engagement.*

However, the district also faces several long-standing pressures:

- High levels of socioeconomic deprivation
- Low rates of school attendance
- A high proportion of residents with no formal qualification

These factors shape both the skills required and the way in which training must be delivered.

## Population and demographic profile

As of 2024, South Waikato has a population of 27,513, with an even split between males and females. The district has a comparatively young population, with 32.7% of residents aged under 24. The largest working-age group is 25 to 44 years (25%), slightly below the national proportion of 29%.

As outlined in the South Waikato Housing Stocktake, residents identify as follows. (Note: people may select more than one ethnic group, so these figures reflect overlapping identities, not separate categories):

- 69% European
- 38.3% Māori (more than double the national rate of 17.8%)
- 13.5% Pacific Peoples (compared with 8.9% nationally)
- Less than 10% identify with Asian, Middle Eastern/Latin American/African, or other ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>.

Socioeconomic deprivation is a significant factor in the district. 85% of residents live in areas ranked 6-10 on the national deprivation index (compared with 51% nationally). These demographic and social characteristics influence local training needs, workforce readiness, and the types of pathways required to support the district's current and future labour market.

## Economic shift and industry change

### Legacy industries under pressure

Long-standing manufacturing, forestry, and wood-processing industries are restructuring or closing. These sectors have historically provided stable work, apprenticeships, and intergenerational employment pathways. Recent changes have been rapid, creating uncertainty for both employers and workers.

### Major redundancies and local impacts

Recent closures and downsizing include:

- 230 job losses at Kinleith Paper Mill
- 120 job losses from Carter Holt Harvey's Tokoroa plywood plant

These redundancies affect not only displaced workers but also:

- Contractors
- Engineering firms
- Transport operators
- Local businesses linked to forestry and manufacturing

Given the generational reliance on these sectors, the social and cultural impact is particularly significant.

### Transition risks for displaced workers

Displaced workers face a range of risks, including:

- Limited availability of comparable local jobs
- Risk of long-term underemployment
- Increased reliance on MSD support

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<sup>1</sup> South Waikato district stocktake April 2025

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- Outward migration in search of work
- Further erosion of apprenticeship pathways

The loss of skilled roles accelerates shortages in mechanical, electrical, and engineering-based trades.

### Emerging sectors and new opportunities

At the same time, new and growing industries are emerging, including:

- Small-scale manufacturing
- Food production
- Logistics
- Retail
- Health and social services



These sectors require first and foremost soft skills, but also new capabilities - including digital literacy, modern engineering skills, up-to-date compliance knowledge and adaptability as technology adoption increases across workplaces.

### Why this shift matters

- South Waikato's economy is diversifying, but the transition period is challenging.
- Workforce supply is tightening as traditional industries shrink.
- Training pathways are not yet aligned to emerging sector needs.
- A coordinated, locally accessible training system is now critical.

## Labour market pressures

### Workforce gaps

Employers report ongoing difficulty recruiting for both entry-level and intermediate roles, particularly in<sup>23</sup>:

- Mechanical engineering
- Electrical
- Fitting and turning
- Heavy diesel
- Construction and trades
- Care and community services

A large proportion of experienced tradespeople are nearing retirement age, creating urgency for succession planning and new talent pipelines. A number of employers we engaged with are now scrambling to put succession plans and workforce development strategies in place and are worried about the pipeline of workers.

<sup>2</sup> South Waikato District Quarterly Economic Monitor June 2025

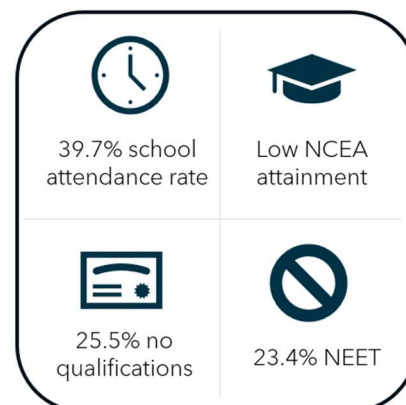
<sup>3</sup> [Education Counts Home | Education Counts](#)

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### Education and training indicators

Key workforce-related education indicators show a pattern of early disengagement:

- School attendance: 39.7% regular attendance (NZ: 58%)
- No qualification: 25.5% of residents aged 15+ (NZ: 13%)
- NCEA Level 2 attainment: 62.1% (NZ: 76.1%)
- NEET: 23.4% of 15-24-year-olds (NZ: 12.9%)
- Tertiary transitions: 41.9% enrol one year after leaving school (NZ: 58.1%)
- Retention to age 17: 62.7% (NZ: 81%)
- Average attendance (to June 2025): 45% (NZ: 58.1%)



These indicators directly affect eligibility for apprenticeships, readiness for work, and the long-term talent pipeline.

### Foundational skills

Employers consistently emphasise the need for stronger foundational skills, literacy, numeracy, digital confidence, problem-solving, communication, and reliability. These skills underpin safe work practices, progression within roles, and the successful adoption of new technologies.

## Broader social and economic pressures

### High deprivation and wellbeing pressures

With 85% of residents living in high-deprivation areas, rising to 96% in some urban zones, many households face challenges linked to:

- Mental health
- Addiction
- Poor housing quality
- Financial pressure

These factors affect learning readiness, attendance, and sustained participation in training.

“  
Employers consistently reported that young people and adult learners are willing but face multiple barriers that limit access to work and training.  
”

### Transport and mobility

Transport is one of the most significant barriers for both youth and adults. Many residents do not have access to a vehicle or a full driver licence, limiting their ability to travel to Hamilton, Rotorua, or other centres for study, block courses, or work. Tertiary providers like Toi Ohoimai do provide free transport for some courses provided out of town (e.g. Forestry in Rotorua.)

### Digital access

Digital access remains uneven. Limited connectivity, access to devices, and quiet study spaces make online learning difficult for many learners and unsuitable as a primary mode of delivery.

### Positive employer commitment

Despite these pressures, South Waikato has a committed base of employers who actively invest in training, offer apprenticeships, and support work-experience opportunities. Many expressed willingness to collaborate more closely if coordination and local delivery were strengthened.

### Migration and talent retention

Outward migration, particularly of young people seeking training opportunities, continues to affect the local labour market. Employers also report difficulty attracting skilled workers from outside the district. Some were bringing workers in from overseas, with two stating they were hiring Filipino employees from overseas. Strengthening local training and progression pathways is essential for retaining talent.



## Implications for workforce development

These demographics, economic, and labour market conditions create a complex environment for workforce development. Employers face shortages in both technical and entry-level roles, while learners face structural and personal barriers to participation. Without targeted, locally accessible, and culturally responsive training options, these pressures are likely to persist.

Together, these factors reinforce the need for a coordinated, district-wide training system that is local, flexible, and directly aligned with industry needs.

