

SENIOR LEADERSHIP GUIDE

FOR
RTO SENIOR
LEADERSHIP

Supporting vocational education and training (VET) student mental health and wellbeing

PURPOSE:

Importance of a whole-of-RTO approach.

Eight action areas to achieve a whole-of-RTO approach:

1. Identify who is responsible
2. Raise awareness
3. Build a culture of support
4. Maintain engagement
5. Embrace diversity
6. Upskill trainer and assessors
7. Develop partnerships
8. Bring students on board.

A WHOLE-OF-RTO APPROACH

Everyone in an RTO can contribute to positive student mental health and wellbeing. It requires actions embedded throughout the whole organisation. This includes a multi-pronged approach across governance, staff and partnerships, and involves much more than responding to disclosures of distress and mental ill-health. A clear commitment from the RTO's senior leadership is required for this to happen.

The eight action areas described in Figure 1 offer some key priorities for RTO senior leadership to promote a mentally healthy community, including practical ideas for implementation across governance, staff and partnerships.

Not all sections or implementation strategies may apply to your RTO as there is great diversity in the ability of RTOs to implement them effectively. In your RTO, there are likely to be aspects of these which are already well implemented, and others that may need work or you weren't aware of. This resource is a useful tool to help you recognise areas of strength as well as priorities for change. Use the **Checklist for RTO Leadership** resource to check your organisation's progress against its identified goals.

FIGURE 1: EIGHT ACTION AREAS FOR YOUR ORGANISATION



Understanding the regulatory requirements

As a leader of an RTO, you need to understand your specific regulatory obligations to provide support to learners, which may include mental health supports. All providers are required to meet the following requirements relevant to learner support:

* The National Vocational Education and Training Regulator (Outcome Standards for NVR Registered Training Organisations) Instrument 2025 ([National Vocational Education and Training Regulator \(Outcome Standards for NVR Registered Training Organisations\) Instrument 2025](#)) in the 2025 Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOS) require that, “the wellbeing needs of the VET student cohort are identified and strategies put in place to support these needs.” (Outcome Standard 2.6) the glossary section of the Standards notes that this means support services and resources to assist with VET students’ physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

* Under the [Disability Discrimination Act 1992](#) (Cth) it is unlawful to discriminate based on disability (including mental illness) including in the education sector. The [Disability Standards for Education 2005](#) (Cth) set out the obligations of education providers and the rights of students with disability under the Act and require providers to ensure ‘reasonable adjustments’ to allow students with disability to access and participate in education and training on the same basis as other students.

EIGHT AREAS TO ACTION FOR A WHOLE-OF-RTO APPROACH



1. Identify who will promote/ champion mental health in your organisation

Promoting mental health and responding to mental ill-health is a collective effort. It is important that as a leader you identify and support (through resourcing, training and acknowledgement) key RTO staff and/or students who can lead or drive mental health initiatives, are alert for issues/ behaviours that might signal a student is struggling and liaise with external partners (including employers and mental health organisations).

Implementation strategies

- Develop a mental health policy and action plan which identifies the key people/positions responsible. In larger organisations this might be a broader group of staff mental health champions. In a smaller RTO this may need to be your responsibility as leader.
- Include mental health and wellbeing as a standing item on leadership/team meeting agendas.
- If your organisation partners with employers (e.g. for work placements and apprenticeships), you should develop a policy to determine how mental health and wellbeing will be promoted and supported across both the education and work setting and how you will work together.

“My VET provider did not really talk about mental health, but I wish they did as you never know who may be experiencing mental ill-health”

VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH





2. Raise awareness

Building the capacity of your organisation to support mental health and wellbeing begins with ensuring there is a common understanding of what mental health is and why it is important.

Key messages to convey to all staff, students and employer partners include:

- mental health is an important aspect of general health
- recognising mental health problems as early as possible is important because:
 - early and effective treatment is available and has good outcomes
 - good mental health helps students to engage with and complete education, training and employment, which leads to better life outcomes.

Reflect on the current level of mental health awareness and understanding in your organisation. Place your organisation where they sit along the spectrum in Figure 2.

Once you have assessed your organisation, consider which implementation strategies you may want to action that will help increase awareness and knowledge. If you have rated yourself as 'very high', consider these activities as maintenance, ensuring that new staff can access the same high-quality information.

