



Student support: enabling the learner journey — support document

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Introduction

Purpose

This support document accompanies the research publication *Effective student support: enabling the learner journey*, which draws on case studies of registered training organisations (RTOs), including student and staff perspectives on the key characteristics of effective student support. It is divided into the following sections:

- Research questions: provides the key research questions that guided the project
- Methodology: describes the data collection method
- RTO case studies: descriptions of each of the eight RTOs that formed the basis for the development of the main research report and the good practice guide
- Effective student support practices across the learner journey: presents the various phases of the VET learner journey, with examples of student support strategies appropriate to each phase.

Research questions

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

The key question guiding this project was:

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

The supporting questions included:

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

Methodology

This research used a qualitative case-study approach to elicit perspectives from both RTO staff and students.

Stage 1: Desktop research

To provide background and context to the research, Stage 1 involved desktop research, collating information from a variety of sources, such as NCVER data on completion rates and the reasons for withdrawal, as reported by the most recent Student Outcome Survey (SOS; NCVER 2024). It also involved a review of the literature to help in identifying any existing relevant research. During this stage the research team consulted with the various jurisdictions to gain insights into their approaches to supporting students towards completion.

Stage 2: RTO case studies

Informed by the first stage, the second stage involved conducting case studies with RTOs considered successful in supporting students towards qualification completion. Based on their successful completion rates, 25 RTOs were nominated by the project sponsors and other jurisdictional representatives. These RTOs reflected different locations, qualifications delivered, provider types and sizes. The case-study approach was not designed to ensure that the sample is representative across any particular RTO characteristic or geographical location; rather, the case-study approach explored the good practice examples of student support, taking their various characteristics into account for context. Details of the scope of delivery and qualifications offered were extracted from the training.gov.au website. Further, a website search was conducted for all the nominated RTOs. The aim of this search was to find background information on the different types of supports RTOs provide, with the aim of informing the development of the interview and focus-group guides. This information helped the researchers to familiarise themselves with the various types of student support provided by RTOs and enabled them to probe both RTO staff and the students regarding these different supports.

Eight RTOs agreed to participate in this research. Three training providers had won the ‘training provider of the year’ award in their respective states and one had won the national award. Before conducting the staff interviews, the researchers had initial discussions with a key contact person (for example, a director and/or senior manager of student support) from each RTO and informed them of the aim of the project. The designated contact person was asked to nominate staff members involved in providing student support and assisting students along their learner journey. These nominations included staff who are experts in developing and providing student-support services, strategies and or other factors that potentially support VET qualification completions.

Table A1 Characteristics of the RTOs participating in the research

RTO ID	RTO type	RTO size	Areas of training provision	Number of staff participants	Number of learner participants
1	Industry association	Large	Health	4	3
2	Private training provider	Large	Early childhood education and care, Leadership and management	12	6
3	Private training provider	Small	Government, Business, Human resource management, Project management	2	9
4	TAFE	Large	Many areas covered	8	6
5	Community-based education provider	Small	Foundation/workplace skills, Business, Community services, Information technology	3	1
6	Community-based education provider	Large	Many areas covered	2	-
7	Private training provider	Large	Community services, Retail, Foundation/workplace skills	2	-
8	Private training provider	Large	Building and construction, Transport and logistics, Business services and Community services	1	-

Note: Locations of each RTO have been omitted to ensure anonymity of participants. They were located in ACT, NSW, NT, Tas. and SA.

Consultations with RTO staff: semi-structured interviews

A total of 34 interviews with RTO staff were conducted, who included directors, general managers, CEOs, RTO managers, training managers, student-support managers, compliance managers, marketing and enrolment managers, trainers and assessors. Before the interviews took place, an information sheet was sent to all the participants, which outlined the aim and the objectives of the research. The interview guide (see table A2) was semi-structured, and the interviews progressed according to the answers/examples provided by the RTO staff participants. Follow-up questions were asked based on the interviewee's expertise and involvement in providing student support.

Table A2 Discussion framework for RTO staff

Contextual information	RTO background and role of the interviewee
Meeting learner needs and types of supports along the learner journey	Questions relating to how the RTO provides support to students at different stages of their learner journey: pre-enrolment and enrolment, course commencement, ongoing study and nearing completion. Potential topics covered included: - Have you identified any pain points in the enrolment process? If so, how did you overcome those challenges? - How do you identify students' support needs during the early stages of their training? - What support services do you provide to students during their initial stages of training? - What strategies do you use to identify students at risk of non-completion? - Are there any specific support needs that arise in the point of assessment? If so, what are they? - Are there any specific supports offered to students nearing completion? - Does your RTO provide any support to students who discontinue their training, to increase the likelihood of re-engagement? - What do you think the challenges/barriers are when providing support to students? - What enables you to provide supports to students? - What do you think are the key success factors that have helped past completers to complete their training?
Meeting the needs of disadvantaged learner cohorts	What additional support is provided for students in different priority groups? Are there any specific supports that would help more (equity group learners, for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, culturally and linguistically diverse learners) complete their training?

Partnerships with others to enhance effectiveness of providing student support	Do you use any external resources to improve provision of student support (e.g. partnerships with other organisations, jurisdictions, peak bodies) If not, are you aware of any? Why are these not used?
Final remarks	Do you have anything else you would like to add, or ask about the project?

Consultations with students: Focus groups and semi-structured interviews

Student voice relates to recognising students' distinctive views on their educational experiences and allowing students to engage with and influence vocational education policies and curriculum by responding to their feedback and insights (Cook-Sather 2006). Thus, to understand students' distinctive views on their experiences in student support across their learner journey, the second phase of data collection involved conducting focus groups and semi-structured interviews with students of the participating RTOs. On behalf of NCVER, RTOs were requested to invite their students to participate in this research project. Five RTOs agreed to help to recruit students. Participant information sheets were emailed to learners, along with an invitation to participate in either a focus-group discussion or a semi-structured interview, based on their preference. To provide a mix of views, students at different stages in their learner journey and those who had recently completed their qualification were recruited. No specific quotas were established for the inclusion of priority cohorts during the recruitment of students for this research as it was out of scope. However, individuals from different priority groups were naturally represented through the standard recruitment process. Students were recruited only directly through RTOs without any social media or external postings. After receiving the invitation, students who were willing to participate emailed directly to the researchers.

Table A3 Discussion framework for learners

Ice breaker	Can you tell us what you studied, how you studied/your mode of study (online, face-to-face, or blended) and whether it was a traineeship/apprenticeship?
Supports received across the learner journey	Which supports/ information helped you most at pre-enrolment and enrolment? Did anyone need help while enrolling? Did you seek support in the early stages of your training? Why? Why not? - Who did you contact first to discuss your concerns? Was it easy to find support? - Which supports/information helped you the most in the early stages of your training? - Is there any support you didn't get that would've helped? Students nearing completion: as you are nearing the end of your course, have you come across any obstacles nearing completion? Examples? Completers: what specific factors do you think made a real difference in helping you successfully complete your training? Whether it's support services, study techniques, personal motivation, or something else entirely, we're interested in hearing what you found most impactful in your journey to completion?
Challenges faced progressing through training	Did you seek help? (Did you know where to find support and how to access those? Did it help? If not, what would have helped?) Did you have regular contact with the training provider? If so, was it helpful? If not, was that something you would want? Were the trainers/assessors able to sense your support needs? Did they proactively reach out? Did your trainers know about the available supports and were they able to guide you on how to access them or point you to the right direction? Examples? Is there any support that you didn't get that would have helped?
Assessment support Placement support	Have you had any challenges with assessments at all? Did you seek help to complete assessments? Examples? Did it help?
Key success factors, challenges and barriers	What do you think are the key success factors that help you to complete your training? What do you think the challenges or barriers are when accessing support?
Final remarks	What suggestions do you have for training providers to improve their support systems and make those more accessible? Do you have anything else you would like to add, or ask about the project?

Before scheduling focus groups and interviews, the students were informed via email that the focus groups and interviews would explore their support needs during training; the importance of support in helping them to complete/continue their qualification; the supports deemed helpful in facilitating completion/continuation; the barriers and enablers to accessing support; and any suggestions for how support could be improved. Further, the student participants were asked to confirm their consent to participate in the focus groups or interviews by responding to the participant consent form. Five focus groups and 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 25 students. Interview questions for these consultations were developed by drawing on the literature review and feedback from the project advisory committee (see table A3).

All the transcripts (both staff and student data) were imported in NVivo (a qualitative data-analysis software package). NVivo was used as a data-management tool to analyse the transcripts. The data analysis began with coding and identifying first-order concepts in each transcript. This process generated a list of codes related to student support in each stage of the learner journey. The next stage of analysis involved an iterative process to obtain a more refined and focused list of codes and themes.

RTO case studies

This section provides descriptions of the eight RTOs examined in this research. Five RTO case studies involved consultations with both staff and learner participants. Only a few staff members were consulted from the other three RTOs. The description for each case study outlines the case study's background and details of staff and student research participants. This information is based on consultations with both staff and learners of each RTO, as well as information gathered from their respective websites. The headings used in each RTO highlight an exemplary practice of support enacted at that RTO. The practices highlighted in the headings are not exclusive to these organisations and were also present in other RTOs.

'Safety nets' to produce 'work-ready' learners: Case study 1

Our goals are focused not necessarily on getting students through the doors but getting students out the other end into jobs, and being absolutely work ready for those roles, and for employers to be saying, 'wow, those students are fantastic employees'. So that then means that whole journey has to be good quality all along the way.

