



THE PARTICIPATION EDGE

A culturally informed
service model for a
resilient workforce



Australia's greatest strength can be found in its people

Our workforce is not just an economic driver — it is the backbone of our shared prosperity. By maximising workforce participation, we secure the skilled talent required for a resilient economy, while also empowering individuals with a platform to seize opportunities that provide financial independence, the opportunity for meaningful work and the autonomy to shape their own future. Labour-force retention and engagement is therefore critical to productivity and a prosperous society.

However, Australia is facing a productivity pivot-point. At a time when the Federal Government's Economic Roundtable has prompted the national conversation to be heavily focused on options for reform, there is a tendency for productivity to be seen as a problem for government. Yet individuals, business and communities also need to play a role in identifying solutions.

Retaining skilled workforces supports productivity

While a key theme of the current debate is rightly focused on building a skilled and adaptable workforce, sound systems will need to be in place to then *retain* that skilled workforce and avoid the skills gaps and workforce shortages that have driven much recent alarm.¹

Kairros comes to this conversation as a business that, over 30 years, has developed an effective model for driving workforce participation and retention with particular expertise in supporting culturally diverse workers — a rapidly growing segment of the workforce that will only continue to grow as Australia looks to a skilled migration system to augment the skills and labour it will draw on domestically. Although complex problems often require complex solutions, we find that Kairros is uniquely positioned to propose a simple solution to a complex problem. While our model addresses only one small component of the broader productivity challenge, at a time when other solutions are focused on time-intensive reform, we take this opportunity to share an existing solution poised for broader uptake, scalable to a national level.

Framing this conversation

We begin by summarising the factors that have brought Australia to this productivity pivot point and the activities taking place in August to seek consensus on solutions amongst a broad range of stakeholders. We then look to a high-level review of the Australian workforce and injury and return to work outcomes, before moving to an analysis of the experience of our cultural diverse workforce. We move to a discussion of the Kairros service model, its correlating high return to work and participation outcomes and how wrap-around services such as these can be scaled quickly to support an expanding culturally diverse workforce and drive workforce retention and productivity. Finally, we conclude with a roadmap setting out initial next steps to operationalise workforce retention.

¹ See for example Tech Council of Australia (2022) *Getting to 1.2 million: Our roadmap to create a thriving Australian tech workforce* (<https://techcouncil.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2022-Getting-to-1.2-million-report.pdf>); Productivity Commission (February 2025) *Housing construction productivity: Can we fix it?* (<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/housing-construction/housing-construction.pdf>).

“We do have a productivity challenge”

It has become an accepted reality that Australians have entered a distinct period of economic uncertainty. Long-term poor productivity growth is dragging down wages, living standards, competitiveness and national resilience. This in turn risks real-income stagnation, our ability to weather international volatility and long term fiscal health.

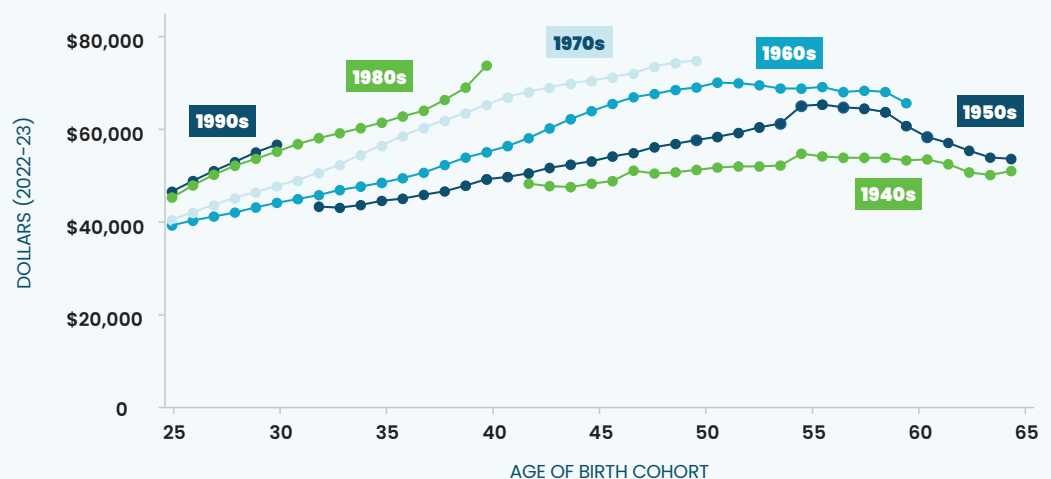
The Productivity Commission explains that although a ‘productivity bubble’ caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is in part to blame, labour productivity was already slow in the five years before the pandemic.² Similar sentiments have been echoed by Treasurer the Hon Dr Jim Chalmers MP, who observed that in the 10 years prior to the pandemic, productivity grew only half as fast as it had two decades earlier.³ Among a group of 31 wealthy countries, McKinsey estimates that only four experienced worse productivity outcomes.⁴

This also isn’t just an Australian phenomenon — while the timing differs, almost every OECD nation experienced reduced rates of productivity growth between 2005 and 2019, compared with the previous 15 years. Average productivity growth also halved across the OECD in that period.⁵

Understanding what happened to productivity growth over the past decade is important for policymakers who wish to turn the trend around. However, while policymakers may set the agenda, beyond the policy sphere this productivity crisis touches each of us directly, influencing our opportunities, security and quality of life. Everyone wants to live in a prosperous society where living standards continue to improve — so that Australia draws in and retains the best talent, keeps our economy strong and leaves the next generation better off.

This is where the data published by the Productivity Commission and others has particularly resonated across both business, families and community groups, as it suggests that young people born in the 1990s may be the first generation in many decades to be financially worse off than their parents, living in a more uncertain global landscape and to consequentially suffer a decrease in living standards.⁶

Incomes have grown for each successive generation until recently



(Source: Productivity Commission, *Growth mindset: how to boost Australia's productivity*, 2025, p 6.)

