



Responding to psychosocial challenges

Practice guide for VET teachers

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Purpose

This practice guide helps VET teachers and trainers to support and respond appropriately to psychosocial challenges affecting learners, while maintaining clear professional boundaries and ensuring learners are connected to appropriate support services.

A one-page *Quick reference guide* based on this document is also available from the NCVER website.



What are psychosocial challenges?

In VET, psychosocial factors affect both learners and teachers and have been linked to student disengagement and early withdrawal from training programs (Cedefop, 2025¹).

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

Teachers are not expected to diagnose or treat these challenges – their role is to recognise, respond, refer, support and review.

Addressing these factors requires a systemic approach that is multifaceted, sustained, and involves all stakeholders.



Common examples of psychosocial challenges in VET

 Stress and anxiety	 Workplace pressures (including apprentices/trainees)
 Mental health challenges	 Social isolation
 Financial stress	 Low confidence or self-efficacy
 Housing instability	 Trauma or past negative education experiences
 Family or caring responsibilities	 Substance misuse
 Domestic and family violence	 Food insecurity

¹ Cedefop 2025, 'VET toolkit for tackling early leaving', viewed Jul 2025, <<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving/intervention-approaches/psychosocial-support>>.



The psychosocial support cycle

The psychosocial support cycle consists of five stages that describe how teachers may recognise and respond to psychosocial challenges affecting their students.



The psychosocial support cycle (cont)

A key principle underpinning the cycle is that teachers are not expected to provide specialised psychosocial support. Their role is to recognise, respond and refer, while continuing to support student learning through effective teaching practice.

This practice guide explains each stage of the cycle and supports teachers to navigate the process, in order to:

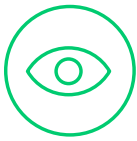
- support learner participation and completion/success
- ensure consistent and safe responses
- align with RTO policies and practices, and duty of care requirements
- clarify when to refer or escalate.

Teachers' ability to effectively support students depends on their:

- **capability** to recognise and respond to learner needs
- **capacity** through manageable workloads, time and resources
- **clarity** regarding their role, responsibilities and boundaries.

These are influenced by a range of system conditions, including organisational leadership, staffing levels, enrolment processes, workload expectations and access to specialised support. More information on these can be found in *Strengthening teaching practice and psychosocial support: Research report or Understanding psychosocial challenges and support in VET: Research summary*, both available from the NCVER website.





Step 1

Recognise early signs

The cycle begins when a teacher notices signs that something may be affecting a student's learning.

The teacher should **focus on the impact on learning**, not on trying to diagnose or solve psychosocial problems.

At this stage, teachers begin considering how the student's learning may be affected and whether there is an impact on the broader learning environment. Depending on the nature of the psychosocial challenge and the teacher's experience, appropriate supports or teaching strategies may already be clear. However, this will not always be the case, and the next stage—having a safe and supportive conversation with the student—may provide further insight. Regardless, progressing to the next stage and speaking with the student is important.



Teacher role

- Observe patterns
- Note changes
- Avoid assumptions
- Document concerns

Some signs are easier to identify than others. For example, disruptive behaviour in the classroom is often more visible than difficulties with concentration. In some cases, students may approach teachers directly to discuss their challenges, while others may attempt to hide them.

Behaviour does not always mean what it appears to. Cultural differences can influence communication, participation and classroom interactions. Before interpreting behaviour as problematic, consider whether it may reflect cultural norms or misunderstandings rather than a psychosocial challenge.



What teachers may notice

- Missed classes or assessments
- Withdrawal or disengagement
- Stress, anxiety or distress
- Changes in behaviour or challenging/disruptive behaviour
- Repeated extension requests
- Difficulty concentrating
- Workplace or personal pressures

RTO role

If there is an **immediate** or **high risk** to the teacher or other students, the situation should be escalated immediately. Where there is no immediate safety risk, but other students' learning is being affected, teachers need clear guidance about the actions they can take to minimise the broader impact.