## Employer and Workforce Insights

Employers across South Waikato were generous with their time and candid in sharing the challenges and opportunities they see in the local workforce – they spoke highly of SWIFT and the work being done to date by the numerous project groups – but stressed the need for an industry engaged and collaboratively led approach. Their insights form the heart of this study.

Across industries, including automotive, flooring, joinery and glazing, fitting and turning, manufacturing, engineering, early childhood education, forestry, food production, transport, retail, and community services, the themes were remarkably consistent. Employers want to hire local where possible, invest in talent, and some had plans for growth. They want to support young people into meaningful careers. They already provide training and on-the-job development. But they face persistent barriers that make it difficult to build and sustain the skilled workforce they need.

This section brings together the key workforce insights from employer engagement, supported by themes from schools, community organisations, and the data.

### Foundational skills gap

Across all industries, employers consistently identified foundational skills rather than technical capability as the biggest barrier to employment.

Foundational skills include:

- Reliability and attendance
- Communication and teamwork
- Willingness to learn
- Problem-solving and initiative
- Basic literacy and numeracy
- Turning up prepared and ready to work.

These skills matter in every role, from entry-level production to technical trades.

Some employers described situations where experienced workers struggle with paperwork, online systems, health and safety reporting, or digital processes, not due to lack of intelligence or effort, but because foundational skills were not well developed earlier in life. Basic employability skills like communications, reliability, commitment, were also lacking.

### Implications

- Training programmes need strong foundation skill components
- Schools and families need support to strengthen attendance, engagement, and work habits
- Employers need help bridging workplace expectations with young people's lived realities
- Successful training requires both technical skills and confidence, literacy, numeracy, and communication.

Foundational skills are the critical building block for the entire workforce pipeline.

### Technical and trade shortages

Most employers described ongoing shortages in technical trades and hands-on roles. These shortages are not new but they are now more urgent.

“

*If applicants can't turn up at school – they can't turn up in a job.*

”

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### Roles in highest demand

- Mechanical engineering
- Fitting and turning
- Heavy diesel mechanics
- Electrical
- Maintenance and automation technicians
- Process and machine operators
- Joinery, flooring, glazing, and construction trades.

Manufacturers also reported growing demand for multi-skilled workers who can operate machinery, troubleshoot, and adapt to new processes.

### Why these shortages matter

These roles:

- Are essential to daily operations
- Require specialised training
- Take years to develop
- Are difficult to recruit from outside the district
- Often have limited alternative suppliers.

In small towns, the loss of even one or two key tradespeople can disrupt an entire sector.

### Implications

- South Waikato urgently needs a reliable local training pipeline
- Without local delivery, shortages will keep growing
- Feedback consistently suggests an in-district training offering is essential for hands-on trades.

## Ageing workforce profile

Many of the district's skilled tradespeople are nearing retirement. Employers estimate the average ages in some roles as:

- Fitters/turners: late 50s to mid-60s
- Heavy diesel engineers: 50s-60s
- Senior mechanical and automation technicians: 50s+

This represents significant institutional knowledge that will be difficult to replace.

### What this means for the district

- Retirements will accelerate shortages
- Younger workers are not entering these trades in sufficient numbers
- Employers are concerned about succession
- Many are already training juniors, but cannot train fast enough

### Implications

- Immediate effort is needed to build a new cohort of apprentices and trainees
- Long-term workforce sustainability depends on strengthening school-to-trade pathways
- Mapping and supporting retirement transitions will be important

### Barriers to participation

Employers, schools, and youth organisations highlighted several barriers that prevent both young people and adults from entering or staying in work and training.

Key barriers include:

- Transport - Many learners cannot get to training or work reliably, especially early morning shifts or locations outside town.
- Cost - The cost of tools, workwear, petrol, course fees, childcare, and lost income can delay or block participation.
- Digital access - Limited devices or connectivity make online learning, which is increasingly common, difficult or impossible.
- Confidence and wellbeing - Limited local support and lack of industry exposure mean some rangatahi lack confidence and disengage from training pathways after school, entering casual work, pausing their next steps, or withdrawing temporarily from study and employment.
- Literacy and numeracy - Low literacy and numeracy levels limit progress in training and hinder access to apprenticeships.
- Workplace exposure - Many young people have limited knowledge of local industries or what jobs actually involve, including tasks, environments, expectations and requirements.



### How barriers compound

Barriers rarely occur in isolation. For example:

- Poor attendance → lower achievement → lower confidence → fewer options
- Cost barriers → inability to join a course → long-term disengagement
- Digital barriers → failure to complete online components → early withdrawal

### Implications

- Training models must be local, practical, and well-supported
- Wraparound support is essential for many learners
- Employers and providers need more structured, coordinated support systems

### Summary: what employers told us

Employers are strongly committed to South Waikato and want to grow their people and their businesses. Across engagement, they consistently described real challenges in finding, preparing, and retaining workers, alongside structural gaps in the current training and workforce system.

In summary, employers highlighted that:

1. **Foundational skills are a major concern.** Many new workforce entrants lack confidence in literacy, numeracy, communication, digital skills, and general work readiness.
2. **Local training options are limited.** Employers report that online learning and travel to other centres are not effective for many learners and make it harder to develop talent locally.
3. **The workforce system feels fragmented.** Employers often rely on individual relationships rather than coordinated processes to access students, trainees, or support services.

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4. **Engagement with schools is inconsistent and hard to navigate.** Employers want to support young people earlier but find the school system difficult to connect with and uneven across the district.
5. **There are a limited number people entering practical and technical pathways.** Employers described a shrinking pipeline into trades, engineering, manufacturing, and processing roles.
  - **Recruitment is increasingly difficult.** Many businesses struggle to find applicants who meet basic skill requirements or who are able to stay engaged through training.

These insights reinforce the need to strengthen pathways from school into training and work, clarify how employers can engage, and ensure learners receive the foundational skills and support they need to enter and succeed in local industries.

## Youth Pathways

Young people in South Waikato are navigating a complex and often fragmented pathway into training and employment. Schools, kura, employers, community organisations, and whānau all play a role, but the system doesn't always work in a coordinated way, and many young people struggle to build the confidence, exposure, and foundations they need to transition successfully.

This section brings together youth-specific insights from schools, students, employers, and youth services providers to understand why transitions break down, what supports are missing, and where the strongest opportunities exist to strengthen the pipeline.

### Exposure and early awareness

Young people don't always see the opportunities around them, yet feel pressured to make decisions about career pathways.

A consistent theme across schools and employers is that many students are unaware of the full range of career pathways available locally. They often know about a handful of familiar jobs, but not the breadth of roles in engineering, food production, logistics, forestry, healthcare, automation, environmental management, or trades.

