

TeachWise

RESEARCH FOR EDUCATORS

Research for educators: what the studies found, and what it means for practice

EDITION 1 · JULY 2026

IN THIS EDITION

What TALIS 2024 Tells Us About Teachers

Adult Skills Around the World

The Global Picture, UNESCO and Education Worldwide

The VET Teaching Workforce in the Research

Who Teaches, What They Hold and How They Are Employed

Student Wellbeing and Mental Health in Tertiary Education

Edited by Sukh Sandhu | teachwisemag.com

EDITION 1 | JULY 2026

Contents

Edition 1: July 2026 3
What TALIS 2024 Tells Us About Teachers 4
Adult Skills Around the World 12
The Global Picture, UNESCO and Education Worldwide 20
The VET Teaching Workforce in the Research: Who Teaches, What They Hold and How They Are Employed 28
Student Wellbeing and Mental Health in Tertiary Education 36
Follow us on LinkedIn 44
About TeachWise 46

EDITORIAL

Edition 1: July 2026

By Sukh Sandhu, Editor-in-Chief

5 articles on what the research says, and what it means for the people who teach and train.

Welcome to Edition 1 of TeachWise. Each article in this edition reads a body of research on education and training, sets out what it found using the reports' own figures, notes its limits, and ends with what it might mean for practice, labelled as our interpretation.

In this edition

- What TALIS 2024 Tells Us About Teachers
- Adult Skills Around the World
- The Global Picture, UNESCO and Education Worldwide
- The VET Teaching Workforce in the Research: Who Teaches, What They Hold and How They Are Employed
- Student Wellbeing and Mental Health in Tertiary Education

Research rarely gives simple answers, and evidence from one setting does not always transfer to another. Where that matters, we say so.

Thank you for reading. Tell us which research you would like us to read next.

Warm regards,
Sukh Sandhu
Editor-in-Chief, TeachWise

TEACHWISE

What TALIS 2024 Tells Us About Teachers

By Sukh Sandhu

The world's largest survey of teachers and principals reports a profession that is still largely satisfied with its work but carrying more stress, more administration and more change than it can comfortably absorb. Australian teachers stand out: they work longer weeks than most of their OECD peers, report stress at almost twice the OECD rate and have taken up artificial intelligence faster than nearly anyone else. This article sets out what the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2024 found, how it was done, where its limits lie and what trainers, teachers and leaders can take from it.

At a glance

Report	Publisher	Year	Method	Sample
Results from TALIS 2024: The State of Teaching	OECD	2025 (7 October)	Self-report questionnaires to teachers and principals	55 education systems; Australia: 359 schools, 6,040 teachers (ACER)
Results from TALIS 2024: Country notes: Australia	OECD	2025	Summary of Australian lower secondary data	Lower secondary teachers and principals
TALIS 2024 Australian Report	ACER	2025	National report of the Australian data	Primary and lower secondary

What the survey asked

TALIS has run since 2008. The 2024 cycle collected data from teachers and principals in 55 education systems, and the OECD's international report, *Results from TALIS 2024: The State of Teaching*, was released on 7 October 2025. The report is a single volume of seven chapters covering the teaching workforce, teachers' professional outcomes, the demands of teaching, learning opportunities, autonomy and leadership, professional relationships, and sustaining the profession. The OECD also published a short country note for each participant.

The core population is lower secondary teachers (ISCED level 2, roughly Years 7 to 10 in Australia). Some systems also surveyed primary (ISCED 1) and upper secondary (ISCED 3) teachers. Australia surveyed both primary and lower secondary teachers. According to

the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), which managed Australia's participation, 359 schools and 6,040 teachers took part.

The 2024 report is built on a "job demands and resources" framework. Demands are things like workload, accountability, student behaviour, diverse learning needs and constant change. Resources are things like initial teacher education, induction, mentoring, professional learning, autonomy, collegial support and terms of employment. The report then asks how these relate to three professional outcomes: teachers' sense that they meet their lesson aims, their wellbeing and their job satisfaction, along with their intention to stay in teaching.

Two scope points matter for our readers. First, TALIS is a schools survey: the international target population explicitly excludes "teachers teaching exclusively to adults", so VET trainers and adult educators are not in the data. Second, everything in TALIS is self-reported. The report's own reader's guide warns that responses may reflect cultural response styles and social desirability, and that "direct comparisons across countries using self-reported measures warrant caution".

