



Understanding psychosocial challenges and support in VET

Research summary

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Highlights

- Psychosocial support is now a core part of the teaching environment. Teachers increasingly support students whose barriers to learning extend beyond course content to include mental health challenges, behavioural regulation difficulties, low motivation, literacy and learning readiness issues, and broader wellbeing concerns. Teachers report a range of behavioural issues in the learning environment, which have significant impacts on teaching and learning, affecting both individual students and the wider learning environment.
- The challenges experienced by VET teachers do not occur in isolation. Compliance pressures, workload intensity, workforce constraints, increasing diversity of learner needs, psychosocial support demands and resource limitations interact within a broader teaching ecosystem, shaping the day-to-day realities of teaching. Teacher strain arises from the cumulative impact of managing multiple, interconnected demands simultaneously, suggesting that the response requires moving beyond viewing challenges as separate issues and recognising how they combine and compound one another in practice.
- Teachers' capacity to support students depends on supportive system conditions, including manageable workloads, adequate resourcing, effective leadership, clear roles, and access to coordinated student support services. Research participants identified the need for stronger systemic responses, including earlier intervention, clearer support pathways, better coordination of services, increased investment in staff and resources, and greater attention to teacher wellbeing.
- Teachers generally reported confidence in recognising students who require support and responding appropriately. However, many felt overwhelmed by the volume and diversity of needs they encounter. To more effectively and confidently respond to psychosocial impacts, teachers need:
 - » capability to recognise and respond to learner needs
 - » capacity through manageable workloads, time and resources
 - » clarity regarding their role, responsibilities and boundaries.
- Teachers reported that they want practical tools they can use in practice. This research resulted in the development of a psychosocial support cycle to help teachers navigate supporting the psychosocial needs of their students, but change in the broader system is required to ensure its effectiveness.



Context and project details

VET teachers¹ are working in increasingly complex environments characterised by growing student diversity and rising learning and psychosocial support needs. As a result, there is a need for deeper insight into the evolving teaching and learning environment.

Within this context, psychosocial factors refer to the emotional, social, psychological, and/or environmental needs and challenges that influence a learner's wellbeing, sense of safety, and ability to participate in and successfully engage with VET. In VET, psychosocial factors affect both learners and teachers and have been linked to student disengagement and early withdrawal from training programs (Cedefop, 2025). Addressing these factors requires a systemic approach that is multifaceted, sustained, and involves all stakeholders.

This research summary examines psychosocial-related challenges that teachers experience in the classroom² and strategies for supporting the psychosocial wellbeing of VET learners. It draws on findings from the *Strengthening teaching practice and psychosocial support* research project.

The research aligns with Action 3 of the VET Workforce Blueprint, which aims to strengthen the evidence base on workforce challenges across the sector (Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council 2024). The project involved multiple data collection methods:

- A national survey of current VET teachers and assessors
- Semi-structured interviews with novice and experienced teachers, teachers delivering the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, and other relevant training provider staff, such as RTO managers, teacher professional development managers, education managers and portfolio leaders
- National research workshops, held in each state and territory across Australia.

Further information about the project findings and methodology is available in *Strengthening teaching practice and psychosocial support: Research report*, available from the NCVER website.



¹ This publication uses the term 'teacher' to encompass all the terms that refer to those who deliver training and/or assess competence in VET, including but not limited to 'VET teacher', 'practitioner', 'trainer', 'educator', 'assessor' and 'lecturer' (as used in Misko, Guthrie & Waters 2021).

² The term 'classroom' is used to describe any learning environment in VET, which may include, but not be limited to traditional classrooms, workplaces, workshops, simulated workplace environments, online delivery and on-country training.



Challenges experienced in the VET teaching role

There has been limited research into the presence and nature of psychosocial factors in the VET context and their impact on both students and teachers.

For this reason, one objective of this project was to gather empirical evidence from teaching staff about their experiences in the teaching role, particularly in relation to psychosocial impacts in the classroom.

The primary source of evidence was the national survey of VET teaching experiences, supplemented by insights from the interviews and workshops. The survey asked current teachers about the student circumstances, behaviours and attitudes they find challenging to support; their confidence in identifying and responding to students' learning needs; and the extent to which student behaviour associated with psychosocial factors disrupts teaching and learning.

While the project focused on building teacher capability to respond to psychosocial impacts in the classroom, it was important to understand how this sits alongside broader challenges. To explore this, VET teachers who responded to the survey were asked, 'What do you find most challenging about your VET teaching/training job?'. Five broad challenge categories emerged:

- Student engagement (e.g. disengagement, poor attendance, lack of motivation or focus)
- Administration (e.g. administrative tasks, compliance)
- Organisational support (e.g. management support, leadership, resources)
- Student diversity (e.g. diverse learning needs)
- Psychosocial challenges (e.g. challenging student behaviour, mental health, negative attitudes).

The findings suggest that VET teachers are challenged by the cumulative interaction of compliance pressures, workload intensity, learner complexity and growing demands for psychosocial support. The need to manage these competing demands highlights the complex role of the VET teacher which extends beyond teaching to include behavioural, emotional, technological and administrative responsibilities.

To explore student-related challenges and support needs further, survey participants were asked what student behaviours, attitudes and/or circumstances they find challenging to support in their teaching/training. Table 1 shows that student disengagement, lack of accountability, student behaviour, poor mental health and challenges related to limited foundation skills were major challenges.

Specific behaviours, especially related to student engagement and accountability, were linked to low motivation to participate in training, including a lack of interest and minimal commitment. Participants noted that these behaviours can create frustration among students who are motivated to learn.

Students' attitude towards learning tends to be negative. It takes a lot of energy from me as a trainer to motivate and engage students and get them interested. (Survey respondent, Novice teacher, Vic.)