² Productivity Commission, *Growth mindset: how to boost Australia's productivity*, 2025, p 6.

³ The Hon. Dr J. Chalmers MP, Treasurer, *Address to the National Press Club Canberra: Economic reform in our second term*, 18 June 2025 (<https://www.npc.gov.au/parliamentary-business/parliamentary-activities/addresses/2025/06/18>).

⁴ P. Coorey, 'PM seeks approval for new economic agenda', *Australian Financial Review*, 10 June 2025. (<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/pm-sets-the-scene-for-new-policy-agenda-20250610-p5m64x>)

⁵ Productivity Commission, *Growth mindset: how to boost Australia's productivity*, 2025, p 8.

⁶ Productivity Commission, *Growth mindset: how to boost Australia's productivity*, 2025, pp 5,6.

This escalating national sense of unease was reinforced in August 2025 when the Reserve Bank of Australia's (RBA) downgraded its long-term outlook for productivity growth, warning that the economy was incapable of sustainably growing faster than 2 per cent annually. The RBA stated that it now believed that productivity would grow by just 0.7 per cent per year over the medium term, down from its previous assumption of 1 per cent annual growth.⁷

Speaking after the RBA's decision, the Treasurer acknowledged:

We do have a productivity challenge in our economy. It is substantial, and it is the government's primary focus — not just next week, at the roundtable [discussed below], but indeed for the course of this parliamentary term.⁸

Homegrown solutions to a global problem

The Productivity Commission has argued that, while many of the problems that have influenced Australia's productivity are global in nature and are being similarly experienced around the world, Australia's most effective response is to ensure that domestic policy settings support economic growth and resilience through productivity gains.⁹ The Federal Government agrees. Following the 2025 Federal Election, both the Prime Minister and Treasurer stated that 'Productivity is our focus'.¹⁰ The Treasurer asserted:

The best defence against global volatility and the best way to lift living standards is with a more productive economy, a stronger budget, and more resilience. It's why I'll organise this term, my time, and our team consistent with these 3 highest priorities.¹¹



⁷ M. Read, 'RBA grim growth warning', *The Australian Financial Review*, 12 August 2025, p 1.

⁸ P. Coorey, 'The policy panic that sent Albanese and Chalmers into private talks', *The Australian Financial Review*, 12 August 2025 (<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/the-policy-panic-that-sent-albanese-and-chalmers-into-private-talks-20250812-p5mm9x>).

⁹ Productivity Commission, *Growth mindset: how to boost Australia's productivity*, 2025, p 2.

¹⁰ The Hon. A. Albanese MP, Prime Minister of Australia, *Address to the National Press Club*, 10 June 2025 ([Address to the National Press Club | Prime Minister of Australia](#)); The Hon. Dr J. Chalmers MP, Treasurer, *Address to the National Press Club Canberra: Economic reform in our second term*, 18 June 2025 ([Address to the National Press Club, Canberra | Treasury Ministers](#)).

¹¹ The Hon. Dr J. Chalmers MP, Treasurer, *Address to the National Press Club Canberra: Economic reform in our second term*, 18 June 2025 ([Address to the National Press Club, Canberra | Treasury Ministers](#)).

The 5-Pillar Reform Agenda

Against this backdrop, the Federal Government announced that by 2028 it will aim to achieve a reform agenda, centered around five pillars:

- **Pillar 1:** Creating a more dynamic and resilient economy
- **Pillar 2:** Building a skilled and adaptable workforce
- **Pillar 3:** Harnessing data and digital technology
- **Pillar 4:** Delivering quality care more efficiently
- **Pillar 5:** Investing in cheaper, cleaner energy and the net-zero transition¹²

The strategic and policy response to this reform agenda will be primarily guided by two key inputs:

- an **'Economic Reform Roundtable'** (originally billed as a 'productivity roundtable') in Parliament House between 19 and 21 August 2025, which brought together 25 participants from government, business, unions and civil society to build consensus around practical/achievable reform focused on three main themes: resilience, productivity and budget sustainability and tax reform, and
- the release of **5 themed interim reports** by the Productivity Commission, timed to inform debate on each of the 5 pillars and canvass the viability of potential solutions proposed by stakeholders in submissions made in the leadup to the roundtable.

The Treasurer has required that any solutions proposed must be national in scope, budget-neutral or positive and specific in implementation.

With this activity particularly centred from August to the end of the year, around which time final reports are expected, this period affords a timely opportunity for all businesses to reflect on their role and the solutions they can bring to this broader national conversation.

(Images: The Productivity Commission's interim reports on the 'Five pillars of productivity inquiries', available here: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/five-productivity-inquiries>)



¹² The Hon. Dr J. Chalmers MP, Treasurer, *Address to the National Press Club Canberra: Economic reform in our second term*, 18 June 2025 ([Address to the National Press Club, Canberra | Treasury Ministers](#)). The '5 Pillars of Reform' are informed by the findings of Treasury's 2023 Intergenerational Report. Under the Charter of Budget Honesty Act 1998, the Treasurer must prepare and publish an intergenerational report at least once every 5 years. The report provides a long-term outlook on Australia's economy, population and government finances. They examine the long-term sustainability of current policies and how demographic, technological and other structural trends may affect the economy and the budget. Find more, including the latest report, at: The Treasury, 'Intergenerational reports' (<https://treasury.gov.au/intergenerational-report>).

Putting people at the heart

Discussions of productivity risk being seen as code for asking fewer people to do more work. Yet, in the lead-up to this debate, government and business reassuringly acknowledged that true productivity is about improving living standards and broadening opportunity. For example, following the announcement of the Economic Reform Roundtable, the Treasurer asserted that:

Too often [productivity] is seen as a cold, almost soulless, concept – when it’s really the best way of making people better off over time, creating more opportunities, making our economy and our society more dynamic.¹³

This echoes the person-centred approach that is exemplified as best-practice within the workforce rehabilitation community and which forms the nucleus of Kairros’ diverse recoveries service model discussed below. While only time will tell if these sentiments remain front of mind for policy makers engaged in the broader national debate, Kairros approaches this productivity discussion retaining its commitment that people remain firmly at the centre of solutions.