Step 2

Respond with a safe and supportive conversation

The goals of this stage are to:

- **better understand the impact on the student's learning**
- **identify appropriate support options.**

Including the student in the process of identifying support needs is important, as it gives them agency and promotes accountability for their own learning journey.

This stage presents a significant risk of teachers moving beyond the boundaries of their role, which should remain focused on teaching and learning. Conversations with students can easily shift into the teacher becoming an 'accidental counsellor' or attempting to help resolve personal challenges.

How teachers approach these discussions requires professional judgement. Considerations include the suspected complexity of the issue, whether it is likely to be addressed through adjustments to teaching or assessment, and the existing relationship between the teacher and the student.

Where the challenge appears to be more complex, or there is a risk that the situation could escalate, teachers should arrange a more formal discussion involving appropriate support staff, such as a counsellor or case manager.



Key boundaries

Teachers should not:

- Provide counselling
- Investigate personal circumstances
- Promise confidentiality beyond duty of care
- Attempt to solve complex personal problems

Example opening questions:

"I've noticed you've missed a few classes and seem a bit overwhelmed. I just wanted to check in and see if there's anything affecting your training that we might be able to support you with."

"Can you help me understand what is happening from your perspective? Is there any context - such as your previous learning experiences, culture or communication style - that would help me better understand the situation?"



Teacher approach

- Speak privately
- Ensure adequate time is available
- Express concern about learning or engagement
- Ask open and supportive questions
- Listen without judgement
- Avoid probing into personal details
- Be clear about limits of confidentiality

RTO role

RTOs should have clear procedures outlining how discussions should be conducted, who should be involved, and the boundaries around the information that may be sought from students.

Step 2

Respond with a safe and supportive conversation (cont)

This second stage involves assessing the impact on learning, informed by the observations and conversations with the student. Teachers can consider:

- Is there any safety risk?
- Is the learner still participating?
- Is the challenge affecting assessments?
- Is the learner at risk of withdrawal?
- Is immediate support required?
- Are other learners being impacted?

Levels of impact on learning can be categorised into mild, moderate and high, enabling appropriately scaled teacher responses to be considered.

Importantly, the table below highlights where the responsibility needs to be shared between the teacher and specialised support services or escalated.

Response level	Level 1 Mild impact	Level 2 Moderate impact	Level 3 High or immediate risk
 Examples	• Stress • Workload pressure • Confidence issues • Short-term personal challenges	• Ongoing mental health stress • Financial hardship • Family pressures • Housing instability • Significant disengagement	• Severe distress • Threats of self-harm • Domestic violence concerns • Safety issues • Crisis situation
 Teacher response	• Flexible learning support • Assessment adjustments • Check-ins • Encouragement • Referral to support services if needed	• Refer to learner support services • Notify student support team (if available) • Develop short learning support plan • Monitor progress • Maintain regular contact	• Escalate immediately • Contact student support or wellbeing team • Follow RTO critical incident procedures • Ensure learner is connected to professional support • Do not manage alone
 Primary responsibility	 Teacher-led support	 Shared responsibility between teacher and RTO support services	 RTO support services and specialist services lead response
 Key principle	 Support learning participation	 Coordinate support and monitor risk	 Safety overrides all other considerations

Lower impact



Higher impact

Step 2

Respond with a safe and supportive conversation (cont)

Teachers may face challenges or uncertainties when planning to respond with a conversation. Overcoming these challenges might require seeking help or advice.

 Capability	Knowledge and confidence barriers • Not knowing the right questions to ask • Fear of doing more harm than good	How this can be addressed Can be improved by professional development, resources, mentoring and practice.
 Capacity	Time and workload barriers • Concerns it will lead to increased work when already at capacity • Lack of opportunity for one-on-one discussions	How this can be addressed Needs to be managed in partnership with the RTO through workload, time and support arrangements.
 Clarity	Role and process uncertainty • Uncertainty around privacy and confidentiality • Uncertainty around what to do with the information • Uncertainty around boundaries of role and responsibilities	How this can be addressed Seek advice from your leader/RTO. Refer to your RTO's policies and procedures.
 Other	Learner and safety factors • Student unwillingness to disclose/ share/discuss (cultural reasons, embarrassment, fear, other) • Concerns about student response (especially for sensitive topics, substance abuse) • Safety concerns	How this can be addressed Seek help from student support services or RTO management.