(Upper management, RTO 1)

RTO background

The RTO in focus in this case study is an industry association with more than two decades of experience in specialising in health and social care. They have recently passed 500 learner enrolments per year in their metropolitan centre. The courses offered range from certificate II, III, IV and diploma-level qualifications. The participants from this RTO were four staff and three learners.

Participants

Four of 25 RTO staff members were interviewed. The four staff representatives were: Director, Education and research; Librarian and student support member; and two course managers.

RTO staff mentioned that they have a mix of learners from diverse backgrounds and they deliver to both adults as and VET for secondary school students. In this RTO, different qualifications attract different learner cohorts from different backgrounds, such as First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) learners. The three learners interviewed were all female, aged 25, 24 and 35, and undertaking a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care. All the learner participants are independent students with two being culturally and linguistically diverse, while the third has a disability.

Table A4 Characteristics of the participating learners, Case study 1

Learner ID	Gender	Age	Qualification	Learner journey	Priority group
S1	Female	25	Diploma	In training	CALD
S2	Female	24	Diploma	In training	CALD
S3	Female	35	Diploma	In training	Disability

Preventing learners from ‘falling off the cliff’: Case study 2

I suppose what we try and do to is get students before they're about to fall off the cliff, and they need that ambulance. We try and we've worked hard to try and develop strategies.

(Upper management, RTO 2)

RTO background

This case study examined good practice student-support strategies in a large private RTO delivering training only in early childhood education and care (ECEC). With the aim of ‘providing [an] undivided focus’, this RTO has been in the training space for over 20 years. Currently, self-paced training is delivered online with educators visiting workplaces on a regular basis. Workplace visits by staff include workflow observations, mentoring learners, and meetings to clarify any concerns and to review learner progress.

The early childhood education and care industry has been struggling to attract and retain staff, which has been attributed to low wages and undersupply of qualified workers.

Participants

Twelve RTO staff members and six learners participated in semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

So again, there's a network of people. We believe it takes a community to support a student, so that's from your leadership all the way through down to someone who answers the phone at the front desk or enters the data

(Upper management, RTO 2)

This RTO has around 50 staff, with a split of approximately 15 in management, 15 student support staff and 20 trainers and assessors. Staff interviewed included the CEO of the organisation, the general manager, training managers, the compliance manager, senior assessors and trainers, the marketing and enrolments manager, the student-support manager and student-support administration staff.

I think probably our strength and now success has been in the quality of the employees. So, all of our employees are early childhood trained. Some at degree level, some at diploma level, and I think that's been an important decision to make. Because they've all had lots of experience in the field, and I think that helps them to relate to the services when they go out to visit the student

(Upper management, RTO 2)

The majority of the staff are long-serving employees. Thus, with their expertise in the field they can ‘proactively identify issues’ and suggest solutions accordingly. Staff and learners emphasised that the passion they all share is one of the ‘success factors’ behind their high completion rates.

Learners in this RTO are from diverse backgrounds and the self-paced online delivery helps them to have individualised learner journeys based on their start date. An assessor/trainer explained that:

We don't have cohorts of students sign up at the same time. They all sign up when the time is right for them, so every student is treated individually because they're all signing up at different times for different reasons in different areas. They may be under 18, they may be living out of home. They might have ticked that they've got a disability or a learning difficulty. Maybe they're of a different culture and they speak two different languages, things like that become what we call red flags so that we can put something in place to support those students throughout their studies. So, everyone's treated individually.

(Trainer and assessor, RTO 2)

The six learners interviewed were all female and at different stages of their learner journeys. Two were enrolled in certificate III and four were enrolled in a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care. Only one learner came from a CALD cohort.

Table A5 Characteristics of the participating learners, Case study 2

Learner ID	Gender	Age	Qualification	Learner journey	Priority group
S4	Female	64	Certificate III	In training	-
S5	Female	-	Certificate III	Completed	CALD
S6	Female	33	Diploma	In training	-
S7	Female	40	Diploma	Nearing completion	-
S8	Female	28	Diploma	In training	-
S9	Female	34	Diploma	In training	-

‘Trainers who care’: Case study 3

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

(Senior trainer and assessor, RTO 3)

RTO background

The RTO in focus in this case study is a family-owned small private RTO with over 35 years of experience in delivering training in government, business, human resource management, leadership and management, and project management. This RTO works almost exclusively with employers to provide training to their employees. The courses offered range from short courses, certificate II, III, IV and diploma-level qualifications and career-support programs. Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, 90% of the training has been delivered face-to-face. Currently, training is delivered predominantly online, coupled with a few modules delivered face-to-face. The training is delivered as a combination of two models: self-paced with a single dedicated trainer and assessor who provides coaching and assessment support throughout the learner journey; and virtual online workshops.

Participants

This RTO has four full-time employees, including two full-time trainers and approximately five contract staff. Of the four full-time employees, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two RTO staff members: the director and the senior learning and development consultant.

Six learners participated in focus groups and three in semi-structured interviews. All the participants are employed full-time and the training was organised and paid through their employers. Of the six learners, one has a disability and another is from a CALD background.

Table A6 characteristics of the participating learners, Case study, 3

Learner ID	Gender	Age	Qualification	Learner journey	Priority group
S10	Female	-	Diploma in HRM	Nearing completion	-
S11	Male	32	Diploma of Government	Completed	Disability
S12	Female	31	Diploma of Government	Commencing	-
S13	Male	31	Diploma of Government	Commencing	-
S14	Male	22	Diploma of Government	Completed	-
S15	Female	19	Certificate IV in HRM	Completed	-
S16	Male	44	Diploma of Government	In training	-
S17	Female	53	Certificate IV in HRM	In training	CALD
S18	Female	-	Diploma of Government	Commencing	-

Ensuring inclusive learning: Case study 4

We know that student support has a huge impact on people's ability to study and to learn.

(Student support staff, RTO 4)

RTO background

This case study examined student-support strategies in a TAFE (technical and further education) institute. This organisation delivers training in multiple areas and offers apprenticeships and certificate-level training through to diplomas and graduate certificates using face-to-face, online and blended delivery modes.

Participants

The eight staff participants interviewed were the senior manager of student support; education advisor (migrants and refugees); education advisor (disability); senior manager (apprenticeships); field officer; general manager (student association); and two heads of departments.

The six learners interviewed were enrolled in various qualifications in different areas such as cyber security, community services, and visual arts, and at different stages of their learner journeys. Of these research participants, four identified as First Nations, CALD and/or having a disability. The differences between these learners are summarised in table A7. All learners who participated in this research study attend face-to-face training.

Table A7 Characteristics of participating learners, Case study 4

Learner ID	Gender	Age	Qualification	Learner journey	Delivery mode	Priority group
S19	Male	32	Certificate III in IT/Cyber Security	In-training	Face-to-face	First Nations and disability
S20	Female	50	Certificate IV in Community Services and Cert. IV in Community Development	Nearing completion	Face-to-face	-
S21	Male	31	Youth work Certificate IV	In-training	Face-to-face	CALD
S22	Female	35	Certificate IV in Mental Health and Diploma of Community Services	Nearing completion	Face-to-face	CALD and disability
S23	Female	-	Diploma of Visual Arts	In-training	Face-to-face	First Nations and disability
S24	Male	40	Certificate IV in IT	Nearing completion	Face-to-face	-

‘Just second nature to help where it’s needed’: Case study 5

For all of us, everyone who's here, I think it's sort of just second nature to help people where that help is needed. I think that's why everybody is here.

(Upper management, RTO 5)

RTO background

This case study, a small community-based training provider, delivers training in foundation/workplace skills, business, community services and information technology courses. Being in the training space for nearly a century, this RTO provides affordable programs and ensures a welcoming and supportive learning space for all individuals in the community by offering predominantly face-to-face delivery with blended training in a few courses. Staff highlighted that their core value is to help priority cohorts to build employability skills and get them back into the workforce:

I do think because we are fairly small, people [students] usually feel quite welcome here.

So that's what people often comment on, that it's not a large institution where people then get lost.

So I think for a lot of vulnerable people that can be quite a positive thing.

(Upper management, RTO 5)

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three staff participants and one learner. The three staff were the principal of the collage and two trainers.

Almost 100% of the learners in this RTO are from disadvantaged backgrounds, of which approximately 70% are identified as CALD. The majority of the learners are long-term unemployed who reside in the local communities. Recruiting learner participants was very challenging in this RTO. Even after multiple reminders from the RTO, only one learner agreed to participate in the research. This learner was a 48-year-old female nearing completion of a Certificate III in Individual Support. She attended face-to-face teaching and was from a CALD background.

Additional RTOs (not full case studies)

This section provides brief descriptions of RTOs 6,7 and 8, where interviews were conducted only with a limited number of staff members, unlike the RTOs detailed above, which included both staff and learner participants.

RTO 6 is a community-based provider with over 50 years of experience in delivering training in multiple areas, including early childhood education and care, community care, business administration and life skills. More than 85% of the training is delivered to disadvantaged cohorts, of which a majority are unemployed. This RTO has around 40 full-time staff and 20 contract staff. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the national RTO manager and a trainer.

RTO 7 is a large Aboriginal community-controlled (ACC) training provider, delivering training in community services, foundation skills and retail services to predominantly remote First Nations learners. Interviews were conducted with the education and training manager and a trainer.