#### Limited workplace exposure

Schools are working on creating experiences for students, but several constraints make it difficult to provide consistent workplace exposure:

- Health and safety requirements
- Limited transport to employer sites
- Staff capacity and timetabling
- Lack of dedicated pathway coordinators
- Competing academic demands

The level of prioritisation given to supporting these pathways is also unclear, it seems more could be done.

Because, this means fewer opportunities for students to:

- See jobs in action
- Understand workplace expectations
- Meet employers
- Try hands-on activities
- Build confidence

#### Why exposure matters

Early exposure is associated with:

- Work readiness
- Confidence
- Clarity about career direction
- Interest in trades or industry roles
- Successful transition into apprenticeships

“

*Employees used to be happy to sweep the sheds and work their way up, younger generations want progression immediately.*

”

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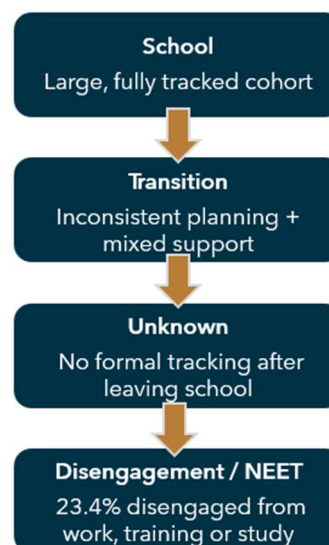
Stakeholders noted that the absence of consistent workplace exposure, particularly when paired with other barriers, can contribute to learners losing momentum or withdrawal from vocational pathways.

### Transition gaps

There appear to be a “cliff edge” after school. Schools and employers both described a gap immediately after Year 12 or 13 where young people finish school but don’t have a clear next step and aren’t well supported into their next chapter. Many:

- Start casual work
- Sign up for short courses but drop out
- Take time off to “figure things out”
- Become discouraged or overwhelmed
- Struggle with transport or cost barriers
- Lose confidence after unsuccessful attempts and don’t have backup plans in place.

This “cliff edge” is dangerous because, once students leave school, “no one is tracking them,” and the fall out seems to occur whenever there are gaps in the system. Schools attempt to plan transitions, but there is no consistent formal tracking once students depart, leading to assumptions that the students “have got everything set and understand” the environments they are entering. To mitigate this loss of learners, the report recommends considering models like the community-driven Otorohanga initiative, where every single student has an Individual Education Pathway (IEP) and a clear trajectory to follow.



### Inconsistent transition supports

Some students get hands-on support from teachers, careers staff, and pathway coordinators but this is not universal or consistent. Schools want to do more, but often lack:

- Dedicated resource and funding
- Local training options
- Clear mechanisms for employer partnerships
- Culturally responsive approaches to career planning.

### Fragmented connections between schools and employers

Schools and employers both want stronger relationships, but there is no coordinated structure to:

- Broker introductions – it is very adhoc, some businesses mentioned reaching out and getting little feedback
- Plan visits
- Align gateway placements
- Support apprenticeships
- Coordinate taster days
- Share information regularly.

MoE operates within a framework where schools maintain autonomy over their specific vocational program partnerships, even though the MoE’s main part is ensuring access and opportunity. This has contributed significantly to the fragmentation noted by stakeholders. For instance, Putaruru schools have gone under the umbrella of the Waikato Trades Academy, while Tokoroa High School partners

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with the BOP/Rotorua Future Academy. The Ministry noted that historically, when unification around vocational pathways existed, all secondary schools worked collaboratively, and unification would help achieve better scales of economy and efficiency. Fragmentation leads to duplications and inefficiencies, making it harder to "join the dots" between pathways. This makes it harder for young people to step into well-supported pathways.

### Students who leave school early

Schools highlighted a growing group of students who disengage before completing NCEA Level 2 - timing that often sees more focused support for senior students around career pathways. These students need specialised support and practical training options, but accessible local pathways are limited.

## Student voice and influences

A small survey was conducted with students. While the sample size was limited (eight responses from three schools), but the insights still highlight important themes. These findings should be regarded as indicative, not representative, as they likely represent feedback from well engaged senior students.

### What influences students most?

Students said their decisions about training or work are shaped by:

- Whānau and family expectations
- Teachers and school leaders
- Friends and peer groups
- Social media
- Perceptions of what jobs are "good" or "secure"

Students also highlighted the importance of:

- Wanting to feel confident and supported
- Needing to understand what work will be like day-to-day



Figure 1: Who influences students' futures

### What students want more of

- Opportunities to try things hands-on
- Practical tasters and short courses
- Work visits and employer talks
- Clearer guidance on pathways and qualifications
- Support with confidence, communication, and "life skills"
- More information about local industries

What students worry about

- Choosing the wrong path
- Not knowing enough about courses or jobs
- Money and affordability
- Fitting in or performing well
- Feeling judged for not having a clear direction

These insights reinforce the need for a more structured and supportive transitions system.

“  
Without early exposure to real workplaces, young people don't understand the opportunities that already exist in their own community.  
”

## Implications for workforce supply

Bringing these youth pathway insights together reveals several important implications for the local workforce pipeline.

### 1. Exposure gaps reduce confidence and limit aspiration

Without seeing jobs first-hand, many young people don't consider trades, engineering, food production, logistics, forestry, or health as viable options, despite high demand and good starting wages. Social media is playing an increasing role in influencing young people as well - with jobs like 'influencers' increasingly being reported as of interest as a career path.

### 2. Early disengagement leads to long-term barriers

Low attendance, patchy engagement, and inconsistent support can compound over time, making it harder for young people to transition confidently into work or training.

### 3. Support structures are not consistent

Schools and kura are working on support structures but they need:

- More resources
- Stronger industry partnerships
- Accessible in-district training options
- Shared systems for transitions
- Broader and more committed support across the wider network influencing young people - families, sports clubs etc.

### 4. Local training is essential

Young people are more likely to succeed when training is:

- Local
- Hands-on and engaging
- Supportive
- Delivered in small groups
- Connected to employers
- Culturally grounded

### 5. Collaboration is the missing link

Employers, iwi, schools, and providers each hold part of the puzzle. A coordinated approach would create more coherent pathways and better outcomes for young people.

## Summary: where youth pathways break down

The main pressure points in the youth pipeline are:

- Not enough early exposure
- Inconsistent support at key decision points
- Unclear or confusing training pathways
- Limited local delivery
- Transport and cost barriers
- Confidence and wellbeing challenges

- Weak school-employer-provider coordination

These challenges connect directly to the workforce gaps identified in Section 4. Strengthening youth pathways is one of the most powerful levers South Waikato has to build a resilient, future-ready workforce.

One part of this study sought to better understand the MPowA programme run by Otorohanga District Council; however, we did not receive a response or the information required to consider the model as part of this report at the time of writing.