Students that are forced to be at TAFE by school or parents are not motivated to be there and waste everyone's time. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, WA)



Challenges experienced in the VET teaching role (cont)

Disengagement can also reflect learning difficulties or poor foundation skills, including language, literacy and numeracy (LLN). Some workshop participants noted that 'basic literacy and numeracy skills are still the largest challenge in the classroom'. Poor foundation skills and other learning difficulties may present as embarrassment and shame, low self-esteem, low confidence, frustration, avoidance of participation, assessment anxiety and dependence on teacher support. These foundation skill challenges may also reflect broader emotional, social, cognitive and environmental pressures, rather than purely academic challenges.

... basic maths is a major problem.
(Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, Qld)

I have found the level of spelling and proper grammar has dropped considerably in the last few years with some students unable to spell even the most basic words. (Survey respondent, Novice teacher, SA)

Student behaviours can be a result of an interaction between psychosocial wellbeing, literacy skills, behavioural regulation and perceptions of the relevance of training, highlighting the increasing need for teachers to understand the interplay of motivation, behaviour and learning readiness.



Challenges experienced in the VET teaching role (cont)

Table 1 Student behaviours, attitudes and/or circumstances reported by teachers, grouped by broad category

Broad category	Specific behaviours (n=714)	Key insight/s	Impact
Student engagement	Disengagement/disinterest (22%) Motivation & Apathy (16%) Lack of commitment (8%) Perceived value/purpose/intent (6%)	Student engagement appears strongly influenced by whether students perceive learning as meaningful, valuable, achievable and connected to their goals (if they have any) or identity. Suggests that many students will not engage if they 'have to be there' (Centrelink benefits, job requirement).	Teachers find it difficult to teach students who do not want to be there.
Student accountability	Non-attendance & lateness (17%) Entitlement/expectations (11%) Accountability/responsibility (6%) Distractions – phones/devices (7%)	Suggests tension between student autonomy, responsibility, classroom expectations, and engagement behaviours.	Educators are navigating student attitudes toward responsibility, boundaries, participation and learning culture.
Behavioural challenges	Disruptive/poor/immature behaviour (15%) Disrespect (10%) Attitude (10%) Attention (7%) Resistance to feedback/help (5%) Aggression/abuse/violence (4%)	Learning challenges may not solely reflect academic ability, but also psychosocial, neurological and mental health factors that impact concentration, regulation and confidence. Indicates behaviour may often be a visible expression of disengagement, frustration, unmet needs, or emotional dysregulation.	Learning challenges impact teaching effectiveness/quality and result in uncertainty about role boundaries.
Emotional and mental health	Mental health (11%) Undiagnosed/undeclared (6%) Disorders (various specified) (5%) Neurodivergence (5%) Student anxiety (4%)	Indicates that emotional wellbeing and cognitive diversity are major influences on student participation and performance. May result in observable and disruptive behavioural challenges and disengagement.	Emotional and mental health factors are affecting learning capacity.
Foundation skills	LLN (6%) Learning ability (5%) ESL/language barriers (4%) Needs/difficulties (4%) Digital literacy (4%)	Students are entering education with highly varied language, literacy, numeracy, digital, and cognitive readiness levels, increasing the complexity of teaching and support.	Foundational capability gaps are impacting participation and behaviour.

Source: National survey of VET teaching experience

Notes: Some survey respondents listed more than one behaviour; data for up to four responses included.

Some of the specific behaviours are not mutually exclusive and can also belong to more than one broad category.



Challenges experienced in the VET teaching role (cont)

Student behaviour and teacher wellbeing

Teacher wellbeing was not a primary focus of this research but emerged as a significant concern across the data, with teachers increasingly supporting students whose barriers to learning extend beyond course content to include mental health, motivation, behavioural regulation, literacy, digital access and personal wellbeing. Workshop participants acknowledged this broadening of their role and expressed concerns about limitations in their ability to

safely manage these complex issues. These challenges are also reflected in the impacts of student behaviour on teaching and teachers, as explored in the survey (Table 2).

The findings described above point to a broader underlying set of influences shaping student engagement and classroom dynamics, potentially related to psychosocial challenges in students and how these manifest in the classroom. The next section explores these factors.

Table 2 The impacts of student behaviour on teaching and teachers (n=731)

	Agree (%)	Somewhat agree (%)	Somewhat disagree (%)	Disagree (%)
Student behaviour has become more challenging since I started teaching	44	23	15	18
Student behaviour negatively impacts my ability to teach at least once a week	28	29	22	21
I feel overwhelmed by student support needs at least once a week	20	28	25	27
Student behaviour negatively impacts my enjoyment of teaching at least once a week	31	27	21	21
I have thought about leaving VET teaching/training in the last six months	31	18	12	38

Source: National survey of VET teaching experience

Challenges experienced in the VET teaching role (cont)

An emerging issue – psychosocial impacts

An important aim of this project was to explore how teachers could be supported to manage and respond to psychosocial impacts in the classroom. These impacts arise from a range of underlying factors which are important to define. The working definition of psychosocial factors for this project was as follows:

Psychosocial factors refer to the emotional, social, psychological, and environmental needs and challenges that influence a learner's wellbeing, sense of safety, and ability to participate in and successfully engage with vocational education and training.

As reported above, psychosocial impacts and challenges in VET appear to centre on the intersection of students' personal circumstances, emotional wellbeing, behaviour, motivation and learning capacity. These impacts can be associated with significant external stressors including trauma, unmet needs, negative educational experiences, exclusion and isolation. Such factors can generate high levels of negative emotion and may trigger anxiety, low mood, fear and stress. The behavioural effects of these can significantly undermine students' engagement with education and participation in learning (Bartušienė et al. 2024; Hughes et al. 2022). In the classroom this can result in disengagement, poor attendance, emotional distress, low capacity to cope with demands and increased dropout risk. Increasingly diverse classrooms with varying learning, behavioural and psychosocial support needs were described across the data, visible in the increased anxiety for students struggling to cope and pressure on teachers to individualise learning and support.

