



Central Highlands Regional Skills Demand Profile

Snapshot 2023



**Victorian
Skills Authority**



State
Government

Jobs, Skills,
Industry
and Regions



Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

The Victorian Skills Authority (VSA) acknowledges and recognises the Traditional Owners of the land within the regional area of the Eastern Maar, Wadawarrung, Dja Dja Wurrung and Wurundjeri People, as well as the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupgalk Nations and its people, their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past, present, and emerging, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Central Highlands Regional Skills Taskforce

The VSA acknowledges the time, contribution, and insights of the Central Highlands Regional Skills Taskforce members (and additional representatives from industry, local government, training providers, and related agencies) who contributed to the development of this profile.

The findings in this profile would not be possible without their openness, generosity, expertise, and commitment to the Central Highlands regional economy and community.

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Tim Harrison	Ararat Rural City Council
Tim Matthews	Hospitality business owner, Chair of Business Ballarat and Chair of the Central Highlands Regional Partnership



About the Victorian Skills Authority

The Victorian Skills Authority (VSA) was established by the Victorian Government in July 2021 in response to the recommendations of the Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy Review.

The VSA brings together the key stakeholders of the skills sector – industry, employers, providers, unions, communities, and learners – to provide skills-led solutions, drive reform and work together to build a better Victoria.

The VSA has a critical role to play in understanding and communicating the skills needed to ensure Victoria can meet the current, emerging, and future skills and industry demands that enable inclusive growth and prosperity for all Victorians.

Regional Skills Demand Profiles

Regional Victoria is at the forefront of key priorities for the Victorian Government. These include the 2026 Commonwealth Games, which will contribute more than \$3 billion to Victoria's economy and create more than 7,500 jobs, and the establishment of the State Electricity Commission (SEC), which will help deliver more than 59,000 new jobs. These new opportunities, along with increasing regional populations, and existing and emerging industries, highlight the critical need to grow and advance skills in the regions so that the people, businesses, and communities of regional Victoria can thrive.

The VSA worked with Regional Skills Taskforces and Industry Roundtables during 2022 and early 2023 to develop Regional Skills Demand Profiles that identify current, emerging, and future skills needs across Victoria's regions. The profiles have been prepared with support from Regional Development Victoria (RDV) in the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (DJSIR). The profiles are a valuable resource for regional Victoria and the Victorian Government. The VSA is working closely with stakeholders to address the opportunities and issues identified in the profiles.

This document is a summary of key findings. The profiles are available on the VSA website at: skillsauthority.vic.gov.au

To access the latest data, readers are directed to the VSA employment forecast dashboard at: www.vic.gov.au/victorian-skills-plan and the Regional Economic Development Strategies (REDS) interactive data dashboards at: <https://www.rdv.vic.gov.au/resources/regional-economic-development-strategies>



About the Central Highlands region

This profile provides a 3-year outlook for the Central Highlands, and the education and training opportunities that can help develop the workforce required for the region.