## Tertiary Provision and Alignment with Industry

South Waikato relies heavily on practical, hands-on, and locally delivered training. Employers strongly prefer in-person learning, and many learners struggle with the cost, travel, or confidence required to study outside the district. As a result, the shape and responsiveness of tertiary provision is directly linked to the strength of the workforce pipeline.

Over recent years, changes in the tertiary sector have affected both the availability and consistency of local delivery, and providers are often constrained by other factors such as financial viability which can influence offerings. This section provides an overview of the current state of provision, alignment with industry needs, the importance of Pūkenga Rau, and opportunities to strengthen local delivery models.

### Current tertiary delivery models in South Waikato

Training in South Waikato is delivered through a combination of:

#### Local in-person delivery

Primarily at Pūkenga Rau in Tokoroa, through Toi Ohomai | Te Pūkenga. Delivery currently includes:

- Carpentry
- Automotive
- Limited engineering or mechanical courses
- Short courses and industry tasters
- Occasional block programmes

Schools and employers value this delivery model because it is hands-on, structured, and accessible.

#### Online or blended delivery

Used increasingly for theory components but widely considered challenging for South Waikato learners due to:

- Digital access issues
- Confidence barriers
- Lack of quiet study environments
- Limited pastoral support

Online learning works well for some, but does not suit the majority of local learners wanting practical, trade-based training.

#### Delivery outside the district

Some residents travel to Rotorua, Hamilton, or other centres for block courses or full qualifications. This is not practical for many due to:

- Cost
- Transport limitations
- Time away from work or family
- Health and wellbeing considerations

This reduces participation and completion.

#### Work-based learning and apprenticeships

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Employers already invest significantly in work-based learning. Many trades (including those in engineering and fitting, manufacturing, processing and forestry) are willing to train apprentices but struggle to access:

- Assessors
- Local off-job components
- Block courses that align with production schedules

### On-site employer-based training

Some larger employers run internal training programmes but still require formal pathways to qualification.

## Alignment gaps between training and industry need

Across all employer conversations, a consistent theme emerged: current training provision does not fully match the skills employers urgently need.

The most significant alignment gaps include:

### 1. Engineering and mechanical trades

Demand is high for:

- Mechanical engineering
- Fitting and turning
- Automation technicians
- Industrial maintenance
- Heavy diesel mechanics

But local delivery of engineering/mechanical trade qualifications is extremely limited.

### 2. Manufacturing and processing

Roles that require:

- Machine operation
- Production troubleshooting
- Automation
- Quality systems
- Health and safety
- Technical literacy

These are not well-supported by structured local training.

### 3. Forestry and wood processing

Employers report limited access to:

- Forestry-specific training
- Chainsaw operation
- Processing technology
- Mill operations
- Supervisory and leadership development

### 4. Construction-related trades

While carpentry and automotive are delivered locally, training in the following is far harder to access:

- Joinery
- Glazing
- Flooring
- Electrical pre-trade
- Forestry.

### 5. Digital and transferable skills

Employers increasingly need workers who can:

- Problem solve and use initiative
- Use digital tools
- Read and interpret data
- Follow automated processes
- Complete online compliance training

But digital literacy varies significantly among learners.

## Why alignment gaps exist

These gaps are not the result of any one provider or decision. They reflect system-level constraints experienced across New Zealand, including:

### Viability thresholds

Providers require minimum enrolments to run courses. Small district populations make some programmes difficult to sustain.

### Funding and regulatory settings

Recent sector reforms and ongoing restructuring have created uncertainty for many providers, with limited flexibility to innovate quickly.

### Staff and assessor shortages

Specialist tutors and assessors are difficult to recruit, particularly in high-demand trades where industry salaries outcompete education.

### Limited collaborative delivery models

Providers often operate separately, but shared delivery or combined cohorts could support achieving viability thresholds.

### Infrastructure constraints

Some programmes require specialist gear, equipment, or facilities that are challenging to install or maintain without long-term certainty.

These constraints help explain why local delivery has become narrower and less responsive.

## Pūkenga Rau: current role and value

Pūkenga Rau is widely recognised by employers, schools, rangatahi, and the wider community as a critical asset for the district.

Its value includes:

- Accessible in-person delivery for learners who cannot travel or relocate
- Hands-on training environment that builds confidence and engagement
- A community hub where schools, employers, and young people can connect
- A visible pathway into trades and vocational careers
- A neutral ground for providers to collaborate

**Pūkenga Rau**

- ✓ Fit-for-purpose facility
- ✓ Strong stakeholder support
- ⚠ Needs course realignment

Employers consistently emphasised that without a local facility, the workforce pipeline will shrink further.

## Fit-for-purpose assessment of Pūkenga Rau

The below outlines commentary on whether Pūkenga Rau is fit-for-purpose. Based on stakeholder feedback and analysis:

### Strengths

- Well-located for schools and employers
- Strong community identity
- Appropriate for small-to-medium cohorts
- Practical, workshop-style environment
- Flexible for multi-purpose use
- Good base infrastructure for trades delivery
- Strong goodwill from local stakeholders to commit resourcing and support.

### Limitations

- Limited utilisation due to gaps in delivery
- Equipment and workshop spaces would benefit from modernisation
- Room sizes and layouts may constrain expanded programmes
- Facility lacks a clear, shared long-term delivery plan
- Not currently set up for multi-provider co-delivery
- Some spaces underused or under-equipped for new industry needs.

### Overall assessment

Pūkenga Rau is fit-for-purpose as a district training hub, but it is underutilised and requires:

- Refreshed investment
- A clearer long-term vision
- Partnership across multiple providers
- Upgraded equipment/technology
- A governance structure that supports shared use

This is entirely achievable and represents one of the district's strongest opportunities.

## Future delivery opportunities

Stakeholders were aligned on several opportunities to strengthen tertiary provision in South Waikato:

### 1. Multi-provider delivery model

A shared model where:

- Multiple providers deliver programmes at Pūkenga Rau
- Courses combine small cohorts from different sectors
- Industry partners co-design delivery
- Rooms and workshops are shared across organisations

This reduces viability constraints and expands options for learners.

### 2. Modular, short-course and taster programmes

Short, practical courses can:

- Build confidence
- Introduce technical concepts
- Allow learners to “try before committing”
- Support early career exploration

These could be co-delivered by providers, employers, and schools.

### 3. Work-based delivery supported by local off-job components

Local off-job delivery for some trades (including forestry and wood processing, automation and heavy diesel) would:

- Reduce travel burdens for apprentices
- Support employers to take on more trainees
- Increase completion rates

### 4. Blended learning with strong local support

Online theory can work when:

- Learners have local pastoral support
- Facilities offer quiet spaces and devices
- Staff help with digital literacy
- Employers reinforce study requirements

### 5. Specialised pathways for high-demand trades

Focused delivery in:

- Mechanical engineering
- Maintenance/automation
- Diesel and heavy vehicle trades
- Process and manufacturing technology
- Construction sub-trades

These pathways align with employer demand and regional economic direction.

