



Managing psychosocial challenges in VET

Practice guide for training providers

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Psychosocial challenges are personal, social, emotional, and/or environmental factors that impact a learner's ability to engage in training.

Purpose

VET teachers report that the psychosocial needs and challenges experienced by students are becoming increasingly complex and prevalent. While supporting diverse learners has always been part of the teaching role, many teachers describe growing pressures associated with responding to student wellbeing concerns, managing challenging behaviours, and addressing barriers that affect engagement, participation and learning.

Creating positive learning outcomes requires an environment in which both students and teachers are supported. Training providers play a critical role in establishing the systems, processes, resources and culture that enable students to access appropriate support while ensuring teachers have the guidance, capacity and support needed to respond effectively to psychosocial challenges within the boundaries of their role.

This practice guide provides practical advice for training providers on how they can create the conditions that support learner success and teacher wellbeing, while managing psychosocial impacts within the learning environment. The guide presents strategies for adopting a whole-of-provider approach to psychosocial support, recognising that effective student support and effective teacher support are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.



Key system conditions that support psychosocial challenges

Enabling better support for students requires more than individual teacher effort.

It depends on organisational systems, policies and practices that equip teachers to respond effectively

to increasingly diverse learner needs. The following framework highlights five key areas where RTOs can strengthen the conditions that enable better student support.



Key system conditions that support psychosocial challenges (cont)



Leadership, organisational support, resources and capacity

What teachers are experiencing

- Increasing complexity of student needs
- Gaps in organisational support
- Uncertainty regarding teacher authority
- Limited resources and uncertainty regarding available supports
- Inconsistent leadership support and understanding
- Difficulty accessing specialised support
- Barriers to referrals and services
- Overstretched student support systems
- Growing expectations around psychosocial support
- Pressure to achieve positive student outcomes



What teachers told us

As a trainer, when faced with supporting student needs, it requires lots of time which is not fully understood by the manager of our workplace. (Survey respondent, Mid-career teacher, NSW)

Access to clear organisation policies, counselling services, and collaboration with student support staff can make a significant difference. (Survey respondent, Novice teacher, WA)

Compliance takes up so much time and admin demands affect quality of training, class preparation and feedback on assessment. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, NT)

How RTOs can help

Policy and organisational practices

- Ensure policies, processes and documentation are clear, accessible and streamlined.
- Embed psychosocial support and referral processes within organisational policies.
- Consider teacher workload impacts when implementing inclusion and support initiatives.
- Reduce duplication and unnecessary administrative requirements.

Funding and investment

- Ensure funding supports quality teaching and learning outcomes.
- Invest in dedicated wellbeing support staff for students and teachers.
- Ensure specialised support services are accessible and supported by clear referral pathways.

Building psychosocial capability

- Provide professional development in mental health first aid, trauma-informed teaching and psychosocial support.
- Build teacher understanding of how psychosocial factors affect learning and how to respond appropriately within their role.
- Recognise psychosocial capability as a core educator competency.

Resources, support and communication

- Improve communication and collaboration between teachers and support teams.
- Provide teachers with easy access to information, resources and support services.
- Establish clear pathways for referral and escalation when students require additional support.
- Reduce administrative and compliance burden to enable teachers to focus on teaching and student support.



Strong policies, smart investment, capable staff and connected support systems enable RTOs to better support teachers and students.

Key system conditions that support psychosocial challenges (cont)



Workload, compliance and role

What teachers are experiencing

- Expanding teacher roles and responsibilities
- Increasing compliance and administration
- Need for clarity around role boundaries and expectations
- Competing demands on teaching time
- Growing student complexity
- Emotional demands of teaching role
- Workload and time pressures
- Variable access to support services
- Increasing accountability for student outcomes
- Difficulty maintaining professional boundaries
- Psychosocial support expectations
- Feeling responsible for challenges beyond the teacher's control



What teachers told us

Identifying and responding to student support needs is an ongoing and essential part of my role. Many students face personal, academic, or workplace challenges that affect their learning. (Survey respondent, Novice teacher, WA)

I spend most of my day answering student emails and taking phone calls. Any extra time is spent on marking. There is no lesson planning or delivery. I don't feel like I do much teaching at all. My role is more of a tech support person in a call centre. (Survey respondent, Novice teacher, NSW)

Less focus on compliance for educators will allow more time and less pressure for educators so they can focus on practice. (Workshop participant, Vic.)

How RTOs can help

Clarify the teacher role

- Define clear professional boundaries and expectations.
- Provide guidance on appropriate responses to psychosocial issues.
- Reinforce that teachers are not expected to diagnose or solve psychosocial challenges.
- Establish consistent sector-wide expectations about the scope of the teaching role.

Reduce workload and compliance pressures

- Review administrative and reporting requirements to reduce unnecessary burden.
- Streamline compliance processes and documentation.
- Rebalance workloads to better align expectations with available time and capacity.
- Protect time for core teaching activities, including pedagogy and relationship building.

