

More Than Just Counselling: Evolving Mental Health Support in Australian TAFEs: Integrating Whole-of-Institution Strategies, Peer-Led Models, and Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice

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Abstract

Student mental health across Australian tertiary education has been under sustained pressure since the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the vocational education and training (VET) sector, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes support highly diverse cohorts who are often at elevated risk of distress due to socio-economic and structural barriers. This professional paper synthesises current evidence and practitioner insights to propose a pragmatic model that moves 'beyond the therapy room'. This paper reviews recent national surveys and sector data on distress and non-completion; outlines enabling frameworks; and presents a co-designed pilot study, the Neurodiversity Initiative, to improve engagement, retention, and workforce readiness among neurodivergent learners in VET. An implementation roadmap and evaluation framework are provided to support scalability across TAFEs of different sizes and contexts. The paper concludes with system-level recommendations to embed inclusive, sustainable responses that meet the current Registered Training Organisation (RTO) standard guidelines for student wellbeing and improving education and employment outcomes for VET learners.

Keywords

TAFE; VET; student mental health; inclusive education; neurodiversity; peer programs; whole-of-institution; Australia.

Introduction and background

Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes occupy a distinctive position in Australia's education landscape. TAFEs support highly diverse cohorts including apprentices, international students, refugees, First Nations learners, students with disability, and mature-age learners. Many students balance work and care, often facing compounding stressors. These intersecting pressures elevate mental health risk and complicate help-seeking. Administrative disclosures of mental illness have long been known to undercount the true burden in the vocational education and training (VET) population. Mild to moderate distress is common, frequently undisclosed, and disproportionately concentrated in equity cohorts (Orygen, 2018).

Counsellors across TAFEs report a marked rise in demand, with presenting concerns increasingly entwining clinical presentations such as anxiety, depression, and complex trauma. Waiting lists for mental health community services and psychological services remain long, and many students face barriers to access if they do not meet specific eligibility or diagnostic criteria. International students particularly find it difficult to navigate counselling and psychological supports without Medicare benefits. Thus, greater responsibility for counselling and psychological support is shifted to on-campus services, creating an urgent need for better systemic supports.

This paper argues that the sector needs a model that is preventative, trauma-informed, strengths-focused, and structurally embedded. Drawing on current evidence and practitioner experience at TAFE, the paper proposes a whole-of-institution approach to student wellbeing. The proposed model would widen the scope of student support, reducing non-completion driven by personal barriers, and generate outcomes data that make the case for sustained resourcing.

The paper presents the Neurodiversity Initiative as a working case example of this approach in action, supported by an implementation roadmap and evaluation framework designed for scalability

across TAFEs of different sizes and contexts. It concludes with system-level recommendations for embedding inclusive student support in the VET sector.

The evidence landscape: Prevalence, risks, and unmet need

National student wellbeing surveys consistently show a high burden of psychological distress and impaired functioning among tertiary students. The headspace and National Union of Students (NUS) survey of 16–25-year-old students reported that two thirds rated their mental health as fair/poor and 65% experienced high or very high psychological distress, with 35% reporting suicidal ideation or self-harm in the past year (Rickwood et al., 2016). Although much research has focused on universities, a regional Australian TAFE study found distress levels higher than normative population data and linked greater distress to emotion-focused coping and reduced academic success (Rice et al., 2021).

More recent youth datasets show that external stressors, particularly cost-of-living pressures, housing insecurity, and employment precarity, are salient drivers of distress. The 2024 Mission Australia Youth Survey (McHale et al., 2024; n=17,480) identified cost of living as the top national concern, followed by climate change and violence/safety, with mental health remaining a leading personal concern. Broader public health analyses similarly link financial stress to worsening mental health for young people (Australian Council of Social Service [ACOSS], 2020; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2025). At the sector level, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) reported that most VET students who discontinue their training cite personal reasons, including illness or health-related challenges; excessive time pressure; and family reasons (National Centre for Vocational Research [NCVER], 2025).