Step 3

Refer to appropriate support

The third stage of the psychosocial support cycle involves referring the student to appropriate specialised support services, where needed.

This stage applies when the student's needs cannot be addressed solely through teaching practices or reasonable adjustments implemented by the teacher.

RTO role

It is important that teachers do not attempt to provide specialised support themselves.

Training providers, and the broader system, need to support teachers to maintain clear professional boundaries and remain focused on their teaching role.

RTOs should also provide information to teachers on a range of available student support services.

Teachers should:

- Explain available support
- Provide contact information
- Encourage referral/access
- Follow RTO policies and procedures

Support services may be provided either internally by the RTO or through external organisations.



Internal RTO support

- Student support services
- Wellbeing team
- Counselling services
- LLND support
- Case management
- Training coordinator



External support

- Community services
- Mental health support
- Crisis services
- Social support agencies
- Employment or housing services

Step 3

Refer to appropriate support (cont)



When support is unavailable or delayed



1. Continue supporting learning within your role.

Focus on creating a supportive learning environment and making reasonable adjustments where possible.



2. Seek advice from student support services or your leader.

Discuss the situation and seek guidance on next steps.



3. Explore alternative support options.

Work with your RTO or student support team to identify other available supports and resources.



4. Document concerns and actions taken.

Record your observations, actions and communications in line with RTO policies and procedures.



5. Escalate if risks increase.

If the student's wellbeing or safety appears to be deteriorating, escalate according to RTO policies and procedures.



6. Follow RTO policies and procedures.

Ensure your actions are consistent with your RTO's guidance, processes and responsibilities.



Key message

If specialised support is unavailable or delayed, teachers should continue supporting the learner's participation in learning, while working with the RTO to identify alternative supports and manage any risks.



Step 4 Maintain learning support

Once referral occurs, teachers continue to support learning, alongside any additional specialised support the student might be receiving.

The teacher's role at this stage is to support the student's participation and learning.

There are two key aspects of teaching practice that are particularly important at this stage of the cycle:

- ensuring teaching practices support and engage diverse learners
- implementing reasonable adjustments where appropriate or required.



These approaches are not intended to resolve all psychosocial challenges, but rather to minimise their impact on learning and participation.

Regular communication between the teacher, the student, and specialised support services can help

support collaboration and monitor progress. This may be easier when support is provided internally rather than externally but may be limited by privacy requirements.



Step 5 Monitor and review

The fifth stage of the psychosocial support cycle is a review and reflect element.

This stage can be conducted alongside the previous 'support' stage and involves the teacher monitoring

the progress of the student. It enables the review of adjustments, where necessary, as well as further intervention, case management or escalation if learning progress does not improve or if the student further disengages.



What teachers should do



Observe learner progress



Maintain communication with the student (without counselling)