Strengthen support systems

- Increase access to specialist student support services.
- Ensure teachers know what supports are available and how to access them.
- Develop clear referral pathways for students requiring additional assistance.
- Provide resources that enable systematic approaches to student support.

Build teacher capability and wellbeing

- Provide practical professional learning on responding to psychosocial challenges.
- Equip teachers with strategies to support students while maintaining professional boundaries.
- Recognise and address the emotional labour associated with supporting diverse students.
- Create conditions that enable teachers to focus on quality teaching while supporting student success.



Clear roles, reduced workload, strong support systems and teacher capability create the conditions for quality teaching and better student outcomes.

Key system conditions that support psychosocial challenges (cont)



Student complexity (behaviour and engagement)

What teachers are experiencing

- Increasing student complexity
- Rising student behavioural and engagement challenges
- Unclear authority and role boundaries
- Teachers acting as frontline support
- Difficulty identifying underlying challenges or needs
- Growing language, literacy and learning barriers
- Student wellbeing challenges affecting learning
- Limited access to, and awareness of, specialist support services
- Limited practical tools and time to use support resources



What teachers told us

Their needs are becoming more and more complex and this is putting a great strain on the teaching staff. Even if they have specified training, some students have an inability to be resilient, be challenged, work hard, change their behaviour for what the workplace will want. We are trying to equip them for the workplace and they struggle to meet those basic needs. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, Vic.)

Classroom control and management is extremely critical in my role now more than ever before. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, Qld, SA and Vic.)

Identifying and responding to student support needs is an ongoing and essential part of my role. Many students face personal, academic, or workplace challenges that affect their learning. (Survey respondent, Novice teacher, WA)

How RTOs can help

Clarify behaviour management and teacher authority

- Define clear teacher responsibilities, boundaries and classroom authority.
- Develop procedures for responding to psychosocial and behavioural issues.
- Provide guidance for managing disruptive or unsafe behaviour.
- Ensure teachers are supported when behavioural issues escalate.

Strengthen student support pathways

- Improve access to specialist wellbeing and support services.
- Establish clear referral and escalation pathways.
- Reduce reliance on teachers as the primary support response.
- Ensure support services are visible and easy to access.

Build teacher capability

- Provide training on psychosocial factors affecting learning.
- Build confidence in recognising signs of student distress and disengagement.
- Develop skills for responding appropriately within the teaching role.
- Equip teachers with practical tools and resources.

Improve student readiness and engagement

- Identify learning and support needs early.
- Strengthen assessment of student readiness and motivation.
- Provide targeted language, literacy and numeracy and digital (LLND) support.
- Implement strategies to improve engagement, attendance and retention.



By providing clear guidance, strong support and effective strategies, RTOs can create safer, more supportive learning environments where teachers and students can thrive.

Key system conditions that support psychosocial challenges (cont)



Student readiness and pre-enrolment

What teachers are experiencing

- A need for pre-enrolment assessment to focus beyond LLND and disability support needs.
- Student support needs are not always identified, disclosed or shared with teachers.
- Teachers are often left responding reactively rather than proactively.
- Students are sometimes enrolled beyond their readiness, capability or support needs.
- Limited study experience, LLND gaps and poor course fit affect learning success.
- Increasing student diversity brings more complex support needs.
- Additional support responsibilities frequently fall to teachers.
- Low readiness and learner accountability can affect engagement, persistence and completion.



What teachers told us

There are lots of undiagnosed learning difficulties - it would be interesting to see if there was a way to test for them during pre-enrolment rather than finding out months in that the learner is severely struggling but has been masking it. (Survey respondent, Mid-career teacher, Vic.)

It all stems from the LLN entry. Limited language skills are a main contributor to everyone's stress. This is not picked up often at entry. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, Vic.)

Identifying support needs early reduces escalation later, but it relies on learners feeling safe to disclose and teachers having time to follow up. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, NSW and Qld)

How RTOs can help

Strengthen pre-enrolment testing

- Broaden testing beyond LLND and disability to identify wider support needs.
- Create psychologically safe processes that encourage disclosure.
- Use pre-enrolment considerations to inform teaching and support planning.
- Identify support needs before students commence training.

Improve student readiness and course fit

- Assess readiness, capability and support needs before enrolment.
- Enrol students in qualifications aligned with their skills and goals.
- Establish clear course prerequisites where appropriate.
- Provide realistic information about course expectations and requirements.

Enhance learning and support pathways

- Strengthen access to LLND, wellbeing and learning support services.
- Provide timely support for students with identified needs.
- Ensure clear referral pathways for additional assistance.
- Reduce the reliance on teachers as the primary support response.

Strengthen pre-enrolment processes

- Communicate clear expectations of learners during enrolment.
- Support students to understand their responsibilities for learning.
- Encourage active engagement and participation from the outset.
- Balance learner support with appropriate student accountability.



