

Student support: enabling the learner journey

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About the research

Student support: enabling the learner journey

Upekha Andrahannadi and Tabatha Griffin, NCVER

This research examines how registered training organisations (RTOs) can more effectively support students throughout their learner journey to help them to succeed. It explores the key characteristics of effective student support, the points at which support needs are identified and delivered, and the barriers that both students and RTOs face in accessing and providing support. Using case studies of RTOs with high qualification-completion rates and/or high student satisfaction with student-support services, the research provides examples of effective student support in practice.

Key messages

- Six key elements of effective student support were identified as important for student success:
 - a whole-of-institution approach
 - early engagement with students and relevant stakeholders (for example, parents, employers, external support services)
 - high-quality training delivered by caring experts
 - continuity of support throughout the learner journey
 - holistic and individualised support
 - strong relationship-building.

While these elements were common across the case-study RTOs, their implementation varied in practice.

- RTOs identified and addressed student support needs at different stages of the learner journey, including pre-enrolment/enrolment, course commencement, during ongoing study, nearing completion, during assessments and in work placements. Some support strategies were implemented during specific stages of the learner journey, while others extended across multiple stages or during the entire learner journey.
- Providing effective support for key priority groups, such as First Nations students, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students and students with disability, requires early engagement, individualised and holistic support, and an environment of cultural safety to address the unique challenges faced by these learners.
- Several challenges can hinder the provision of effective student support, including:
 - RTO-based challenges (for example, staff shortages, time constraints and limited funding)
 - student-based challenges (for example, behavioural barriers, learner capabilities and mindset)
 - external challenges (for example, unsupportive work environments).

John King
Managing Director, NCVER

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Executive summary

This research investigates how registered training organisations (RTOs) can most effectively support students to succeed in their training, focusing on qualification completion. It examines:

- the key characteristics of effective student support
- when and how support needs are identified and provided throughout the learner journey
- the barriers faced by students and RTOs when accessing and delivering student support.

An important aspect of this research was capturing perspectives from both RTO staff and students. Through case studies of RTOs with high qualification-completion rates and/or high student satisfaction with student-support services, the research provides examples of effective student support in practice.

Key characteristics of effective student support

Six interconnected elements were identified as important for student success.

A whole-of-institution approach

Fostering student success requires a sustained, organisation-wide commitment to embedding student support across the entire learner journey, from pre-enrolment to completion. A student-centred, whole-of-institution approach ensures that well-defined support structures are in place and delivered through collective approaches by skilled and well-supported staff.

Early engagement with students and relevant stakeholders

Timely engagement enables learner support to be embedded from the outset. Engaging not only with students but also with parents, employers and external support services helps to create a strong network of support.

High-quality training delivery by experts who genuinely care

Training delivered by highly skilled, responsive and passionate training and support staff is fundamental to effective student support. These professionals proactively implement support strategies before students become disengaged.

Continuity of support

Ongoing support benefits both learners and trainers. When provided consistently across an organisation, it enhances the effectiveness of student-support structures.

Holistic and individualised support

Given the diverse and often complex challenges faced by students, effective support must be holistic and tailored to individual needs. This may include wellbeing support, such as counselling and financial assistance, in addition to course-related or language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) support. Peer-support mechanisms can also be valuable.

Relationship-building

Strong relationships underpin effective student support. While the trainer–learner relationship is particularly important, relationships between the RTO, student and other stakeholders also play a key role in developing support structures. A shared commitment to student success drives these relationships.

These elements were common across all case-study RTOs, despite differences in their size, location, provider type and student cohorts. While implemented in different ways, they were consistently underpinned by a genuine commitment to student success, rather than to simply meeting compliance requirements.

Supporting students through their learner journey

Learners' needs evolve throughout their training, creating a challenge for RTOs to determine whether, when and how to offer support. Aligning support to different stages of the learner journey can help training providers to effectively identify and respond to students' needs. This research identified key support strategies at the following stages of the learner journey:

- *Pre-enrolment and enrolment*: early engagement to ensure students' expectations and capabilities align with the course; support through the enrolment process; bridging courses
- *Commencing learners*: well-planned induction (including clear guidance on accessing support); introduction to the learning management system (LMS); LLN and digital literacy support
- *Ongoing learners*: continuous monitoring and identification of support needs; ongoing training and wellbeing support
- *Assessment*: consistent conditions for practice and assessments; progress reviews through assessment tasks
- *Work placements*: matching of students with suitable workplaces; pre-placement preparation; ongoing placement support
- *Nearing completion*: targeted, timely support; career guidance; support for students who do not complete their course.

Barriers to providing and accessing student support

The provision of effective support can be hindered by challenges that are RTO-based, student-based or external.

- RTO-based challenges include staff shortages, time constraints and limited funding, all of which limit their capacity to meet growing demand for support. Trainers may lack expertise in specialised support areas, raising questions about their role in delivering student support. Competing priorities, such as compliance requirements and implementing rapid changes to training packages, can also strain resources.
- Student-based challenges include behavioural issues, such as reluctance to seek help for fear of stigma, judgment and discrimination, lack of confidence or embarrassment. Language barriers and digital literacy challenges can also discourage learners from accessing support.
- External factors include unsupportive work environments, which prevent students from accessing support and hence affect their ability to complete their qualification. Students reported issues with balancing study and work commitments, with long work hours limiting their ability to seek help during trainer and support staff work hours.

Providing effective student support is complex. It requires appropriate resourcing and implementation, tailored to the RTO's unique characteristics and those of its student cohort. While the revised Standards for RTOs set minimum obligations for student support, well-resourced and thoughtfully designed support structures can go beyond compliance, fostering a genuinely supportive learning environment.



Context

Qualification completion and non-completion

More than half of the critical skills required for future employment are projected to be delivered through vocational education and training (VET; Jobs and Skills Australia 2024). Given VET's importance in shaping the current and future Australian workforce, it is essential not only to attract learners but also to ensure they succeed in their training.

While there are many ways to measure 'success' in VET, the most commonly reported indicator is qualification completion (Wibrow, Hall & Griffin 2024). Completing a full qualification holds significant value for industry and equips students with the skills necessary for sustained employment (Papadimitriou 2023). However, VET completion rates for qualifications that were commenced in 2019 were less than 50% (NCVER 2024a).

Across the sector, there have been long-term concerns that completion rates are too low, leading to the formation of the National VET Completions Taskforce (Papadimitriou 2023). Qualification non-completion has also been a long-standing issue in the broader Australian tertiary education sector, with improving completions remaining an ongoing strategic goal (Higher Education Standards Panel 2018; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency 2020).

Improving completion rates is challenging due to the complex and often individualised nature of student withdrawal, which involves an interplay of institutional, social and personal factors (McInnes, James & Hartley 2000). Previous research has identified key reasons for learners' non-completion of their qualifications, broadly grouped into the following categories:

- employment-related reasons, such as changes in work circumstances (for example, finding a job, starting a new job, increased work hours)
- training-related reasons, including issues with course content or inconvenient class times
- personal circumstances, such as health issues, financial troubles or personal relationships
- achievement of their goals before course completion, where students feel they have gained the skills they need
- mismatch between the training and the student's abilities or interests, leading them to seek different training (Wibrow, Hall & Griffin 2024, p.3).

Findings from the 2024 National Student Outcomes Survey provide further insights into non-completion (table 1; NCVER 2024b). Some reasons, such as changing or starting a new job (17.6%); completing all intended training (8.1%); or acquiring the skills needed for their job (5.0%), suggest that these students are unlikely to complete their qualification even if additional support is provided. However, other reasons, such as stopping study for personal reasons (21.9%); training not meeting expectations (12.8%); problems with work placement (5.5%); or due to training-timetable issues (3.3%), indicate areas where student support could make a difference. While it is unrealistic to hope to eliminate all disengagement or non-completion, effective student support can improve student retention and completion rates.

Table 1 Main reason for discontinuing training for qualification part-completers (2024), %

Main reason	%
Personal reasons	21.9
Changed job or started a new job	17.6
Training was not as expected	12.8
Completed all intended training	8.1
Training no longer related to plans	7.7
Started other training	6.8
Problems with the work placement	5.5
Learnt skills needed for the job	5.0
Training timetable was not flexible enough	3.3
Achieved training goals	3.0
Lost job	2.6
Other	5.9

Source: NCVET (2024b)

Student support

Student support is a requirement under the revised Standards for RTOs (Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2024), which state that VET students are to be ‘treated fairly and are properly informed, supported and protected’ (p.7). RTOs are obligated to provide support in several key areas:

- *Information:* prospective students have access to clear and accurate information to make choices about the training product and the RTO, and to assess the suitability of the training product for them, taking into account their skills and competencies.
- *Training support:* students have access to training support services and other staff to assist their progress through the training product, with reasonable adjustments made to support students with disability.
- *Diversity and inclusion:* the learning environment promotes and supports the diversity of VET students.
- *Wellbeing:* the wellbeing needs of the VET student cohort are identified and strategies put in place to support these needs.
- *Feedback, complaints and appeals:* effective feedback and complaints processes are established to address concerns and inform continuous improvement, and appeal processes are available in instances where a decision has an adverse impact on a VET student (Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2024).