Many of the factors affecting them are outside the classroom, cost of living, housing, having to work and study, cost of TAFE courses. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, NSW)

Many learners face personal, academic, or language challenges that can affect their engagement and progress. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, Qld)

Student needs are so diverse; daily student behaviour has a massive impact and is very broad in range. Adapting to competing needs [...] is very demanding and at times seemingly impossible. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, Vic.)

Teachers describe having to manage psychosocial-related behaviours including conflict between students and teachers, disruptive conduct, lack of accountability, disrespect, poor focus, unsafe behaviours and emotional dysregulation. These behaviours disrupt the ability of the teacher to deliver training, the learning of the student affected, and the learning of other students (table 3).



Challenges experienced in the VET teaching role (cont)

Table 3 Impacts of student behaviour arising from psychosocial needs (n=752)

	Agree (%)	Somewhat agree (%)	Somewhat disagree (%)	Disagree (%)
Student behaviour arising from psychosocial needs disrupts my planned teaching at least once a week	38	29	19	13
Student behaviour arising from psychosocial needs disrupts their own learning at least once a week	50	28	13	8
Student behaviour arising from psychosocial needs disrupts other students' learning at least once a week	44	27	17	12

Source: National survey of VET teaching experience

Overall, the findings present a challenging picture. While participating teachers were passionate about teaching and committed to supporting student success, they reported significant pressures across many aspects of their role. Teachers are required to manage the broad impacts of psychosocial needs on teaching and learning, often without an understanding of the underlying factors that contribute to them nor the ability or responsibility to support those underlying factors.

Despite the complexity, effective management of these impacts is key to ensuring positive learning outcomes for all students, involving both proactive and reactive approaches.

The following section outlines a structured approach to guiding teacher responses to psychosocial challenges in the classroom.





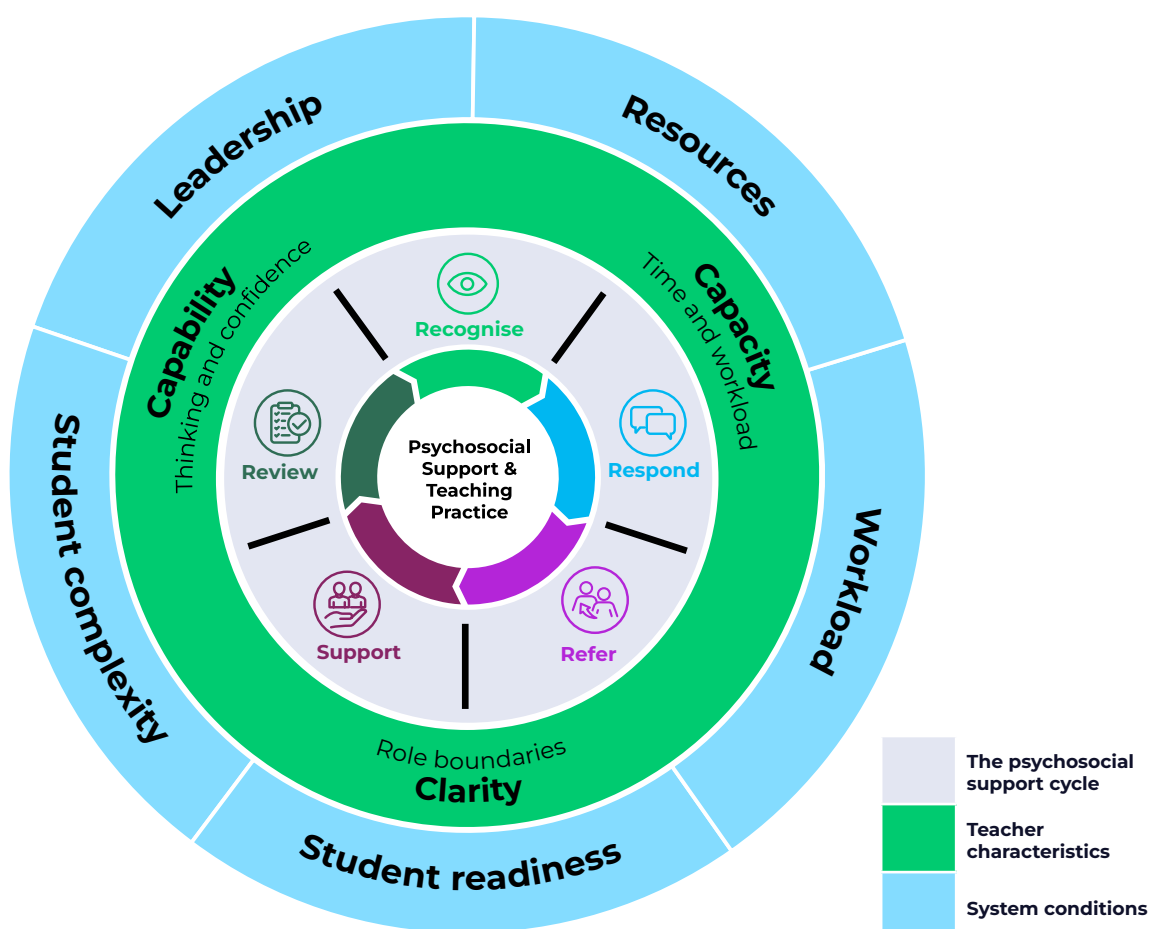
Providing psychosocial support

In VET, psychosocial factors affect both learners and teachers and have been linked to student disengagement and early withdrawal from training programs (Cedefop, 2025). Addressing these factors requires a systemic approach that is multi-faceted, sustained, and involves all stakeholders.

To support practice, this project developed a psychosocial support cycle (the coloured ring in figure 1) to guide teachers in recognising, responding to, referring, supporting, and reviewing students experiencing psychosocial challenges.

The cycle clarifies that teachers are not expected to provide specialised psychosocial support; rather, their role is to identify concerns, facilitate access to appropriate services, and support learning through inclusive teaching practices. Effective implementation of this approach, however, depends greatly on system conditions that are largely out of their control: manageable workloads, strong and supportive leadership, adequate staffing and resources, and organisational support. It is also dependent on their own capability, capacity and clarity about their role and responsibilities.