Research tracking completion patterns suggests that conventional completion metrics can mask other forms of ‘training success’, but they nonetheless highlight the role of personal barriers for priority cohorts (Wibrow et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the need to address both individual wellbeing and structural determinants that affect persistence and achievement.

Who are our students? Diversity, equity, and intersectionality

TAFE student communities reflect Australia’s diversity. Many students study on short, intensive timetables, while others are in multi-year apprenticeships. Ages range from mid-teens to later adulthood. Therefore, student services increasingly support equity cohorts whose pathways differ markedly from those of typical university populations.

Internal service data and national youth surveys suggest that First Nations young people and gender-diverse students are more likely to indicate plans for TAFE pathways. These students are also at elevated risk of distress and discrimination, underscoring the importance of culturally safe, inclusive, and co-designed supports (McHale et al., 2024).

A study examining post-school outcomes for young autistic adults found autistic adults were significantly more likely than non-autistic adults to attend TAFE rather than university (Flower et al., 2021). In many TAFEs, a substantial proportion of students accessing disability inclusion identify as neurodivergent, and counselling teams see students with neurodivergent traits awaiting formal assessment. Diagnostic delays sometimes cause semester-long delays in academic adjustments. Stigma can further deter disclosure, and family dynamics can complicate assessment.

An anxiety-informed, strengths-based, predictable service design is therefore critical to access and retention at TAFE. Neurodivergent learner attrition from training pathways such as care and community support sectors and building and construction, where labour shortages are already significant, make targeted, neuro-affirming supports a sector-level priority, not only a student wellbeing concern.

Beyond the therapy room: The evolving role of TAFE counsellors

Across the education sector, counsellors now routinely partner with faculty and student-facing teams to broaden reach and impact. Common activities include co-facilitated classroom wellbeing sessions and staff training on recognising distress and responding to disclosure. Counsellors also provide input into learner access plans and reasonable adjustments, while facilitating targeted group programs that address executive function, anxiety management, placement-related stress, and help-seeking. These collaborative roles enable counsellors to act as systems integrators. Recognising the demand for mental health supports at universities, best-practice recommendations suggest adopting a settings-based strategy, co-designed with students and the mental health sector, to improve student mental health and wellbeing (Orygen, 2020). Scoping reviews of international VET mental health research highlight the importance of supportive school environments, vocational identity, and physical activity in promoting positive mental health, with even small interventions having outsized effects due to interrelated dimensions of wellbeing (Solberg et al., 2023).

A longitudinal study found marked increases in distress among university students from 2019 to 2020 that did not fully revert after the COVID-19 lockdown, underscoring the need for sustained, system-level responses for incoming cohorts (Dingle et al., 2024). Analyses during and after pandemic lockdowns demonstrated that financial support schemes buffered anxiety and depression, while subsequent cost-of-living pressures saw renewed increases in financial stress and psychological distress (ACOSS, 2020; AIHW, 2025). For international students and young renters, financial stress predicts disruptive housing events, isolation, and poorer wellbeing, pointing to the value of integrated supports, such as welfare and counselling pathways on campus (Wilson et al., 2023). Students with disability who have accessed university student services express a need for supports to be more student-centred, personalised, accessible, and empowering (Hitches et al., 2025).

For neurodivergent students, the literature emphasises the benefits of predictable structures, reduced sensory load, explicit teaching of executive function skills, and staff training that moves beyond compliance to strengths-based practice (Gibbs et al., 2025; Hillson, 2025). This shows that while existing counselling supports help students, more targeted and scaffolded supports are required at the institutional level.

Good-practice recommendations: Towards a whole-of-institution design

Australian universities have advanced settings-based frameworks to support student wellbeing, which can be adapted for TAFEs. Baik et al.'s (2017) Framework for Promoting Student Mental Wellbeing in Universities outlines five action areas. These include engaging curricula; supportive social, physical, and digital environments; community awareness; mental health knowledge and self-regulation; and access to effective services enabled by policy, participation, resources, and staff development (Baik et al., 2017). While the institutional structures differ, the core principles of prevention, inclusion, literacy, access, and continuous improvement translate well to TAFE. Recent VET guidance echoes these themes. NCVER (2025) highlighted the need for recent good-practice guidelines to support priority cohorts and sustain engagement throughout the learner journey.