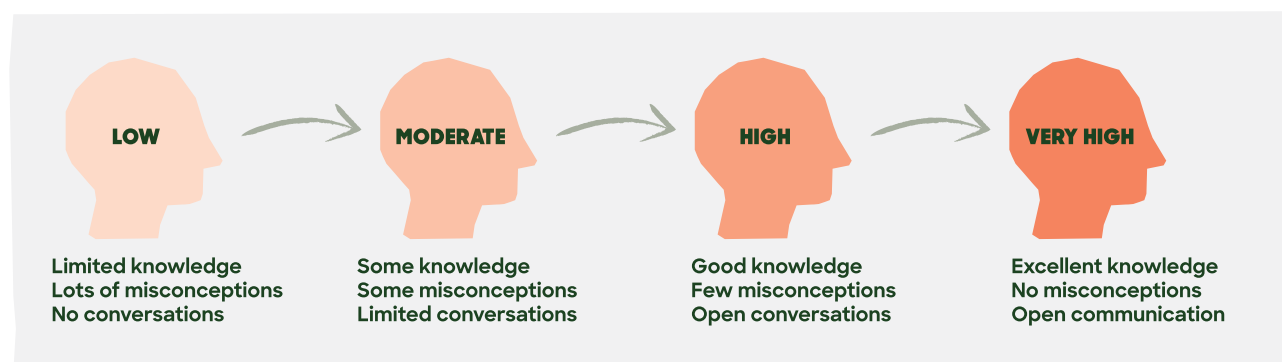
“ People aren't aware of the attitudes they hold, the unconscious bias.”

VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Implementation strategies

- Disseminate information about mental health (including information from local mental health services) in written form to both students and staff. For example, newsletters and website updates.
- Acknowledge local, national and international mental health days to normalise conversations about mental health and show your support. For example, R U OK? Day, National Day of Action against Bullying and Violence and World Mental Health Day. You can find these here: www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au.
- Organise appropriate guest speakers and/or training for staff and students on mental health.
- Ensure students know how to access support either internally or through external services. Reminders should be sent regularly and also provided by staff.
- Ensure staff know where they can access support if they need it. For example, an Employee Assistance Program (if applicable).
- Schedule time for staff to read this suite of resources and set a time to discuss the resources.
- Share this suite of resources with employer partners and/or resources from organisations such as WorkSafe Australia, Heads Up and Beyond Blue.

FIGURE 2: ORGANISATION SELF-ASSESSMENT OF LEVEL OF AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH (GERSH, 2019)





3. Build a culture of support

Changing culture is a complex and challenging task. It requires consistent, everyday actions prioritised by leadership and embedded in your organisation at all levels.

An organisational culture where mental health and wellbeing is valued is one that breaks down mental health stigma by encouraging open and supportive communication about mental health (as we do with physical health). It ensures staff and students feel safe to seek help, know they will be supported, and receive appropriate interventions in a timely manner, without penalty. It is critical this culture is led and modelled by senior leadership in the organisation. Being a good role model for good mental health includes:

- demonstrating positive behaviours around problem-solving
- resilience
- managing difficult relationships
- help-seeking and self-care
- showing empathy and kindness
- being an open communicator
- celebrating achievements.

“ How do we make sure we have staff who have an appetite for empathy and have a willingness and desire to want to understand? Empathy and understanding are the universal antidotes to mental health difficulties.”

VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Implementation strategies

- Include mental health promotion (including approaches to reducing stigma and using appropriate language) in your strategic plan, policies and decision-making processes.
- Ensure HR/leadership departments have a proactive approach to wellbeing and culture, and that they are role modelling skills and strategies to build good mental health.
- Commit to ongoing and sustained action to support mental health and wellbeing. For example, set up regular times to check in with staff and allocate and follow up on actionable steps when a staff member identifies they are experiencing a mental health issue.
- Create and maintain a safe way for students to disclose mental ill-health prior to commencing study. This may involve a way to indicate that they would like to talk to someone privately, rather than putting the details in an enrolment form.
- Create and maintain a supportive and effective process for a student to disclose a mental health concern and ensure you have policies in place regarding how to respond and offer support.
- Actively encourage staff to ask for support when they need it. Convey that staff mental health is equally important as student mental health, and that staff will be supported and treated with respect if they seek help.





4. Maintain student engagement

When people experience mental ill-health, they often disengage from education, training and social interactions. Disengagement can lead to worsening mental health which, in turn, negatively impacts engagement and becomes a vicious cycle.