These standards set an expectation for RTOs to provide a broad range of student-support services, including training-related assistance such as language, literacy, numeracy and digital support (LLND), as well as flexible learning options. In addition, RTOs are expected to offer wellbeing support services and resources that assist learners’ physical, mental and emotional wellbeing (Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2024; Wibrow 2023).

The importance of these obligations was reinforced by the National VET Completions Taskforce, which provided good practice examples of student support and interventions applicable to the learner journey and which may assist learners to complete their VET qualifications (Papadimitriou 2023). Providing examples of how RTOs can effectively implement these obligations can help to improve completion rates across the sector and aligns with one of the goals of this research.

This project

Aims and methodology

This research aimed to explore how RTOs can best support learners in completing a VET qualification. Specifically, it sought to identify the factors, strategies and support services that contribute to student success.

The key question guiding this project was:

- What types of good practice student support assist students to achieve qualification completion?

The supporting questions included:

- What are the characteristics of effective student support?
- How do support needs vary across different stages of the learner journey?

This study did not attempt to quantify the effectiveness of specific interventions and supports in improving qualification completion, given that obtaining suitable data for such an exercise is challenging. Instead, the research focused on identifying and reporting on the student-support strategies used by RTOs with high qualification-completion rates and/or high student satisfaction with support services.

It is important to acknowledge that high completion rates are not solely a reflection of effective student support. Similarly, low completion rates do not necessarily indicate poor support services. Some RTOs, particularly those delivering training to students from key priority groups, may have low completion rates, despite providing excellent support. In such cases, alternative measures of success may be more relevant. However, for the purpose of this project, the research focused on how student support contributes to qualification completion. Therefore, the study included both RTOs with high completion rates and high student satisfaction with support services.

A qualitative case-study approach was used to capture perspectives from both RTO staff and students. State and territory government training authorities were invited to nominate potential case-study RTOs, based on the outlined characteristics. Of the 25 RTOs invited to participate, eight agreed to take part. These RTOs varied in location, provider type, size and the qualifications delivered.

A total of 59 respondents, including RTO staff and students, contributed to this research (table 2). Thirty-four interviews were undertaken with RTO staff across these eight RTOs, involving directors, CEOs, general managers, training managers, student-support managers, compliance managers, marketing and enrolment managers, and trainers and assessors.¹

Five of the RTOs also facilitated student participation in the study, with 25 students taking part in focus groups or individual interviews.

¹ To safeguard participant anonymity, specific job titles have been deidentified or presented in generalised terms

Further information on the research methodology can be found in the support document available on the NCVER portal.

Table 2 Characteristics of participating RTOs

No.	Type	Size	Areas of training provision	Staff participants	Student participants
1	Industry association	Large	Health	4	3
2	Private training provider	Large	Early childhood education and care, Leadership and management	12	6
3	Private training provider	Small	Government, Business, Human resource management, Project management	2	9
4	TAFE	Large	Many areas covered	8	6
5	Community education provider	Small	Foundation/workplace skills, Business, Community services, Information technology	3	1
6	Community education provider	Large	Many areas covered	2	-
7	Private training provider	Large	Community services, Retail, Foundation/workplace skills	2	-
8	Private training provider	Large	Building and construction, Transport and logistics, Business services, Community services	1	-
Total				34	25

Note: The locations of each RTO have been omitted to ensure anonymity of participants; they were located in ACT, NSW, NT, Tas. and SA.

This report

This report highlights the effective student-support practices that contribute to successful qualification completion. The four chapters that follow are:

- Effective student support: six key elements
- Effective student-support practices across the learner journey
- Priority student cohorts
- Challenges in providing and accessing support.

Further information on the individual RTO case studies is available in the support document on the NCVER portal.



Effective student support: six key elements

A key objective of this research was to identify the key characteristics of effective student-support practices. Despite variations in type, size, qualifications offered and delivery modes, all case-study RTOs shared a commitment to fostering a supportive learning environment throughout the learner journey. Six key elements emerged from the thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups with both staff and students:

- a whole-of-institution approach
- early engagement with students and relevant stakeholders (such as parents, employers, external support services)
- high-quality training delivery by genuinely caring experts
- continuity of support
- holistic and individualised support
- relationship-building.

These elements represent a combination of institutional strategies, processes and staff behaviours. They are interconnected and often overlap and reinforce one another (figure 1).

These findings align with previous research on effective student support in VET. The emphasis on individualised and proactive support reflects key elements identified in student support for VET delivered online (Hume, Griffin & Andrahannadi 2023). Similarly, the important role of organisational culture in fostering the development of support systems for learners (Montague & Hopkins 2002) is reflected in the whole-of-institution approach highlighted in this study. Importantly, these six elements potentially reinforce many of the recommendations in the National VET Completions Taskforce's report (Papadimitriou 2023).

While these elements are aligned with the revised RTO Standards, they also provide a framework for student support, one that extends beyond regulatory compliance, as demonstrated in the case studies that follow.

Figure 1 Six key elements of student support



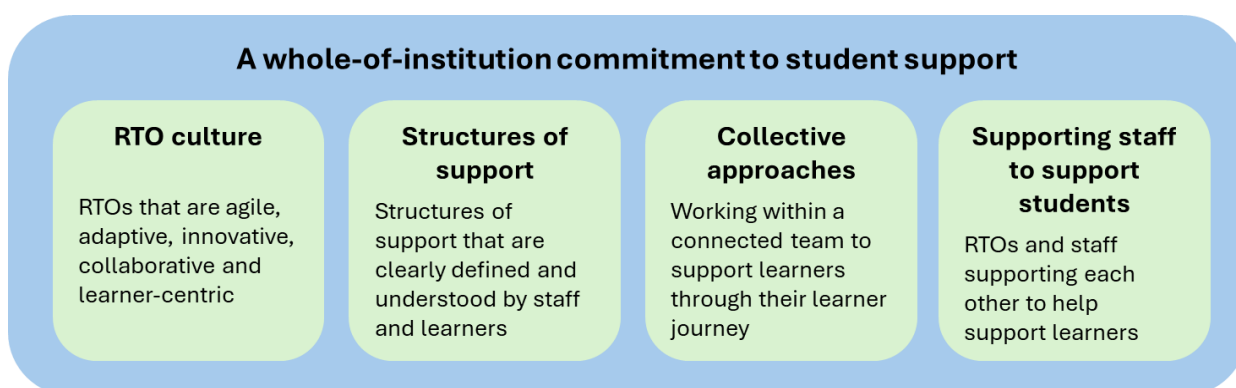
A whole-of-institution commitment to student support: ‘It takes a community’

So, in terms of learner support, that’s been our bread and butter from day one. (RTO management, RTO 6)

Tertiary education institutions operate as ‘complex social systems’ (Farrell 2009, p.87), whereby institutional culture can significantly influence a student’s decision to withdraw or remain in their studies (Roberts 2018). The case-study RTOs underscored the importance of a deeply embedded, institution-wide commitment to student success. A whole-of-institution approach ensures that all staff members play a role in fostering a supportive learning environment, such that student support is embedded throughout the entire learning experience.

Four intertwined facets were identified in the case study interviews (figure 2). Given the diversity of the RTOs in size and structure, responsibility for implementing these aspects varies. However, the research suggests that fostering a supportive institutional culture must be driven from the highest levels of management.

Figure 2 A whole-of-institution commitment to support contributes to student success



RTO culture

Participants believed that RTOs that foster an agile, adaptive, innovative, collaborative culture – one that is learner-centric – are best equipped to support student success:

The core of what [the] CEO has always carried through this whole organisation, I believe, is that the student always comes first. So, they are at the centre of all of our decisions in terms of what is best for the student.

(Area manager, RTO 2)

Research has consistently shown that a student-centric institutional culture positively impacts on student retention, completion and success; for example, the Higher Education Standards Panel (2018) recommended that institutions develop comprehensive student-centric support strategies to improve student outcomes. Similarly, Montague and Hopkins (2002) found that effective learner support is characterised by an organisational culture that encourages learner support at all levels, values people and demonstrates that learners are valued.