Good-practice elements include a whole-of-institution approach: early engagement from pre-enrolment, caring trainers as gate-openers, strong relationships and messaging tools in learning management systems, holistic and individualised supports, and continuity of support with regular check-ins and warm external referrals (Andrahannadi & Griffin, 2025). Together, these elements create a blueprint for TAFE wellbeing services to move from reactive, clinic-only responses to proactive, layered systems of care that align with the current Registered Training Organisation (RTO) standards for enhancing student wellbeing (Australian Skills Quality Authority, 2025).

The Neurodiversity Initiative proposed in this paper is designed as a direct application of this convergent evidence base, operationalising each of Baik et al.'s (2017) five action areas and NCVER's (2025) good-practice elements. The initiative is built on five principles: engaging curricula, supportive environments, community awareness, mental health knowledge and self-regulation, and access to effective services. This paper provides the rationale and roadmap for applying these principles to deliver targeted supports for neurodiverse students at TAFE.

A proposed neurodiversity initiative for students at TAFE

Neurodivergent students encounter barriers to engagement, access, and peer connection under standard, largely reactive support models. This contributes to a reduced sense of belonging, increased psychological distress, and under-utilisation of existing services. There is a clear opportunity to implement a co-designed, accessible model that proactively addresses these gaps and provides defensible data on what works in the VET context.

Aims and objectives

The Neurodiversity Initiative is designed around four interconnected aims: to develop a co-designed, neuro-affirming support model for neurodivergent learners in VET; to evaluate its effectiveness in improving student engagement, belonging, and retention; to examine its impact on workforce readiness and transition outcomes; and to contribute evidence to the emerging field of inclusive education in vocational training contexts.

These aims reflect a deliberate shift in outcomes, moving beyond engagement or course completion to employment readiness. In VET sectors with significant workforce shortages, such as the care economy, including aged care, disability services, and community support, improving the retention and workplace transition of neurodivergent learners is both an educational imperative and a workforce development priority.

Theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1981) ecological systems theory provides a lens for diagnosing why neurodivergent TAFE students disengage and for designing a response that reaches the right levels. Neurodivergent learners in VET face barriers that are rarely confined to a single relationship. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has a core aim of reducing structural barriers by proactively designing learning environments that anticipate variability in how students engage, process information, and demonstrate their skills (CAST, 2024).

Two complementary frameworks ground the Neurodiversity Initiative in a whole-of-institution design. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory maps the *where*, identifying the multiple environmental levels at which neurodivergent TAFE students encounter barriers, and at which the initiative must therefore intervene. UDL provides the *how*, the design principles that determine what that intervention looks like at each level. The Bronfenbrenner model identifies the problem, while UDL informs the design logic.

Microsystem: Nearest level, most immediate barriers, UDL engagement

At the microsystem level, neurodivergent students engage daily with trainers, counsellors, peers, and learning spaces, and it is here that barriers are most acutely felt. Sensory-intensive workshop environments, assessment tasks that assume uniform executive function capacity, and the absence of safe disclosure pathways mean students frequently mask difficulties until disengagement or crisis. UDL's principle of multiple means of *engagement* directly addresses this level.

Rather than waiting for students to seek help, the initiative creates low-barrier entry points through counsellor-facilitated small-group sessions that combine psychoeducation with practical, TAFE-relevant skills. Skills such as time-boxing, visual scheduling, and emotion regulation strategies can

be utilised by students in the classroom and during clinical placements. These skills, combined with self-advocacy coaching, assist students to communicate accessibility needs to supervisors, employers, and colleagues. Predictable group structures and peer mentorship scaffolds further foster the sense of belonging and safety that neurodivergent learners need to remain engaged. This need is not addressed by standard reactive models (Gibbs et al., 2025).