What key themes have emerged to date?

Between 31 July and 13 August 2025, the Productivity Commission released interim reports on its five productivity inquiries. Below is a summary of the draft recommendations made for the policy reform, which informed the debate at the Economic Roundtable the following week.

Pillar theme	Focus of the Productivity Commission’s draft recommendations
Pillar 1: Creating a more dynamic and resilient economy	• Corporate tax reform to spur business investment • Regulating to promote business dynamism¹⁴
Pillar 2: Building a skilled and adaptable workforce	• The best resources to improve school student outcomes • Building skills and qualifications for a more productive workforce • Fit-for-purpose occupational entry regulations¹⁵
Pillar 3: Harnessing data and digital technology	• Enable AI’s productivity potential • New pathways to expand data access • Supporting safe data access and use through outcomes-based privacy regulation • Enhance reporting efficiency, transparency and accuracy through digital financial reporting¹⁶

¹³ The Hon. Dr J. Chalmers MP, Treasurer, *Address to the National Press Club Canberra: Economic reform in our second term*, 18 June 2025 ([Address to the National Press Club, Canberra | Treasury Ministers](#)).

¹⁴ Productivity Commission, 2025, *Creating a more dynamic and resilient economy: Interim report* ([Interim report – Creating a more dynamic and resilient economy](#)).

¹⁵ Productivity Commission, 2025, *Building a skilled and adaptable workforce: Interim report* ([Interim report – Building a skilled and adaptable workforce](#)).

Pillar 4: Delivering quality care more efficiently

- Reform of quality and safety regulation to support a more cohesive care economy
- Embed collaborative commissioning to increase the integration of care services
- A national framework to support government investment in prevention¹⁷

Pillar 5: Investing in cheaper, cleaner energy and the net-zero transformation

- Reducing the cost of meeting emissions targets
- Speeding up approvals for new energy infrastructure
- Addressing barriers to private investment in adaptation¹⁸

It is clear that a broad range of innovative and forward-looking recommendations was a focus of debate at the Roundtable. But at its heart, productivity depends on people — their participation, skills and ability to contribute consistently.

Noting the particular relevance of Pillar 2 — Building a skilled and adaptable workforce — to both Kairros and others engaged in the enterprise of injury recovery and return to work, we make the observation that the options under consideration are currently centered on skills development and training. While there is clearly a substantial volume of evidence supporting the need to upskill Australia's workforce, the scaffolding must also exist to retain those skilled and adaptable workers to ensure the resilience, productivity and prosperity of our workforce. Recent studies have estimated that replacing a high-performing or highly skilled worker can cost a business up to two to three times the outgoing worker's annual salary.¹⁹

The options also rely on reform, which inevitably takes time and requires the input and concurrence of many different stakeholders. With reform potentially coming at the expense of expediency, we note the opportunity for contributions that promise achievable results utilising existing service models that can be scaleable to a national level.

The fundamental role of workforce participation

One of the most direct levers for productivity is workforce participation. While technology and policy reform matter, the size, health and engagement of the labour force is critical. Under-utilisation of the workforce remains a barrier to maximising full employment and productivity of the workforce, with people sidelined by injury, illness or barriers to returning to work.

Return to work models offer a concrete example of how targeted interventions can lift participation and, in turn, productivity.

Any productivity agenda needs to place labour market participation and workforce inclusion at the heart of Australia's economic strategy.



¹⁶ Productivity Commission, 2025, *Harnessing data and digital technology* ([interim report — Harnessing data and digital technology](#)).

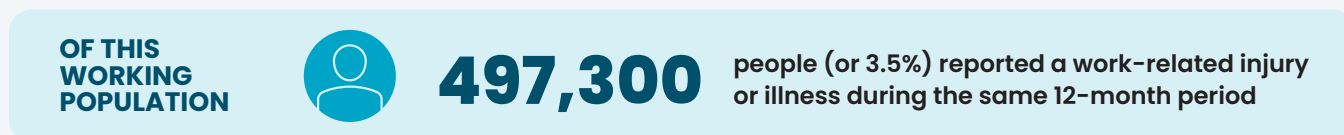
¹⁷ Productivity Commission, 2025, *Delivering quality care more efficiently. Interim report* ([interim report — Delivering quality care more efficiently](#)).

¹⁸ Productivity Commission, 2025, *Investing in cheaper, cleaner energy and the net zero transformation* ([interim report — Investing in cheaper, cleaner energy and the net zero transformation](#)).

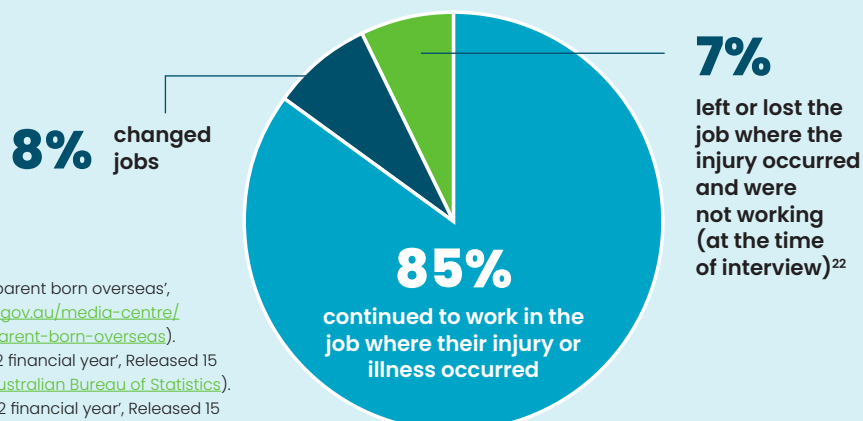
¹⁹ N. Boddy, 'The real cost of losing a star performer', *Australian Financial Review*, 15 April 2021 (<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/careers/the-real-cost-of-losing-a-star-performer-20200217-p54lgo>).