As learner-support needs, and our understanding of them, continue to evolve (Hume & Griffin 2021; Hume, Griffin & Andrahannadi 2023; Wibrow 2023), institutions must embrace ongoing review, reflection and adaptation to ensure their support systems remain relevant and responsive. A culture of continuous improvement helps RTOs to proactively adjust to changing circumstances, as one participant noted:

And as you know, the years go on, things change and you know the growth of the business ... COVID, who would have thought that would have come out, we had to totally rethink our strategies, and we were able to do that quite easily because that's our culture ... we are constantly evolving and adapting and changing and making changes as we need to. So that wasn't a new thing for us to have to adapt ... because we are so well rehearsed in making changes and adapting and changing things as we need them to improve our practices.

(Trainer, Assessor, Manager, RTO 2)

The importance of student support is increasingly influencing student decisions on where to enrol (Wibrow 2023). As one learner explained:

I think first and foremost is knowing that you have the support. I think if you don't feel supported, it makes it really hard to keep going and to keep wanting to do and finish the qualification.

(Learner)

Providing students with opportunities to give feedback is critical to continuous improvement. The revised Standards for RTOs (Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2024) reinforce this by specifying that students must be able to provide feedback on their training, submit complaints and request appeals.

Clearly defined and understood support structures

A whole-of-institution commitment enables the development of clearly defined support structures that are well understood by RTO staff and students. These structures vary across RTOs and are often tailored to the needs of their student cohorts, as well as to the available resources.

The case-study RTOs adopted different support models. Some maintained centralised and/or dedicated support services, while others relied on more dispersed models. Some had in-house expertise in different types of student support, while others partnered with external providers. This research found that all models can be effective if they are well understood by all staff, well communicated and easily accessible to students.

For example, RTO case study 4 (a TAFE [technical and further education] institute) has dedicated student-support centres in several locations, offering face-to-face, phone and online assistance. These centres provide a wide range of supports, such as academic support, career advice, counselling and specialised support for First Nations students, students with disability, international students, migrants, refugees, youth and LGBTIQ+ students. In addition to in-house services, this RTO also refers students to external providers for specialised support, such as drug and alcohol services and women's legal services. Additionally, its student association collaborates with the support centres to: provide individualised support; conduct student surveys to understand student-support needs; and educate trainers and other staff about these and how to encourage students to access appropriate support networks. This support structure provides clear and accessible points of contact for learners seeking assistance:

We have [RTO name] student association here. They're very helpful. They have dedicated people that can help you navigate to get you to whatever services you might need. That's helpful. When I arrived here, the student accommodation officer was very friendly and helpful. (Learner)

Other RTOs adopted different models. RTO case study 1, a large industry association training provider, provides LLN support and counselling, while referring students to external providers for specialised assistance, for example, support for First Nations learners. Similarly, RTO case study 3, a small private provider, relies on external providers for specialised support while providing academic and general support in-house. As this RTO works almost exclusively with employers to provide training to their employees, the trainers flag any student wellbeing concerns with the employer, who also plays a role in support.

Although the structures of support vary in these case studies, all the participating RTOs prioritised the clear communication of available support services. This process begins before enrolment and continues throughout the learner journey to ensure that students, staff and relevant stakeholders (such as parents, schools and employers) understand the available resources and how to access them. Examples of this communication approach are provided in the accompanying support document.

Adequate resourcing is essential to developing and maintaining high-quality support structures. Case-study RTOs emphasised the importance of adequate funding and/or budget structures for student-support initiatives. Private providers noted that the control they have over their budgets enables them to prioritise student support. The community-based provider, as a not-for-profit organisation, also had flexibility in allocating resources. Public providers, however, relied more heavily on the funding they received for student support. When funding does not keep pace with increasing demand, it can impact on staffing and the breadth of services offered.

A collective approach

A whole-of-institution commitment to student support is strengthened through internal collaboration and strong connectivity between teams. This ensures that all staff members work together to support learners and that information is shared effectively. Collaboration is especially important for holistic support, which often involves multiple staff members. By fostering an interconnected approach, case-study RTOs created a supportive environment, whereby learners felt valued and supported. Boxes 1 to 3 provide examples of how RTOs implement collective approaches to student support.

Supporting staff to support students

Effective support relies on well-supported staff. This includes ensuring that staff have the necessary skills, manageable workloads and appropriate wellbeing support. Examples of the strategies RTOs use to prioritise staff development, capacity and wellbeing – enabling them to deliver high-quality student support – are summarised in table 3. These examples reinforce some of the actions associated with the opportunities identified in the VET Workforce Blueprint (Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council 2024) to support and grow a sustainable VET workforce.

Table 3 Staff support initiatives to enable effective student support

Activity	Purpose
Mentoring program for trainers and assessors	Skill development, problem-solving
Having flexible work schedules	Capacity management, wellbeing
Streamlining staff members' roles to better focus on their key role	Capacity management, wellbeing
Setting boundaries on responding to learners	Capacity management, wellbeing
Conducting and/or enabling participation in professional development and training sessions on topics such as mental health first-aid; classroom management; responses to allegations of sexual harassment; gender differences; bullying and harassment; and AI training	Skill development, problem-solving, wellbeing
Managers having fortnightly one-on-ones with the team members, providing staff with the opportunity to rate their personal wellbeing and professional growth	Connecting and engaging, wellbeing
Conducting regular group sessions (for example, weekly toolbox sessions, monthly lunches) to brainstorm new developments in the field and share successful techniques	Skill development, problem-solving
Having regular check-ins between management/supervisors/team leaders and trainers (especially those who are remote) to address any concerns and provide necessary support	Connecting and engaging, problem-solving, wellbeing

Box 1: Four layers of 'safety nets'

Case study 1 described how their student support is provided through four layers of 'safety nets' to support learners to achieve their goals. These safety nets included: educators in the classroom; course managers; student support officers; and external learner-support services (LSS).

These four layers play different roles and interact with the students in different ways:

The educators in the classroom (home group teachers) are the first point of contact for students to raise any concerns. Students are encouraged to communicate any challenges they face, including personal issues, to their educator, who will then facilitate access to appropriate support services and other staff members. To ensure students are on track, educators monitor their progress against specific criteria, including timely submission of assessments, attendance and successful completion of placements, and consistent attendance in classes and simulation activities. If a student fails to meet these requirements, they are deemed as not making satisfactory progress, and the educators notify the course manager to facilitate appropriate intervention.

Course managers arrange a meeting with the student within two weeks of being notified by the educators (or if they are contacted directly by a student). Students are then directed to appropriate external support services or other staff members, such as student-support officers. Course managers are also responsible for calling intervention meetings, ensuring appropriate action plans are signed by the educators and students, monitoring the action plans, and escalating non-compliance with action plans, as per RTO policies and procedures. The director of this RTO emphasised that course managers are seen as 'problem solvers', who can 'get people over the finishing line', and who are seen as 'bringing in another layer of creativity and work'.

The student-support officers are experts in identifying and evaluating learners' LLN gaps and they provide learners with strategies and support to help address those gaps. Students can either inform the educator or course manager about their LLN needs or directly contact the student support officer if they prefer.

The RTO has a learner-support services agreement in place with the external organisations that provide specialised one-to-one support services for learners. For example, the RTO has a contract agreement with an LSS provider who is specialised in providing LLN and other support to specific groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Students can either self-refer or reach out via the RTO. Students who wish to confidentially contact a learning support service provider may do so by using the contact information available in the student handbook or on display in the student library and the student lunchroom.

Box 2: The onion ring: a layered approach to student support

The general manager of case study 2 used an 'onion ring' metaphor to explain their layered approach to student support, highlighting how their teams work collectively to help students succeed:

We think that, because we've got multiple windows into a student, because we're all taking a collective approach to it, I'll say it's more like an onion ring ... it's the idea of building a circle around them. So, when the student says, 'I need help', we know who the person is to jump in there. Now, if that person is not available, we have someone else jump in there and say 'hey, we'll work on this. How about we do this and this to move forward.' So, it's the collaborative approach and I really believe specialising the teams in those areas allows them to really work on the bit that's important to them. Once the student realises that they've got this ring of people around them, they're confident ... and know that they're supported.

The collective approach, and the linkages between all involved parties, was evident in further interviews for case study 2. The compliance manager explained how they work closely with the enrolments and marketing team to make sure that information is clear from the start. The student-support manager explained how they also work closely with the enrolments team to gain information from the pre-enrolment process and ensure that information is passed onto the training team, flagging LLND and the other support needs of the learners with the trainers and assessors.