RTO 8 is a large private training provider, delivering training in building and construction, transport and logistics, business services and community services. All the training programs are workplace-based, and learners must be employed in an area relevant to the enrolled course. Only one staff participant, the director, was interviewed from this training provider.

Effective student-support practices across the learner journey

Our goals are focused not necessarily on getting students through the doors but getting students out the other end into jobs, and being absolutely work-ready for those roles, and for employers to be saying, ‘wow, those students are fantastic employees’. So that then means that whole journey has to be good quality all along the way.

(Upper management, RTO 1)

This section describes the various phases of the VET learner journey and the student-support strategies appropriate to each phase.

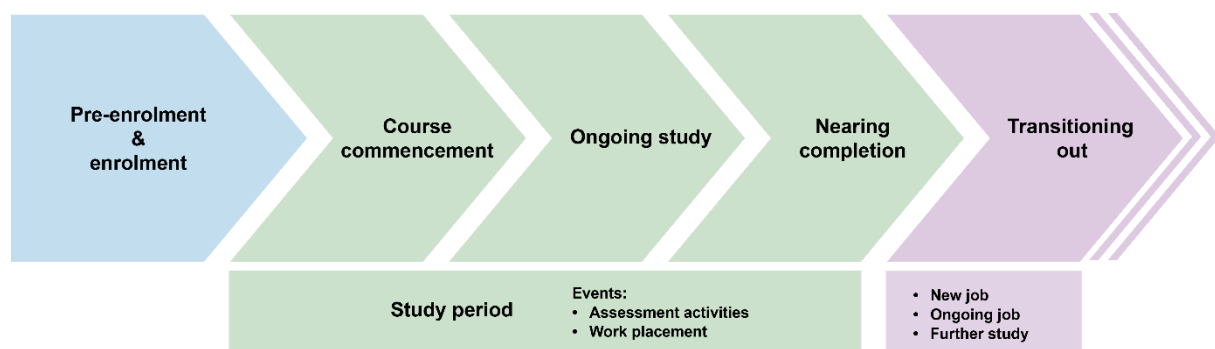
Learner needs are not static and may change as learners progress through their learning journey. This creates an ongoing challenge for RTOs to determine *if*, *when* and *how* to offer support. One aim of this research was to explore how RTOs provide support to students across their learning journey to determine what types of supports are effective in the different stages of completing a qualification.

The learner journey: what does it look like?

The learner journey in tertiary education can be described as a series of transition phases, whereby different support and/or intervention points can occur (Chambers & Paull 2008; Lizzio 2011; Roberts 2018). In the VET sector more specifically, the National VET Completions Taskforce highlighted the following phases of the VET learner journey: research, enrolment, studying, finalising study, and transition to employment or further study. The taskforce also highlights an additional stage, in which learners explore dropping out of their course while in the studying phase, although they emphasise that ‘all stages and transition phases of the learner journey influence completions and the achievement of successful learner outcomes’ (Papadimitriou 2023, p. 14).

The stages along the learner journey is a useful mechanism for training providers to identify learners’ support needs and to frame support strategies accordingly. In this research the following stages of the student journey were considered: pre-enrolment and enrolment; course commencement; ongoing study (includes assessment and possible work placement events); and nearing completion (figure A1). A final stage of the student journey is the transition out of training, into employment or further education, for example. While support for this transition can be important and helpful for learners, the scope of this project was focused on supporting learners to complete their training. Nonetheless, some of the supports provided through the study phase of the learner journey are in preparation for this transition phase.

Figure A1 The VET learner journey



Identifying learner support needs

Identifying learners in need of support, at any stage of the learner journey, can be a difficult task for training providers. Students who withdraw from study and those who complete often share the same concerns and attitudes, meaning it is difficult to accurately predict who is more likely to withdraw (McInnis, James & Hartley 2000). Further, Papadimitriou (2023) reported that the methods used by providers to identify students at risk are varied and often not automated (such as through the learning management system [LMS]), with heavy reliance on the VET workforce to identify these learners. They suggest that implementing ‘early warning systems’ through the LMS could assist with more timely identification of learners in need of support.

RTO participants in this research reported several examples of how they identify and address students’ support needs along the learner journey. These are described in the following sections.

Table A8 Examples of effective student-support practices described for each stage of the learner journey

Learner journey stage (and events)	Effective student-support practices
Pre-enrolment and enrolment	Pre-enrolment engagement Enrolment support Bridging courses
Commencing learners	Induction The learning management system Six-week support sessions (for LLN) Digital literacy support Wellbeing support
Ongoing learners	Ongoing identification and support, as per commencing learners
Assessment events	Similar practice and assessment conditions Review of progress through assessment tasks
Work placement events	Matching students and workplaces Pre-placement preparation Placement support
Nearing completion	Additional support Career guidance, where appropriate Finding success in non-completion

Pre-enrolment and enrolment support: building strong relationships right from the start

Ensuring alignment between learner expectations, motivations and capabilities at the enrolment stage is important for successful qualification completion (Papadimitriou 2023). The 2024 National Student Outcomes Survey data showed that approximately 13% of qualification part-completers did not complete their qualifications because the training was not as expected. It is possible that this apparent mismatch between student expectations and the experience of the training could be reduced through pre-enrolment support, whereby the student is provided with accurate course information.

The training provider staff and the learner participants in this research confirmed that supporting learners to make informed training choices prior to enrolment is an important aspect of enabling successful completion:

part of what we do is, we want to ensure that [the] student has the right information so that they're fully informed to make the right choice about the pathways that they want to have for their learning,

because there's lots of different pathways for students these days.

(Marketing and enrolments manager, RTO 2)

I went to their session, and they basically had us in a big classroom with like three or four of their staff to help in person and to choose our units. That was really good because I thought I would go straight into the Certificate IV, but they informed me that actually if you have no background, you do certificate III first and then you start [certificate] IV, and I did, which is really good. (Learner)

Pre-enrolment engagement was broadly perceived by RTO staff as the starting point for building strong relationships with the learners. These pre-enrolment consultations with prospective students are conducted with multiple aims in mind: to ascertain the students' understanding of what they will achieve by studying their chosen qualification; and to explore their readiness, motivations, support needs and potential barriers. The consultations are also used to assess and ensure learner capabilities (such as language, literacy and numeracy levels) and to outline learner obligations and responsibilities. Further information on what types of support a student might need is also gleaned from details provided on the enrolment forms.

The RTO staff also reported that it can be beneficial for other relevant stakeholders, such as the parents of school-based trainees, employers, and support personnel of learners with special needs, to be involved in these pre-enrolment consultations. This can enable a better assessment of learner needs and an understanding of the unique environments in which the learners live and work.

How pre-enrolment support is provided

The ways in which RTOs provided pre-enrolment and enrolment support differed, potentially due to the qualifications being delivered and their student cohorts. For example, RTO 1 (private RTO, delivering in health) reported having individual, in-person pre-enrolment consultations with learners.

Addressing learners' lack of awareness of the realities of the occupation of interest was one of the primary concerns for RTO 1:

We do get people [learners] who don't realise that they will see people naked, and they'll be washing them and things like that. So, we have to sort out 'if you can't do that' ... So, we try and get them to understand what the work is.

(Upper management, RTO 1)

Similarly, as a small community-based organisation providing training to mostly vulnerable cohorts, RTO 5 also reported that it's essential to have individual, in-person consultations prior to enrolment, in this case to identify individual learner needs and to design targeted support strategies.

While staff and learners of the case-study RTOs generally preferred in-person pre-enrolment engagement, this was not always possible for remote/online learners. Support for these learners was provided through virtual pre-enrolment consultations with trainers and support staff, supplemented by up-to-date pre-enrolment information on the website, including short videos.

Challenges in providing pre-enrolment support

Despite the benefits of pre-enrolment consultations (especially in-person, one-on-one), two challenges were identified. Firstly, conducting pre-enrolment consultations is resource-intensive. Staff of the large public training provider (RTO 4) acknowledged that even though pre-enrolment consultations are beneficial for both the RTO and the learners (particularly for disadvantaged cohorts such as learners with a disability and young learners), it is challenging to conduct these to the optimal degree when large numbers of students are enrolling. This makes it difficult to identify all those students who may be enrolling in a course beyond their capacity or to identify support needs early (especially as this RTO reported an increase in enrolments for learners from disadvantaged cohorts):

The pre-enrolment (stage) is actually really important, but it is one of the areas that we still struggle with getting people to engage with us. We haven't got that right yet, but we know that this has a huge impact on people's ability to study and to learn. And given that we are a large public provider, it means we get many people coming to us and sometimes they may not have the capacity.

(Student support staff, RTO 4)

Secondly, some staff reported that learners sometimes misunderstood the purpose of the pre-enrolment consultations, considering them as an 'interview' to obtain entry to the course. In such situations, the learners may hesitate to reveal any issues or support needs they may have, due to concerns that it will jeopardise acceptance into the course or of fear of discrimination. Staff suggested that it was important to ensure that learners understood the purpose of the pre-enrolment consultations, which created a safe space for them to provide information so that appropriate supports can be provided. In some cases, staff reported trying to obtain this information by having multiple discussions with the learners, thereby building trust with them.

Some of the learner participants in this research reported that they had participated in face-to-face pre-enrolment consultations. Despite the concerns described above, these students reported they felt confident and comfortable sharing their personal stories and learning abilities, due to the sessions being in-person and in a one-to-one setting.