Painting a picture: Population, workforce and return to work

Drawing on the most recent census data available, we know that in 2021-22, Australia reported a population of over 25 million, 75% of whom identified with an ancestry other than Australian as their first response. Of these, 48% reported having at least one parent who was born overseas, 27.6% of the population were born in another country and 23% spoke a language other than English.²⁰



OF THE PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCED A WORK-RELATED INJURY OR ILLNESS IN 2021-22



²⁰ Media release: '2021 Census: Nearly half of Australians have a parent born overseas', Australian Bureau of Statistics, 28 June 2022 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/2021-census-nearly-half-australians-have-parent-born-overseas>).

²¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Work-related injuries for 2021-22 financial year', Released 15 February 2023, ([Work-related injuries, 2021-22 financial year](https://www.abs.gov.au/Work-related-injuries-2021-22-financial-year) | Australian Bureau of Statistics).

²² Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Work-related injuries for 2021-22 financial year', Released 15 February 2023, ([Work-related injuries, 2021-22 financial year](https://www.abs.gov.au/Work-related-injuries-2021-22-financial-year) | Australian Bureau of Statistics).

Injury and return to work for Australia's culturally diverse workforce

The same industries that report the highest rate of migrant workers — manufacturing, construction and healthcare — are among those foreshadowed to experience significant expansion in the coming years.²³ This underscores the need for workforce supports and recovery solutions that ensure workforce participation and retention for a culturally diverse workforce.

However, a key challenge for both policy makers and workplace practitioners has been the limited data available reflecting the lived experience of the CALD workforce in Australia. Even so, the CALD population in Australia has been identified as an at risk group in the context of the workplace, with Safe Work Australia and state-based work health and safety authorities like SafeWork NSW and Work Healthy Australia indicating that CALD and migrant workers are overrepresented in workplace injuries.²⁴ This is due to factors such as a concentration in high-risk industries, English language barriers, lower literacy and fear of speaking up about workplace safety, which contribute to higher rates of harm compared to other workers.

Studies undertaken to date have made clear the disparities that exist in the types and frequencies of work-related injuries experienced by migrant versus local workers across manufacturing, construction and healthcare. Findings include:

- Migrant workers are over-represented in injury data related to manual handling, machine accidents and crush injuries. These injuries are often linked to roles requiring repetitive, high-risk manual labour and minimal automation, which are frequently assigned to foreign-born workers.
- Fatal injuries and machinery-related accidents were disproportionately high among migrants in Australia, especially those in trades and production roles.
- Migrant workers were more likely to be assigned to hazardous or 'survival' jobs.
- Migrant workers were at higher risk of injury than local workers due to language barriers, a lack of procedural clarity, lack of localised training or orientation on safety protocols, fatigue from shiftwork and an absence of union representation.
- Foreign-born workers are overrepresented in injury and hospital admission records for high-risk industries.
- Migrant workers face higher exposure to hazardous tasks due to limited employment options and lack of safety training, often exacerbated by precarious visa statuses and fear of reprisal. This reinforces how vulnerability extends beyond the jobsite into social structures.
- Some migrants view physical strain as part of duty, with this stoicism/endurance mindset leading to underreporting or self-managing injuries.
- Migrants may prioritise retention of employment over personal safety, which may discourage leave-taking or seeking medical attention.
- Migrant healthcare workers are at increased risk of burnout, anxiety and depression due to underemployment, role mismatch, workplace discrimination, isolation and exclusion from social and professional networks.²⁵

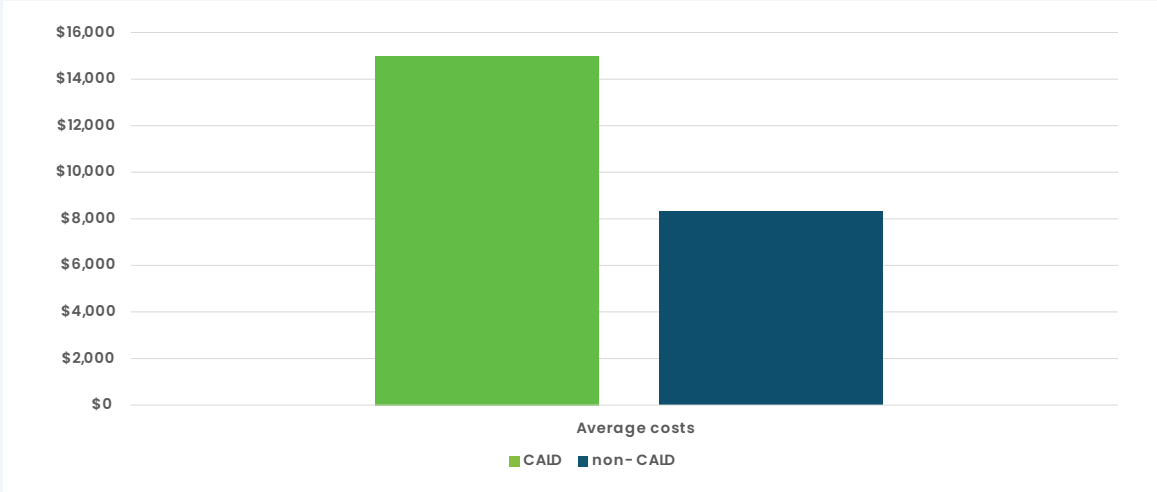
²³ Productivity Commission (February 2025) Housing construction productivity: Can we fix it? (<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/housing-construction/housing-construction.pdf>); Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024, Care and support economy: state of play (<https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/care-support-economy-state-of-play.pdf>).