The assessment manager, senior trainers and assessors highlighted the importance of having open communication, not only within their own teams, but also with other teams and of making sure that all communication is documented:

So, there's a nice flow between everybody, between all the teams, to make sure that one student is supported.

A supportive environment and having the support of all stakeholders were named as success factors of the organisation.

Box 3: Mini teams

Sitting within the layered approach used by case study 2 (described in box 2) is the recently launched initiative of the use of 'mini teams' to enhance student learning. A mini team consists of two trainers and one student-experience advisor from the support team. Each team is assigned a group of learners, whom they assist from enrolment through to completion, providing continuity of support (another key element of effective student support), as one interviewee described:

So, it's a team that has a couple of trainers and a student support person in it, trying to move the conversations from happening between lots of different people to just within that little group and trying to brainstorm solutions and being able to then use that solution each time that problem arises again.

(Trainer, Assessor, Manager, RTO 2)

This approach is mutually beneficial for the staff, learners and employers. It allows the trainers and the student-support staff member to build better understanding of each other's roles and reduces potential duplication of work. The arrangement helps to establish trust with the learners and their workplaces, supporting them from commencement to completion, creating a personalised learner-journey experience:

We saw the benefit in being able to specialise, in a way, or build relationships by aligning a mini team ... so, you get familiarity, you build connection, you build relationships not just internally but also externally with our external stakeholders. Our mini team would build relationships with the students when they first start, obviously welcome them into the course, but also being that point of contact with a workplace supervisor. The main structure of our student group is trainees, so there's a necessity to build that relationship with the workplace supervisor because they're doing the role of mentoring, directing, human resourcing and all these types of things.

(Student support staff, RTO 2)

The RTO maintains six mini teams, with the members of each team meeting once a week for approximately half an hour to plan the week. This arrangement gives the members of each team an opportunity to have ownership over a small group of students, as opposed to trying to manage a much larger group. Participants highlighted the success of the mini-team initiative, emphasising the professional development they gain from the leadership opportunities given to the mini team to work independently. One manager referred to the mini team as a 'buddy system':

Sometimes you don't want to talk to your manager about the everyday bits and pieces, you just want to have that chit chat with someone who will just listen and won't judge or won't turn it into a policy conversation or something along those lines. So, the buddy system has worked really well, and our managers aren't a part of that buddy system at all. When those buddies meet, it's the two trainers and the student's support person. There's no management involved in that meeting. We then just get them to report anything out of there that needs management support through email and then we meet each week as a management team to look at those different necessities.

(Trainer, Assessor, Manager, RTO 2)

Early engagement: to prevent learners from ‘falling off the cliff’

I suppose what we try and do is get students before they’re about to fall off the cliff, and they need that ambulance. We’ve worked hard to try and develop strategies. (Upper management, RTO 2)

To establish learner support as early as possible, case-study RTOs emphasised the importance of engaging not only with the learners but also with the key stakeholders, such as parents, employers and external support services (table 4). The pre-enrolment stage was identified as the starting point for this engagement, since it was at this point that the strong relationships with learners – an essential component of effective support – were built.

Participants also reported that, while early engagement was important, providing timely support whenever needs arose, across all stages of the learner journey, is equally important. Ensuring that support remains responsive throughout the learning experience is a key factor in student success. (See the section, ‘Effective student support practices across the learner journey’ in the accompanying support document for more information on the learner journey and how RTOs engage early with learners.)

Table 4 Examples of early engagement with learners and other stakeholders

Learners
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Pre-enrolment consultations to identify learner intentions, support needs and to educate them about pathways and the expectations for the students in the training▪ Detailed inductions focusing on building relationships and ensuring they understand how to request and access support▪ Early identification of learners at risk of non-completion to provide targeted support and develop intervention plans▪ Early engagement with learners nearing completion to offer extra support and assistance to ensure a successful transition▪ Sessions with non-completers to identify re-engagement opportunities (early identification of disengagement/intent to withdraw)
Parents, guardians, schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Involve all the relevant stakeholders (such as parents of school-based trainees, or support personnel for learners with special needs) in pre-enrolment consultations▪ Consultations with schools to identify needs of school-based learners, provide pathway information, understand school workload and foster strong relationships to help improve alignment between school and VET
Employers (immediate supervisors, line managers, human resource managers)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Consultations with employers to understand training requirements of the learners to develop training and assessment strategies▪ Workplace supervisor information sessions to explain the training process, explain the value of training and demonstrate how the supervisors can add value to the training process▪ Sessions on workplace mentoring before student placement▪ Guidance to employers on possible approaches to solve any issues that arise related to training
External support service providers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Consultations with external support-service providers before new commencements to establish relationships, understand the types of support available and to discuss service accessibility, costs involved and referral procedures.

High-quality training delivery by caring experts

I think probably our strength, and now success, has been in the quality of the employees.

(Upper management, RTO 2)

If you can have this combination in an RTO: trainers who care, and a business that isn't just about numbers, that's when you're going to get the quality outcomes for individuals.

(Senior trainer, Assessor, RTO 3)

Training delivered by a highly skilled, experienced, responsive and passionate workforce, who genuinely care for the learners, was fundamental in providing effective student support for the case-study RTOs. Many of their staff are long-term employees, with the experience and expertise to 'proactively identify issues' (RTO 2) and implement support strategies before students reach the point of withdrawing or disengaging from their course. Staff noted that their shared passion for student success is a key contributor to their RTO's high completion rates:

Genuine care [and] intention for them to do well. I say to every one of my students at the beginning of a program, 'If you are genuinely motivated to finish this qualification, I will do everything in my power to do that', and that it is me getting up with COVID yesterday and assessing so that someone can graduate on Thursday. It's me reaching out to people who I'm really concerned about and having the meeting through the client to try to work out learning plans to get them to submit stuff... Our business is a small business. It's a very value-based, integrity-based and quality-based business.

(Senior trainer and assessor, RTO 3)

We have [CEO name] at the forefront as our CEO who's just got a passion for children and early childhood. So, she's our guiding light, our North star, so that's fantastic as well. Our trainers have a very good passion for the industry as well. They're very good advocates for the early childhood industry. They've worked in that industry, obviously themselves being trainers and assessors and they have a good belief system that it is a very good outcome for a student to complete the qualification. So it's a motivating factor to say 'well, having a qualification is a really good thing in life, to actually get done. If completion is far, let's go the whole way.'

(Student support staff, RTO 2)

However, staff acknowledged that ultimately learners must be motivated to complete their training:

It's also acknowledging that I can't do the qualification for you. If you haven't got that motivation, then that's on you.

(Senior trainer and assessor, RTO 3)

Learners appreciated having access to trainers who, they believed, were going above and beyond to provide support:

I had a lot going on [personal issues] in my certificate III. I really struggled and [RTO name] as a company really stepped up. So, I didn't complete my certificate III in time, but they extended my candidature. I had a great trainer and assessor, and she sat with me for three hours every day for five days, morning and afternoon, so I would complete on time. So, she would talk me through anything that I needed. She obviously wasn't a counsellor, but she spoke with me about my [issues] and about everything that was going on. She sat with me through my assignments, and she helped me every step of the way.

(Learner)

I think the biggest success factor in training is the trainer or the facilitator. I think having a really good facilitator makes a huge difference.

(Learner)

The trainers were really engaging. But not only that, they were just very lovely, and you could tell that they really did care about our experience and helping us to complete the program. And just very empathetic for all of us, which was really helpful.

(Learner)

Continuity of support

... very happy because I had one person to help me, to be around and support me all the time.
(Learner)

Another key element of student support is continuity of support. Trainers and learners acknowledged that this is beneficial for both learners and trainers, enabling meaningful connections to be established with learners and facilitating consistency in the provision of support. Case-study RTOs described various ways by which continuity of support was provided:

- mini teams supporting the same learners throughout the learner journey (as described in box 2)
- learner-support sessions with the same trainer from commencement to completion
- intensive blocks of support, with the same trainer; for example, see the six-week LLN support sessions described in the support document.
- same trainer undertaking workplace visits and observations:

[Trainer's name] comes out every six weeks and she's amazing. [She] touches base with me via phone, and books in appointments, to see that I'm studying. So initially when I signed up, she came out to the workplace to meet with me and went through everything. Our web portal has her direct email and phone numbers ... she is only a phone call away, and she still comes out every six weeks to check in with me and see how I'm going and if I need help. Yeah, they really go over and above.