Figure 1 The psychosocial support cycle, teacher characteristics and system conditions.



Providing psychosocial support (cont)

System conditions

Findings from both the survey and the workshops indicated that teachers' experiences of psychosocial challenges, and their capacity to respond effectively, are strongly shaped by the environments in which they work. As illustrated in figure 1, the effectiveness of the proposed cycle does not depend on teacher action in isolation but is influenced by broader system conditions (blue ring) and teacher characteristics (green ring) that enable its implementation. Strengthening psychosocial support therefore requires attention not only to teacher practice, but also to the organisational and system-level factors that shape capacity, capability, and role clarity in responding to student psychosocial needs.

These system conditions can influence workload pressure for teachers, professional agency, staff wellbeing and the ability of teachers to support students effectively, and require organisational and sector-wide responses. The following sections examine these system conditions, followed by teacher characteristics and the central tension arising from their interaction.

Leadership and organisational support

Despite their significant impact on teaching and learning, psychosocial challenges are frequently overlooked in organisational planning and support strategies (Van Nieuwenhove & De Wever, 2024). In addition to describing individual student-related challenges that impact the classroom, research participants described systemic pressures due to organisational and leadership practices. The pressures described included inadequate support (and sometimes protection) and a lack of understanding of the complexity of teaching and supporting diverse learners. Organisational and sector-wide priorities (such as increasing enrolments), compliance requirements, and qualification completion targets, were reported by some participants as lacking the structural support and resourcing needed for effective and successful implementation.

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

Classroom management, teacher and student welfare and quality educational outcomes are overlooked in the interest of course completions, inflated class sizes ... (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, NSW)

I find delivery is being compromised by the pressure of time/finances and the loss of management that also understands proper educational processes.
(Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, NSW and Vic.)

Research highlights education institute leadership as a significant predictor of psychological safety within education teams, which is essential for optimal teaching practice and positive student outcomes (Ibrahim et al. 2021). These findings highlight the importance of organisational support and psychological safety for both teacher wellbeing and student outcomes.



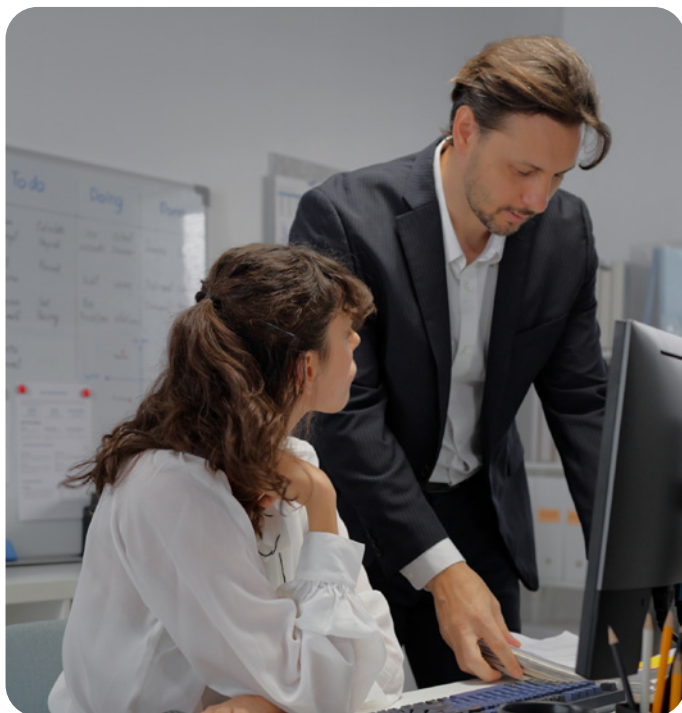
Providing psychosocial support (cont)

Resources and system capacity

Teachers reported challenges accessing additional or specialised support for students due to limited service availability, access barriers, and eligibility requirements such as formal diagnoses or referrals from health professionals. Even when support services existed, awareness of available options was often low, and many services were overwhelmed by demand.

There is pressure in some RTOs for students to disclose diagnosed disabilities to access "flexibility" [...] Many impacts on students' lives are not medically diagnosable, these impacts are often as significant on a student's capacity to complete studies. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, WA)

Students in need can't always access the level of support they demand, when they need it. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, NSW)



Without organisational and leadership accountability, and with specialised support services not always accessible, the responsibility for managing sometimes complex educational, behavioural, and psychosocial demands shifts onto teachers. Indeed, across the workshop and survey data, a dominant narrative is not simply 'lack of resources' but rather that teachers feel responsible for delivering inclusive, high-quality outcomes within systems that are not always capable of supporting these expectations. It has been implied in the literature that individual teachers are responsible for learning how to manage, moderate and work their way through problems that are fundamentally shaped by broader systemic issues (Karnovsky & Kelly 2025). However, participants described a mismatch between the ability to address problems and the impacts of doing so on their workload, wellbeing and job satisfaction, and how this is compounded by the pressure to meet expectations for inclusive, high-quality outcomes for students.

Many additional hours are spent in an attempt to support students with specific support needs. This is always at the expense of myself, though, and 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)

We are required to parent students as much as educate them, especially without sufficient tools, training, support to implement, to make the learning environment and experience better for all. (Survey respondent, Mid-career teacher, WA)

Providing psychosocial support (cont)

Workload, compliance and role overload

It is documented internationally, and across all education sectors, that changes to teachers' roles and responsibilities mean they are being pulled away from their main task of teaching. This can reduce the quality of teaching and learning, divide teachers' focus, limit creative and critical thinking in the classroom, and lead to students being exposed to teachers' stress and anxiety (Beames et al. 2023, Gast et al. 2022, Hughes et al. 2022, Ibrahim et al. 2021). VET teachers report that workload is driven not only by the volume of work but by the ongoing changes to the teaching role itself. Teachers described growing compliance, administrative, behavioural management and student support responsibilities that reduce the time available for teaching, relationship building and pedagogy. Participants reported that their growing responsibilities beyond teaching are contributing to workload stress and role overload.