²⁴ I. Wang (2025) Kairros Literature review series: *Personal Injury Risks for Migrants in Australia: Scoping review of focus industries – Manufacturing, Construction and Healthcare*, Kairros (<https://www.kairros.com.au/research/>).

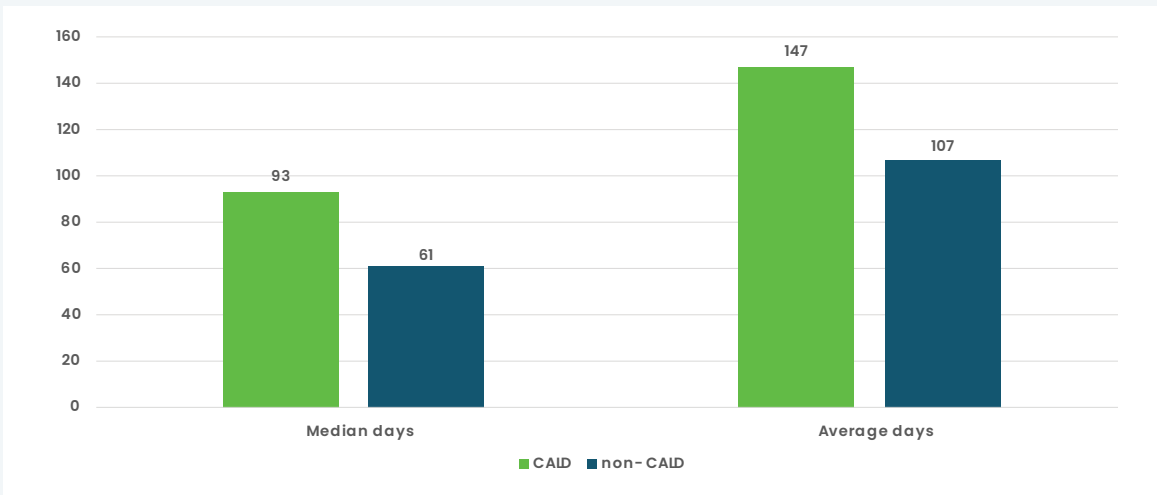
²⁵ Productivity Commission (February 2025) Housing construction productivity: Can we fix it? (<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/housing-construction/housing-construction.pdf>); Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024, Care and support economy: state of play (<https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/care-support-economy-state-of-play.pdf>).

These injuries have both a human cost and a financial cost for business. A recent study prepared for NSW’s State Insurance Regulatory Authority (SIRA) indicated that people with an injury who spoke an additional language other than English incurred a higher cost for return to work services and required longer periods off work than those who only spoke English.²⁶

Average cost per Return to Work



Absences from work – Days



SIRA also found that people with an injury who spoke an additional language other than English were less likely to achieve a direct return to work outcome compared to people with an injury who only spoke English (62% compared to 76%). SIRA attributed this to the greater difficulty that people who speak other languages have engaging with the recovery through work process.²⁷

As noted above, the same industries that report the highest rates of migrant workers are among those foreshadowed to experience significant expansion in the coming years. **It is therefore vital that mechanisms that support CALD and migrant workers and ensure their retention in the workforce are rapidly adopted to build resilience into the workforce and, in turn, drive Australia’s productivity.**

²⁶ Urbis, for the State Insurance Regulatory Authority (SIRA), *Workplace Rehabilitation Provider Evaluation*, 1 July 2025, p. 57 ([Workplace Rehabilitation Program Evaluation – Final Report](#)).

²⁷ Urbis, for the State Insurance Regulatory Authority (SIRA), *Workplace Rehabilitation Provider Evaluation*, 1 July 2025, p. 22 ([Workplace Rehabilitation Program Evaluation – Final Report](#)).

What makes participation work?

The evidence consistently shows that effective workforce participation strategies are underpinned by several key features.

A biopsychosocial approach

The biopsychosocial model considers biological, psychological and social aspects of injury and illness, in contrast to the traditional 'biomedical' model which focuses only on biological/physical factors.²⁸

A person-centred approach

Evidence shows that better return to work outcomes result from a tailored, person-centred approach. SIRA explains that to achieve a positive return to work outcome, the process, support and intervention provided by all stakeholders should respond to an individual worker's circumstances and needs and engage and equip the person to be involved in their recovery.²⁹

Early intervention

A 2024 independent research report by Monash University, commissioned by Safe Work Australia, reported 'universal consensus' as to the value of intervention that takes place less than three months after the lodgement of a claim to improve recovery outcomes. Stakeholders offered deep insight into barriers to and facilitators of early intervention after claim lodgement: employer knowledge and skills (particularly in small and medium-sized businesses); healthcare provider knowledge; access to specialist healthcare services; and communication between all relevant parties.³⁰

SIRA has also identified that in the early stages of a claim a written return to work plan increases the likelihood of return to work by 1.7 times.³¹

Shaping participation strategies for a culturally diverse workforce

Research commissioned by Kairros contends that the base strategies discussed above must be augmented by additional pillars of practice to address the persistent barriers that exist for culturally diverse communities, specifically:

- Culturally-specialised return to work services: Tailored return to work programs must address the distinct needs of CALD communities, incorporating language support, mental health assessments and culturally responsive service delivery.
- Workforce development: Cultural competence training must be expanded for service providers and CALD representation should be a feature of leadership and frontline roles.³²
- A 'health navigator': The research available provides clear evidence that while interpreters and migrant health workers benefit communication, they alone cannot address the breadth of barriers faced by CALD communities. Instead, the best outcomes are achieved by allocation of a 'health navigator' to overcome barriers posed by the health system, education, assessment and mediation and to provide advocacy and emotional support.³³

It is through the lens of these research findings that Kairros has shaped its service delivery model, ensuring that we align with best-practice to achieve an equitable recovery for all.