(Learner)

- regular check-ins via different modes, such as face-to-face, online, phone, email or text message. Some examples included weekly or fortnightly 20-minute conversations with the trainers or weekly zoom calls:

I think the students knowing that they've got all means of communication through the portal, the learning-support sessions, the ongoing visits that we do, the simple check-ins, SMS check-ins, how you are doing today ...

(Manager, RTO 2)

... it's great that there's so many different ways you can access support as well, like through the portal or through your trainer.

(Learner)

Holistic and individualised support

It's more about individual students and the challenges they bring.

(Upper management, RTO 5)

Staff and learner interviews revealed that students have individual learning journeys and may experience challenges across various aspects of their lives, including personal and work-related struggles. In 2024, approximately 22% of qualification part-completers cited personal reasons for not completing their qualification (NCVER 2024b), highlighting the significant impacts of life circumstances on student outcomes. Recognising this, the case-study RTOs view holistic support, which includes student wellbeing, as a key element of effective student-support practices.

Approaches to holistic support varied among case-study RTOs and was often based on the institutional characteristics and their learner cohorts. For example, the small community-based RTO serving vulnerable and priority-learner cohorts emphasised the importance of guiding learners with care and giving them confidence by building strong personal connections. Staff reported providing tailored, face-to-face support 'every step of the way', from pre-enrolment consultations to completion. They reported that creating a sense of belonging in the training organisation helped to build trust between learners and

trainers, leading to improved attendance, with learners also proactively reaching out for support. Trainers knew students by name and understood their individual learning styles, which ensured that support was meaningful and effective. In addition to direct assistance, staff referred students to external service providers for mental health, accommodation and financial support.

Cultural safety was also a key consideration, particularly for learners from CALD and Indigenous backgrounds. The case-study RTOs implemented various strategies to foster culturally inclusive and safe learning environments, such as connecting First Nations learners with cultural centres and appointing Aboriginal engagement officers and cultural diversity coordinators. (See the section on priority learner cohorts for further examples.)

Beyond academic and LLN support, holistic student support includes a range of additional services, as outlined below.

Counselling

Examples of how counselling support was provided include:

- In-house counsellors, who provide either in-person or virtual consultations:

We don't have enough counsellors to have one on every campus, but we do move the counsellors around. We can give people counselling appointments close to where they study or close to where they live because we've got five different sites. We've got phone counselling and online counselling, so we've got lots of options for people. So, if someone's having a meltdown somewhere and we've only got a counsellor available with a crisis appointment on one of our big campuses, then we can give them a phone appointment and it is free. So, it's good and they can get in much faster ... So we see a lot of students, but we're more able to fit in with those needs and service people.

(Student support staff, RTO 4)

- RTO referrals to external service providers

I have had students who expressed to me that they have had suicidal thoughts and things like that. Again, I'm there to support, but I can only direct them on where to go for that additional support and we have two companies we work with [company names] ... So, they're a partnership.

(Senior trainer, Assessor, Manager, RTO 2)

- Trainers who provide informal support

Staff from some case-study RTOs reported that educators often provide informal counselling/wellbeing support to learners experiencing personal challenges, as they are often the main point of contact. However, staff members also explained they feel that some risk is associated with the provision of this informal counselling when they are not adequately trained to do so. In such situations, the trainers would prefer to help learners connect with expert assistance through referrals to external service providers:

We do our best that we can to support them in helping them to identify any needs, but obviously because we're not professionally trained, there are lines there that sometimes we can't cross.

(Course manager, RTO 1)

We are quite a small RTO, and I would love to say that we have all of these great procedures in place. But a lot actually does happen in passing, little conversations that we have here and there. In our main premises we've got 6 classrooms. So, our students pretty much know every single staff member that we have here ... we're trying to record a lot more, but really a big part of that student support happens informally.

(Upper management, RTO 5)

Many case-study RTO staff reported that they proactively reach out to students to identify personal challenges and wellbeing concerns at various stages of their learner journey. For example, some trainers have individual chats with students about their wellbeing and record key points in the student portal as a confidential internal reference. This enables timely follow-ups and ensures connected support across different staff members (also enabling connected support to be provided).

If a student has told me they're a bit stressed because they had to move out of wherever, that flatmate's home or something, then I'll make a note of that saying, 'student mentioned feeling stressed, this currently happened in their home life' or something, just so it's in their notes and that everyone's [staff] aware of how to support that student next when they see them. We make sure we maintain confidentiality as well.

(Senior assessor, RTO 2)

Financial and other living support

Several initiatives aimed at providing financial and other living support were described by case-study RTO staff and students, for example:

- *Scholarships and fee assistance:* RTOs offer various scholarships and fee-assistance programs to help learners manage the costs of education. This includes concessions for low-income students, fee waivers and access to low-cost refurbished laptops.
- *Financial aid referrals:* educators connect learners with external financial support providers and resources, such as government assistance programs, emergency relief funds and financial counselling services.
- *Other living support:* transportation subsidies (cab vouchers) and meal allowances are provided to help learners to overcome barriers to participation.
- *Referrals to external service providers:* these help to locate living support such as accommodation and transport.

Peer support

Both RTOs and students emphasised the importance of peer support in enhancing the learner experience. Students value the opportunity to connect with others who understand their challenges and share their experiences. This peer support, however, can be difficult for students undertaking their training remotely.

Case-study RTOs cited the following examples as initiatives aimed at facilitating peer support:

- Trainers encourage students working in the same workplace (for example, the same childcare centre) to work together on assessments during their allocated study time.
- For online learners, trainers organise breakout rooms during training sessions and encourage students to use virtual platforms for peer interaction.
- Informal gatherings such as coffee and lunch catch-ups are organised to help foster peer connections.

Some students reported that they often seek help from peers before approaching trainers. Students created opportunities for face-to-face peer support by organising library meet-ups, coffee catch-ups and informal study sessions. They also used platforms like MSTeams or WhatsApp to create virtual spaces for peer connection.

While students appreciate informal peer support, they also emphasised the need for more formal structures. They suggested integrating messaging tools into the learning management system to facilitate connections and enable trainer involvement, particularly for students without peers in their workplace or who are studying online.

Relationship-building

Effective student support is underpinned by strong relationships across all stakeholders. Early engagement plays a key role in fostering these connections. Case-study interviews identified five important relationships that contribute to student success.

Trainer–learner relationships

The trainer–learner relationship was identified as the most important relationship in student success:

99% of all successful student outcomes is because of the teacher student relationship.

(Student support staff, RTO 4)

A strong connection fosters mutual respect, opens communication and creates a safe environment, where learners can feel comfortable in seeking support. Trainers who understand the specific needs of their students can provide personalised support:

I think it's really knowing who they are and what they need ... and having that connection, which quite often falls back to the trainer because they've got the most contact with the student throughout the journey and it's kind of that concierge role ... that person who is really familiar with this individual and knows what they need to get through ... If we don't have those relationships, that just fall through the cracks.

(Senior manager, RTO 4)

Trainer–support staff relationships

Collaboration between trainers and support staff strengthens student support by ensuring a unified, coordinated approach. Strategies used include: establishing 'mini teams', where staff work together to identify and respond to learner needs; support staff attending workplace visits alongside trainers; and support staff being present in training rooms to provide direct assistance.

Learner–support staff relationships

Trust and communication between learners and support staff play an important role in enabling effective student support. RTOs encourage students to connect with the support staff early in their learner journey.

RTO–employer relationships

For apprentices, trainees and students requiring a work placement, strong RTO–employer relationships ensure learners receive adequate support:

It's very much about the relationships that we build with those employers and the trust and respect that we have with them. Employers know that we'll support them, and I know that they come to me for guidance.

(Senior trainer and assessor, RTO 3)

The trainers in case study 2 maintained employer engagement through regular workplace visits, which involves supervisors in the training by: providing them with learners' observation reviews; informing them about what the learners are studying; and providing advice on how to identify learners at risk of non-completion. The RTO also uses these visits as an opportunity to observe whether the workplace is providing adequate study time and to encourage supervisors to reach out to RTO staff to discuss support strategies.

The RTO in case study 3 works almost exclusively with employers to provide training to their employees undertaking traineeships. The RTO trainers undertake extensive consultations with employers prior to planning training delivery to shape the training to both their needs and those of the employees. These initial consultations also help trainers to develop learner-support strategies and in providing guidance to the employers regarding approaches to solving issues that arise in the training:

When we're writing up the training and assessment strategy, we're able to fill in quite a lot about the target audience [the learners] because we've communicated with the employers and we've understood the types of roles that they're going to be doing. We know what their recruitment process entailed, and they can be quite rigorous sometimes as well, so we do have a pretty good background about that target audience.