Workload: long weeks, heavy administration

Full-time Australian lower secondary teachers reported a total working week of 46.5 hours, against an OECD average of 41 hours. Their face-to-face teaching time is lower than average, so the extra hours sit in planning, marking and administration.

Table 1. Weekly hours reported by full-time lower secondary teachers, Australia and OECD average, 2024

Task	Australia (hours)	OECD average (hours)	Change in Australia since 2018
Total working time	46.5	41	No change
Teaching	20.1	22.7	No change
Preparing lessons	8.4	7.4	Up 0.8 hours
Marking and correcting	5.7	4.6	Up 0.7 hours
Administrative work	4.7	3	No change

Source: OECD (2025), Results from TALIS 2024 Country notes: Australia, "Working hours", drawing on TALIS 2024 Tables 3.8 and 3.10.

Internationally, the report finds teachers work "almost half an hour more per week than in 2018" on average, with large variation. Japan is the most cited example of a system that acted: its teachers worked almost 60 hours a week in 2018 and around 55 in 2024 after a government push to reduce workload.

The more striking finding is about how workload feels. On average across OECD systems, about half of teachers name excessive administrative work as a source of stress, and 40% say the same of too much marking. In Australia the figures are higher: 69% cite administrative work, 50% cite marking and 46% cite keeping up with curriculum or programme changes (country note, drawing on Table 3.16).

The OECD makes an important distinction here. Time spent on administration and the stress it causes do not move together neatly. In 18 systems, reports of administrative stress rose after 2018, but time on administration rose in only 9 of them. The report concludes that teachers' stress is "more closely linked to constant, unsupported change than to resource shortages". Australian responses fit that pattern closely.

Table 2. Teachers' views of change and reform, lower secondary, 2024

Statement	Australia	OECD average
Too many change initiatives are introduced at my school	46%	31%
I would like a period of stability before new changes	59%	44%
I am asked to implement changes without the necessary resources	41%	31%

Source: OECD (2025), Country notes: Australia, "Changes and reforms".

The OECD also uses its own adult skills survey to check whether teachers are unusually overworked compared with other graduates. In 13 of 26 countries with comparable data, teachers reported working fewer hours than similarly qualified workers, and in only two (Japan and Singapore) did they report working more (Box 3.1). Australia did not take part in that adult survey round, so the comparison cannot be made for Australian teachers.

Wellbeing and stress

Across OECD systems, around one in five teachers (19%) say they experience stress "a lot" in their work. Australia is one of six systems where more than 30% do. The country note puts the Australian figure at 34%, up 10 percentage points since 2018.

Table 3. Wellbeing, satisfaction and status, lower secondary teachers, 2024

Indicator	Australia	OECD average	Australian trend since 2018
Experience stress "a lot" in their work	34%	19%	Up 10 points
Job harms mental health "a lot"	15%	10%	Not reported
Job harms physical health "a lot"	11%	8%	Not reported
All in all, satisfied with their job	84%	89%	Down 6 points
Agree teachers are valued in society	33%	22%	Down 11 points
Agree teachers' views are valued by policymakers	19%	16%	Down 10 points
Under 30 and intend to leave within five years	19%	20%	Up 7 points

Source: OECD (2025), Country notes: Australia, "Well-being", "Satisfaction and retention" and "Status of the teaching profession"; TALIS 2024 Tables 2.3, 2.7, 7.1, 7.24 and 7.31.

The international picture of who is stressed is consistent. Female and younger teachers are more likely to report stress "a lot". In Australia, teachers under 30 are more likely to report it than those aged 50 and over; ACER's national summary puts the figures at 36% against 30% at lower secondary. Early career teachers are also more likely to name classroom discipline as a source of stress: ACER reports 55% of lower secondary teachers with five years' experience or less, compared with 38% of those with ten or more.

Discipline matters because it is the strongest predictor in the report. The OECD finds that maintaining discipline as a source of stress is "a key predictor" of teachers' fulfilment of lesson aims, wellbeing and job satisfaction. Teachers who report being intimidated or verbally abused by students, or who find classroom discipline highly stressful, are "twice as likely to want to leave teaching within five years". Principals' reports add context for Australia: Australia is among the systems where verbal abuse or intimidation of staff on school premises affects more than 15% of teachers, against 5% on average.