Pre-enrolment course information and awareness of support options

Learners reported that having awareness of the provision of student support was a deciding factor in selecting the RTO. This aligns with the findings of recent research that identified the importance of student-support services to prospective learners (Wibrow 2023). Students in this current study also reported that being provided with detailed information about the job roles, career pathways, their obligations as learners, how training is delivered, placement options, and information about the fee structure and payment options helped them to finalise their course choice, as they felt more confident and comfortable about what they were signing up for. This reinforces the importance of accurate pre-enrolment information, as highlighted by Papadimitriou (2023) and TEQSA (2020) and as specified in the revised Standards for RTOs (DEWR 2024).

Bridging courses: do they always 'bridge' the gap?

One commonly provided form of student support is assistance to students who need help with LLN. The *Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015* specify that RTOs are required to assess the LLN skills of learners, prior to training, to ensure they are at an appropriate level for the course. Where it is identified that a learner needs LLN support to undertake their training, this might be provided before commencing, via a bridging course, and/or it might be provided alongside their chosen VET qualification.

One RTO case study gave an example of how they sometimes require students who are lacking the required LLN skills to do a bridging course¹ as a pathway to enrolment. After the learners complete the bridging course, they are consulted again to identify any remaining skills gaps, for which a learner-support plan is set up.

While the aim of the bridging course is to support learners with LLN issues, staff acknowledged that these courses are 'not necessarily tailored to any specific VET industry' and can be 'very disconnected from the

¹ In this case, the bridging LLN course is a government-subsidised program that runs for two weeks.

actual [requirement]’ (Student support staff, RTO 1). The educators further report that, in some situations, learners may still have significant support needs and require further support to increase the likelihood of success in their chosen training:

So, a student will go to a bridging course and that bridging course is not necessarily tailored to any specific VET industry ... They'll go off to a bridging unit and that bridging unit may be theoretically aligned with the requirements of Level 3 numeracy, but practically very disconnected from the actual maths that person will do in the nursing course. So, they might get through that course and still bring very limited skills and require a lot of support. So, when we send students to bridging courses, we do that with an awareness that this person will probably need some assistance to bring that knowledge into that VET course.

(Student support staff, RTO 1)

Students confirmed this concern and suggested that the LLN test and bridging courses should be more contextualised to match the expectations of the program in which they are enrolling. Learners also suggested that having tailored information regarding the required LLN level in the pre-enrolment consultation would help them to gauge the required skills for the specific qualification:

There should be a little mini something with the pre-enrolment, or more handouts, or more research that we can look into and start learning about. Like, if the school could give us something and be like, ‘right, these are the things that you’re going to need to know or do’.

(Learner)

Examples of LLN support provided alongside the chosen qualification is given in the ‘commencing’ learner journey section.

Table A9 provides further examples of challenges identified at the pre-enrolment and enrolment stage, and the strategies the case-study RTOs use to solve them.

Table A9 Various challenges and needs identified at the pre-enrolment and enrolment stage, and the supports provided

Need	Support
Learners lacking the required LLN skills	- Require or encourage students who are lacking the required LLN level, to do a bridging course prior to enrolment - Targeted LLN support sessions to upskill prior to enrolment (e.g.: mini-courses to improve LLN skills) - Establish individual support plans
Challenges due to disability	- Individual support plans established - Reasonable adjustment provided
Difficulties in obtaining identification documentation for First Nations learners for enrolment or other training-related purposes	- RTO works closely with the employers and requests them to provide letters proving residential address - Enrolment team works with guardians and foster parents to help students to reach out to government bodies to issue Medicare cards and birth certificates in the correct names
Recognising prior learning	Compliance and enrolment teams working collaboratively to help learners obtain recognition of prior learning and map credits from previous training providers
Other support needs such as wellbeing, living and financial support	Provide information about in-house or external support service centres

Commencing learners

It's getting that relationship and getting them off on the right foot and monitoring them closely in that commencing period, I think [that] really sets them up for success. I think if they fall behind at the start, it can deteriorate pretty quickly and it can go down a bit of a rabbit hole pretty quickly there.

(Trainer, assessor and area manager, RTO 2)

The case-study RTOs provided several examples of activities or interventions they put in place at the time of commencement, including induction sessions (covering introduction to the LMS, an important tool for monitoring student progress) and the early provision of support, as described below.

Getting the start right, through well-planned induction

A thorough and effective induction into the training organisation, programs and support systems was seen as a key requirement in setting students up for success in their training.

I think starting that induction, and that first month, is really critical in establishing a successful study pattern, successful relationships with their supervisors and making sure all those foundations are in place.

(Trainer, assessor and area manager, RTO 2)

As reported by the RTOs, these sessions:

- are conducted by trainers and student-support staff
- introduce the learners to the LMS, assessment requirements, training and workplace expectations
- focus on building relationships and explaining how to find support
- allow the trainers and support staff to spend extra time with the learners identified by the enrolment team as having learning difficulties or other barriers:

just to make sure that they are comfortable, and also gives us a chance to develop the relationship and work out exactly what the barriers are for them.

(Trainer, assessor and area manager, RTO 2)

- are valuable for both learners and staff. For the staff 'it's a really good opportunity to get to know the learners and to gauge what they need' (RTO 5) and for the learners to get to know the trainers and become familiar with the processes.

Like the pre-enrolment consultations, how the RTOs conduct inductions varied and was based on the learner cohorts and the characteristics of the RTOs. For example, several of the case-study RTOs reported that they conduct their induction sessions in person (RTO 1: private, large, delivering in health; RTO 5: community-based, small, delivering to disadvantaged cohorts; and RTO 7: private, large, delivering to First Nations and remote learner cohorts). RTO 2 (private, large, delivering self-paced training online) also reported that they encourage the learners to attend in-person induction sessions to build stronger relationships, but will organise video or audio meetings if the learners are unable to physically attend. RTO 3 (private, small, delivering online) conducts group sessions via virtual platforms, whereby trainers introduce the learners to the program, inform them of available supports, and provide learners with the opportunity to talk to the administrative team and ask any questions about the program and support needs.

Learners highlighted the value of having detailed inductions:

We had an induction session before our first module, and in that session [trainer] talked to us about [the learning management system], where we have all of our assessment and reading and everything. And she said any content inquiries go to [trainer] and then all the admin inquiries go to [student-

support officer]. So, it was really clear who to go to for what. And that information session was really good, like outlining all of the dates of the program and all of the things that we were going to use.

(Learner)

We were given a learner's guide which had a range of information in there ... like expectations, and when things were due and what they would look like.

(Learner)

And they also run these sessions called 'twilight sessions', where the admin officers from each department will come together and help people choose their subjects and let them access a computer.

(Learner)

Identifying needs and supporting learners through a well-designed learning management system

Learning management systems have become essential tools in VET, serving as vital information hubs for both educators and learners. The LMS not only facilitates training delivery but is also becoming an increasingly valuable tool for capturing learner data. For trainers, the LMS provides data on student engagement and progress, including frequency of access and specific activities within the system (Hume, Griffin & Andrahannadi 2023). Such data can inform providers' decision-making and enable proactive interventions and targeted support (Papadimitriou 2023; Veluvali & Suriseti 2021; TAFE Directors Australia 2020).

Students are usually introduced to the LMS upon commencement of their training, often during an induction session. All the participants in this research confirmed the important role that the LMS plays in supporting their students across the entire learner journey.

Staff from RTO 2 described how their LMS is continually being customised to benefit the learners and those supporting them. They suggested the following features are important in a well-designed and resourceful LMS:

- All stakeholders are connected through the LMS. To ensure better understanding of the learners' needs and enable continuity of support, all interactions with learners are documented in the LMS and all relevant stakeholders (such as parents of school-based trainees, career advisors, support staff, trainers, assessors, employers, supervisors, and trainee/apprentice provider companies) are looped into these interactions via the LMS.
- A SMS feature has been added to the portal to improve response time and facilitate access and communication.
- 'Need help' button in the LMS is a quick and easy way for learners to get in touch with a trainer. Using this, the learners can reach out to trainers to ask questions or to organise a 20-minute one-on-one support session. This function is monitored around the clock and learners reported that they received responses within 24 hours.
- The individualised system-populated assessment due dates are based on the learner's start date, and visualisations of assessment completions. As the training is self-paced and delivered online in this RTO, the due dates are populated by the LMS according to learner start date, and the workload involved in their assessments is displayed for the student. These due dates are monitored by the staff and used by the educators to trigger changes in risk levels and to identify where support might be needed.

Initial six-week learner support sessions with the same trainer (extended if necessary)

As an alternative to pre-enrolment bridging courses to address LLN support needs, LLN support can be provided alongside training. The trainers and support staff of RTO 2 explained how they had developed an intensive six-week learner-support session plan for the learners identified as needing LLN support, which is initiated at the beginning of their course.

These sessions are usually conducted by the same trainer across the six weeks to assist in building relationships and to provide a continuity of support. The trainer works with the learner on their first few assessments, with the aim of preparing them for the remainder of the course. The learner's progress is reviewed after the first six weeks, and the option of extending the support sessions is offered, if needed. Alternatively, 'they can go off on their own for a little bit, see how they go studying on their own, because it is self-paced' (Assessment manager, RTO 2),

With that six-week support, a trainer and a student can decide if the student needs another six weeks during their course ... it's a fixed time every week for six weeks ... they have the same one person for six weeks ... so I can see each stage they've reached that goal from the week before and I can track that with them. And it's nice for the student to have the same familiar face each week.