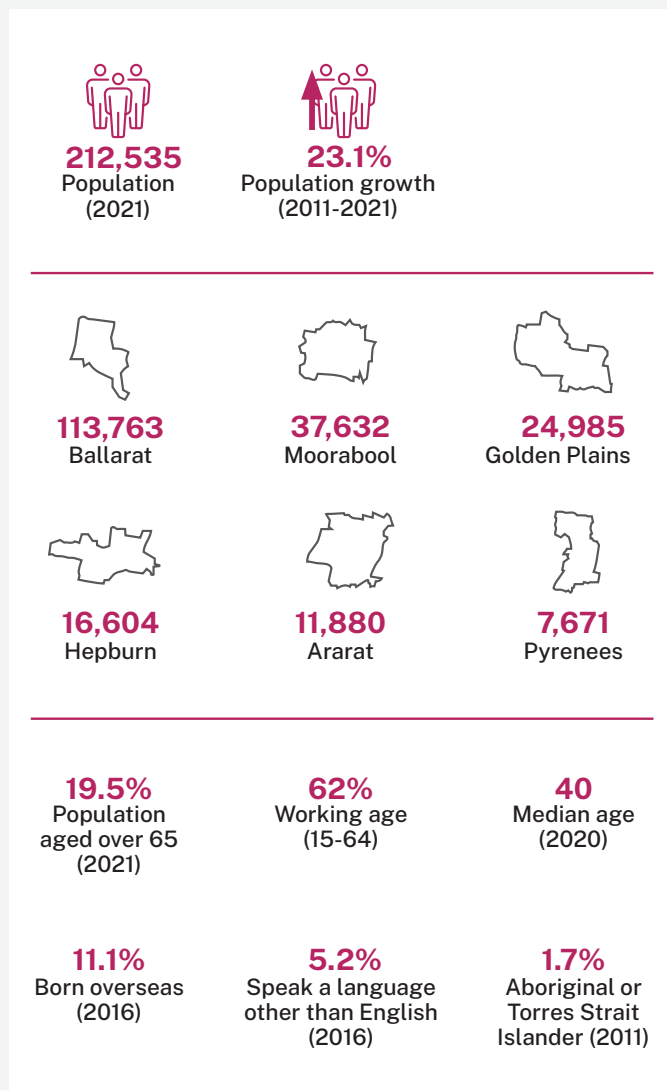


Figure 1 | Overview of the Central Highlands region

The Central Highlands region spans the east-west transport corridor connecting Melbourne to western Victoria and has more than 212,530 residents. The region comprises 6 local government municipalities — Ararat Rural City, City of Ballarat, Golden Plains Shire, Hepburn Shire, Moorabool Shire, and Pyrenees Shire. The region is home to Eastern Maar, Wadawarrung, Dja Dja Wurrung and Wurundjeri People, as well as the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupgalk Nations, who have lived, worked and cared for their Country and resources for many thousands of years.

Since 2011, the region's population has grown more than 23.1%, the second highest growth rate for the period in Victoria's regions and faster than Greater Melbourne. The Golden Plains Shire grew fastest within the period 2011-2021, while Ballarat has the largest total population increase of 18,578 residents.

This growth is expected to continue, with the region's population estimated to reach around 226,217 by 2036.

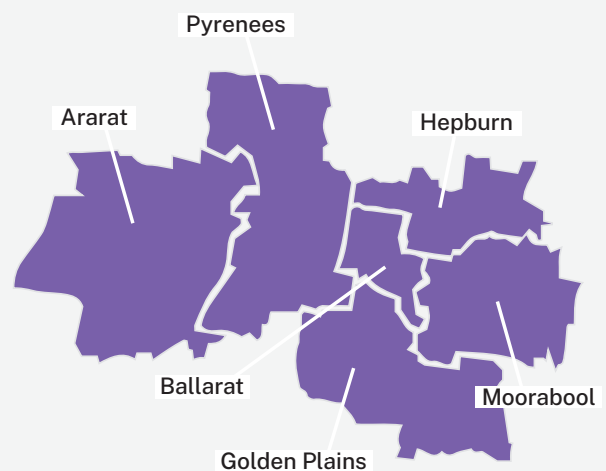


Figure 2 | Map of the Central Highlands region



Industries in the region

The regional economy has evolved over the years from a reliance on manufacturing and agriculture towards service-based sectors, including health and education, driven by population growth, and maturing of key social infrastructure.

Agriculture and manufacturing remain important local industries, drawing on the region's natural assets and strategic connections to markets via road and rail freight networks.

Key industries in the Central Highlands region are diverse yet interconnected. There are many points of intersection and connectivity between industries that support supply chains and other outcomes for the regional community and economy.


Outlook on jobs growth

The VSA's 3-year employment projections show significant demand for workers in the region – with more than 5,880 additional new workers required in the 3 years between 2022 and 2025.

At least 4,870 workers will also be needed to replace retirements. The type of skills required by industry are becoming more complex. This highlights the need to ensure workers have the skills to meet industry's evolving needs.

Estimates of total new workers for 2022–25 across the 7 key industries in the Central Highlands are as follows:

- visitor economy – 2,440
- manufacturing – 490
- health and community services – 2,230
- construction – 1,080
- agriculture – 330
- business, professional, and public administration services – 1,770
- education and training – 1,300



The diversification of industry has changed the nature of skills and training required in the region.

Central Highlands challenges and opportunities

Challenges

Current worker shortages in the Central Highlands region highlight a need to engage and upskill the existing population, while looking to grow the emerging and future workforce.



Figure 3 | Priority skills across Central Highlands' major industries

Like other parts of Victoria, the Central Highlands is affected by cost-of-living pressures, significant labour shortages and continued recovery from the pandemic.

These are exacerbated by underlying challenges in the region such as housing accessibility, access to child care, and teacher and trainer shortages.

The Central Highlands is also experiencing some challenges that are resulting in barriers to education, training and workforce participation, attraction, and retention.

Feedback from the Regional Skills Taskforce and industry roundtables indicates that the education and skills system and industry will need to transform to meet the changing needs of students, workers, industry, and community.