## 6. Expanded use of Pūkenga Rau

Pūkenga Rau can become:

- A hub for youth exposure
- A centre for employer-led micro-credentials
- A base for multiple providers to collaborate
- A shared facility for industry events and training
- A visible symbol of local opportunity

## 7. Stronger iwi and cultural partnerships

Culturally grounded delivery, particularly for Māori and Pacific learners, improves engagement, confidence, and outcomes. There is strong appetite for this locally.

### **Summary: tertiary provision must be local, practical, flexible to changing industry needs, and partnership-driven**

Training shapes the future workforce. Without local, hands-on delivery, South Waikato risks:

- Fewer young people entering trades
- Declining availability of skilled workers
- Increased employer recruitment pressure
- Lower participation in tertiary study
- Widening gaps in key industries

Strengthening tertiary provision, particularly through a long-term plan for Pūkenga Rau, is essential to building a resilient workforce pipeline.

## Future Skills and Industry Diversification

South Waikato’s economy is rooted in manufacturing, forestry, engineering, food production, transport, and community-facing services. These sectors will continue to be the district’s foundation, but the nature of work is changing. Employers are adapting to new technologies, compliance requirements, sustainability expectations, and more sophisticated production systems.

Understanding future skills is essential to planning a workforce system that prepares rangatahi and adults for long-term, secure, high-quality jobs. This section explores the skills that will matter most over the next 5-10 years and the opportunities for South Waikato to diversify and expand its economic base.

### Economic shifts shaping future workforce demand

Several major trends are already influencing workforce needs across the district:

#### 1. Automation and advanced manufacturing

Local manufacturers are investing in:

- Automated processing lines
- Digital monitoring systems

While automation reduces the need for some manual tasks, it increases the need for:

- Technicians
- Maintenance engineers
- Machine operators with troubleshooting capability
- Workers who can use digital interfaces confidently

“

*South Waikato can't rely on the industries that built its past. Future skills and diversification will shape its next chapter.*

”

#### 2. Growth in food production and value-added processing

South Waikato’s food production sector is expanding into more sophisticated processes requiring:

- Quality assurance
- Food safety compliance
- Technical production skills
- Logistics
- Export readiness

#### 3. Environmental and sustainability requirements

Across forestry, agriculture, transport, and manufacturing, employers face increasing expectations around:

- Waste management
- Cleaner production
- Environmental monitoring
- Sustainable supply chains

These shifts create new workforce needs in environmental management, compliance, and planning.

“

*We'll be here in 50 years - trades are fairly futureproofed. We will always need someone to bolt parts.*

”

### 4. Growth in care, health, and community services

South Waikato's ageing population and growing demand for wellbeing and support services mean more roles in:

- Community support
- Mental health
- Disability support
- Social services

These roles require empathy, communication, and wellbeing knowledge as much as technical skill.

### 5. Digital expectations across all industries

Every industry now requires some level of digital capability. This includes:

- Using online systems
- Completing health and safety modules
- Entering production data
- Communicating via email or messaging

Digital literacy is becoming a baseline requirement.

## Emerging skill sets for the next 5-10 years

Across employer interviews, educational insight, and market trends, several key future skill areas emerged as high priorities.

### Mechanical, electrical, and maintenance skills

These roles underpin almost every productive sector in South Waikato. Demand for:

- Multi-skilled technicians
- Mechanical fitters
- Maintenance engineers
- Automation support roles and machinists

Will only increase as technology advances.

### Digital and data literacy

Not advanced coding, but practical capability to:

- Operate digital machinery
- Understand automated processes
- Complete online forms
- Follow digital workflows

These skills support productivity and safety.

### Process and production technology

As production lines become more sophisticated, employers need workers who understand:

- Process flow
- Quality assurance
- Traceability systems
- Health and safety compliance

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- root-cause analysis

### Logistics and supply chain skills

The district’s transport and distribution sectors will increasingly require:

- Route optimisation
- Digital freight systems
- Inventory software
- Warehouse automation
- Cold chain management



### Environmental management and sustainable practices

Not necessarily new, but there is a growing call for better pathways to be imbedded in:

- Environmental monitoring
- Regenerative practice
- Emissions management
- Water and land stewardship

These align strongly with iwi and community values.

## Opportunities for pathway expansion and industry diversification

South Waikato has several opportunities to diversify and grow its local economy, building on existing strengths:

### 1. Advanced manufacturing pathway

There is potential to develop a specialised pathway combining:

- Engineering basics
- Mechatronics
- Automation
- Digital production
- Maintenance technology

This could be delivered locally through a mixed provider/employer model at Pūkenga Rau.

### 2. Forestry and wood processing modernisation

As forestry evolves, new roles will focus on:

- Mechanised harvesting
- Technology-based processing
- Environmental monitoring
- Mill automation

Developing a forestry tech pathway would support one of the district’s major industries.

### 3. Food and beverage technology

A growing opportunity exists for training in:

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- Food science basics
- Quality assurance
- Packaging technology
- Health and safety compliance
- Export processes

This sector has growth potential and strong career progression.

### 4. Sustainable land and environmental management

Aligning with iwi priorities, new training could support careers in:

- Environmental monitoring
- Pest management
- Water care
- Land stewardship
- Biodiversity and conservation

These pathways can attract rangatahi who value kaupapa-driven, meaningful work.

### 5. Community and care workforce development

A structured pathway from school → micro-credentials → Level 3-4 health and wellbeing qualifications would support local employers and address a rising need.

### 6. Logistics, transport, and supply chain

With demand for heavy vehicle operators and warehouse staff, South Waikato could strengthen:

- Driver training
- Logistics technology
- Warehousing operations

This aligns with growing freight activity in the wider region.

## What this means for the workforce system

Across future skills and diversification opportunities, several system-wide implications emerge:

### 1. New pathways must be built on strong foundational skills

Future roles will require literacy, numeracy, confidence, communication, and digital capability.

### 2. Local delivery is essential

Learners will not travel reliably or consistently for training, so pathways must be accessible within the district.

### 3. Courses must be modular, practical, and industry-aligned

Short tasters, micro-credentials, and stackable modules will help learners move step-by-step into more specialised training.

### 4. Industry, iwi, schools, and providers need to co-design pathways together

No single organisation can deliver future skills alone, pathways must be joined up, easy to transition to, and lead to real existing opportunities in the workforce.

### 5. Pūkenga Rau remains central

It is the best physical platform for:

- Practical training
- Shared provider delivery
- Employer-led micro-credentials
- Technology demonstrations
- Exposure for rangatahi

### 6. Cultural identity and whānau-based support are essential

Future pathways must reflect Māori and Pacific values and learning models to ensure they are attractive options, sustainable solutions, and provide the transition and wrap-around support required for everyone to thrive.