Mesosystem: Connections between settings, UDL representation

The mesosystem focuses on the quality of connections between a student's microsystems. This is where many neurodivergent learners fall through the gaps in VET. A student's needs for adjustments may be known to the counselling team but be unrecognised by their workplace supervisor. In many cases, on-campus adjustments may not be communicated to a placement host, and fragmented institutional processes can leave a student with inconsistent messages across departments.

UDL's principle of multiple means of *representation* is the design response at this level. By ensuring that neurodiversity-affirming language, plain-language communications, and visual supports are consistent across all environments, the student can better connect with different systems. The initiative operationalises this by establishing shared language and referral pathways across counselling, disability/accessibility inclusion, teaching departments, and industry partners, so that the student's support does not reset each time their setting changes (Cole et al., 2024).

Exosystem: Institutional structures, UDL action and expression

The exosystem encompasses the institutional policies and decisions that shape the student's experience without their direct involvement, such as curriculum design, assessment frameworks, staff professional development, and resource allocation. It is at this level that structural barriers are most entrenched, including diagnostic delays that leave students waiting a semester for reasonable adjustments and professional development programs that stop at awareness rather than building genuine neurodiversity literacy for staff. Reforms are also needed to make assessment designs more adaptable for students with processing differences.

UDL's principle of multiple means of *action and expression* addresses this directly by shifting the institutional default from uniform assessment toward flexible demonstration of competency, scaffolded tasks, visual timetables, and communication scripts for workplace contexts (CAST, 2024). The initiative embeds this shift through a disability inclusion working group that includes staff with lived experience of neurodivergence and applies a co-design lens to remove friction points across navigation, sensory load, and learning design. Evidence from the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training's national work on UDL in the VET sector confirms that when educators engage with these principles, they move beyond compliance to develop a genuine understanding of learner variability and shared responsibility for inclusion (Pigato, 2024).

Macrosystem and chronosystem

At the macrosystem level, the initiative operates within the TAFE services structure and actively advances a broader cultural and legislative shift. The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth), the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (Attorney-General's Department, 2005), and national VET equity priorities all mandate inclusive design, and changing community attitudes increasingly frame neurodivergence as natural human variation rather than deficit (CAST, 2024). The initiative is designed to be consistent with and to reinforce this shift, positioning neurodiversity-affirming practice as a quality indicator for VET delivery rather than a specialist accommodation.

The chronosystem dimension adds a further rationale: the student population the initiative serves is growing. More adult learners are entering TAFE after adverse schooling experiences or while seeking late neurodivergent diagnoses. The post-COVID-19 shift to hybrid learning has sharpened

the need for the predictable, accessible design that UDL prescribes. The initiative is therefore not a one-off program but an institutional evolution that builds staff capability; open-access resources; and a sustainable, staged peer mentoring infrastructure.

Taken together, Bronfenbrenner identifies the levels at which the initiative must work, UDL specifies how it should be designed at each of them, and the Neurodiversity Initiative is the applied practice that brings both frameworks to life in the TAFE context.

Co-design approach

Student co-design

Co-design is built into the methodology from the outset. In the needs analysis phase, student surveys gather baseline data on barriers to engagement, preferred delivery formats, sensory and communication accessibility requirements, and the language and structure of student-facing resources. These responses directly shape workshop topics and session scheduling. Student participation is acknowledged through formal recognition or modest remuneration, reinforcing the value of their contributions as expertise rather than consultation. Throughout the pilot, iterative student feedback helps refine content and delivery, ensuring the program remains aligned with the real priorities and preferences of neurodivergent learners in the TAFE context.

Staff capability building

Alongside student co-design, a structured staff involvement strand runs through the initiative, recognising that sustainable change in learning environments depends as much on educator capability as on student-facing programming. A staff survey administered during the initiative's early phase gathers baseline data on confidence levels, knowledge gaps, challenges encountered in supporting neurodivergent learners, and preferences for the delivery of professional learning. These insights help directly inform the development of tailored, blended professional learning modules. The module for staff covers inclusive communication, executive function support, sensory-considerate environment design, UDL implementation, and flexible assessment options to accommodate different learning profiles. Teaching teams act as co-designers and evaluators of the pilot.