(Senior trainer and assessor, RTO 2)

Digital literacy support

Staff from the case-study RTOs emphasised the importance of assessing and supporting digital literacy from the start of the course. Difficulties with completing online enrolment forms often serve as an early indicator of limited digital literacy, a signal to the RTOs to flag these learners for early intervention and additional support.

All RTOs reported that the prevalence of online components in most of the training programs means that students with limited digital literacy can find it challenging to navigate the LMS, access assessment tasks and communicate via online platforms. To address these challenges, RTOs encourage students with limited digital literacy skills to participate in foundation skills units:

a lot of people might be savvy when it comes to a phone and all that kind of stuff. But when it comes to using a computer and, drag and dropping and, copy and pasting and uploading forms, downloading forms, they struggle. So, with every single student, we do spend time going through the digital component and we actually wrap around that digital component around one of their foundation skills units.

(National RTO manager, RTO 6)

RTO 1, delivering training in the health industry, explained the importance of developing digital literacy skills in learners and familiarising them with relevant digital devices, not only so they can complete the training, but also to enable them to use the technology that will be present in the workplace:

One of the issues we have is that people do need computer skills in order to do our actual courses, mainly because when they finish, it is a requirement at the workplace ... if you're in a hospital, now they have things on wheels that you push around which are basically computers and aged care is loaded with computers. So they do have to have those skills.

(Upper management, RTO 1)

Learners, particularly mature-aged students, confirmed the need for digital literacy support, acknowledging the challenges identified by RTO staff participants:

Well, I just I submit my work and then I'll get an email and then they might tell me that it's not satisfactory. And then I need to go in the LMS and just see what they've said and that's where I

struggled with the computer: finding the feedback. I still struggle with finding that information to review what they're saying so that I can go back and fix it. It's not my comfort zone, if you know what I mean.

(Learner)

Ongoing learners (beyond commencement stage)

For students who have progressed from the commencement stage into ongoing study, the case-study RTOs reported that they continue to monitor student progress, such as through the LMS, observations and regular check-ins, and provide ongoing support as required.

During this stage, learners will undertake various assessments and will possibly participate in a work placement if required for their qualification. In this research, these are considered as 'events' that can occur at any point along the 'study stage' of the learner journey. Examples of how the case-study RTOs support their students during assessment and work placement events are provided below.

Assessment support

We have a requirement that we observe skills, and we can't change the requirement of the unit of competency, but we can change the method. So, you know, it's just trying to think as creatively as possible.

(Student support staff, RTO 1)

RTO staff gave several examples of how they are supporting learners to successfully complete their assessment activities. Some examples included:

- inviting students to practise tests as early as possible and on a regular basis in their learner journey. A student-support officer explained that some students 'get really nervous' around assessment tasks and identifying that early on is important
- providing additional time to complete the assessments
- ensuring creativity and flexibility in assessment methods to help students to manage various forms of anxiety (for example, to alleviate a nursing student's fear of blood in the beginning, the trainers started with blue fluid instead of red in a practical assessment, which significantly reduced the student's anxiety for that assessment).

When offering the above examples, the educators stressed the importance of maintaining the 'validity of the assessment' while being creative around providing support:

I think being aware and everyone being on the same page ... Again, lot of documentation and reasonable adjustment. I think the assessments, quite often you can tailor and not upset the validity of the assessment. But you've got to really assess against 'is it still valid?', 'is it still reliable?'

(Course manager, RTO 1)

The strategies reported in the interviews aligned with those reported in Griffin and Davidson (2025), where teachers reported several approaches to designing or adapting assessment tasks to enable students with different needs and abilities to demonstrate competence; these tasks included verbal rather than written assessment, varying assessment methods and enabling students to shape assessment tasks.

Running practice sessions and assessment under similar conditions

A common strategy used to help students to feel less anxious in assessments was to conduct practice sessions and assessments under the same conditions. In some cases, students were unknowingly assessed during what they believed was a practice session, thereby avoiding assessment anxiety:

We do run practice sessions under exam conditions, and they think they're doing a practice session ... So they'll do them with their teacher, she'll tell them it's a practice. So psychologically they're thinking they're doing a practice and then at the end she goes, 'hey, guess what, you've got 100%' and they go 'why can't I do that when I do the test' and she [trainer] said, 'guess what, you've just done the test'.

(Upper management, RTO 1)

Staff participants suggested that tweaks to assessment, conducted without affecting the validity of the assessment, enable learners to overcome their anxiety. One staff participant explained how these initiatives have helped First Nations learners, to overcome 'trauma of test'. As explained:

particularly Aboriginal students, there is still the trauma of a test. And so, I have actually given them the exam questions, and I'll be sitting with them and get them to do it, and ... they get 100%, and then they get the good news that they've actually done it, but without all the panic and anxiety. Because the reality is, in the workplace it's not, you know, doing it in an exam setting. You do it with your colleague, and your colleague checks it, and you're using a calculator. So, we wrote that as a reasonable adjustment so that we could document as to why they weren't sitting the exam with everybody else, and it worked fine. This is just thinking creatively ... it's a reasonable adjustment, but it doesn't affect the validity of the actual assessment process.

(Course manager, RTO 1)

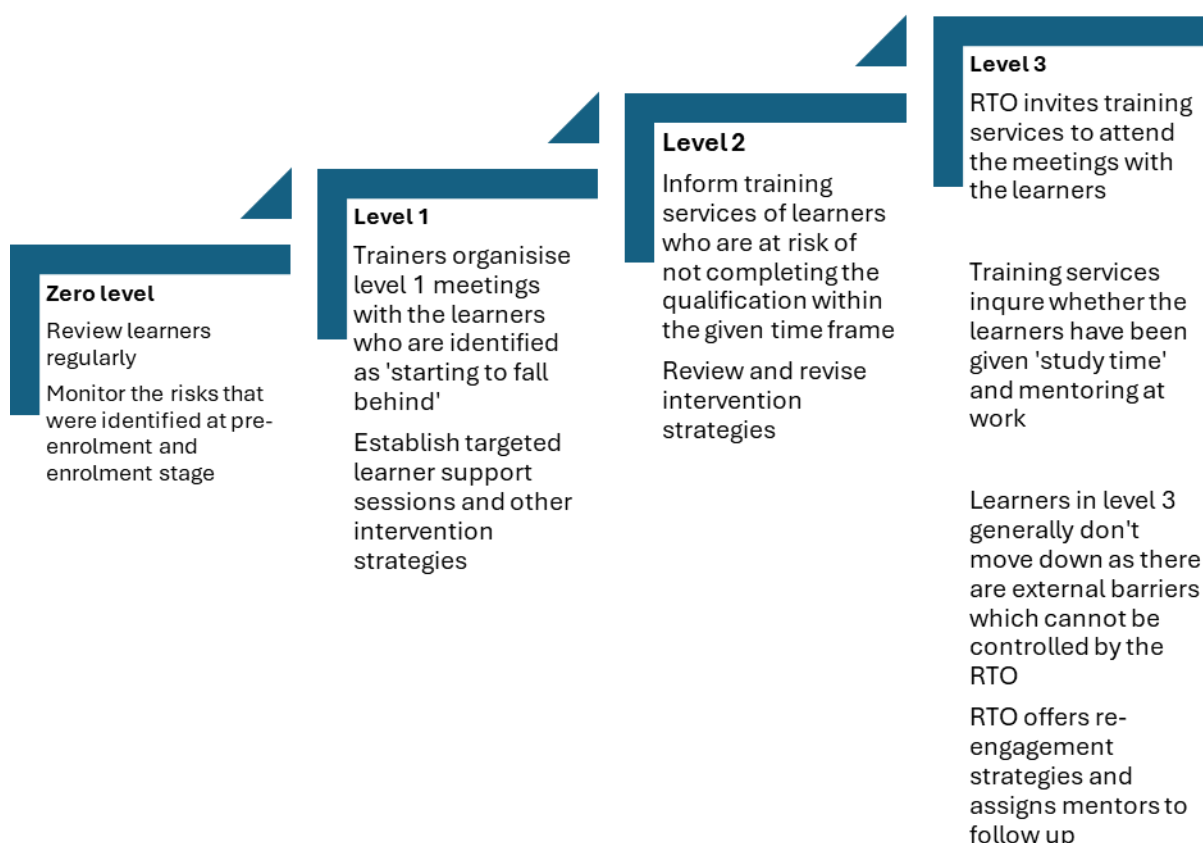
Identification of support needs through reviewing assessment progress: four risk levels to identify students at risk

Another RTO case study explained how their staff identify learners at risk of non-completion by regularly reviewing the progress of assessment completion. These reviews identify learners who are falling behind, which triggers intervention strategies and supports. In this RTO, there are four risk levels (figure A2) and learners move up a risk level when they fall behind the due date for six assessments (other reasons may also trigger a change in risk level):

Risk plans aren't always a negative thing. Our review processes, as trainers, I think is the other crucial part in maintaining the student success along the journey. If we didn't review them, they could potentially get to the end, and it'd be unachievable to get them across the line. If we can intervene early enough and have those conversations and meetings earlier, the success rate is much higher for them at the end. So that trainer review cycle is really important.

(Trainer and assessor, RTO 2)

Figure A2 Four risk levels to identify students at risk in a large, private RTO, a case study example¹



Note 1 'Training services' in this figure refers to the relevant governing body for apprenticeships and traineeships.