There is also a reminder that most teachers still like their jobs. Almost nine in ten teachers across the OECD are satisfied overall, and in Australia 84% are. ACER reports that 71% of Australian teachers would choose teaching again. The decline is real, but it is a decline from a high base.

Professional learning: high participation, mixed impact

TALIS 2024 confirms that almost all teachers take part in professional learning, but it questions whether that learning is working. Across OECD systems, just 55% of teachers say the professional learning they did in the previous 12 months had a positive impact on their teaching. The figure for Australia is 49%.

The report adds a finding with direct implications for anyone who designs or buys professional development. Teachers' perceptions of an activity's impact are, in the OECD's words, "a stronger predictor of fulfilling their lesson aims than the actual content or focus of the activity". In other words, relevance and quality as experienced by teachers matter more than the topic on the flyer.

Time is the main barrier. Across the OECD, 63% of teachers agree that lack of time prevents participation, and this barrier rose by 25 percentage points on average since 2018. The largest increase of any system was in Australia, at 43 percentage points (Table 4.40). In the country note, 76% of Australian teachers say professional learning conflicts with their work schedule and 74% say they lack time because of other commitments.

Table 4. Learning opportunities for lower secondary teachers, 2024

Indicator	Australia	OECD average
Professional learning had a positive impact on teaching	49%	55%
Recent arrivals at a school who took part in induction (formal or informal)	93%	72%
Novice teachers with an assigned mentor	41%	26%
Novice teachers in schools offering mentoring	98%	81%
Recent graduates who rate their initial teacher education	70%	75%

Indicator	Australia	OECD average
as high quality		
Recent graduates prepared for multicultural or multilingual settings	22%	33%

Sources: OECD (2025), Country notes: Australia, "Teachers' learning opportunities"; OECD average for multicultural preparation from Chapter 4 Highlights.

Australia does well on induction and mentoring. Mentoring matters: the OECD reports that in about a third of systems, novice teachers with an assigned mentor are more likely to report meeting their lesson aims and higher job satisfaction. The weak point is initial preparation for diversity. Only 22% of Australian recent graduates felt prepared to teach in multicultural or multilingual settings, and the share who felt prepared for subject content was 21 percentage points lower than in 2018. Meanwhile 66% of Australian lower secondary teachers work in schools where more than 10% of students have special education needs, up 30 percentage points since 2018.

Feedback and appraisal

Feedback appears in TALIS in two ways: as a lesson aim and as something teachers receive. On the receiving end, appraisal is widespread but what follows it varies. On average, 65% of teachers take part in post-appraisal discussions about how to improve their teaching, 46% are offered a development or training plan, 20% are given a mentor and 12% receive financial incentives.

Feedback seems most valuable early in a career. Across OECD systems, 76% of novice teachers (compared with 63% of experienced teachers) say feedback they received in the past 12 months led to a positive change in how they manage student behaviour. Classroom observation with feedback is still rare in most systems: only 9% of teachers observe colleagues and give feedback monthly or more, although more than half do so in Kazakhstan, Shanghai (China), Uzbekistan and Viet Nam.

In Australia, 67% of teachers agree their principal provides useful feedback to teachers and staff, below the OECD average of 77%. Australian teachers also report that team teaching fell by 5 percentage points and feedback based on classroom observation by 3 points since 2018, while collaborative professional learning rose by 8 points.

Artificial intelligence and digital tools

TALIS 2024 is the first cycle to ask teachers about AI. Its definition is broad, covering any capacity for computers to perform tasks "traditionally thought to involve human intelligence", not only generative chatbots.

Across OECD systems, around one in three teachers report using AI in their work in the previous year; the country note gives the OECD average as 36%. Singapore and the United Arab Emirates are highest at around 75%, and France and Japan are below 20%. Australia is near the top at 66% for lower secondary teachers. ACER reports 47% for Australian primary teachers.

Table 5. How lower secondary teachers who use AI are using it, 2024

Use of AI	Australia	OECD average
Generate lesson plans or activities	71%	64%
Efficiently learn about and summarise a topic	71%	68%
Automatically adjust difficulty of materials	46%	Not reported in summary
Assess or mark student work	15%	26%
Review data on student participation or performance	9%	25%

Sources: OECD (2025), Country notes: Australia, "Technology"; OECD averages from Results from TALIS 2024, Chapter 1 (Table 1.60).