Clear pre-enrolment processes, the right course fit, strong support pathways and clear expectations help set students up for success and better outcomes.

Key system conditions that support psychosocial challenges (cont)



Teacher wellbeing

What teachers are experiencing

- Workload and systemic pressures are impacting teacher wellbeing.
- Teachers report experiencing stress, fatigue and emotional demands.
- Increasing demands and support needs are challenging to manage.
- Variable recognition and limited opportunities for professional agency can influence morale.
- Administrative requirements can limit time for quality teaching and student support.
- Limited authority to manage behavioural issues can create challenges for teachers.
- Teacher engagement, satisfaction and retention remain important considerations for training providers and the sector.
- Teachers recognise that staff wellbeing directly influences student wellbeing and classroom culture.



What teachers told us

On top of teaching, marking, assessing - it's the pressure and the mental health load we are burdened with. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, SA)

Many additional hours are spent in an attempt to support students with specific support needs - this is always at the expense of myself though. Assessing is generally completed on weekends to compensate. I do this because I genuinely care but it is not a sustainable option. (Survey respondent, Mid-career teacher, WA)

Classroom behaviour management is a bigger issue than recognised. I would like to share that every day in my classroom I have at least 50% of my students who require extended guidance or support. That impacts the learning of the rest of the class. (Survey respondent, Novice teacher, NSW)

How RTOs can help

Prioritise teacher wellbeing

- Recognise teacher wellbeing as central to student success.
- Embed wellbeing into organisational policies and practices.
- Monitor and respond to psychosocial risks in the workplace.
- Foster psychologically safe and supportive work environments.

Reduce workload and pressure

- Review administrative and compliance demands.
- Protect time for teaching, assessment and student engagement.
- Ensure workloads are realistic and manageable.
- Reduce unnecessary duplication and reporting requirements.

Strengthen support and recognition

- Provide access to wellbeing and employee support services.
- Recognise and value teachers' professional expertise.
- Equip teachers with support for complex student needs.
- Create opportunities for debriefing and peer support.

Build a sustainable teaching workforce

- Address factors contributing to burnout and attrition.
- Support professional growth and capability development.
- Strengthen teacher agency and decision-making capacity.
- Promote a whole-of-institution approach to wellbeing.

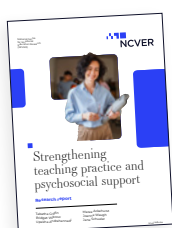


Supporting teacher wellbeing helps create psychologically safe learning environments, strengthens student wellbeing and improves educational outcomes.

Information and additional resources

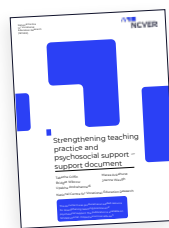
This practice guide is one of several resources developed through the research project *Strengthening Teaching Practice and Psychosocial Support*. The project involved extensive consultation with VET teachers and other VET professionals through a national survey, semi-structured interviews, and workshops conducted across Australia.

These activities informed a suite of practical resources for VET teachers and training providers.



Strengthening teaching practice and psychosocial support: Research report

Research findings on teaching practice and psychosocial challenges in the VET sector.



Strengthening teaching practice and psychosocial support: Support document

Includes some additional supporting evidence related to professional development and the importance of psychosocial support for teachers, as well as the initial literature review.



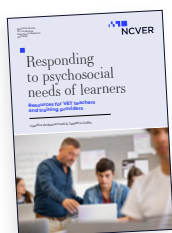
Strengthening teaching practices in VET: Research summary

Summarises the research related to strengthening teaching practices in VET.



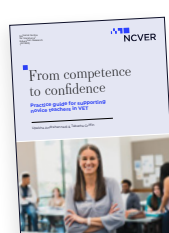
Understanding psychosocial challenges and support in VET: Research summary

Summarises the research related to the teacher experience of psychosocial challenges and how teachers can support psychosocial needs.



Responding to psychosocial needs of learners: Resources for VET teachers and training providers

Resources to support VET teachers in recognising, responding to and referring learners for specialised support.



From competence to confidence: Practice guide for supporting novice teachers in VET + Quick reference guide

Key conditions and strategies for supporting novice teachers as they develop in their teaching roles.



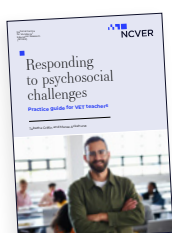
Managing psychosocial challenges in VET: Practice guide for training providers + Quick reference guide

Practical advice for training providers on supporting psychosocial needs in learners and teacher wellbeing.



Developing the educator mindset in VET: Practice guide + Quick reference guide

Explores the importance of developing and sustaining an educator mindset in VET.



Responding to psychosocial challenges: Practice guide for VET teachers + Quick reference guide

A guide for VET teachers on recognising, responding to and supporting learners experiencing psychosocial challenges.



From professional learning to practice for VET teachers: Practice guide + Quick reference guide

Effective approaches for embedding new teaching skills and sustaining improvements in practice.



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