²⁸ P. Rozen QC, (2021) *Improving the experience of workers: A review of WorkSafe Victoria's management of complex workers' compensation claims*, p vi.

²⁹ State Insurance Regulatory Authority, 2025, *Recovery at work insider: A tailored, person-centred approach*, citing Safe Work Australia, *National RTW Strategy 2020-2030* and Moo, A, Bywood, P, Clark and McMillan, J., 2021, *Best practices for person-centred case management: literature review*. ISCRR ([Recovery at work insider – A tailored, person-centred approach – SIRA](https://www.kairros.com.au/research/)).

³⁰ Monash Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health and the Healthy Working Lives Research Group, SPHPM, (2024) *Early Intervention in the Workers Compensation Process*, Monash University.

³¹ State Insurance Regulatory Authority, 'Reversing the trend – improving return to work outcomes in NSW', ([Reversing the trend – improving return to work outcomes in NSW – SIRA](https://www.kairros.com.au/research/)).

³² Dr D. Sheppard, 2025, *Literature review series: Employment and long-term unemployment status for migrants in Australia: promoting the need for a specialised approach to RTW services for CALD clients*, Kairros (<https://www.kairros.com.au/research/>).

³³ Dr D. Sheppard, 2025, *Literature review series: Justification for 'health navigator role' to bridge the gap for CALD community groups*, Kairros, (<https://www.kairros.com.au/research/>).

The Kairros model

With over 30 years' experience, what sets Kairros apart from other rehabilitation consultancies is our expertise in culturally diverse rehabilitation. While the base services we provide mirror those of many other providers – worksite assessments, medical case conferences, vocational assessments, capacity evaluations, return to work plans, worksite reviews and durability monitoring – how we do this makes all the difference.

As we have discussed above, through our research, Kairros identified patterns of delayed referrals, lower engagement and reduced service access for culturally diverse clients. These are only exacerbated by socio-cultural barriers. In response, we have developed a unique diversity-informed service model that addresses these barriers to support sustainable, equitable recovery.



A diverse recoveries service model delivered by a diverse workforce

This service model is delivered by highly trained consultants, many of whom are multilingual and from different cultural backgrounds. As a team who understands that culture shapes how people experience pain, recovery and trust, we adapt our care to our clients. As Kairros Rehabilitation Consultant Roshan Thapa describes his work, 'at Kairros, we don't just talk about diversity — we live it.'

“ At Kairros, we don't just talk about diversity — we live it.



Scan the QR Code to hear more from Roshan



This is integral to the effectiveness of our diverse recoveries model — our bilingual team members work in collaboration with the specialist Kairros Interpreting Service (KIS) to communicate in over 90 languages, empowering client communication, providing cultural safety and enabling clients to co-design their recovery plan. This symbiotic relationship amplifies the role of consultants and interpreters beyond that of a conduit for 'message transfer' in a health setting, to that of a 'health navigator'.³⁴

The Kairros Interpreting Service (KIS)

We know the language barrier can act as a roadblock for successful client outcomes, so our unique in-house interpreting service is available to clients to support them in their recovery journey.

Our team of NAATI-certified interpreters, including those proficient in Auslan, are knowledgeable in the intricacies of the rehabilitation process and work seamlessly alongside our Rehabilitation Consultants, improving communication and accuracy across treating parties. We draw on the passion and skillset of a team that in three short years has grown to over 260 interpreters that speak more than 90 languages and who believe that their role isn't just about language — it's about establishing a strong connection with clients, demystifying the rehabilitation process and having empathy for the client's situation and injuries. This connection empowers workers to regain a sense of control over their injuries and recovery plan, to navigate their rehabilitation with greater confidence and to receive consistent support throughout their recovery journey. Our expertise delivers equitable outcomes for all.



³⁴ The merits of a 'health navigator' or 'patient navigator' have been convincingly argued in a literature review by Dr Dianne Sheppard, 2025, *Justification for 'health navigator role' to bridge the gap for CALD community groups* (<https://www.kairros.com.au/research/>).

For KIS Manager Jennifer Sy, who has driven the growth of the Kairros Interpreting Service since its inception, the role of KIS is simple but essential: ‘KIS is here to bridge the gap — we make sure that communication is never a roadblock in our clients’ journey to recovery.’

“ We make sure that communication is never a roadblock in our clients’ journey to recovery.



Scan the QR Code to hear more from Jennifer



We now service over 90 languages, including:

- | | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| ✓ Amaharic | ✓ Cantonese | ✓ Korean | ✓ Portugese | ✓ Tongan |
| ✓ Arabic | ✓ Farsi | ✓ Malayalam | ✓ Somali | ✓ Triginya |
| ✓ Bahasa Indonesia | ✓ Hakha Chin | ✓ Maltese | ✓ Spanish | ✓ Turkish |
| ✓ Burmese | ✓ Hindi | ✓ Mandarin | ✓ Swahili | ✓ Vietnamese |

A service model grounded in evidence that what we do works

How does Kairros’ service model translate into outcomes? While Kairros has supported over 14,000 clients to return to work across more than 30 years in operation, our recovery and return to work outcomes for our culturally diverse workforces demonstrate the particular strength of our model.

Durable return to work

Over the 2024 and 2025 financial years, Kairros has maintained a durable return to work rate of 70% for culturally diverse clients. This compares favourably with the outcomes of the 105 workplace rehabilitation providers captured in the SIRA study referred to earlier in this paper (being the most recent and comprehensive dataset available for comparison at the time of writing) which found that overall, providers achieved a durable return to work rate of 62% for people with an injury who spoke an additional language other than English.

Recovery achieved at a competitive cost

While this return to work rate represents a clear benefit for workers in terms of recovery and wellbeing, the costs associated with each case reveal the broader economic and organisational benefits achieved by Kairros’ model. Although SIRA reported that the workers who spoke English as an additional language represented in their study incurred significantly higher costs in returning to work than those who spoke English as a primary language (\$15,000 versus \$8300)³⁵, Kairros recorded significantly lower average case costs of just \$7,200 across the 2024 and 2025 financial years — **that is, up to half the cost recorded for the same group across the industry**. Tangible outcomes such as these underscore how Kairros’ expertise, innovative solutions and person-centred service model translate to long-term value for employers and for the broader economy.