Two features of these data stand out. First, AI is mostly being used for preparation rather than for assessment or analysis of student data. Second, the main reason non-users give is skills, not access: among Australian teachers who had not used AI, 75% said they lacked the knowledge and skills to teach with it, the same as the OECD average, while 25% cited lack of school infrastructure (OECD average 37%).

Teachers are also wary. On average, seven in ten agree that AI could enable students to misrepresent others' work as their own, and around four in ten agree it may amplify biases, reinforce misconceptions or compromise data privacy (Table 1.62). About 50% agree AI helps create or improve lesson plans, with very wide variation between systems.

Professional learning is trying to catch up. Using AI for teaching and learning is the most common area of high professional learning need, reported by 29% of teachers on average and 26% in Australia. On average, 38% of teachers took part in professional learning on AI, from 76% in Singapore to 9% in France. The OECD notes that the systems with the highest AI use are also those where teachers most often report AI training.

Hybrid and online delivery also persists after the pandemic. On average, over 16% of teachers work in schools where at least one lesson was taught hybrid or online in the previous month; in Australia, 24% do.

Job satisfaction and staying in teaching

The final chapter asks why teachers stay or leave. Its answer is that salary is "just one of many factors". Teachers who are satisfied with their terms of employment excluding salary are "almost 40% less likely" to consider leaving within five years. Teachers who feel their profession is valued by society are more than 10% less likely to consider leaving, even after controlling for motivation, contracts and pay.

The risk of attrition is highest for teachers under 30 and over 50. In Australia, the share of under 30 teachers intending to leave within five years rose by 7 points to 19%, close to the OECD average. The share of Australian lower secondary teachers aged 30 to 49 intending to leave also rose by more than 5 points since 2018.

Australian teachers' salary satisfaction (55%) is well above the OECD average (39%) but fell 13 points since 2018. Satisfaction with other employment terms fell 9 points to 69%.

Combined with the falls in perceived social value and policymaker regard, the Australian trend lines all point the same way, even though the levels remain at or above international averages on several measures.

What the findings do and do not show

TALIS is strong on breadth, comparability and trend data. It uses representative samples, common questionnaires and an adjudication process, and it only comments on statistically significant differences. Its limits are equally clear.

- **Self-report only.** TALIS measures what teachers say, not what they do. Workload hours are recalled for the most recent complete week, and stress is self-rated.
- **Associations, not causes.** The report shows that discipline stress, autonomy, collaboration and mentoring are associated with wellbeing and satisfaction, sometimes after controlling for other characteristics. It does not show that changing one causes a change in another.
- **Comparability cautions.** Some estimates carry non-response warnings. Australia's 2018 primary data and 2018 lower secondary principal data did not meet participation standards, so primary trends for Australia need care.
- **Schools only.** TALIS excludes teachers who teach exclusively adults. Inferences for VET and adult education are by analogy.

It is also worth separating three things. The **findings** are the percentages and associations above. The OECD's **recommendations** include limiting novice teachers' teaching loads, expanding mentoring, giving teachers more instructional autonomy, supporting change rather than multiplying it, and building AI capability alongside safeguards. The **implications** below are our own reading.

What this means for your practice

Our interpretation, not the OECD's. TALIS does not survey VET trainers, but the demand and resource patterns it describes are likely to be familiar in registered training organisations, TAFEs and adult education.

1. **Treat change as a workload item.** In Australia, 46% of teachers say there are too many change initiatives and 41% say they implement change without resources. Before introducing a new template, system or process, decide what it replaces and resource the transition. Leaders can track the number of concurrent changes as deliberately as they track hours.
2. **Audit administrative tasks, not just hours.** The report shows administrative stress rising even where administrative time did not. Ask staff which tasks feel pointless or duplicated, then remove or automate those first.
3. **Make professional learning feel relevant.** Perceived impact predicted lesson success more than topic. Short, practice-linked sessions where staff apply something the next week are more likely to be rated as useful than generic compliance briefings. Schedule learning inside paid time, since time was the most common barrier.
4. **Protect new staff.** Mentoring, lighter early loads and feedback on managing learner behaviour were all associated with better outcomes for novices. New trainers and

assessors, many of whom come from industry as second career educators, are likely to benefit from the same supports.