The RTO staff further explained that they establish individual support plans for learners who have learning and or other barriers and who are identified as at risk of not completing the course. Trainers set goals in these individual support plans, with targeted learner-support sessions booked in for six-week cycles. Similar to the six-week support sessions described earlier, at the end of each six-week cycle, the individual support plan is reviewed by the trainers, alongside the learners and other relevant stakeholders (career advisors and parents of school-based trainees), and revised accordingly, until the learner is back on track. Again, the learners work with the same trainer to maintain continuity of training and build strong relationships:

So, it's pulling all those people in again at that six-week point and going 'let's see where we are', 'are we getting back on track?', 'have we met these goals?', and 'let's revise the goals and put them down for the next six weeks'. We have particular risk levels as well that we will look at ... as we go through this. Our hope is, if the student gets to a level one or level two, then they get back down eventually to no risk now to completing.

(Student support staff, RTO 2)

Other assessment support and intervention strategies described by the case-study RTO participants are summarised in table A10.

Table A10 Examples of assessment support and intervention strategies provided by the case-study RTOs

Assessment support
Assessments divided into small and manageable chunks
Assessments and training content spaced out to promote an achievable workload
Availability of assessment help sessions

So the way the structure of our course is, each unit will have a quiz task, a theory task and a workplace task, and then some have an observation as well. So if a student is stuck on a particular theory assessment, they can book a 'need help' session. (Student support staff, RTO 2)

Trainers and assessors identify 'high risk' theory modules and assessments and offer learner support sessions

Separate email address in the LMS for any assessment questions, with quick response

Three step feedback process

Learners are given three attempts to submit assessments, with assessors providing specific and constructive feedback on all three attempts to both learners and trainers (for example, directing them to the resources, giving them key words to find information, textbook page numbers for reference).

Encourage students to use AI to help clarify assessment requirements

In one RTO, trainers and assessors have tested using AI with some learners who find it difficult to understand and interpret assessment questions. Using AI to rephrase assessment questions and to find templates have been identified as helpful. A CALD learner participant mentioned that she found this initiative very helpful in interpreting assessment tasks

Online assessment processes or tools that help trainers and assessors to track progress in real time

Ability for workplace supervisors to access learners' marked assessments in the LMS and help students to resubmit

Option to follow up with workplace supervisors and other relevant organisations/bodies to seek additional support and/or implement other options such as extending the contract to complete the qualification

Organise priority marking for late submissions

Continued encouragement and support by trainers:

So quite often our trainers are their cheer squad, sending text messages and asking them, have you done your assessment?', 'just do one question today, you can do it', that sort of thing ... we've got a variety of ages in our training group, some young, some old. So even our training group had to learn different things, like, what's a GIF in a text message, or even just using emojis and things like that to talk in teenager lingo. (Trainer and assessor, RTO 2)

Offer suspension from training for a short period of time

It was evident from the learner interviews that proactive and ongoing support provided via multiple platforms; flexibility around assessment deadlines; the provision of detailed and constructive feedback; and the responsiveness of the trainers and assessors have helped them to successfully complete their assessments:

There's a 'help' button on the portal, and also you can email them, and they get back to you with an answer to your question within like half an hour. There's a whole team dedicated to, just sitting there and answering those questions. Yeah, they're really good. I've used them a couple times.

(Learner)

The trainer was quite quick in coming back with the feedback. And again, when the trainer comes out [to the workplace], she's always, emphasising, you know, 'you can ring me, we can talk about it' and she's coming out next Tuesday. She actually just rang before the meeting and said she's coming out to talk about the assessment that I'm doing at the moment, and I mean, I didn't reach out to talk to her about it, but she wants to come and just offer her support which is, I find they're very good.

(Learner)

They usually reply within an hour. So, they can be like 5 minutes, 10 minutes and then other times they can be an hour and a half so ... I think the questions email is great.

(Learner)

Work placement support: perfecting the match

In some qualifications it is a training package requirement for learners to undertake a work placement. The experience of organising and participating in a work placement can be difficult for the student, however, and may lead to qualification non-completion. Indeed, the National Student Outcomes survey

shows that, in 2024, 5.5% of qualification part-completers did not complete their qualifications due to problems with their work placement (NCVER 2024).

The participants in this research confirmed that negative work placement experience is a risk for non-completion, for example:

I think that placement experience, it's so catch 22. They go out there and have a bad experience, then they drop out, and it just goes around in this horrible circle.

(Upper management, RTO 1)

Challenges can occur if the work placement is not well matched with the student. In one RTO, the educators and placement coordinators invest significant effort into securing the right placement for learners:

We place all our students, which is a different model to some RTOs where students have to find their own placements.

(Upper management, RTO 1)

Learners reported that they valued the efforts made by their RTO to find them the best match for placement, including consideration of issues such as the distance they would have to travel.

In my pre-enrolment interview, they told me that 'you are not going to the placements outside [the metropolitan area]. So that made me very comfortable because some of my friends with other providers were going like 2 hours of driving from [metropolitan area] for their placement.

(Learner)

In addition to ensuring a good match between learners and workplaces, supports are provided before and during placement.

Pre-placement preparation: know before you go!

Preparing learners for placement can help in enabling a successful experience. It was noted by a number of interviewees that some learners have no previous experience working in such environments and may enter with an idealistic view. Thus, educators in case-study RTO 1 ensure that the learners are familiar with the work environment and their rights and responsibilities before starting their placement. RTO staff and students gave examples of how the RTO prepare learners for placement:

Beforehand, we do a lot of work with them [students] on pre-placement work. My managers do that. They go into the classrooms and talk to them about what they're going to see, how to behave ... sometimes to be careful of what comes out of their mouths. If they see something that's wrong, they need to address that, and if they can't address it on the working front, they must tell us immediately.

(Upper management RTO 1)

Learners appreciated the RTO preparing the necessary documentation and educating them about the different work environments and their rights and expectations before starting the placement.

They will give us all the details [about placement] and then all the required documents, whatever we need.

(Learner)

Supporting learners throughout the placement

The success of placements can be improved through the provision of ongoing support during the placement. RTO staff reported strategies such as regular site visits to monitor the progress and wellbeing of the trainees; proactive engagement with the trainees to identify and address any challenges they may have encountered; and to ensure that trainees have a clear communication channel to reach out for any assistance.

The learners valued ongoing support during placement, with many believing their RTOs go above and beyond to ensure the work placement experience is as smooth as possible. They especially value the advice and encouragement to contact trainers if they face any difficulties during the placement. One learner spoke about how her educator visited the placement workplace and supported her when she faced a difficult situation:

My educator visited there for two days in the first week and then second week. So, I just shared this incident with my educator ... she did a de-brief at RTO centre. She called me in for a one-to-one for an hour. I went there and I talked with my educator and she motivated me and it was, kind of, counselling. (Learner)

Limitations to placement support

Not all issues with work placements can be solved through the provision of support. Given that the requirements of work placements in some qualifications are full-time and unpaid, learners can face challenges undertaking the required number of hours when they have work or family commitments. In such situations, some RTOs reported offering alternative arrangements, such as delaying the placement until more convenient, but this solution will not work for all students.

Learners nearing completion

As learners approach the completion of their training, the provision of continuous and targeted support can help them to transition successfully to the next phase of their journey (into the workplace or further training, for example). RTO staff mentioned that, for some learners, this stage can bring increased pressure. To help alleviate this, these RTO staff reported implementing strategies such as continuous reviews and follow-ups by trainers and support staff, proactively reaching out to learners and arranging one-to-one support sessions if required, career counselling, mentoring, help with time management and emotional-wellbeing support.

Learners who were nearing completion reported that having access to educators and support staff without any delay is critical in this stage. Additionally, learners appreciated how their educators and support staff encouraged them to finalise the remaining tasks and fostered a sense of achievement by celebrating the milestones achieved to that point:

I celebrate already with them because they might have done 10 units, and 10 units is a lot when you're working full-time, as we know, we've done it ourselves. So just being aware of that and just giving them a message every now and again 'you are nearly there, you've just put another task in, you've only got 3 to go' and it's just celebrating with them because it's a big milestone to be able to study and work, particularly with under-fives and their families. (Training manager, RTO 2)

Acknowledging that completion is not the only form of success

Sometimes, no amount of support will enable a student to complete their qualification. The RTO staff described several examples where support is unlikely to stop students from discontinuing their training: when learners' personalities and learning abilities do not match the qualification or the field of study; when there is a large skills gap between the pathway-entry qualification and the next level of qualification; when there are significant mental health concerns; and difficult family circumstances.

When students are identified as at risk of disengaging or withdrawing, RTO staff described having discussions with the learners to assess the situation and determine whether any intervention would help. These included:

- having regular check-ins to assess their wellbeing
- offering additional support to complete their assessments
- offering other supports such as financial, accommodation, transport or counselling through external learner support services
- offering other programs that they may find easier to complete.

It was evident from the interviews that the staff of these case-study RTOs invest significant effort to help learners complete their qualifications. However, staff emphasised that:

Sometimes success isn't completing the qual, sometimes it's completing a number of units, and everybody still being sane and mentally well at the end of it because, you know, the qualification is not worth somebody pushing themselves to the limit and beyond and having severe anxiety or falling into a depression and not being able to function for the next six months. That's not success for anybody.

(Trainer and assessor, RTO 2)

For learners who are unable to complete their qualification, despite the support provided, RTOs may encourage them to obtain a statement of attainment for the units they have completed. The learners might also be encouraged to keep in touch with the trainers and the enrolment teams to explore further opportunities to re-enrol, 'allowing them to finish that qualification':

The biggest, the most painful thing with training is when students disappear. We don't do exit interviews, but we tend to sort of do a lot prior to the exit interview. Our philosophy is, 'the doors are always open. This may not be the right time but keep us in mind if you want to study again'.