Methodology

The initiative adopts a mixed-methods, design-based research approach organised across three phases: needs analysis, co-design, and pilot implementation. These phases reflect Baik and Larcombe's (2017) five action areas and NCVET's (2024) good-practice elements, adapted to the specific conditions of the TAFE context. This phased approach ensures the initiative is built from evidence of what neurodivergent learners and educators need, tested under real conditions, and evaluated with sufficient rigour to support scaling decisions.

Phase 1: Needs analysis

The first phase establishes the evidence base from which the initiative is built. Surveys of students and staff will provide baseline data on the barriers neurodivergent learners experience in VET. These include disclosure practices, sensory and communication accessibility needs, and the gap between available services and actual help-seeking.

Parallel staff surveys will gather data on professional learning activities aligning with neuro-affirming principles, as highlighted above. Quantitative data will be analysed descriptively and inferentially; open-ended responses will be analysed thematically. This phase does not simply confirm that a problem exists; it maps the specific contours of that problem so that the initiative's design responds to a verified local need.

Phase 2: Co-design

The co-design phase moves from needs identification to program development through participatory workshops with neurodivergent students and teaching staff. Workshop topics, session scheduling, and sensory and communication accessibility approaches will be informed by survey feedback. The language and format of all student-facing resources, including Easy English and multimodal communication options, would be developed and refined based on participant feedback.

Student involvement will be voluntary and central to the initiative's design. Participants would contribute to defining success indicators, shaping content and testing accessibility features, and their participation would be acknowledged through formal recognition or modest remuneration. Staff contributors, as co-designers and learners, will directly shape the modules developed in this phase. The disability inclusion working group, including staff with lived experience of neurodivergence, will help ensure adjustments to lighting and sensory load, as well as plain-language communication, before the pilot begins.

Phase 3: Pilot implementation

The pilot will be delivered across small-group sessions facilitated by counsellors and disability/accessibility support staff. Program content would integrate psychoeducation with practical skills. These will include time-boxing and visual scheduling, tailored study and memory strategies, communication scripts for classroom and workplace conversations, and emotion regulation practices suited to workshop floors and clinical placements. Peer mentorship scaffolds will help build belonging and self-advocacy alongside the group sessions.

Concurrently, tailored professional learning modules would be delivered to teaching staff, covering neurodiversity and diverse learning profiles. Inclusive communication, support, sensory-considerate environment design, UDL implementation, and flexible assessment options would help equip trainers to sustain neuro-affirming practice beyond the pilot's duration (Safer-Lichtenstein et al., 2024).

A pre-post evaluation using validated measures would assess outcomes across five dimensions: student engagement and belonging, course retention, self-advocacy and help-seeking confidence, readiness for work-integrated learning and employment, and educator confidence and practice change.

Data analysis and results

Quantitative data will be analysed using paired t-tests and regression; qualitative data from open-ended responses will be analysed thematically. Together, these methods will generate both the outcome data needed to make the case for scaling and the process data needed to understand what works, for whom, and under what conditions. The data would help build a defensible evidence base that the VET sector currently lacks for neuro-affirming practice.

Expected outcomes

Three levels of expected outcome follow from this design. At the student level, it is anticipated that the outcomes from the initiative will include improved course completion rates among neurodivergent learners, greater confidence in self-advocacy and help-seeking, and greater readiness for work-integrated learning and employment, particularly in care and support sectors experiencing ongoing workforce shortages.

At the institutional level, it is anticipated that the initiative will improve staff confidence and capability in neuro-affirming practice, more consistent application of inclusive design across

departments, and open-access resources and governance structures that sustain the model beyond the pilot phase.

At the sector level, the initiative will generate the first empirical evidence of a structured, co-designed, neuro-affirming support model in the Australian VET context. This will lay a foundation for adaptation and scaling across the national TAFE network and contribute to policy development in inclusive education and workforce planning.