(Upper management, RTO 3)

The RTO–employer relationship that has been developed in this case study enables the RTO staff to work closely with the learners' immediate supervisors, line managers, program managers and human resource managers to ensure that students are being supported throughout their learner journey. To do this, the trainers and administrative staff:

- conduct supervisor information sessions to explain the training process, 'reiterate the value of training' and demonstrate 'how the supervisors can add value to that process'
- provide 'supervisor information kits' with guidelines on how to complete supervisor reports
- conduct weekly meetings with workplace coordinators to discuss how best to support learners, particularly those who are not reaching out to trainers and who may not feel comfortable asking their direct supervisor for help
- flag concerns with the program manager regarding any identified issues relating to the personal health and wellbeing of learners, suggesting that the employers may want to 'reach out and do a welfare check'.

(Senior trainer and assessor, RTO 3)

Other stakeholders

Building strong relationships with other stakeholders such as parents, guardians, schools and external service providers helps to create a robust support network for students. Case-study RTOs reported that these collaborations should not be limited to one-off meetings but should be an ongoing process of continuous cooperation. Maintaining strong rapport with stakeholders enables early identification of learner-support needs, ensuring timely and proactive interventions:

It's definitely about the relationship and including the whole community in that conversation right from the start.

(Trainer and assessor, RTO 2)

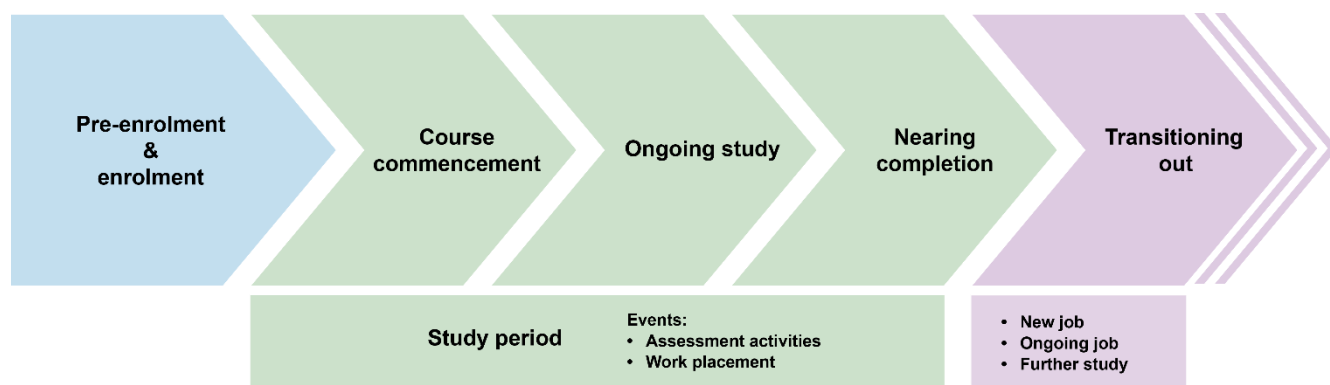


Effective student support across the learner journey

The VET learner journey can be described as a series of transition phases, each of which presents opportunities for student support to positively influence completion and successful learner outcomes. These stages provide a useful framework for training providers to identify learner-support needs and subsequently to implement targeted strategies.

This research considers the following stages in the student journey: pre-enrolment and enrolment; course commencement; ongoing study (includes assessment and possible work placement events); and nearing completion (figure 3). A final stage involves the transition out of training, for example, into employment or further education. While support for this transition can be important and helpful for learners, the focus of this project is on supporting learners to complete their training. Nonetheless, some supports provided through the study phase also help learners to prepare for this transition phase.

Figure 3 The VET learner journey



The six elements of effective student support align with different phases of the learner journey; some span the entire journey, while others are appropriate only at certain stages.

- A *whole-of-institution approach*, based on a student-centric RTO culture committed to student success, necessarily involves placing effective student support at the centre of student interactions at all stages of the learner journey. This is linked closely to the provision of *continuity of support* for students by all RTO staff, from start to finish, thereby ensuring that the learner develops confidence, safety and trust throughout the learning process.
- *Strong relationships* with students and other key stakeholders, while important from the outset, also need to be continually nurtured throughout the learner journey.
- *Early engagement* is critical at pre-enrolment to identify student needs, including LLN and study support, but is equally important when challenges related to learning, attendance, performance or wellbeing emerge, allowing for timely intervention.
- The delivery of *quality training* and the provision of *holistic and individualised support* from experts who genuinely care are particularly important during the study, assessment and work placement phases. Given the trust and care built through holistic support, individualised assistance often extends into the transition phase as learners move into employment or further study.

While comprehensive information about student-support practices implemented by the case-study RTOs can be found in the support document for this report, some key examples of effective practices at each stage of the learner journey are given in table 5.

Table 5 Examples of effective student-support practices for each stage of the learner journey

Learner journey stage (and events)	Effective student-support practices
Pre-enrolment and enrolment	Pre-enrolment engagement Enrolment support Bridging courses
Commencing learners	Induction Learning management system Six-week support sessions (for LLN) Digital literacy support Wellbeing support
Ongoing learners	Ongoing identification and support, as per commencing learners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment events 	Similar practice and assessment conditions Review of progress through assessment tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work-placement events 	Matching students and workplaces Pre-placement preparation Placement support
Nearing completion	Additional support Career guidance, where appropriate Finding success in non-completion



Priority student cohorts

Anybody who comes with any barriers is a priority.

(Student support staff, RTO 1)

It is well documented in the literature (Papadimitriou 2023; NCVER 2023; Lamb et al. 2018; Woolcott Research 2016) and supported by interview findings that certain learner characteristics increase the risk of non-completion. The VET Completions Taskforce report refers to these student groups as ‘priority cohorts’, which include but are not limited to:

- First nations learners
- learners from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds
- learners with a disability or facing mental health challenges
- learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- learners in regional or remote areas
- young people not engaged in education, employment or training (Papadimitriou 2023, p.37).

This section of the report details the specific supports provided by the case-study RTOs for selected priority cohorts (those with whom the case-study RTOs had significant experience). Of the eight RTOs who participated in this research, four (RTOs 4, 5, 6 and 7) reported having a large proportion of priority learners.

- RTO 4 delivers training to a large cohort of students with disability.
- RTO 5 primarily serves students from priority cohorts, with around 70% having been identified as CALD learners.
- RTO 6 provides more than 85% of its training to priority cohorts, the majority of whom are unemployed.
- RTO 7 specialises in delivering training to remote and First Nations learners.

(See the support document, available from the NCVER portal, for further details about each RTO.)

While early engagement is important for all learners, RTO staff reported that priority cohorts particularly benefit from personalised support from the outset of their training. Staff emphasised the importance of guiding these learners to the ‘right education pathway’, helping them to ‘get work-ready’ and ‘reach their goals’, and ensuring they enrol in courses aligned with their goals and capabilities.

Table 6 provides a summary of the various supports provided by the case-study RTOs for three priority cohorts: First Nations learners, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) learners and learners with disability, as described by the interviewees.

Table 6 Support for learners in priority groups: examples from the case study RTOs

First Nations learners	CALD learners	Learners with a disability
Specialised in-house support service centres for First Nations learners	Staff from CALD background help other staff to understand the various support needs of CALD learners	Pre-enrolment consultations with learners, parents and caregivers to manage their expectations and to discuss learner capabilities
These support centres provide guidance for First Nations learners along their learner journey and provide cultural and other supports	Expert support such as international student advisors, migrant and refugee support officers, accommodation	Offer trial sessions before enrolment

Partnering with external service providers who are specialised in providing supports to First Nations learners	officers and cultural diversity coordinators	Collaborating with different disability employment providers and settlement providers to collect learner background information to help determine support needs
The RTO meets with the partnering learner support service (LSS) organisation to discuss the support needs of the First Nations learners, after which the LSS organisation engages with the learners confidentially and provides the required support, such as access to accommodation, transport, ICT support and counselling	Bilingual trainers to help CALD learners understand the training	Provide additional breaks in training
	Tailored pre-enrolment and induction sessions for CALD learners: help to understand the learning environment and workplace culture in Australia	One-on-one coaching
	Course and career advice before enrolling and after finishing their courses	Provide the learning resources in advance and run them through an accessibility reader
Online pre-enrolment modules to access anytime	One-on-one LLN support, targeted assessment support and peer tutoring	Conduct a mini course to 'upskill' prior to enrolment
Programs with specialised support targeted to First Nations learners (cadetships, traineeships)	In-house support service centres for CALD learners	Disability advisor to check in with educators regularly and provide information and guidance to help learners
Connecting First Nations learners with the relevant cultural centres	Creating networking opportunities with other learners	Providing extra time, or other reasonable adjustments, to complete assessments
Aboriginal engagement officers and mentors	Providing referrals to external support centres	Provide referrals to external support centres
Requests to apprentice companies to assign First Nations mentors in workplaces	Trialling immersive learning (such as virtual reality), particularly to support cohorts such as young learners and CALD learners	
Trainers with additional qualifications in LLN skill sets to be able to support First Nations learners	Promoting peer tutoring	
Re-teaching maths and development of 'practical bridging programs' to improve numeracy skills	Encouraging students to use AI to help clarify assessment requirements	
Place-based regional study hubs with a mentor and tutor to support students to improve LLN skills		

First Nations learners: 'their journeys, not kind of the same'

... understanding that their life cycle as a student, there's lots of starts and stops because of reasons out of their control. (Area manager, RTO 7)

The learner journey for First Nations students is complex due to the many challenges they may face throughout their training. Overall, Indigenous learners have lower VET qualification-completion rates than non-Indigenous learners (33% compared with 48%; NCVET 2024a).