Maintain communication with the support team



Document key actions



Review adjustments



What this enables



Make further adjustments



Introduce further interventions



Introduce a coordinated support approach



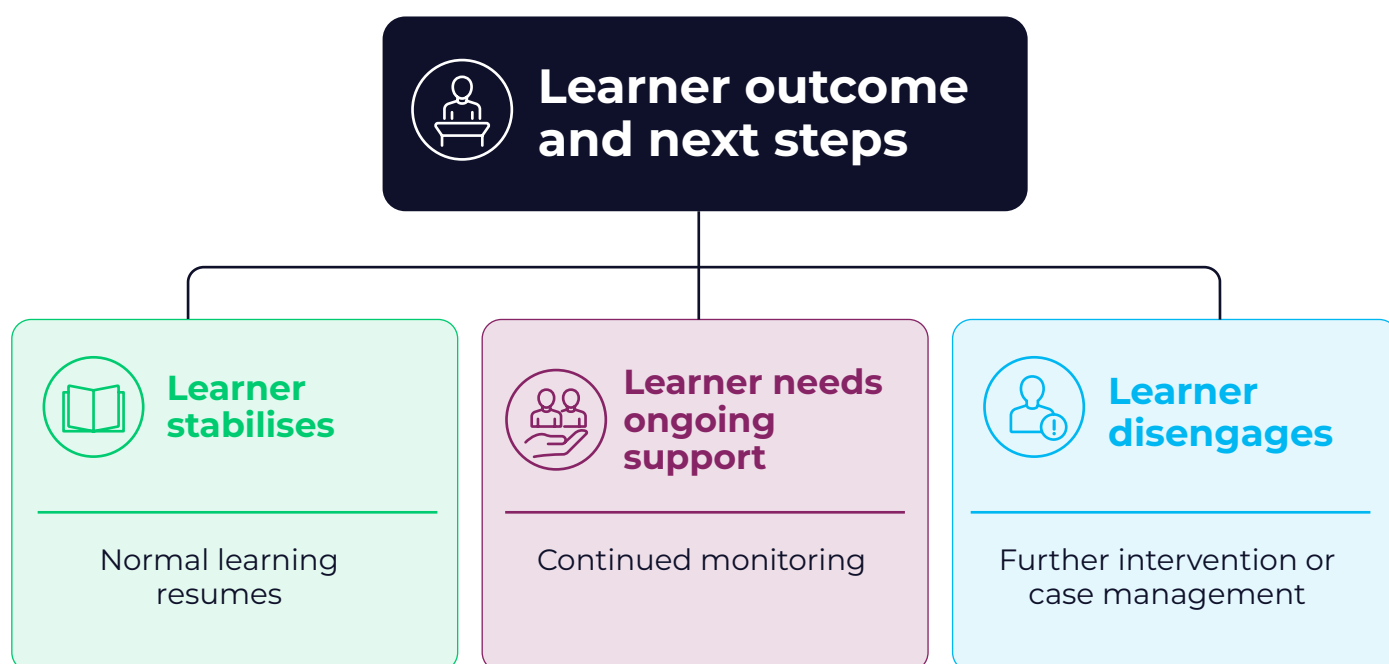
Escalate if needed



Regular monitoring and review ensures support remains effective, proportionate and responsive to the learner's changing needs.

Step 5 Monitor and review (cont)

Ongoing monitoring helps determine whether normal learning activities can resume, whether additional support should continue, or whether further escalation is required.



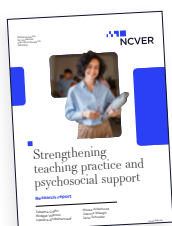


Teachers are not expected to diagnose or treat these challenges – their role is to recognise, respond, refer, support and review.

Information and additional resources

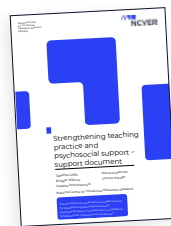
This practice guide is one of several resources developed through the research project *Strengthening Teaching Practice and Psychosocial Support*. The project involved extensive consultation with VET teachers and other VET professionals through a national survey, semi-structured interviews, and workshops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



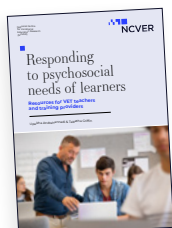
Strengthening teaching practices in VET: Research summary

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.



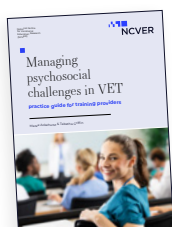
Responding to psychosocial needs of learners: Resources for VET teachers and training providers

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.



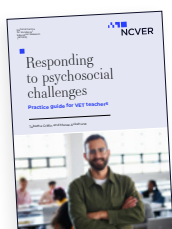
Managing psychosocial challenges in VET: Practice guide for training providers + Quick reference guide

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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