Encouraging students to participate and maintain engagement in their studies, despite mental health difficulties, can mean that your RTO plays an important part in their recovery. Establishing, resourcing and supporting a range of processes, systems and activities that enable students to stay engaged in their training while experiencing mental ill-health is a key responsibility for senior leadership staff.

Implementation strategies

- Develop a policy responding to non-attendance/ decline in academic performance so staff are clear about their role and required steps. For example, after two missed classes, the organisation will reach out to the student via text message or email and after three missed classes, by phone call.
- Ensure there is a clearly communicated system and process for requesting and making reasonable adjustments to course requirements and task due dates to support students experiencing mental ill-health to remain engaged in learning.
- Support trainers and assessors and administrative staff to upskill in how to:
 - Reach out to students who stop attending or whose performance declines, to discuss what they are experiencing and what your organisation can do to help. This might include checking how the student prefers to engage (for example, by phone, email, video call, in-person) and as far as possible, respecting their preferences.
 - Maintain communication with students who need to take some time off.
 - Ensure classroom feedback incorporates recognition of persistence, overcoming challenges, and participation, not just excellence in performance.
 - Offer flexibility in terms of engagement. For example, offering extensions on assignments or assessments, offering course materials early to students to help reduce their anxiety, being flexible with how a student attends, providing instructions verbally and in writing (students with mental ill-health can have difficulty concentrating and processing information), and offering support to fill out forms required for reasonable adjustments.
 - Problem solve ways to help the student re-engage and maintain engagement to the best of their ability. For example, reducing student contact hours, and arranging weekly check-ins with staff.
- Where learning is undertaken remotely, ensure trainers/assessors know how to support students. For example, diarise regular check-ins, encourage connection with peers, ensure students know how to access support and provide this information regularly. Relevant advice developed for the schools sector is available from the [Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership Limited](#).





5. Embrace diversity

People from minority groups, including those with diverse sexuality, gender identity, cultural background, learning and physical abilities, can all be at increased risk of exclusion, discrimination, and victimisation, which can exacerbate risk for mental ill-health.

Creating an atmosphere that starts with inclusion helps to build a supportive culture and facilitates positive mental health. Senior leadership of RTOs have a role to ensure that policy, processes and systems that support diversity and inclusion and address racism, discrimination and stigma are established and actioned across the organisation.

Implementation strategies

- Review and maintain all organisation policies to ensure they promote diversity and inclusion, including inclusive language.
- Don't tolerate bullying, racism, vilification, discrimination or intimidation. Embed this in policy and ensure staff are aware.
- Ensure organisational and learning spaces are welcoming to everyone. People are more likely to feel like they belong when they see elements of themselves or their culture represented. For example, through signage in appropriate languages, posters explicitly welcoming minority groups, flags, artwork.
- Consult with staff and students about what will help them feel included and involved. Invite suggestions through discussion at staff meetings, or through surveys.
- Use diverse types of resources to communicate with staff, including clear graphics, audio or video contributions.
- Celebrate diversity by incorporating celebrations and social activities relevant to all staff and students.
- Actively advertise to diverse groups to recruit staff.

A summary on the needs of various population groups can be accessed in the **Understanding students who may be at increased risk of mental ill-health** resource.

“More help with older aged students like myself on how to navigate technology”

“Importance of orientation periods to normalise conversations around mental health, help students understand what services are available.”

VET STUDENTS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

FIGURE 3: DIVERSITY THAT COULD BE RELEVANT TO YOUR ORGANISATION





6. Upskill staff to support students

Trainers/assessors might be the first to notice that a student isn't coping as well. This means they need to have the skills and knowledge to:

- know what to look for to identify a student who might be struggling
- enquire sensitively so they understand how they can help the student
- respond appropriately to ensure the student gets the right support.

Discussions about mental health may make your staff feel anxious. They may worry about saying the wrong thing or making things worse.

It is important that RTO leaders support and resource their staff to feel confident and capable to have conversations with students about mental health and wellbeing, particularly with students who appear to be struggling. This means allowing them time to build their skills and access the information they need.

“ These people had no idea how to react to me ... staff training in mental health [would have helped]. ”

VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Implementation strategies

- Ensure activities to upskill staff in mental health are included in your organisation's relevant policies, and in team and staff workplans.
- Embed mental health resources in orientation processes for all new staff to ensure a baseline knowledge of mental health is provided. This could include the **Mental Health 101** and **Guides for: senior leadership, trainers and assessors, and administration staff** included in this suite of resources.
- Resource appropriate mental health training for staff. For example, organise and/or provide time for staff to read mental health resources, attend relevant webinars, complete online learning or in-person training, and embed regular mental health refresher training in work plans for staff.
- Contact your local mental health service to build networks. Find out how best to link/refer students to them, and to enquire about training opportunities for staff.
- Ensure students and staff know where they can access mental health information and/or support in and outside your organisation. Include information about mental health, ill-health and where to get help on your RTO's website and in newsletters and other communication material.