Table 7 Main reason for discontinuing training: First Nations learners

Main reason discontinued training	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Personal reasons	33.6	21.6
Training-related reasons	31.2	36.9
Change in job situation	21.0	21.2
Got what they wanted from training	10.1	14.5
Other reasons	4.1	5.8

Source: NCVET (2024b), DataBuilder.

As shown in table 7, around 34% of Indigenous learners cited personal reasons as the main reason for discontinuing their training, significantly higher than the 21.6% reported by non-Indigenous learners. This trend was also evident in consultations with staff from an Aboriginal community-controlled RTO, which specialised in training remote First Nations learners. Staff reported ongoing family obligations as an additional factor that these students need to balance with training and employment. Low attendance due to family commitments was a key concern, prompting the RTO to emphasise the need to raise awareness among learners of the value of education and how it can lead to better opportunities, and also to highlight the need to engage families and communities in the learning process to enhance student participation and success:

I think like one of the biggest barriers for training and employment is a family kind of humbug² ... and it's about being able to do that pastoral care around the student and the family and almost like case managing that family to say, 'hey, it's good that this person wants to go to work and do study and achieve something in their life'. It's being able to kind of support that person to do that and I think that's probably where it needs to be.

(Area manager, RTO 7)

First Nations learners often face additional barriers, such as low levels of LLND skills, transport and accommodation issues, limited access to technology, cultural obligations, which impact on attendance, and previous negative or poor educational experiences. Recognising these challenges, one RTO staff member explained that they prioritise unit completion rather than qualification completion, viewing this as a successful outcome for some learners.

Importance of relationships: 'No trust, no training'

Building relationships, even friendships, and trust through continuous engagement was emphasised as a critical success factor in supporting First Nations learners. As explained:

So, I think that it's a relationship that you build with them, is what makes or breaks your ability to train them.

(Trainer, RTO 7)

Well, if the trust is not there, then they [students] probably won't come to training.

(Area manager, RTO 7)

Trainers gave examples of how they become mentors to these students and build friendships outside of training.

I say to my trainers, if some of your students invite you out to go hunting or fishing while you're in community, that's a sign that they want to engage. And that's probably more important than doing the training, because they want to invite you into their life and what they do. And it helps build that connection and you'll get better results in the long run.

(Area manager, RTO 7)

In addition to trainer–learner relationships, strong relationships between RTOs and employers are important in supporting First Nations students, particularly those undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships. By fostering these connections, RTOs create a support network that increases the likelihood of successful qualification completion.

Staff at case-study RTO 7 reported that many First Nations students disengage from training due to challenges in the workplace, often stemming from a lack of understanding and support from employers. By acting as an intermediary, the RTO works to build positive relationships between trainees and

² The staff reported 'family humbug', referring to ongoing family obligations for the learners.

employers, ensuring that both parties understand their roles and responsibilities. This includes educating employers on the benefits of cultural awareness, mentoring and creating a supportive workplace environment.

Targeted place-based recruitment campaign for highly supported school-based traineeships

The enrolment and marketing manager at RTO 2 explained that their team works closely with the Department of Education to specifically target First Nations learners to enrol in early childhood education and school-based care traineeships, for which they provide additional student support.

So, we've got relationships with the Department of Education and childcare centres and specifically look to support those within an Indigenous setting. So, we target specific areas where we know there's a need to grow those resources in the childcare profession. So, it's not something we put out widely on social media. We actually approach centres in targeted regions to work with them closely and the schools on a direct marketing campaign rather than a public one and that's also because we have limited spots because of the additional support that goes into that program [and also] I can't open it up across the state. Unfortunately, we just don't have the capacity at this point in time. So we limited it to 10 to 20 students each intake and really focused on getting those through the two-year program.

(Area manager, RTO 2)

The level of support provided increases the chance of completion for these First Nations learners, but the resources required means that they are limited in how many places they can offer.

Finding meaning for First Nations Learners

Finding individualised ways to assist First Nations learners to relate to their training can help in sustaining their participation. Ongoing discussions with Aboriginal learners to identify what is important to them, in terms of their Country and family, and identifying creative ways to help them to 'find meaning' in their training, were seen as good practice in providing support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners:

And so, we were really thinking about meaning and having those discussions with her about what was important to her. Country happened to be not in metro [City], even though she lived in metro [City] ... So, we started to write timetables for her, like equivalent of being on a map on the way to her house or her Country. And so, for every town that she would pass through in the car to get to Country, we made that a day, 'so by coming on the Tuesday and if you complete Tuesday, that's like you've reached, say, like an outer, sublime, place in country', and then the next stop was like the next town on. It worked and so we had to think about meaning and what meaning was for that person ... and then what that meant in her world.

(Course manager, RTO 1)

RTOs that are committed to supporting First Nations learners in regional, rural and remote areas can face different barriers (Griffin & Andrahannadi 2023) and often adopt unique approaches to support learners; for example, due to the lack of dedicated student-support staff, trainers in RTO 7 take on a multifaceted teaching and support role. Recognising that LLN can be a significant barrier, many trainers have undertaken additional LLN skillsets to better support learners, demonstrating their commitment to providing holistic support, such that they become the primary source of support due to the remote nature of the training.

Learners with a disability

Training-related reasons were reported by approximately 40% of learners with disability as the main reason for discontinuing training, followed by personal reasons (30.7%) and change in job situation (14.1%, table 8; NCVER 2024b). Providing holistic and individualised support to learners with disability

may assist in alleviating some of the training-related reasons and possibly some personal reasons for discontinuing. As highlighted in the pre-enrolment and enrolment support section, early engagement with these learners is important for understanding individual support needs. Additionally, assessment of their existing skills and capability at that early stage will reduce the likelihood of enrolling students in a course in which they are unlikely to succeed:

I'm very much of that mindset, you know, prevention's better than the cure, and early intervention is always the better option. A lot of work that I do could be reduced and would be saved and allow me to better spend my time supporting students if we had done that earlier. More options to do early intervention and more power to say to students, 'this is not going to work for you and we're not going to enrol you'.

(Education advisor-priority cohorts, RTO 6)

This is an important point when considering the learner's capacity to succeed in their preferred course (versus a course that has been recommended to them, which may be in a different skills area), and the amount of support that may be required to assist them to reach their goals.

Table 8 Main reason for discontinuing training, by disability status

Main reason discontinued training	With a disability	Without a disability
Training-related reasons	39.5	36.2
Personal reasons	30.7	21.6
Change in job situation	14.1	22.9
Got what they wanted from training	9.6	13.6
Other reasons	6.1	5.7

Source: NCVER (2024b), DataBuilder.

Building strong relationships with parents, guardians and external disability support workers is important in creating both a supportive and empowering learning environment for students with disabilities. Case-study RTOs 5 and 6 emphasised the importance of fostering independence and confidence in these learners, encouraging a collaborative approach, whereby a student's support worker facilitates the learning experience but enables the learner to take ownership. These RTOs highlighted that external support workers play a vital role, but it is important that their involvement complements the RTO's teaching and support mechanisms. For example, RTO 6 reported that they are developing a code of conduct for support workers, which outlines expectations and promotes good practice:

So, some people may have their own support workers ... and the student attends with their support worker ... Sometimes I've come across situations where I don't agree with how the support worker is managing the student, like the student needs to be more autonomous and have more control. So we are actually coming up with a bit of a code of conduct for support workers because ... when people are learning, you need to give them their autonomy, and their confidence.