## Culturally Embedded Pathways

Māori and Pacific learners are vital to South Waikato's present and future workforce, reflecting a significant share of the district's youth and early-career pipeline. The 2023 Census shows that the Māori population is comparatively young, with close to 30% aged under 15 and more than 20% aged 15-29, an age profile that reinforces the importance of accessible youth and early-career pathways.

This section summarises what we heard from iwi, providers, youth organisations, Pacific leaders, and employers about how to build culturally grounded pathways that support strong participation, achievement, progression, and belonging. (It is worth noting this section was limited in its scope, and more work must be done on understanding these pathways).

### Raukawa workforce priorities and aspirations

Raukawa plays a critical leadership role in South Waikato's development, including workforce and education outcomes.

Key priorities include:

- Pathways that reflect tikanga, whakapapa, and cultural identity
- Training that supports long-term wellbeing, not just short-term qualifications
- Meaningful, high-value employment for rangatahi
- Opportunities that keep whānau connected to whenua and community
- Careers aligned with Raukawa's environmental, social, and economic goals
- Pathways into leadership, governance, planning, and environmental management
- A system where Māori learners feel seen, supported, and valued

Raukawa stressed that rangatahi thrive when they can express their identity, learn in supportive environments, and see clear, achievable steps into the future.

### Why this matters for the workforce system

A strong Māori workforce is essential to the district's long-term economic and cultural wellbeing. When training reflects Māori identity and values, engagement, confidence, and achievement all improve, and local employers benefit from a more resilient, capable, future-focused talent pool.

## Why culturally embedded delivery works

Across stakeholder conversations, one point was repeated consistently: when the learning environment reflects identity, whānau, culture, and values, participation and completion rates increase dramatically.

This is supported by:

- Youth development evidence
- Tertiary provider experience
- Employer feedback
- Iwi and Pacific stakeholder insights

Key elements of culturally grounded pathways include:

- Kaiako who understand cultural context
- Learning that acknowledges lived experience
- Whānau involvement
- Small-group, relationship-based delivery
- Strengths-based framing of achievement
- Celebration of culture, language, and identity
- Kaupapa and service-oriented learning
- Support with practical barriers (transport, gear, devices)

These approaches create environments where learners feel valued, respected, and safe to learn.

## Current gaps for Māori and Pacific learners

Despite strong community strengths, the current workforce system presents several gaps.

### Limited culturally responsive training options

Training is often generic and not grounded in tikanga, identity, or Pacific values.

### Few pathways into environmental and kaupapa-led work

Rangatahi are interested in the following, but pathways are unclear or not well-promoted:

- Environmental management
- Water care
- Kaitiakitanga
- Biodiversity roles
- Native plant restoration

### System does not consistently engage whānau

Whānau play a central role in decision-making but are often not involved in:

- Transitions planning
- Course selection
- Pastoral support
- Ongoing learner progress

*When learning reflects who people are - their whakapapa, identity and values, engagement and success grow dramatically.*



Digital and financial barriers disproportionately affect Māori and Pacific learners

Transport, cost, and device access continue to shape participation.

### Opportunities to strengthen culturally based pathways

There is strong appetite, from, iwi, providers, and employers, for a more culturally grounded workforce system. Key opportunities include:

#### Co-designed pathways with Raukawa and Pacific leaders

Training and transitions must reflect:

- Local identity
- Whakapapa
- Whānau aspirations
- Cultural values
- Kaupapa-led priorities

#### Culturally framed foundation and bridging programmes

A culturally responsive “pre-trade” or “first step” programme would support learners to:

- Build confidence
- Strengthen foundational skills
- Explore industries
- Build relationships with employers
- Transition into higher-level training

#### Dedicated pathways into environmental and kaitiaki-based roles

Work in:

- Whenua restoration
- Water and land care
- Biodiversity
- Environmental monitoring
- Aligns deeply with rangatahi interests and iwi aspirations.

#### Local delivery based at Pūkenga Rau or community hubs

Culturally grounded programmes work best in:

- Small groups
- Familiar environments
- Accessible locations
- Whānau-connected spaces

#### Leadership development for rangatahi

Rangatahi Māori and Pacific youth show strong leadership potential that could be strengthened through:

- Youth leadership programmes
- Governance exposure
- Employer mentorship

## **Summary: culturally grounded pathways are a system strength, not a niche**

Māori and Pacific learners are central to South Waikato's future workforce. Strengthening culturally grounded pathways is not an optional extra, it is essential to:

- Improve participation and completion
- Build a resilient local workforce
- Support iwi aspirations
- Enhance employer capability
- Close long-standing gaps
- Strengthen community wellbeing

When culture and identity are embraced, the whole workforce system becomes more effective, inclusive, and future-ready.

## Challenges and Implications

The findings across employers, schools, providers, iwi, youth services, and learners show a clear pattern. South Waikato does not have a shortage of motivation or opportunity, but the workforce system is not working as a coherent whole. Each part is doing its best, but the system as a whole is fragmented, under-resourced, and inconsistent.

This section defines the core problems the evidence has revealed. These are not individual failings; they are system-level issues that require system-level solutions.

### The workforce pipeline is breaking at multiple points

Across the learner journey, from early exposure to long-term employment, there are consistent breakpoints where people fall out of the system.

The main pressure points are:

- Inconsistent school attendance
- Limited early exposure to workplaces
- Unclear or unsupported transitions after school
- Limited in-district training options
- Low literacy, numeracy, and digital confidence
- Cost and transport barriers
- Underdeveloped foundational skills
- Gaps in pastoral support
- Training that doesn't reflect identity or culture
- Limited alignment between training and industry need

When these pressures combine, many young people and adults become disconnected from training, employment, or progression.

### No single organisation can fix this alone

Schools, tertiary education providers, employers, iwi, and community organisations all care deeply about young people and local success. But each group is operating with different pressures, limited capacity, and unclear mandates, in an uncoordinated way.

The result:

- Schools and employers require more structured connections
- Employers want a steady pipeline but lack support
- Providers want viable class sizes but face constraints
- Iwi want culturally grounded pathways
- Rangatahi want clarity and confidence
- Community services want stronger coordination

Everyone is pulling in the same direction, but not in the same formation.

### Training provision is not matching industry demand

Employer demand is clear for roles in:



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- Mechanical engineering
- Trades
- Automation and process technology
- Heavy diesel
- Manufacturing and production
- Forestry and wood processing
- Environmental and land care
- Logistics, transport, and warehousing
- Care and wellbeing roles

But local delivery is limited, fragmented, or not accessible to learners.

### The gap is structural:

- Viability thresholds
- Tutor and assessor shortages
- Changing tertiary sector settings
- Limited collaboration between providers
- Underutilisation of Pūkenga Rau

Unless these gaps close, shortages will worsen as the current workforce ages.