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

It is yet another thing that is added on to the lecturer's workload. More things get added but never removed. The expectations and workload of all lecturers continue to increase. (Survey respondent, Mid-career teacher, WA)

We are becoming responsible for everything when more and more students have issues. At some point teaching needs to be the focus and support organised so that it can be. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, Tas.)



Providing psychosocial support (cont)

Student readiness and pre-enrolment

Concerns that pre-enrolment screening is not used effectively was another significant theme to emerge from the workshop and survey data. Three main issues with pre-enrolment screening were identified by research participants:

- Pre-enrolment screening is not broad enough (often focused on LLND and disability)
- Students not disclosing support needs, for various reasons (fear of not being accepted into the course, embarrassment, not wanting to be singled out)
- Information received through pre-enrolment screening not being used to inform teaching staff.

When students do not feel psychologically safe, or they feel it may have consequences for their training experience, they may be less likely to disclose learning difficulties or disabilities to their training provider, particularly psychosocial disabilities and neurodivergence, which are often invisible or masked (Collins 2024). Non-disclosure of these needs often means that teachers need to respond reactively rather than proactively, which can place additional pressure on teaching capacity, especially if these needs arise during critical periods such as assessment.

and teachers having time to follow up. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, NSW and Qld)

Sometimes it is not until assessment that we realise a student is not going as well as they said they were. (Workshop participant, Qld)

Many additional challenges, including personal circumstances, that interfere with readiness and ability to engage in learning have been documented through previous research (Smith 2021). Indeed, participants in this research provided many accounts of students being enrolled in courses that they are not suited for, or when they are not ready for study. This can be due to low levels of previous study experience or LLND skills, psychosocial needs and misunderstandings about the nature of the course (Andrahannadi & Griffin 2025). Research participants suggested that pre-enrolment processes could be strengthened to better identify the readiness and support needs of students required to successfully undertake their chosen qualification, to help minimise psychosocial impacts of these challenges in the classroom.



Providing psychosocial support (cont)

Student complexity (behaviour and engagement)

Previous research highlights the many psychosocial factors affecting student behaviour and engagement, such as trauma, lack of basic needs, negative prior educational experiences, exclusion and isolation due to neurodiversity (Bartušienė et al. 2024; Collins 2024; Davidson, 2020; Hughes et al., 2022; McGregor, 2024; Van Nieuwenhove & De Wever 2024). Life circumstances also create conditions which can also interfere with readiness to study (e.g. refugee status, multi-generational unemployment, students with children and no access to reliable childcare). The VET teachers participating in this research reported increasing student complexity driven by growing diversity across many of these psychosocial factors.

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.)

Teachers report that they are increasingly acting as frontline support to complex behavioural, psychosocial and learning needs, many of which originate outside of the training. This aligns with previous research which highlights some of the challenges teachers report in the Australian VET context, including students being disruptive and presenting with challenging learning needs (Casselson 2024; Smith 2021).

Classrooms are being forced to absorb an increasing degree of disruptive and disrespectful impacts stemming from these needs, with teachers reporting that adequate support is not always available to sustain a productive learning environment. Uncertainty regarding their authority to manage disruptive behaviour, and how they will be supported to do so, adds to the pressure.

I find student behaviour has changed over the years and we should feel safe in our jobs as teachers, but this can sometimes be a hard line to work within. If a student is on drugs you don't know, you can't check, you really can't even ask it in case of a bad response. This can be scary. (Survey respondent, Experienced teacher, Vic.)



Providing psychosocial support (cont)

Teacher characteristics and a central tension

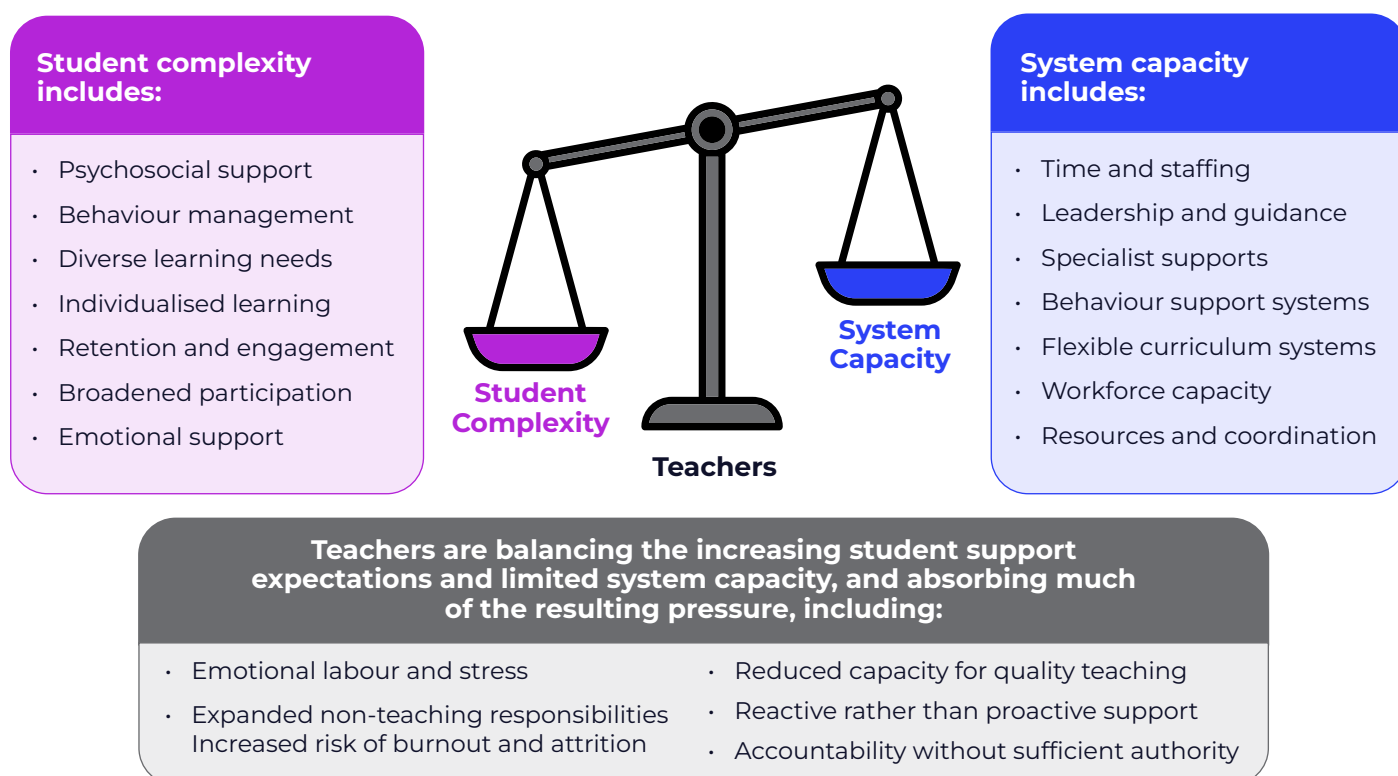
A persistent tension exists between increasing student complexity and the limits of system capacity, shaped by the system conditions described above (figure 2). Teachers are positioned in the middle of this tension, working to manage the imbalance between students' needs (reported to be growing heavier) and systems that often lack the time, staffing, specialist support, resources, and coordination to respond effectively.