(Upper management, RTO 2)

Examples of effective student support across the learner journey

The remainder of this document presents examples of effective student-support practices at each stage of the learner journey, as described by the case-study RTOs, including direct quotes from the interviewees (table A11). Note that the table also includes the examples described above, for easy reference.

It should be noted that not all student supports fit neatly within the learner journey stages. While some of the reported practices were conducted during specific stages of the learner journey, such as during the pre-enrolment, enrolment or commencing stages, other practices spanned numerous stages, or the whole learner journey. Some support needs might be identified or addressed differently, depending on the stage that the learner is in.

Note, for clarity, brevity and to protect the anonymity of the interviewees, not all information is provided for every interview.

Table A11 Examples of student support across the learner journey

Pre-enrolment and enrolment stage	
Need	How support is provided (examples/comments/observations)
Pre-enrolment awareness	▪ Identifying information needed by VET students and providing clear, accurate and current information through: – career expos – pre-enrolment information on the RTO website including short videos – direct inquiry via phone and email – immersive activities with school-based VET students – ‘smart start’ process for school-based VET students We are just in the process now of redeveloping our smart start process where we send information and forms out to schools and say if anyone wants to come to [RTO name], refer in advance, get their transitions officers or their disability workers to contact us in advance. So, we can get those students in, have a chat to them and let them see what the campuses are like, where they would be studying. Let them meet the support people and know what it's about and to be able to gauge at what level they're going to be capable of starting their study journey on when we do that. That is a lot more successful. You can't force people to do these, but we are re-engaging with the school systems. (Student support staff, RTO 4) ▪ Pre-enrolment consultations and assessments: – face-to-face and/or virtual pre-enrolment consultations with students (individual and/or group) to ascertain the students' understanding of what they will achieve by studying their chosen qualification and to explore their readiness, motivations, support needs and potential barriers. The consultations are also used to assess and ensure learner capabilities (such as LLN levels) and to outline learner obligations and responsibilities. Further information on what types of support a student might need is also gleaned from details provided on the enrolment forms – consultations with other stakeholders such as parents/guardians, schools, employees and other relevant stakeholders to identify support needs – the provision of advice to students and other stakeholders on the suitability of the training product for the students
LLND skills require further development to meet course requirement	▪ Assessing LLN capabilities (e.g. upfront assessment of need process in South Australia; see UAN suitability and support needs assessment guide for more details) ▪ Requiring or encouraging students who are lacking the required LLN level to do bridging courses prior to enrolment ▪ Conducting targeted LLN support sessions to upskill prior to enrolment (e.g. mini courses to improve LLN skills) ▪ Establishing individual support plans ▪ Providing referrals to external support service providers
Challenges due to disability and other learner characteristics (see table A12 for more information on priority cohorts)	▪ Establishing individual support plans ▪ Ensuring flexibility in timetable scheduling ▪ Ensuring flexibility in course requirements and assessment options

Difficulties in obtaining identification documentation for First Nations learners for enrolment or other training-related purposes	▪ RTO works closely with the employers and requests them to provide letters proving residential address ▪ Enrolment team works with guardians and foster parents to help students to reach out to government bodies to issue Medicare cards and birth certificates in the correct names
Recognising prior learning	▪ Compliance and enrolment teams work collaboratively to help learners obtain recognition of prior learning and map credits from previous training providers
Other support needs such as wellbeing, living and financial support	▪ Identify wellbeing-support needs (through pre-enrolment consultations and from enrolment application forms) ▪ Enrolment team alerts trainers, assessors and support staff of learners' training and wellbeing needs and establishes individual support plans accordingly ▪ Ensure that learners have a safe and inclusive learning environment by providing information about whom to reach out to in-house and how to access them ▪ Provide referrals to the available external support services and information on how to access them

Commencing learners

Getting familiar with the learning environment	▪ Detailed induction sessions: a thorough and effective induction into the training organisation, programs and support systems: – conducted by trainers and student-support staff and take place in person and/or virtual sessions – introduce the learners to the LMS, assessment requirements, training and workplace expectations – focus on building relationships and explaining how to find support – provide learners with the opportunity to talk to support staff and ask any questions regarding the program and support needs – allow the trainers and support staff to spend extra time with the learners identified by the enrolment team as having learning difficulties or other barriers: We had an induction session before our first module, and in that session [trainer] talked to us about [the learning management system], where we have all of our assessment and reading and everything. And she said any content inquiries go to [trainer] and then all the admin inquiries go to [student-support officer]. So, it was really clear who to go to for what. And that information session was really good, like outlining all of the dates of the program and all of the things that we were going to use. (Learner) We were given a learner's guide which had a range of information in there ... like expectations, and when things were due and what they would look like. (Learner) And they also run these sessions called 'twilight sessions', where the admin officers from each department will come together and help people choose their subjects and let them access a computer. (Learner) ▪ Apprentice mentors (commencing and beyond) So they'll [mentors for apprentices] go around and be available and pop into classes. So, for students struggling, they might go to the mentor and the mentor might be able to help them with tutoring. Understanding what they're doing ... They've [students] got personal issues. If they [mentors]
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can't help them [students] with the advice, if it's a workplace advice, they will actually, flip them back through to our training and initiatives unit or if they need disability support or counselling, flip them into the rest of our team. Do soft referrals ... so that they've got someone there because apprentices are often hard pressed. Sometimes they're underpaid, sometimes they work in pretty dodgy small, employment places where they're not getting paid properly. (Student support staff, RTO 4)

- Apprentice field officers (commencing and beyond)

We have a small team of field officers that engage with Australian school based apprentices and then other apprentices and trainees here in the (jurisdiction name) in high risk industries. The purpose of that engagement is to ensure that everyone has all the information they require to successfully start or continue through an apprenticeship pathway. It's to ensure that both parties, the employer and or the apprentice are meeting their obligations under the training contract and also to help or assist with any sort of issues, or questions, you know, problems with the system or with individuals within that system. (Student support staff, RTO 4)

Support through the LMS

- LMS is continually being customised to benefit the learners and those supporting them:
 - All stakeholders are connected through the LMS. To ensure better understanding of the learners' needs and enable continuity of support, all interactions with learners are documented in the LMS and all relevant stakeholders (such as parents of school-based trainees, career advisors, support staff, trainers, assessors, employers, supervisors, and trainee/apprentice provider companies) are looped into these interactions via the LMS.
 - SMS feature has been added to the portal to improve response time and facilitate access and communication.
 - 'Need help' button in the LMS as a quick and easy way for learners to get in touch with a trainer. Using this, the learners can reach out to trainers to ask questions or to organise a 20-minute one-on-one support session. This function is monitored around the clock and learners reported that they received responses within 24 hours.
 - Individualised system-populated assessment due dates based on the learner's start date, and visualisations of assessment completions. As the training is self-paced and delivered online in this RTO, the due dates are populated by the LMS based on learner start date, and the workload involved in their assessments is displayed for the student. These due dates are monitored by the staff and used by the educators to trigger changes in risk levels and to identify where support might be needed.

LLN support

- Six-week learner support sessions with the same trainer (extended if necessary) initiated at the beginning of the course:
 - These sessions are usually conducted by the same trainer for the six weeks to assist in building relationships and to provide a continuity of support. The trainer works with the learner on their first few assessments, with the aim of preparing them for the remainder of the course. The learner's progress is reviewed after the first six weeks, and the option of extending the support sessions is offered, if needed:

With that six-week support, a trainer and a student can decide if the student needs another six weeks during their course ... it's a fixed time every week for six weeks ... they have the same person for six weeks ... so I can see each stage they've reached, that goal from the week before, and

	I can track that with them. And it's nice for the student to have the same familiar face each week. (Senior trainer and assessor, RTO 2)
Wellbeing support	- Proactively reach out to identify wellbeing support needs. - Provide wellbeing support in-house and/or refer to external service providers.
Digital literacy support	- Difficulties with completing online enrolment forms often serve as an early indicator of limited digital literacy, signalling to the RTOs that these learners need early intervention and additional support: - Encourage students with limited digital literacy skills to participate in foundation skills units: A lot of people might be savvy when it comes to a phone and all that kind of stuff. But when it comes to using a computer and, drag and dropping and, copy and pasting and uploading forms and downloading forms, they struggle. So, with every single student, we do spend time going through the digital component and we actually wrap around that digital component around one of their foundation skills units. (National RTO manager, RTO 6) - Familiarise the learners with relevant digital devices: One of the issues we have is that people do need computer skills in order to do our actual courses, mainly because when they finish, it is a requirement at the workplace ... if you're in a hospital, now they have things on wheels that you push around, which are basically computers, and aged care is loaded with computers. So, they do have to have those skills. (Director, Education, Research and aged care, RTO 1) - Learners, particularly mature-aged students, confirmed the need for digital literacy support, acknowledging the challenges identified by RTO staff participants: Well, I just I submit my work and then I'll get an email and then they might tell me that it's not satisfactory. And then I need to go in the LMS and just see what they've said and that's where I struggled with the computer: finding the feedback. I still struggle with finding that information to review what they're saying so that I can go back and fix it. It's not my comfort zone, if you know what I mean. (Learner)
Ongoing learners (beyond commencement stage)	
Ongoing LLND support needs	- Continue to monitor student progress, such as through the LMS, observations and regular check ins via multiple channels. - Conduct continuous LLND support sessions.
Wellbeing support needs	- Staff have individual chats with the students about their wellbeing and record issues in the student portal confidentially for future follow-ups and to organise required support. - Counselling - in-house counsellors that provide either in-person or virtual consultations - RTO referrals to external service providers - trainers providing informal counselling/ wellbeing support - Financial and other living support