(Trainer, RTO 6]

Several other examples of how RTOs support students with disability are summarised in table 6. Challenges in supporting learners with disability persist, however, including support staff being stretched beyond capacity and a lack of funding to match the significant rise in enrolments among learners with disabilities experienced by some of the case-study RTOs. This can impede the timely implementation of access plans and highlights the need for increased resources to meet the growing demand.

Furthermore, RTO staff discussed the absence of low-level certificate programs and how this presents a barrier for some learners with disabilities, limiting their pathways into vocational education. Despite these challenges, RTOs are actively implementing reasonable adjustments, such as modified assessments and flexible learning arrangements, to support students with disabilities to succeed.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) learners

Similar to learners with a disability, training-related reasons (32.7%) was the main reason for discontinuing training for CALD learners, followed by personal reasons (28%) and change in job situation (20.7%, table 9; NCVER 2024b).

Table 9 Main reason for discontinuing training, CALD learners

Main reason discontinued training	CALD learners	Non-CALD learners
Training-related reasons	32.7	37.1
Personal reasons	28.0	21.6
Change in job situation	20.7	20.7
Got what they wanted from training	10.4	15.4
Other reasons	8.2	5.3

Source NCVER (2024b), DataBuilder.

This cohort of learners, which includes migrants and refugees, often requires additional support as they navigate not only a new learning environment but also significant cultural and social adjustments. Recognising that these learners need time to adapt and may face unique challenges, the RTO staff reported that they ensure appropriate support systems are readily available.

And then when they first start studying, it might be just helping them settle in ... It could be getting them used to our learning management system, how to navigate that, how a course in [RTO name] works, how education works in Australia. Whatever that particular person needs at that time. Some people, their first week in class, it's overwhelming, the volume, that amount of English, then they might not have the digital skills. So it might be just helping them in the first couple of weeks, seeing if we can get them over the initial hump they're struggling with, or it might be a time when we have a conversation about this might not be the right time [for undertaking the training].

(Education advisor-priority cohorts, RTO 4)

To address both LLND and personal needs, the case-study RTOs offer supports that emphasise flexibility, individualised attention and a holistic approach. (Refer to table 6.)

CALD learners reported that they receive ‘quite a lot’ of support; for example, educators and support staff helping them to become accustomed to the new learning environment, responding to their queries in a timely manner and willingly providing extra support in assessments:

Well, I'm an international student, so I didn't actually know how the education system works in Australia. So when enrolling I needed support because I didn't know what to do, and where to go. I wasn't familiar with the whole system. Before I flew here, someone from [the] Community Services Department contacted me, [informing me] of who I should contact and where and when. So, when I arrived, I just went there as instructed in the email. Actually, it was really well organised.

(Learner)

One CALD learner, however, described her struggles to grasp the slang expressions commonly used by educators and peers in classroom and workplace settings. They described this as a significant challenge, as it often hindered their ability to engage and communicate effectively with others.

In summary, all RTO staff participants emphasised the importance of acknowledging the diversity of their learners and offering inclusive teaching and support to enable the success of all students, including those from these priority cohorts.



Challenges in providing and accessing support

This section of the report identifies the challenges faced by both RTOs and learners in the provision and access of student-support services. Across the RTOs, several challenges were identified by staff and learners. These are categorised loosely into: RTO-based, student-based and other barriers such as workplace-based barriers. Many of the challenges, and potential solutions, are interconnected. It should be noted that not all the challenges were experienced by every RTO or learner in this research.

RTO-based challenges in providing student support

- Trainers may lack expertise in providing specialised student support

Trainers differ in the pathways they have taken into VET teaching and training, and this is often reflected by the training qualifications they hold (Griffin & Davidson 2025). Some RTO staff believed that the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE) does not adequately equip trainers with the pedagogical knowledge and training to address diverse learning needs, including the provision of LLN support and catering to cultural differences and disabilities. The adequacy of the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment has been well debated (for example, see Smith 2024) and will not be elaborated here, but it should be noted that their prior training may contribute to challenges for trainers, especially those who have come from industry rather than from an educational background. It should be noted that the Credential Policy, a component of the new legislative instruments coming into effect with the revised Standards for RTOs (Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2024), may make it easier for non-VET teachers to transfer to the VET workforce, perhaps bringing additional expertise into VET learner support.

There is also the question of the extent and type of support trainers should be providing. While it is expected that they will support students to understand course-related content, it may be beyond their roles to provide other supports, including LLN or wellbeing support. This can be a challenging issue for trainers if learners request support from trainers for which they are not trained to provide. These challenges are consistent with those presented in the VET Workforce Blueprint (Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council 2024), which highlights the necessity for further research.

To address this challenge, RTOs mentioned strategies that had been implemented, such as conducting compulsory professional development sessions to staff, which focused on areas such as pedagogical skills, cultural awareness and inclusive teaching practices, and implementing team-teaching and support models.

- Staffing and time constraints

Staff shortages limit the amount of time trainers can spend with individual learners, hindering the provision of targeted support. Some learners raised concerns about inconsistencies in support provision due to lack of permanent trainers and support staff, with these impacting on continuity of support. As identified in previous research, RTOs delivering training in regional, rural and remote areas in particular face significant challenges in providing support to learners due to trainer shortages, coupled with locational barriers (Griffin & Andrahannadi 2023).

- Funding and resource constraints

Funding and resource constraints are challenging for all RTOs, irrespective of their size or type. Small RTOs struggle to offer specialised support services in-house due to limited resources (such as a small number of staff). Publicly funded training providers also face challenges in securing sufficient funding to match an increasing demand for support, which can restrict their capacity to hire specialised support staff, mentors and additional staff to support other activities such as those associated with the resource-intensive pre-enrolment and enrolment stages. Resources can also be stretched by other priorities in the RTO, for example, meeting compliance requirements and implementing rapid changes to training packages.

Student based challenges in accessing support

The student has to want help [and that] is the big thing. The student has to be open to help, and particularly if they are struggling ... they have to be open to having the conversation around that as well. Sometimes it takes us two or three meetings to get [it] out of them. What it is, that is the barrier, that they're happy to share, so going back to again building that relationship.

(Trainer and assessor, RTO 2)

Student-based barriers often arise from individual circumstances and learning styles. These barriers can impact a learner's ability and/or willingness to access and benefit from support services. RTOs mentioned that, despite widespread and targeted promotion of support services within institutions, it was often difficult to ensure that the students who most needed the support would access it.

- Behavioural barriers

All RTO participants reported students' hesitation to seek help due to reasons such as stigma, fear of judgment or discrimination, lack of confidence or embarrassment. They are also aware that cultural factors may influence help-seeking behaviour, with some learners reluctant to ask questions or request assistance:

Some of them just feel really embarrassed and think, 'my God, I can't do this kind of thing', even though we say to them hundreds and hundreds of times that 'it's fine. You're only learning it. It's OK' or they just don't know how to ask the questions. (Trainer, Assessor, Area manager, RTO 2)

So, there is very much the idea of being a good student is not asking questions ... and just doing what the educator says and ... not going up there. (Course manager, RTO 1)

- Learner capabilities and mindset

Language and digital literacy barriers can prevent learners from seeking and accessing support; for instance, some learners are resistant to online support sessions as a consequence of their limitations in digital literacy or their lack of access to technology. Learner isolation in online environments can also hinder them from seeking help, especially for mature-aged and disadvantaged learners:

But probably for our team, the biggest challenge is giving feedback ... The language barrier and understanding the question and then trying to give our feedback in a way that they'll understand as well. (Senior trainer and assessor, RTO 2)

It's the use of technology because we've just recently moved all of our assessments online ... so that has been a bit of a challenge for some of our students ... if they don't have access to technology or technology is not their friend, they struggle using it. (Manager and senior assessor, RTO 2)

Also, RTO staff raised concerns about learners' lack of motivation or ownership of their training and a negative mindset, which can affect their engagement with support services. This can occur when learners have been obligated to enrol in a course (for employment or government benefits reasons) or have enrolled above their capability.

Other barriers

Unsupportive work environments can hinder students' access to support services and their ability to successfully complete their studies. Students reported issues such as being unable to obtain study time due to staff shortages in their workplaces and long work hours, which prevented students from accessing support services during the trainer's and support staff's work hours. When trainers visit the workplace to observe trainees, heavy workloads can prevent trainees from having sufficient time to interact with the trainers, constraining the support they can receive. This was reported as a common barrier by the learners who were studying Early Childhood Education and Care, limiting the effectiveness of on-the-job training and access to additional support. To foster supportive workplace environments – those that enable learners to succeed in their course – the case-study RTOs invest significant resources into building strong relationships with employers, with the aim of enabling an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders.



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