Teachers will always work in this space, with teachers describing their classrooms, and themselves, as absorbing much of the pressure created by this imbalance. Many reported that their roles are expanding to include more non-teaching responsibilities, increased emotional labour, and reduced capacity to focus on core/quality teaching. A key aspect to this is a feeling of increased responsibility and accountability for student outcomes.

The research findings also point to another aspect of this tension, between reactive and proactive support. Research into psychosocial safety in further education and higher education similarly emphasises the importance of preventative approaches, including early identification, strong peer and teacher relationships, and environments that support help-seeking (Dickinson & Connolly 2022; Ling et al. 2024). Teachers regularly described systems responding once issues had escalated rather than intervening early, leaving teachers managing crisis points instead of having time for prevention, rapport/relationship building and proactive support. Participants consistently identified earlier intervention, even as early as pre-enrolment, stronger communication and coordination across organisations (such as schools, workplaces), and better access to specialist supports and services as opportunities to reduce the central tension.

Three teacher characteristics - capability, capacity, and clarity - sit at the heart of this space. These were consistently highlighted by research participants as important elements of their role that enable, or hinder, their ability to manage the impacts of the psychosocial needs of their students.

Figure 2 The balance between student complexity and system capacity



Providing psychosocial support (cont)

Capability

Different psychosocial support needs can present in similar ways, such as student disengagement or poor assessment outcomes. Many teachers reported lacking the capability to identify the underlying causes of these behaviours and distinguish psychosocial support needs from other factors such as culture, generational differences, or individual personality traits. They expressed concern about being expected to diagnose and/or address increasingly complex psychosocial issues despite not being trained specialists in this area. While some felt previous professional development had been too limited or insufficiently practical, others argued that it is unrealistic for teachers to be experts in all areas related to psychosocial support. Instead, a more realistic approach for teachers is to build their capability in understanding how various challenges impact learning, knowing how to respond appropriately within their teaching practice, and knowing where to find appropriate support and resources, for the student and/or for themselves.

Several specific impacts on teacher capability were clarified by participants. Delayed identification of psychosocial support needs, whether by disclosure or observation, leaves teachers with limited time to recognise and respond to issues. System conditions, including the visibility and availability of resources, and leadership support for capability development across the different facets of teaching, were seen as particularly influential because they are largely beyond the teachers' control. Participants specifically called for practical training to support the growing number of students experiencing mental health challenges, with mental health first aid highlighted as a useful model. Raising awareness of cultural differences, neurodiversity, trauma-informed practice, and developing emotional intelligence were also identified as important areas for capability development.

Capacity

The demands of the VET teacher role have been well-documented in the literature (Beames et al. 2023, Gast et al. 2022, Ibrahim et al. 2021) and reinforced by participants in this research. In addition to compliance, reporting, teaching, and assessment responsibilities, teachers are increasingly expected to support a diverse range of student needs. Workshop participants spoke of scope creep within their roles, and that there is more expected of teachers than ever before. There was a feeling that managing psychosocial impacts in the classroom and addressing these psychosocial support needs was 'yet another thing' that was being added to teachers' workloads. Participants reported that the time and emotional bandwidth required to adapt their approaches to the sheer array of student needs can be emotionally exhausting, and that heavy support requirements for some students meant there was no time for other students, or for 'teaching' more generally. This was exacerbated when limited support services for students were available which contributed to a sense of being 'spread too thin', and not being able to focus on what many participants believed was their core role of teaching.

Participants emphasised that improving teacher capacity requires addressing the system conditions that shape workload and support. This includes re-evaluating the scope of responsibilities of the teacher role, ensuring that resources are available to free up teacher time, and leadership in the RTO assisting with implementing systemic approaches to supporting students. Many participants suggested that teachers should not be expected to provide all support themselves and called for greater access to support services, additional in-classroom assistance, and dedicated learning support staff.

Providing psychosocial support (cont)

Clarity

Participants identified three areas requiring greater clarity:

- the role of teachers (and the boundaries of their role), including their authority to act in specified situations
- appropriate actions when psychosocial challenges arise
- the supports available for both students and teachers.

Increased clarity in these areas will help teachers balance their responsibilities and duty of care with their capability and capacity. Many expressed concern about doing more harm than good, and described feeling like 'accidental counsellors', as students often disclose personal challenges to the teachers they trust. Whilst specialist support staff may be available, teachers are frequently the first to encounter psychosocial issues in the classroom and during assessment and want to understand where their role ends and where the specialist takes over.