5. **Build feedback into routine.** Observation with feedback is rare almost everywhere. A simple peer observation cycle, even once a term, gives staff the kind of feedback that novices in TALIS said changed their practice.
6. **Develop AI capability deliberately.** Most teachers who do not use AI cite skills, not access, and most who do use it are planning with it. Offer structured practice with AI for planning and resource adaptation, alongside clear rules on assessment integrity, privacy and checking outputs.
7. **Watch the early and late career groups.** Intention to leave is highest under 30 and over 50. Exit and stay interviews, flexible arrangements and recognition of expertise are low cost ways to respond.

Sources

- OECD, *Results from TALIS 2024: The State of Teaching*, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1787/90df6235-en
- OECD, *Results from TALIS 2024: Country notes: Australia*, 2025, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/results-from-talis-2024-country-notes_e127f9e2-en/australia_75d1e7a1-en.html
- Friedman, T., Ainley, J., Schulz, W. and Dix, K. (ACER), *TALIS 2024 Australian Report: The Teaching and Learning International Survey*, 2025, https://research.acer.edu.au/talis/12/
- ACER, "TALIS reveals insights into teacher wellbeing, job satisfaction and future opportunities", 2025, https://www.acer.org/news/article/talis-reveals-insights-into-teacher-wellbeing-job-satisfaction-and-future-opportunities

TEACHWISE

Adult Skills Around the World

By Sukh Sandhu

The OECD's Survey of Adult Skills 2023 tested about 160,000 adults in 31 countries and economies and found that, over roughly a decade, adult literacy fell or stalled in most of them, with the steepest losses among those who already had the weakest skills. Australia was not part of the 2023 round, so its most recent internationally comparable data are now more than a decade old. This article sets out what the survey measured, what it found, what Australia's own data say about adults with VET qualifications, and what the results mean for trainers and adult educators.

At a glance

Report	Publisher	Year	Method	Sample
Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World? Survey of Adult Skills 2023	OECD	2024 (December)	Household survey with tablet-based adaptive assessment and background questionnaire	About 160,000 adults aged 16 to 65 in 31 countries and economies
Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011 to 2012	ABS	2013	Australian component of PIAAC Cycle 1	Australians aged 15 to 74
PIAAC Cycle 2 in Australia (Australian Study of Adult Skills)	Jobs and Skills Australia	From 2026	Australian component of PIAAC Cycle 2	Field trial from October 2026; main data collection from December 2027

What the survey is

The Survey of Adult Skills is the main output of the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Its first cycle ran in three rounds between 2011 and 2017. The second cycle's first round collected data in 2022 and 2023, a year later than planned because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection was scheduled for 1 September 2022 to 30 April 2023, although many countries were allowed extensions because of interviewer shortages and difficulty reaching some groups. The OECD published the international results in December 2024.

Respondents completed a background questionnaire and then an assessment on a tablet, with a stylus available for those unfamiliar with digital devices. The assessment was adaptive, meaning the difficulty of later items depended on earlier answers. It measured three domains:

- **Literacy:** accessing, understanding, evaluating and reflecting on written texts, in print and digital forms, to achieve goals and participate in society.
- **Numeracy:** accessing, using and reasoning critically with mathematical content and information to manage the mathematical demands of adult life.
- **Adaptive problem solving:** a new domain in 2023, defined as "the capacity to achieve one's goals in a dynamic situation in which a method for solution is not immediately available".

Scores sit on a 0 to 500 scale and are grouped into proficiency levels. In literacy, Level 1 runs from 176 to less than 226 points, and adults at this level can locate explicitly cued information on a single page and understand short texts. Below Level 1, adults can process meaning at the sentence level. The OECD calls adults scoring at or below Level 1 "low performers".

Literacy and numeracy results can be compared with the first cycle. Adaptive problem solving cannot be compared with the earlier problem solving in technology-rich environments domain, because the underlying constructs differ.

Did Australia take part?

No, not in the 2023 round. Australia participated in the first cycle in 2011 and 2012, run by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). It is not among the 31 countries and economies in the 2023 results.