The Regional Skills Taskforce and Industry Roundtables identified a common set of priority skills requirements across all major industries in the Central Highlands region as per Figure 3.



The Regional Skills Taskforce and Industry Roundtables raised 5 common challenges related to workforce skills and training in the Central Highlands along with opportunities to address cross-cutting workforce and skills needs.

Table 1 | Workforce challenges and opportunities in the Central Highlands

Challenge	Opportunity
Limited understanding of industry growth and associated career pathways	Promote awareness of industry activity and associated career pathways
Barriers to accessing vocational and higher education	Identify and address barriers to participation in post-school education and the transition to employment
Inter and intra-sector workforce competition	Enhance inter and intra-sector collaboration to attract, build and retain a skilled and diverse local workforce
Alignment between higher and vocational education and workforce needs	Leverage industry experience to develop innovative approaches for preparing for work
Risk of a low skilled workforce	Increase opportunities for continual learning and development





The Central Highlands region has unique strengths and future opportunities.



Opportunities

The Central Highlands region has significantly changed in recent years but its strengths mean it is well-positioned to actively plan to address challenges and take up opportunities. The strong economy of the Central Highlands makes it attractive for population growth and industry expansion.

Key to Central Highlands' continued success is a skilled local workforce that can evolve to support future industry and community needs. The Regional Skills Taskforce identified 7 industries of focus within the Central Highlands region:

- visitor economy
- manufacturing
- health care and community services
- construction
- agriculture
- business, professional and public administration
- education and training

The health care and social assistance sector is the single largest employer in the region with 18% of workers. Education and training and construction each account for 10% of the workforce, while retail trade and manufacturing employ 9 and 8% of workers respectively. These industries also have a higher proportion of employment relative to the average across Victoria, highlighting the significance of these industries to the Central Highlands economy.

Consultation identified a range of potential education and training responses to address the current and emerging challenges facing major industries.

There are also specific opportunities for growth in the region.

Opportunities for growth

Commonwealth Games

Ballarat will be a regional host city for the 2026 Commonwealth Games, hosting several sport programs, including athletics and para-athletics, boxing, the marathon, and mountainbike racing. This is a significant opportunity for investment in community infrastructure, sport facilities, housing, accommodation, and general site activations across the region.

State Electricity Commission

The Victorian Government is bringing back the State Electricity Commission (SEC) to help drive down power bills and create thousands of jobs to enhance use of renewable energy like wind, hydro, and solar, and to store it, such as with batteries. An SEC Centre of Training Excellence will be established to coordinate and accredit courses in clean energy, connecting with TAFEs, Registered Training Organisations, unions and the industry, supporting 6,000 positions for trainees and apprentices.

Manufacturing

Food product manufacturing is one of the key strengths in the region, as favourable agricultural conditions mean primary and secondary production can take place within the region. The continued prosperity of this industry is closely connected to the increasing use of sustainable production practices, and support of Aboriginal owned and operated food production businesses.

Transport and rolling stock-related manufacturing is another significant specialisation of the region as is rail maintenance and manufacturing operations, such as for the new X'Trapolis 2.0 train fleet, which is expected to create around 750 additional jobs, 100 of which are expected to be located in Central Highlands.

Renewable energy and waste management

The energy and waste sector intersects with other major industries in Central Highlands, including manufacturing, agriculture, and construction. There are opportunities in each of these areas for decarbonisation, circular economy activity and innovation through technology. The Central Highlands region is already embedded within several networks committed to the promotion and implementation of renewable energies and sustainable waste management, including the Grampians New Energy Taskforce, Renewable Energy Zone (Western Victoria and South West), and Local Government Area-specific strategies and initiatives.

Visitor economy

Central Highlands benefits from a diverse and established visitor economy offering with potential for accelerated growth in coming years. The central city of Ballarat provides a strong launch pad for tourism to the area and there are many experiences and activities on offer for locals and domestic and international travellers. Ballarat, as a UNESCO City of Craft and Folk Art, houses several museums and heritage attractions including the Ballarat Art Gallery, Sovereign Hill Living Museum, and North Gardens Indigenous Sculpture Park. Work is currently underway to support the sector to continue to grow and thrive, particularly in preparation for the 2026 Commonwealth Games.

A photograph of a man with a beard and long hair, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a green sweater, smiling broadly. He is carrying a large, light-colored canvas basket filled with red and green apples on his back. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green foliage. An orange circular graphic is overlaid on the bottom left of the image, containing text.