7. Develop partnerships with services and supports

While some larger RTOs may have resources available to fund internal supports and services, such as student welfare officers and counselling services, many will rely on linking students who require mental health supports to external services. The ideal model of support for mental health involves a broad system of services and programs that work collaboratively with each other.

As an RTO leader, it is important that your staff can easily connect with services and supports are available. This might require facilitating more formal referral agreements with external providers or ensuring that local service information is collected, kept up to date and accessible.

Implementation strategies

- Ensure activities to develop links and partnerships with external mental health services are in your organisation's relevant policy or plan (for example, mental health policy or stakeholder engagement plan).
- If your organisation is large or provides dedicated wellbeing and student support services, include activities to build partnerships and links between teaching, administration areas and these services.
- Assign a responsible staff member/s of the RTO to create relationships and liaise with local services.
- Promote external supports regularly to staff and students, encouraging them to seek support if required. This includes display information about national mental health support services and local mental health and support services on your website, in communal areas, and in newsletters.
- Arrange meetings or phone calls with local mental health services and community organisations to learn what they do and how you can collaborate or refer to them.



8. Bring students on board

Involving students in designing, developing and delivering responses to mental health and wellbeing in VET will ensure that what is delivered is informed by their needs, perspectives and the reality of their experience and, as a result, will have a greater impact.

This has been recognised in approaches and efforts to support mental health and wellbeing in other educational settings (Orygen, 2020).

There are many ways that students can be brought on board. These include:

- actively seeking information from students about their needs and perspectives of mental health and wellbeing, for example through surveys, consultations, focus groups
- supporting a student action group with a focus on mental health and wellbeing
- co-designing mental health and wellbeing resources, programs or initiatives with students, including students with a lived experience of mental ill-health
- asking students to participate in reviewing and evaluating initiatives (including students in designing and conducting the evaluation)
- establishing peer support or mentoring programs where students can connect with other students to safely share experiences and advice.

As a leader, *you* set the tone in recognising the need to involve students in any planning or delivery of mental health related responses. It is also important you consider and put in place processes and policies that recognise the contribution students made. This might be through celebration events, payment or reimbursement for students involved in activities, certificates, etc.

“It’s not a one-size-fits-all situation. For some students, TAFE could be a safe haven from their home life”

VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Implementation strategies

- Endorse and source funding to enable student engagement in mental health and wellbeing responses, including consultations, student action groups, co-design work, and mental health peer support.
- Introduce all staff to the role of students – including in co-design – and the peer workforce in your institution and the positive value you place on it during orientation.
- Work with other educational providers or mental health organisations who have delivered student/service user engagement activities to access advice and resources, or to work on programs/initiatives together.
- Support students who have expressed an interest in being involved in leading or participating in mental health and wellbeing activities.
- Provide recognition and consider different types of rewards for staff who are innovators in co-design with students.

REFERENCES

1. Gersh, E. (2019) Supporting mental wellbeing in community sport: A guide for responding. Melbourne: Orygen.
2. Orygen (2020) Australian University Mental Health Framework report. Melbourne: Orygen 2020.

This product/publication is funded by the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations through the Enhance RTO capability to support VET student mental health and wellbeing project.

Disclaimer The ‘supporting VET student mental health and wellbeing’ resources (the Resources) are designed to assist registered training organisations (RTOs) to understand relevant legislation and policy, as well as the application of that legislation/policy to the provision of vocational education and training to support student mental health and wellbeing.

The information contained in the Resources is intended only as a guide to relevant legislation and policy and does not constitute legal advice, impose additional legal obligations on RTOs or purport to provide binding interpretations of legislative obligations (for example, those under the *2025 Standards for Registered Training Organisation (RTOs) (Commonwealth)*, the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Commonwealth)*, and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Commonwealth)*).

The information contained in the Resources is accurate as at the date of publication. RTOs should seek legal advice specific to their individual circumstances to understand their legal obligations. For any questions about the Resources, please contact the [Department of Employment and Workplace Relations](#).

Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.



Australian Government

dandolopartners