## Foundational skills are the most critical weakness in the pipeline

Employers consistently said the same thing: “We can teach technical skills, but we need the basics.”

This includes:

- Reliability and attendance
- Communication
- Teamwork
- Problem-solving
- Literacy and numeracy
- Digital confidence
- Willingness to learn

### Why this matters

Without foundational skills, learners struggle to:

- Transition into apprenticeships
- Complete qualifications
- Progress at work
- Navigate online components
- Understand workplace expectations

This is a major barrier to both youth and adult participation.

## Youth pathways lack structure, support, and visibility

The transition from school to training to work is one of the most important parts of the system, yet it's one of the most fragile.

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Key weaknesses include:

- Limited exposure to industry
- Inconsistent careers support
- Fragmented school-employer relationships
- Unclear qualification pathways
- Limited local options for “first step” learning
- Lack of confidence and wellbeing support
- Barriers that accumulate quickly (transport, cost, digital access).

*Students who responded highlighted the importance of local training options and hands-on learning.*

This contributes to some of the highest NEET rates in New Zealand, but these are system outcomes, not learner deficits.

## Māori and Pacific learners are not being fully supported by the system

Culturally grounded support improves outcomes dramatically, yet the current system:

- Underutilises iwi leadership
- Lacks structured Māori and Pacific pastoral support
- Has limited kaupapa-based pathways
- Provides few visible role models
- Does not consistently include whānau in transition decisions
- Lacks culturally aligned first-step programmes

This constrains participation for the very communities that make up the district’s core workforce.

## The system lacks a shared workforce model and clear accountability

There is no single, coordinated structure that brings together:

- Schools
- Employers
- Providers
- Iwi
- Pacific communities
- Youth organisations
- SWIFT
- Council and Government

The consequences:

- Repeated effort
- Duplicated initiatives
- Missed opportunities
- Reliance on personal relationships rather than system design
- Decisions made in isolation
- Uneven access to opportunities

There is no shared workforce plan, no shared accountability, and no shared operating model.

## Pūkenga Rau holds potential

Pūkenga Rau is widely valued, but currently:

- Underutilised
- Lacking a long-term vision
- Constrained by fragmented provision
- Tied to a single-provider model
- Unable to meet the full range of employer demand

Without a shared vision and delivery model, it cannot fulfil its potential as the district's workforce hub.

## What this means for South Waikato

South Waikato has the opportunity and the mandate to rebuild its workforce pipeline around:

- Local, practical, accessible training
- Strong foundational skills
- Culturally grounded learning pathways
- Coordinated school-employer-provider relationships
- Future-focused skills and industries
- A revitalised Pūkenga Rau
- A shared regional workforce strategy led by swift and partners

The evidence shows the challenge clearly: The system is not broken because of lack of effort. It is broken because the parts are not connected.

Fixing this requires coordination, local delivery, cultural alignment, and long-term commitment, not a collection of short-term programmes.



## Strategic Recommendations

Strengthening the South Waikato workforce system requires coordinated, practical action from employers, schools, providers, iwi, Council, Government and SWIFT. The recommendations below provide a clear, staged plan to improve participation, foundational skills, transitions, training alignment, and long-term workforce resilience.

### A unified approach

This South Waikato Workforce Development Strategy provides a useful foundation, but it is high-level and aspirational. Its intent to connect training, youth pathways, employer engagement, and socio-economic support is essential to breaking cycles of deprivation and long-term unemployment. The critical next step is to convert this ambition into coordinated, measurable action that can be reinforced through measurement and shared ownership.

#### The foundation

The following elements form the core infrastructure needed to support long-term workforce development:

- Positioning Pūkenga Rau as a multi-sector hub anchoring trades, skills delivery, youth engagement, and foundation skills programs.
- Using hybrid learning models, one-day apprenticeships, and wrap-around support offering flexibility for employed adults, apprentices, and rural learners.
- Strengthening integrated youth pathways, including IEPs and culturally-informed programmes that strengthen inclusion, resilience, and Māori and Pacific workforce development.

This infrastructure establishes the space, structure and coordination needed but it is only the foundation for system-wide change.

#### Coordinated action

The workforce system operates as an ecosystem. As summarised in the levers table below, these pressures intersect and compound, highlighting where shared ownership, measurement and coordination can most meaningfully strengthen outcomes.

Lever	Role and Responsibility	How it Can Be Grounded / Measured
Job Availability and Local Economic Growth	Council, employers, regional economic development agencies	Targeted industry investment: apprenticeships/jobs created; alignment with critical skills shortages
Socio-Economic Support	MSD, SWIFT, Te Tira/IMPACT Hub	Adult literacy/numeracy participation; transport, housing, and financial support uptake; wrap-around service engagement rates
Youth Education and Pathways	MoE, TEC, secondary schools	Percentage of students with Individual Employment Pathways and/or Plans A/B/C; Gateway and micro-placement completions; post-

		school tracking of employment/training
Employer Leadership and Engagement	Local employers	Co-funded placements; advisory group participation; workplace mentoring/secondments delivered
Integrated Coordination and Accountability	TBD	Central oversight of actions; monitoring progress; quarterly review cycles to adjust of strategy

### Grounding the strategy in reality

To strengthen momentum and avoid fragmentation, success depends on shared responsibility, measurable outcomes, and well-supported pathways that reflect local identity and lived experience.

## Recommendations for the workforce pipeline

These are the core actions needed to improve outcomes across the entire workforce system.

### 1. Strengthen early-stage engagement and foundational skills

Action across families, schools, providers, and community groups to:

- Build communication, teamwork, literacy, numeracy, and digital skills across all stages of education
- Develop life skills (time management, readiness for work)
- Increase early industry exposure

**Purpose:** Address the most significant barrier identified by employers.

### 2. Establish a coordinated, district-wide workforce model

Create a shared structure that connects schools, providers, employers, Iwi, Pacific leaders, and SWIFT. This structure should oversee:

- Shared planning
- Information flow
- Transitions support
- Employer-school matching
- Data tracking
- Workforce forecasting

**Purpose:** Eliminate duplication, fill gaps, and ensure the system moves in the same direction.

### 3. Develop a South Waikato Workforce Plan (5-year)

A shared plan covering:

- Future workforce demand
- Priority skills and industries
- Training requirements
- Target groups (e.g., rangatahi, career changers)
- Roles and responsibilities
- Long-term funding needs

**Purpose:** Give the district a strategic, stable, long-term direction.

#### 4. Implement an “Explore/Try/Train/Work” pathway structure

A clear, simple, district model that:

- Raises awareness (explore)
- Provides hands-on tasters (try)
- Delivers structured learning (train)
- Connects learners into jobs (work)

**Purpose:** Create visibility and reduce confusion for learners, whānau and employers.

### Recommendations for schools and youth transitions

#### 5. Create a structured school-to-work transition programme

A consistent approach across secondary schools, kura, and alternative education settings including:

- Dedicated transition coordinators
- Regular employer visits
- Shared calendar of industry tasters
- Joint planning with providers
- Clear information on requirements for trades and apprenticeships.