It is important that the sector does not place unrealistic expectations on VET teachers to "diagnose" or "solve" psychosocial challenges. Instead, their role should focus on understanding how these challenges affect teaching and learning and providing appropriate educational support to help students achieve the intended learning outcomes. Clarifying the boundaries of the teaching role would benefit from a sector-wide approach, supported by clear organisational policies, procedures, realistic expectations, and strong communication between teachers and specialist support staff. Teachers also sought practical guidance on responding to psychosocial challenges within the scope of their role, including managing disruptive or unsafe behaviours, implementing reasonable adjustments, maintaining professional boundaries, and accessing advice. Clear information about available student support services, referral pathways, and supports for teachers themselves was seen as essential.

Building capability, rebalancing capacity and ensuring clarity about the boundaries of their role will better enable teachers to act more effectively in their roles, not only managing the psychosocial impacts in the classroom but also across their teaching more generally.





The psychosocial support cycle

Teachers consistently indicated in the survey and interviews that they are seeking practical guidance on how to respond to and manage the psychosocial challenges they encounter in their learning environments.

In response, a draft psychosocial support cycle was developed that describes the process of responding to psychosocial impacts in the learning environment and that can be used to guide teachers' responses to better support their students' learning needs. The draft psychosocial support cycle was presented to workshop participants, who were invited to discuss the validity and practicality of the different elements. The cycle was then refined based on participant feedback (figure 3).

This cycle was designed as a practical product, accessible to teachers, but which could also be used by training providers to align with their own policies, practices and information sources. It should be noted that the usefulness and effectiveness of the psychosocial support cycle, however, are dependent on the teacher characteristics and system conditions discussed previously. Effective student support, including that for psychosocial needs and impacts, requires input from all stakeholders in VET - the system, training providers (and leadership), teachers and dedicated support staff, and the students.

Figure 3 The psychosocial support cycle





The psychosocial support cycle (cont)

Elements of the psychosocial support cycle

The psychosocial support cycle is based on the principle that teachers should focus on the impact of psychosocial challenges on teaching and learning, rather than on diagnosing underlying psychosocial issues, as this often requires specialised expertise. It also recognises that teachers want clarity about the authority and options available to them when psychosocial challenges are disrupting the learning environment or affecting other students, including situations where providing support is either not possible or insufficient.

The cycle consists of five stages that describe how teachers may recognise and respond to psychosocial challenges affecting their students, in ways that are appropriate to their role and responsibilities.



1. Recognise

The cycle begins when a teacher notices signs that something may be affecting a student's learning, that may or may not be related to any support needs identified during the pre-enrolment process.

Observations might include (but not be limited to) missed classes or assessments, disengagement, stress or distress, changes in behaviour, repeated extension requests, difficulty concentrating, or workplace and personal pressures.

Some signs are more visible than others, and some students may approach teachers directly to discuss their challenges, while others may attempt to hide them. This stage of the cycle can be strengthened through effective pre-enrolment processes that can help identify existing support needs.

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 learning for others is disrupted, teachers need clear guidance about the actions they can take, supported by training provider leadership.

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, it may already be clear what supports or teaching strategies are needed but further understanding can be gained through a conversation with the student (the next stage). Workshop participants identified a range of factors that influence teachers' ability to recognise psychosocial challenges relating to teacher capability, capacity and clarity:

- Capability – for example, lack of awareness regarding student diversity, previous experience, lack of confidence
- Capacity – for example, class size, time spent with students, delivery mode
- Clarity – for example, lack of understanding about the teacher's and RTO's responsibility.

Teachers also suggested a range of resources and supports that would help teachers overcome these barriers (table 4).

Whether concerns arise through teacher observation or student disclosure, the next step in the cycle is a safe and supportive conversation with the student (the second stage of the cycle).



The psychosocial support cycle (cont)

Table 4 Resources, supports and information that would help teachers recognise psychosocial challenges

• Clear guidance from the training provider about organisational responsibilities and the role of teachers in responding to psychosocial needs and impacts • Strengthening of the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, or providing additional training, to include content about psychosocial challenges and their impact on learning • Professional development to build awareness of common psychosocial challenges, their impact on learning, and how it relates to teaching practice, including: » mental health training » understanding neurodiversity in students • Emotional intelligence training • Access to mentors who can help teachers manage challenges and support problem-solving	• Reduced class sizes or additional in-class support, such as an extra teacher or teacher's aide, particularly in larger classes • A glossary, dictionary, or language guide to support understanding of relevant terminology • Practical communication tools, such as scripts or conversation starters, to help teachers respond to challenging situations, including: » tension or conflict » students arguing back » stonewalling or disengagement » gaslighting » rudeness or passive aggression » put downs or disrespectful behaviour » undermining or contradictory behaviour » complaining
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Note: as suggested by research participants.

The psychosocial support cycle (cont)



2. Respond

The second stage of the psychosocial support cycle involves responding to the initial observation through a safe and supportive conversation with the student.

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. The purpose of the conversation is to better understand the impact on the student's learning and to explore and/or identify appropriate support needs.

Research participants highlighted several concerns that teachers may experience at this stage, particularly around confidence in discussing sensitive issues and determining the most appropriate response (table 5).



Table 5 Challenges in responding to observations with a conversation

Capability

- Not knowing the right questions to ask
- Fear of doing more harm than good

Capacity

- Concerns it will lead to increased work when already at capacity
- Lack of opportunity for discussion with the student

Clarity

- Uncertainty around privacy and confidentiality
- Uncertainty around what to do with the information
- Uncertainty around boundaries of role and responsibilities

Other

- Student unwillingness to disclose/share/discuss (cultural reasons, embarrassment, fear, other)
- Concerns about student response (especially for sensitive topics, substance abuse)
- Safety concerns

Note: as reported by research participants, not an exhaustive list.

The psychosocial support cycle (cont)

How teachers approach these discussions, therefore, requires some professional judgement. Considerations include the suspected complexity of the issue, whether it might be addressed through adjustments to teaching and/or assessment or if additional supports are likely required, 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. To support teachers in these situations, 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.