However, to fully appreciate the impact of our service, it is essential to understand the context in which our outcomes are achieved.

Where complexity meets expertise

Notwithstanding that research confirms that having a written return to work plan within the first 30 days of injury increases the likelihood of returning to work by 1.7 times,³⁶ it has been our experience that by the time that clients are referred to Kairros, a very significant period has elapsed since their injury. In the 2025 financial year alone, a median of 264 days had elapsed since the date of injury before clients reached us for support.³⁷ While this is consistent with SIRA's finding that workers who spoke English as an additional language were significantly more likely to be in the long-term high-volume engagement pattern,³⁸ it has been our particular experience that stakeholders tend to refer cases to Kairros that have stalled elsewhere owing to a barrier. These barriers can be varied: a referral may be delayed because an employer not being supportive of an employee returning to work, a lack of understanding of the workers' compensation scheme on the part of the employer or employee, a lack of understanding of the value of rehabilitation services from a Claims Manager or employer, a lack of support navigating the workers' compensation system provided to an employer by an insurer (particularly in the case of culturally diverse employers who benefit from the same types of language and system supports that culturally diverse workers benefit from), or a worker's disillusionment with the initial support and recovery process of another treatment provider.

Quite commonly, the delay in a client reaching Kairros can be attributed to a seemingly straightforward injury that had initially been referred to another provider becoming vastly more complex due to extenuating cultural factors. The case study to the side demonstrates how cultural beliefs can strongly influence health and recovery pathways and how respecting and integrating cultural frameworks builds trust and leads to better health outcomes without compromising personal values.

Case study

A young male taxi driver originally from India sustained a back injury. He had declined western medical treatment, preferring traditional medicine and expressed a strong view that recovery should occur naturally before engaging in exercise. He displayed fear-avoidance behaviours and refused medication, injections and physiotherapy.

It became apparent that his cultural beliefs were creating barriers to recovery and, unfortunately, he experienced ongoing pain and could not return to work.

On being referred to Kairros, his consultant adopted a counselling approach framed by his cultural beliefs, acknowledging the effectiveness of traditional medicine in India due to its connection with the local environment. They discussed practice in Australia and how western medicine could complement his beliefs and offer necessary support.

By aligning treatment with the client's cultural values rather than challenging them, the client accepted that western medicine in Australia could work alongside his traditional beliefs to support his rehabilitation. He agreed to trial medication and physiotherapy and positive changes were quickly recorded in his recovery.

³⁶ SIRA, p 57.

³⁷ State Insurance and Regulatory Authority, 'Factors influencing return to work outcomes', Updated 14 January 2025 ([Factors influencing return to work outcomes – SIRA](#)).

³⁸ When translated as an average score for the year, this figure is even more stark – with an average of 643 days having elapsed between the date of injury and referral in the 2025 financial year.

³⁸ State Insurance Regulatory Authority, 'Reversing the trend – improving return to work outcomes in NSW', p 20 ([Reversing the trend – improving return to work outcomes in NSW – SIRA](#)).

In other cases, Kairros finds that injured workers face barriers seeking support and treatment due to the factors discussed earlier in this paper: language barriers, lower literacy, fear of speaking up, a lack of awareness of their entitlements, isolation from formal support networks and fear of reprisal connected with their employment or visa conditions. The case study below captures the experience of a worker whose fear regarding his visa status and limited English prevented him from engaging with much needed rehabilitative care. A sense of isolation and helplessness quickly manifested into fear, disengagement and withdrawal from work, family and community. Fortunately, the intervention of a Kairros consultant supported him to restore his physical function, personal identity, autonomy and ultimately become a source of advice and mentor for others in his community navigating the healthcare and compensation systems.

Case study

After falling 3.5 meters from a ladder, a 57 year old window cleaner sustained a traumatic brain injury and spinal fractures that left him hospitalised for over one and a half months. Living in Australia on a bridging visa, he faced not only severe physical and cognitive challenges but also deep uncertainty about his future and that of his family. He spoke only Mandarin, had little understanding of Australia's health or insurance systems and carried the emotional weight of being unable to return home — even for his mother's funeral — without risking deportation. The client feared communicating with treatment teams or insurers and his sense of helplessness and uncertainty intensified his distress.

Kairros initially engaged a bilingual consultant to build trust and rapport and to clarify the intent of rehabilitation. The consultant quickly identified a range of cultural barriers impacting his recovery: low health literacy, fear of authority, trauma-related cognitive impairment, a very limited understanding of Australian systems and the uncertainty regarding his visa, which had been referred for a final court hearing at the time of his injury.

Intervention strategies utilised drew on an integrated, trauma-informed framework, incorporating occupational therapy, psychology and culturally responsive coaching. Therapists used translated handouts, visual tools and culturally-aligned metaphor-based education to explain the recovery process. As rapport strengthened, communication was complemented by a KIS interpreter, enabling the client to participate more meaningfully in discussions with his medical team and to learn about the insurance process. Kairros worked with his treating professionals to simplify their language and incorporate the use of diagrams and provided the client with digital literacy coaching, teaching him how to use email in Mandarin and translation apps. To support the client's long-term integration into the broader community, we arranged for his formal participation in community-based TAFE and library programs.

Gradually, he rebuilt daily routines, strengthened his memory and progressed from bed bound immobility to independent walking and lifting. Six months later, he was not only physically stronger but also more confident. He prepared documentation for his refugee tribunal, re engaged with the visa process and launched a small cleaning/home support business. Beyond his own recovery, he began informally mentoring others from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds as they navigated the healthcare and compensation systems.