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Next steps

The Central Highlands Regional Skills Taskforce identified next steps to address regional skills and workforce needs.

The VSA will seek to address some of these over the coming year, while others require coordinated action by industry, government, and the education sector. Next steps have been classified by how long it will take for benefits to be realised, immediate, medium term, or long term. An action plan will be developed in collaboration with the community.

Immediate impact (1–2 years)

1. Publication of industry data and trends for current and prospective students, parents and career counsellors.
2. Support the development and publication of career pathway and journey mapping examples for the Central Highlands region.
3. Targeted engagement with students and vulnerable communities to build awareness of higher and vocational education, skills development, and career pathway opportunities.
4. Undertake research to better understand the data, trends and factors affecting regional enrolments and completions.
5. Increase access to 'earn and learn' opportunities for current and prospective learners.
6. Develop a clear pathway for prospective students to transition from non-traditional training opportunities into higher and vocational education.
7. Partner with Jobs Victoria, regional, community and other industry bodies to improve access to work for learners completing their studies.
8. Provide data and insights to support workforce planning.
9. Connect key stakeholders in the region to increase accessibility and improve the quality of education and training provided.
10. Strengthen connections between education and training institutions and industry to raise awareness of employment pathways.
11. Leverage industry training materials, facilities and programs across multiple organisations to increase scale.
12. Facilitate peer learning and cross-business mentoring.
13. Promote micro-credential courses that can meet industry and employee skill development needs.
14. Design and deliver micro-credential courses to upskill employees.
15. Review and redesign recruitment processes to prioritise core competencies, alongside technical competency.





Medium-term impact (2–5 years)

1. Expand engagement activities with students and their networks.
2. Support businesses with shared resources and streamlined processes to increase access to work placement opportunities across the region.
3. Support the Senior Secondary Pathways reform agenda through facilitation of local opportunities to improve Vocational Education and Training (VET) within the region.
4. Continue to consult apprentices and employers to ensure the apprenticeship model remains fit for purpose.
5. Advocate for simplifying pathways for transitioning workers or mature and retiring cohorts so they can take up opportunities in other industries.
6. Shared recruitment pools across organisations where appropriate or feasible.
7. Work with the VET Development Centre (VDC) and industry experts to support skills development for the teacher workforce.
8. Encourage industry and education providers to take a place-based approach to course design and delivery for skills and occupations in the region.
9. Highlight the opportunities and benefits of lifelong learning to increase participation.
10. Improve access and provision of education, training, and employment for Aboriginal people through working closely with Traditional Owners.
11. Promote a culture of learning by establishing communities of practice around different industries, technological innovations, or skill level cohorts.

Longer-term impact (5+ years)

1. Promote the success stories of learners, workers and businesses in the region through innovative marketing campaigns.
2. Advocate and support local initiatives to address housing, transport and childcare accessibility that impact participation in higher and vocational education, and the employment and upskilling of current and prospective learners and workers.
3. Provide local insights to support the development of the annual Victorian Skills Plan.
4. Facilitate discussions and collaborative projects that improve design and delivery of education and training courses relevant for the region's major industries.
5. Facilitate a smooth flow of teachers between industry and higher and vocational education.
6. Future skill requirement planning and mapping.

Central Highlands case studies

RUSON program

The Registered Undergraduate Students of Nursing (RUSON) model is a pilot program to employ second and third-year students above the ratio to undertake general nursing activities under the delegation and supervision of registered nurses.

It provides an opportunity for students to 'earn while they learn' before their graduate year.

Participants are provided with a list of included and excluded duties, while staff are trained to support the student and ensure they are working within their scope of practice.

The RUSON program has been extremely successful for Central Highland's health care and community services industry and taskforce members reflected on the opportunity to expand and replicate the program across other major industries in the region.

Federation University co-op model

Federation University will become the first in Australia to establish a globally recognised cooperative model into course offerings. Building on existing partnerships with businesses, the model allows students to undertake paid work with established businesses for course credit, while putting into practice their learnings from the traditional classroom component.

This model develops work-ready graduates who already have connections to industry, the region, and a deeper understanding of career pathways.

Every Federation co-op degree will include transferable skills as well as the technical skills to prepare students for their careers and at least 150 hours of workplace learning that contribute to their course credits.

The co-op model provides students with an opportunity to work with employers and build work experience to go straight from university into a first job or new career.





Published by the Victorian Skills Authority
Level 3, 289 Wellington Parade South
East Melbourne Victoria 3001
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June 2023

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