**Purpose:** Address transition gaps and reduce NEET rates. Consider models like IEPs and MPowA.

#### 6. Expand exposure and practical experiences for students

Deliver more:

- Site visits
- Hands on tasters at Pūkenga Rau
- Employer talks
- Short practical modules
- Mentoring programmes

**Purpose:** Build confidence and help rangatahi make informed decisions.

#### 7. Strengthen pastoral and wellbeing support

Embed wellbeing, confidence building, and cultural support into:

- Gateway placements
- Transition programmes
- School based vocational programmes

**Purpose:** Improve engagement and persistence among learners with high potential but high barriers.

### Recommendations for employers

#### 8. Create an Employer Partnership Network (led by SWIFT)

A simple co-ordinated structure for employees to:

- Host tasters
- Take on trainees
- Provide work experience
- Co-design training modules
- Receive support in pastoral care

**Purpose:** Reduce the administrative burden and strengthen industry school links

### 9. Support employers to take on apprentices and trainees

Provide:

- Help with paperwork
- Access to local assessors
- Guidance on pastoral support
- Shared induction resources

**Purpose:** Increase the number of apprentice-ready employers.

### 10. Develop employer-led micro credentials and short courses

Work with providers to create:

- Short technical modules
- Health and safety refreshers
- Machine operation skills
- Digital literacy sessions

**Purpose:** Upskill local workers without requiring long term study.

## Recommendations for tertiary providers

### 11. Align local training delivery with industry demand

Focus delivery on high need areas:

- Mechanical trades
- Engineering basics
- Process and manufacturing technology
- Forestry and wood processing
- Logistics and supply chain
- Automotive and heavy transport
- Healthcare and social work
- Digital

**Purpose:** Ensure qualifications match skills for the future economy.

### 12. Enable multi provider delivery at Pūkenga Rau

Reduce viability constraints by allowing:

- Multiple providers to share students
- Shared use of facilities and equipment to limit overheads
- Partnerships with employers for delivery

**Purpose:** Expand the variety and reach of programmes.

### 13. Provide more flexible, modular, stackable courses

Short courses can build into full qualifications. Examples include:

- Intro to engineering
- Machine operation and troubleshooting
- Workplace numeracy and digital skills
- Practical health and safety

**Purpose:** Meet learners where they are and support incremental progression.

#### 14. Expand local off-job components for apprentices

Deliver theory and block courses locally through:

- Evening classes
- Weekend modules
- Intensive block weeks

**Purpose:** Strengthen apprenticeship completion and employer uptake.

### Recommendations for Pūkenga Rau

#### 15. Establish Pūkenga Rau as the district Workforce Hub

Pūkenga Rau to be repositioned as:

- A multi-provider training centre
- A home for short courses and tasters
- A youth exposure hub
- A site for employer-led sessions
- A centre for environmental/kaitiaki pathways
- A digital access and study support space

**Purpose:** Maximise an already valued asset.

#### 16. Invest in facility upgrades and modern equipment

Upgrades could focus on:

- Engineering and mechanical tools
- Digital production equipment
- Safety gear
- Space for environmental and outdoor training
- Flexible learning areas

**Purpose:** Ensure facilities meet modern industry needs.

#### 17. Rebuild utilisation through a shared delivery schedule

Develop a year-long timetable that coordinates:

- Multiple providers
- School tasters
- Employer short courses
- Foundation/bridging programmes

**Purpose:** Lift usage, viability, and visibility.

### Recommendations for Māori and Pacific pathways

#### 18. Co-design training pathways with Raukawa and Pacific leaders

Partnerships to shape:

- Programme content
- Pastoral support
- Assessment approaches
- Transitions and mentoring

**Purpose:** Improve engagement and achievement for Māori and Pacific learners.

## 19. Create culturally grounded first-step programmes

Deliver programmes focused on:

- Confidence
- Foundational skills
- Cultural identity
- Early exposure to industries

**Purpose:** Support learners who need a structured introduction before pre-trade training.

## 20. Establish specialised pathways into environmental and kaitiaki-focused roles

Develop training in:

- Environmental monitoring
- Water and land care
- Biodiversity and conservation

**Purpose:** Align with iwi priorities and youth aspirations.

## Recommendations for SWIFT

### 21. Lead the coordination of the district-wide workforce model

SWIFT is well placed to:

- Convene partners
- Maintain employer relationships
- Coordinate pathways
- Track labour market shifts
- Monitor progress
- Provide district-wide leadership

**Purpose:** Create coherence across the system.

### 22. Support shared data, monitoring, and evaluation

Track:

- NEET rates
- Training participation
- Apprenticeship uptake
- Employer demand
- Pathway completion rates

**Purpose:** Inform strategic decisions and secure funding.

### 23. Advocate for funding aligned with district needs

Represent South Waikato in:

- Regional workforce discussions
- Tertiary funding negotiations
- Government workforce planning

**Purpose:** Ensure national settings support local delivery.

## Recommendations for system integration

### 24. Develop a shared transitions protocol

Clear agreements between:

- Schools
- Providers
- Employers
- Iwi and Pacific partners
- SWIFT

Covering:

- Information handover
- Pastoral handover
- Tracking learners after school
- Shared responsibilities

**Purpose:** Reduce lost learners and improve continuity. Consider an IEP or MPowA type programme (more info required.)

### 25. Utilise and promote existing digital platforms

Examples like FutureForce, which is not district-specific, still provides a strong foundation for:

- Local job and career profiles
- Practical, step-by-step pathway guidance
- Industry exposure and employer connection
- Foundational learning and engagement tools

A South-Waikato-tailored digital companion or localised layer remains an option for future development.

**Purpose:** Increase visibility and access to opportunities.

### 26. Pilot an integrated “Workforce Coach” model

Dedicated coaches to:

- Help learners plan pathways
- Navigate training
- Access support
- Stay connected to employers

**Purpose:** Improve engagement and reduce attrition.

## Why this strategy matters

South Waikato faces entrenched workforce pressures, including tightening labour supply, foundational skill gaps, technology adoption shifts, sector changes, and uneven access to local training and support. These recommendations reflect engagement feedback and labour market signals captured across the study.

*South Waikato is not short on potential. It is short on coordination. This is fixable. Long-term impact will only be achieved when Pūkenga Rau, hybrid learning, strengthened youth transitions, employer partnerships, and community and iwi aspirations operate together as a coordinated workforce ecosystem.*

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