	– scholarships and fee assistance, including concessions for low-income students, fee waivers, and access to low-cost refurbished laptops – financial aid referrals connecting learners with external financial support providers and resources, such as government assistance programs, emergency relief funds and financial counselling services – other living support such as transportation subsidies (cab vouchers) and meal allowances – referrals to external service providers to assist in locating other living support, such as accommodation and transport ▪ RTO initiatives to encourage peer-support: – If the students are working at the same workplace (for example, the same childcare centre), trainers facilitate students to work together on similar assessment tasks during their allocated study time. – For online learners, trainers organise breakout rooms during training sessions and encourage students to use other virtual platforms to interact with peers. – Organise informal catchups such as coffee and lunch catch-ups. ▪ Student initiatives to encourage peer support – Students value the opportunity to connect with others who understand their challenges and share experiences. – Some students seek help from peers first before reaching out to trainers. – Organise library meet-ups, coffee catch-ups and informal study sessions. – Use platforms such as Teams and/or WhatsApp to create virtual spaces for connection. – Students emphasised the need for more formal peer support such as integrating messaging tools within the LMS to facilitate connections and enable trainer involvement.
Assessment support	▪ Design or adapt assessment tasks to enable students with different needs and abilities to demonstrate competence: – inviting students to undertake ‘practice’ tests as early as possible and on a regular basis in their learner journey. A student-support officer explained that some students ‘get really nervous’ around assessment tasks and identifying that early on is important – providing additional time to complete the assessments – ensuring creativity and flexibility in assessment methods to help students manage various forms of anxiety – conducting practice sessions and assessment under similar conditions; a common strategy used to help students feel less anxious in assessments, was to run practice sessions and assessments under the same conditions. In some cases, students were unknowingly assessed during what they believed was a practice session, thereby avoiding assessment anxiety: We do run practice sessions under exam conditions, and they think they're doing a practice session ... So, they'll do them with their teacher, she'll tell them it's a practice. So psychologically they're thinking they're doing a practice and then at the end she goes, ‘hey, guess what, you've got 100%’ and they go ‘why can't I do that when I do the test’ and she [trainer] said, ‘guess what, you've just done the test. (Upper management, RTO 1) When giving the above examples, the educators stressed the importance of maintaining the ‘validity of the assessment’ while being creative around providing support: I think being aware and everyone being on the same page ... Again, lot of documentation and reasonable adjustment. I think the assessments, quite

often you can tailor and not upset the validity of the assessment. But you've got to really assess against 'is it still valid?', 'is it still reliable?'

(Course manager, RTO 1)

- Identify support needs through reviewing assessment progress by the use of four risk levels to identify students at risk. These reviews identify learners who are falling behind, triggering intervention strategies and supports. In this RTO (RTO 2), there are four risk levels, and learners move up a risk level when they fall behind the due date for six assessments (other reasons may also trigger a change in risk level):
 - Zero level: review learners regularly. Monitor the risks that were identified at pre-enrolment and enrolment stage.
 - Level 1: Trainers organise level 1 meetings with the learners who are identified as 'starting to fall behind'. Establish targeted learner-support sessions and other intervention strategies.
 - Level 2: Inform training services (i.e. relevant governing body for apprenticeships and traineeships) of learners who are at risk of not completing the qualification within the given timeframe. Review and revise intervention strategies.
 - Level 3: RTO invites training services to attend the meetings with the learners. Training services enquire whether the learners have been given study time and mentoring at work.
 - Learners in level 3 generally don't move down as there are external barriers that cannot be controlled by the RTO. RTO offers re-engagement strategies and assign mentors to follow up.

Risk plans aren't always a negative thing. Our review processes, as trainers, I think is the other crucial part in maintaining the student success along the journey. If we didn't review them, they could potentially get to the end, and it'd be unachievable to get them across the line. If we can intervene early enough and have those conversations and meetings earlier, the success rate is much higher for them at the end. So that trainer review cycle is really important.

(Trainer and assessor, RTO 2)

- Ensure that assessments divided into small and manageable chunks.
- Organise assessments and training content to be spaced out to promote an achievable workload.
- Ensure availability of assessment help sessions:

So, the way the structure of our course is, each unit will have a quiz task, a theory task and a workplace task, and then some have an observation as well. So, if a student is stuck on a particular theory assessment, they can book a 'need help' session'.

(Student support staff, RTO 2)
- Trainers and assessors identify 'high risk' theory modules and assessments and offer learner-support sessions.
- Add separate email address in the LMS for any assessment questions, with quick response.
- Three-step feedback process: learners are given three attempts to submit assessments, with assessors providing specific and constructive feedback on all three attempts to both learners and trainers (for example, directing them to the resources, giving them key words to find information, textbook page numbers for reference).
- Encourage students to use AI to help clarify assessment requirements: in one RTO, trainers and assessors have tested using AI with some learners who find it difficult to understand and interpret assessment questions. Using AI to rephrase assessment questions and to find templates have been identified as helpful. A CALD learner participant mentioned that she found this initiative very helpful in interpreting assessment tasks.

	▪ Use online assessment processes or tools that help trainers and assessors to track progress in real time. ▪ Facilitate the ability for workplace supervisors to access learners' marked assessments in the LMS and help students to resubmit. ▪ It was evident from the learner interviews that proactive and continuous support, provided via multiple platforms; flexibility around assessment deadlines; the provision of detailed and constructive feedback; and the responsiveness of the trainers and assessors have helped them to successfully complete their assessments: There's a 'help' button on the portal, and also you can email them, and they get back to you with an answer to your question within like half an hour. There's a whole team dedicated to, just sitting there and answering those questions. Yeah, they're really good. I've used them a couple times. The trainer was quite quick in coming back with the feedback. And again, when the trainer comes out [to the workplace], she's always, emphasising, you know, 'you can ring me, we can talk about it' and she's coming out next Tuesday. She actually just rang before the meeting and said she's coming out to talk about the assessment that I'm doing at the moment, and I mean, I didn't reach out to talk to her about it, but she wants to come and just offer her support which is, I find they're very good'. They usually reply within an hour. So, they can be like 5 minutes, 10 minutes and then other times they can be an hour and a half so ... I think the questions email is great.
Other Intervention strategies for at-risk learners	▪ Consider the option to follow up with workplace supervisors and other relevant organisations/bodies to seek additional support and/or implement other options such as extending the contract to complete the qualification. ▪ Organise priority marking for late submissions. ▪ Ensure continued encouragement and support by trainers: So quite often our trainers are their cheer squad, sending text messages and asking them, have you done your assessment?', 'just do one question today, you can do it', that sort of thing ... we've got a variety of ages in our training group, some young, some old. So even our training group had to learn different things, like, what's a GIF in a text message, or even just using emojis and things like that to talk in teenager lingo. (Trainer and assessor, RTO 2) ▪ Offer suspension from training for a short period of time. ▪ Conduct regular check-ins to assess students' wellbeing. ▪ Offer additional support to complete their assessments. ▪ Offer other supports such as financial, accommodation, transport or counselling through external learner support services. ▪ Offer other programs that they may find easier to complete.
Work placement support	▪ Educators and placement coordinators invest significant effort into securing the right placement for the learners. – Learners reported that they valued the efforts made by their RTO to find them the best match for placement, including consideration of things like the distance that they would have to travel: In my pre-enrolment interview, they told me that 'you are not going to the placements outside [the metropolitan area]. So that made me very

comfortable because some of my friends with other providers were going like 2 hours of driving from [metropolitan area] for their placement'.
(Learner)

- For pre-placement preparation, the RTO ensures that the learners are familiar with the work environment and their rights and responsibilities before starting their placement by conducting pre-placement information sessions and preparing the necessary documentation:

They will give us all the details [about placement] and then all the required documents, whatever we need. (Learner)

- Organise ongoing support throughout the placement:
 - regular site visits to monitor progress and wellbeing of the trainees
 - proactive engagement with the trainees to identify and address any challenges
 - ensuring trainees have a clear communication channel to reach out for assistance:

My educator visited there for two days in the first week and then second week. So, I just shared this incident with my educator ... she did a de-brief at RTO centre. She called me in for a one-to-one for an hour. I went there and I talked with my educator, and she motivated me, and it was, kind of, counselling. (Learner)

Learners nearing completion

- Continuous reviews and follow-ups by trainers and support staff
- Proactively reaching out to learners and arranging one-to-one support sessions if required
- Access to educators and support staff without any delay
- Career counselling
- Mentoring
- Help with time management
- Emotional wellbeing support
- Fostering a sense of achievement by celebrating the milestones achieved so far:

I celebrate already with them because, they might have done 10 units, and 10 units is a lot when you're working full-time, as we know, we've done it ourselves. So just being aware of that and just giving them a message every now and again 'you are nearly there, you've just put another task in, you've only got 3 to go' and it's just celebrating with them because it's a big milestone to be able to study and work, particularly with under-fives and their families. (Training manager, RTO 2)

- Acknowledging that completion is not the only form of success
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