This stage presents a significant risk of teachers moving beyond the boundaries of their role and becoming an 'accidental counsellor'. While participants felt they needed a greater understanding of psychosocial challenges to feel confident having these conversations and to avoid causing unintended harm, they emphasised that teachers are not (and should not need to be) experts in psychosocial issues or support. Instead, teachers need practical skills to conduct supportive conversations while remaining within the scope of their professional role. Participants suggested that support could be strengthened at this stage through access to strategies for asking appropriate questions and maintaining professional boundaries, a support person or service for teachers, or an independent liaison person, who could help identify appropriate support needs for students.



The psychosocial support cycle (cont)



3. Refer

The third stage of the psychosocial support cycle involves referring students to specialised support services, when their needs cannot be addressed solely through teaching practices or reasonable adjustments implemented by the teacher.

These services may be internal or external to the training provider. Research participants suggested that RTO supports for psychosocial challenges are generally less established than supports for language, literacy and numeracy (LLND), culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), First Nations, or disability-related needs, although this varied across training providers.

Workshop participants discussed a range of challenges associated with referring students to specialised support services, many of which reflect broader system-level issues rather than teacher capability, capacity, or role clarity. Participants reported that specialised support services are often under-resourced, underfunded, or difficult for students to access.

Participants identified several system- and RTO-level changes that could strengthen referral pathways and improve access to additional resources and appropriate support services for students, such as:

- the availability of online or AI tools to help teachers know where to refer students
- external supports being made available from within the training provider (where practical), or enabled capacity for teachers to refer to external supports
- adequate funding and resourcing for support services
- wellbeing support advertised and available for students, to enable self-access
- student counsellors
- ensuring support is scalable (not all situations require the 'full treatment').

Teachers reported that it is difficult to avoid feeling responsible to help students when other supports are limited. Maintaining clear professional boundaries and remaining focused on their teaching role is important for teachers at this stage, however, rather than attempting to provide specialised support themselves.

The psychosocial support cycle (cont)



4. Support

The fourth stage of the psychosocial support cycle involves the teacher continuing to support the student's participation and learning alongside any specialised support services the student may be accessing.

Workshop participants identified two key aspects of teaching practice that are important at this stage of the cycle:

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

Participants wanted a better understanding of how different psychosocial challenges affect learning and what teaching strategies can reduce their impact. They also emphasised the importance of using evidence-based, high-impact teaching strategies and approaches such as Universal Design for Learning, more inclusive course and lesson design, and better ways to engage and support students in online delivery environments.

These are teaching-related skills that can be strengthened through building teaching capability more broadly. In addition to formal professional development that can help strengthen these skills, teachers suggested that peer mentoring and greater access to practical resources would be valuable at this stage.

Teachers also sought a better understanding of reasonable adjustment processes and practices, including how to collect sufficient supporting evidence and how to implement in online delivery settings. While there are resources available that provide information on reasonable adjustment (for example, Australian Government 2026), teachers may need to seek advice from their RTO if they are unsure about how to implement it in their specific context.

Where possible and appropriate (especially regarding privacy requirements), regular communication between the teacher, the student, and specialised support services can help coordinate support and monitor progress, although participants noted that this is generally easier when services are provided internally.

Participants acknowledged that these approaches will not resolve all psychosocial challenges but may help reduce their impact on learning.



The psychosocial support cycle (cont)



5. Review

This fifth and final stage of the psychosocial support cycle is a review and reflect element and can be conducted alongside the previous 'support' stage.

This stage involves the teacher monitoring the progress of the student and enables the review of adjustments, as well as further intervention, case management or escalation if learning progress is not improved or if the student further disengages. This stage also enables the teacher to reflect on how well the psychosocial support cycle has worked, building the knowledge and capability of the teacher, and potentially identifying additional supports or changes that would improve the process.

Using the cycle

This psychosocial support cycle was developed both to describe and guide responses to psychosocial challenges in practice. However, translating the cycle into practice is not straightforward, given increasing teacher workloads, limited time, and the complexity of supporting growing numbers of students with diverse and evolving needs. While this cycle has been depicted as a neat flow, teachers described that their reality is that they often have many students with different support needs, all presenting at different times throughout the training journey.

Workshop participants suggested a system that could be developed and used alongside this psychosocial support cycle, to help them implement it. They reported they would value an easy-to-access system where they can:

- record observations and/or emerging concerns
- find information about available support services, that relate to the observations they have made
- see information that is tailored for students in their specific subject areas, as well as more broadly
- record their review and reflection notes.

Participants noted that (de-identified) information captured through such a system could extend beyond individual practice to inform organisational decision-making, as well as broader research, policy development, and funding models. In this way, the cycle is positioned not only as a practice tool, but also as a potential mechanism for strengthening system-level understanding and response.

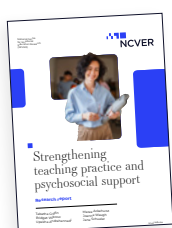
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Information and additional resources

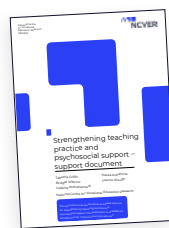
This practice guide is one of several resources developed through the research project *Strengthening Teaching Practice and Psychosocial Support*. The project involved extensive consultation with VET teachers and other VET professionals through a national survey, semi-structured interviews, and workshops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



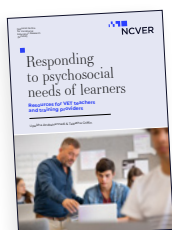
Strengthening teaching practices in VET: Research summary

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.



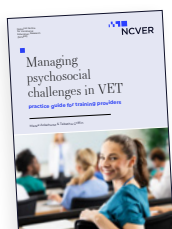
Responding to psychosocial needs of learners: Resources for VET teachers and training providers

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.



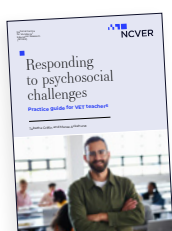
Managing psychosocial challenges in VET: Practice guide for training providers + Quick reference guide

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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