For our client, rehabilitation was more than physical recovery — it restored his independence, identity and sense of purpose. His journey shows how inclusive, culturally responsive care can not just transform an individual's life, but also ripple outward to strengthen communities.

Quality reflected in client feedback

It is this ability to deliver strong outcomes for our clients in even the most complex circumstances that lead to our clients reporting such high levels of satisfaction with our services. We proudly report a 90% client satisfaction rate, with clients speaking to the reassurance and confidence that has come from working alongside a dedicated provider who understands, listens, consults, explains and is driven to co-design their roadmap to recovery. Seeing our clients thrive is what drives all the team at Kairros and their stories not only inspire us to keep doing what works well, but provide us the opportunity to incorporate clients' lived experience into ensuring our model remains relevant and effective.

Often, one of the simplest markers of satisfaction has been having a rehabilitation provider who simply speaks their language. For one family member, having an advocate who spoke their language transformed a difficult process, restoring their father's dignity in the recovery process by explaining difficult concepts, presenting the options available and removing barriers:

“

Luckily for my father and I, the insurer finally appointed Kairros to look after his case. Ever since they (have) been involved, I have constantly been surprised by how much they have been able to achieve in dealing directly with the employer, doctor and physiotherapist. Even just with them being able to attend the appointments with us has helped considerably. This has made the process much smoother and I believe has helped my father's recovery. It has been particularly helpful for Kairros to be able to converse with us in Chinese and explain some of the more difficult aspects of the case. My father and I cannot express our thanks to them enough and really look forward to their continued involvement in his case, especially as he continues his return to work plan.



For another client, working with the dedicated Kairros team signalled the shift from giving up to regaining a sense of autonomy, putting their recovery back into their own hands:

“

It has been a very long and tough journey being on workers' compensation. As such, I am thankful that I have one of Kairros' Rehab Consultants on board. At a time when I wanted to give up, seeing Kairros' consultant's work ethic truly nourished my soul. Their determination, can-do attitude, they always asked me what I needed and sought to help me on my recovery journey. I was recently approved hydrotherapy, after a very long process — really impressed here! Also the way my consultant would explain and consult with me regarding my rehab journey made me feel included and in control too.



Proof that the Kairros model works

The metrics set out in the previous pages, while impressive in isolation, are remarkable when considered in light of the complex circumstances in which they were achieved. Given there is a median referral delay of some 264 days between the date of injury and the client reaching Kairros — often resulting in significantly more complex presentations — the consistently strong outcomes achieved by Kairros in maintaining a competitive durable return to work rate at up to half the average cost incurred in culturally diverse injury cases across the industry, demonstrate the real strength of Kairros' service model.

Our results exemplify why wrap-around services such as ours can and should be scaled to support an expanding culturally diverse workforce and drive workforce retention and productivity.

Our expertise gives us confidence that culturally diverse workforce participation and return to work outcomes directly relate to unlocking hidden productivity gains. Better outcomes, lower cost, with cultural care that works — Kairros is return to work reimagined.



Next steps: Operationalising workforce retention

Pivoting back to the productivity question at the heart of this discussion, how can the experience of Kairros inform broader planning for Australia's workforce moving forward? We propose the following as first steps:

1

Acknowledge the link between workforce retention and prosperity

Labour-force retention and engagement must be recognised as central to both productivity and a thriving society. As noted earlier, the cost to business of replacing a highly skilled worker can be up to two to three times the cost of their salary. While we are strongly supportive of proposals to build a more skilled and adaptable workforce, the scaffolding must also exist to retain those skilled and adaptable workers to ensure the resilience, productivity and prosperity of Australia's workforce.

2

Scale effective support models nationally

Government and business should work together to identify and expand proven wrap-around service models that can be rapidly delivered at scale and which support Australia's diverse workforce — such as the Kairros model — to drive workforce resilience and retention.

By addressing the full spectrum of worker needs — from physical, social and psychological recovery to vocational reintegration — government and business can make a proactive investment in human capital and help individuals return to meaningful work faster and more sustainably. This, in turn, reduces long-term welfare dependency, alleviates pressure on healthcare systems and strengthens economic productivity.

Moreover, scalable wrap-around services offer a blueprint for inclusive workforce development. They are particularly effective in supporting workers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, regional communities and sectors with high injury rates. When government and industry co-invest in these models, they create a shared infrastructure for resilience — one that benefits employers, employees and the broader economy.



3

Improve reporting and planning for culturally diverse workforces

This paper has discussed at length the challenges persistently faced by culturally diverse workers, including the absence of reliable, consistent data to capture their lived experience or support evidence-based benchmarking. While this paper contributes to addressing that gap, meaningful progress demands deliberate policy and business decisions that mandate data collection and accountability.

Regulators, service providers and employers must be compelled to systematically capture and report data that reflects the realities of Australia's increasingly diverse workforce.

Current reporting frameworks fall short of capturing cultural nuance, posing obstacles for those that, like us, are focused on designing services that are truly inclusive and effective.

Embedding enhanced reporting standards into broader workforce planning — such as through DEI strategies or regulatory obligations — would facilitate a better understanding of what drives inclusion, resilience and successful return to work outcomes for people from diverse backgrounds. Without this infrastructure, there is a real risk that solutions will remain fragmented and reactive, rather than strategic and scalable.

Australia's economic prosperity is at a critical pivot-point — but Kairros remains optimistic that effective solutions to the productivity crisis do exist. We look forward with anticipation to the outcomes of the policy discussions underway in Canberra and are proud to be one of many workforce stakeholders leading the way in proposing practical solutions to a collective challenge.

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The service delivery case studies and client outcomes reflected in this white paper represent the work and achievements of the incredible team at Kairros. Empowerment, enablement and care is at the heart of what they do. Through their skill, commitment and collaboration, they ensure equitable recovery for all.

Kairros, October 2025

Disclaimer: The statistical and other information reflected in this paper are accurate at the time of writing.