Implementation roadmap for TAFE services

Measurement and quality improvement

Across all three phases, consistent data collection will ensure the initiative generates the defensible evidence base that the VET sector currently lacks for neuro-affirming practice. Disaggregated reporting by cohort, including the vulnerable student groups mentioned earlier, makes equity gaps visible and informs targeted improvement. Results will be reported to institutional leadership with recommendations for integration into standard operating procedures, ensuring the initiative's findings move from pilot evidence to embedded practice rather than remaining at the research stage. Future longitudinal research, tracking outcomes at six months and one year post intervention, will assess the model's effectiveness over time and build the evidence base for key stakeholders. These will include internal stakeholders such as educators and institutional leaders and external stakeholders, including employers and sector bodies.

Scalability

The model is designed from the outset for adaptation and scaling. Open-access resources developed during the co-design phase, including staff professional learning modules, student-facing materials in multiple formats, and program governance frameworks, will be made available to the national TAFE Network under a non-exclusive licence. The evidence generated through the pilot evaluation will provide a foundation for adaptation across TAFEs of different sizes, cohort profiles, and regional contexts. The data collected will contribute to system-level improvements in training accessibility and workforce development in sectors where neurodivergent learner attrition has the most significant downstream consequences.

Barriers, risks, and enablers in the VET sector

Implementing layered wellbeing systems in TAFE is not without difficulty. The most persistent structural barriers are limited staffing and short funding cycles, which constrain capacity to build programs that require sustained investment. Fragmented workflows between academic areas and student services can mean that a student's distress is noticed in one part of the institution but not acted upon in another.

The complexity of sustaining support across placements and shift work, where students are physically dispersed and often supervised by industry rather than TAFE staff, adds a further layer of challenge. Risk management frameworks must account for fluctuating staffing capacity and the specific environmental safety considerations of workshops, clinical settings, and high-risk trades.

Enablers are equally clear from the evidence and from sector practice. Leadership endorsement and genuine resourcing are the most powerful levers for change. Psychologically safe team cultures, in which staff feel supported in raising concerns and sharing workload, enable the kind of inter-professional collaboration upon which whole-of-institution approaches depend.

Recommendations for the VET sector

As stated above, TAFEs should adopt the proposed model for prevention, inclusion, mental health literacy, access, and outcomes measurement. Alongside this, dedicated resourcing for early engagement pathways and scalable group programs is needed to widen reach and reduce reliance on individual counselling appointments.

Neurodiversity-affirming supports should be prioritised, with streamlined pathways to formal assessment that do not require students to wait a semester for adjustments. Peer-led models, grown with appropriate supervision and governance to ensure safety and fidelity, offer one of the most cost-effective ways to extend support while building community and belonging.

Industry partnerships should be formalised to integrate Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training and address psychosocial hazards in apprenticeships and placements, where students are often most isolated from campus-based support (Bhakta et al., 2024). Investment in data systems that enable rapid identification of at-risk students, continuity of support across the learner journey, and disaggregated monitoring of outcomes by equity cohort will be essential for demonstrating impact and driving improvement.

Limitations and future directions

This professional paper synthesises sector evidence and practitioner observations rather than presenting primary empirical findings. Systematic, VET-specific prevalence and intervention studies remain limited compared with those for universities, constraining the precision of benchmarking. Future research should examine the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of layered models across diverse TAFE contexts, with particular attention to rural and remote campuses, apprenticeship settings, and intersectional equity cohorts. Mixed-methods designs co-produced with students will be crucial for capturing lived experience and implementation nuances.

Conclusion

TAFEs are central to Australia's education and workforce pipelines and serve many learners for whom inclusive, proactive mental health support is decisive. Moving beyond a therapy-only paradigm toward a system that is preventative, participatory, and embedded in learning will better match student needs and sector realities. By integrating the principles proposed above and targeting them to embed neurodiversity-affirming practice, TAFEs can lift wellbeing, retention, and graduate outcomes in tandem.

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