Australia has since rejoined the programme. At November 2026, Jobs and Skills Australia states that "Australia is taking part in the second cycle" of PIAAC, delivered with Ipsos and known locally as the Australian Study of Adult Skills. Its published timeline shows field trial data collection beginning in October 2026 and main study data collection beginning in December 2027. Separately, the ABS says it has no plans for a future release of PIAAC data, and that Jobs and Skills Australia is leading a Foundation Skills Study that includes a national survey of adult literacy and numeracy.

The practical consequence is that Australian educators cannot place current Australian adults in the 2023 international tables. The 2011 to 2012 data remain the latest internationally comparable Australian evidence, and they are used later in this article with that caveat clearly in view.

The international results

Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden were the strongest performers in all three domains. Finland led in literacy (296 points, against an OECD average of 260) and numeracy (294, against 263). Finland and Japan shared the top score in adaptive problem solving. Eleven countries performed below the OECD average in all three domains: Chile, Croatia, France, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Korea, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Spain.

Table 1. Average proficiency of adults aged 16 to 65, selected countries, 2023

Country or economy	Literacy	Numeracy	Adaptive problem solving
Finland	296.5	293.8	276.5
Japan	289.2	290.8	276.3
Sweden	284.1	285.2	272.6
Norway	280.8	284.8	270.6
England (UK)	271.6	268.4	258.9
Canada	270.8	270.7	259.4
Germany	266.1	272.8	261.0
Ireland	262.8	259.7	248.7
OECD average	260.0	263.0	250.6
New Zealand	259.6	255.7	249.4
United States	258.2	248.8	247.5
Singapore	254.5	274.1	251.8
Korea	249.0	252.7	237.6
Chile	217.9	214.3	217.5

Source: OECD (2024), Survey of Adult Skills 2023, Tables 2.1 and 2.3 and Figure 2.1 data (StatLink for Chapter 2), drawing on Annex Table A.2.1. Values shown to one decimal place as in the StatLink workbook.

New Zealand, often the closest comparator for Australia, sits at the OECD average in literacy and adaptive problem solving and below it in numeracy. The United States shows one of the widest gaps between literacy and numeracy, and Singapore the reverse.

Low performers

On average across participating OECD countries, 18% of adults are low performers in all three domains. The share ranges from 7% in Japan to 44% in Chile. In literacy alone, 9% of adults scored below Level 1 and 17% at Level 1 on average, so about a quarter of adults are at or below Level 1.

Table 2. Adults aged 16 to 65 who are low performers, selected countries, 2023

Country or economy	At or below Level 1 in all three domains	At or below Level 1 in literacy and numeracy	Below Level 1 in literacy
Japan	7.1%	7.8%	3.8%
Finland	9.1%	9.8%	6.1%
England (UK)	13.5%	14.8%	6.0%
Canada	13.4%	14.9%	5.9%
OECD average	18.1%	19.9%	8.9%
New Zealand	18.8%	20.9%	10.5%
United States	22.8%	25.0%	11.5%
Chile	44.2%	47.7%	25.1%

Source: OECD (2024), Survey of Adult Skills 2023, Figure 2.5 and Figure 2.2 data (StatLink for Chapter 2), drawing on Annex Tables A.2.2 and A.2.3.

A decade of decline or stagnation

Twenty-seven of the 31 participants also took part in the first cycle, most of them (21) in 2011 and 2012. The time between the two measurements therefore differs by country, and the OECD does not report a cross-country average change.

In literacy, average proficiency improved significantly in only two countries, Finland (by 15 points) and Denmark (by 9 points). It was stable in 14 and declined significantly in 11. The largest falls were 31 points in Poland, 28 in Lithuania, 23 in Korea and 21 in New Zealand. Numeracy trends were more favourable: scores improved in 8 countries, with the largest gains in Finland and Singapore (17 points each) and Estonia (9), were stable in 12 and fell in 7.

The OECD's analysis of where the declines came from is the most important finding for adult educators. In its words: "Declines in average proficiency are largely due to falls among the lowest-performing adults." In most countries the literacy scores of the lowest-performing 10% fell, while the top 10% fared better. The gap between the highest and lowest scoring 10% widened in 17 countries in literacy and 13 in numeracy. Half the countries saw an increase in the share of adults at or below Level 1 in literacy, and none saw a reduction.

Who is being left behind

- **Education.** Nearly all countries recorded literacy declines among adults with below upper secondary education. Among tertiary-educated adults, literacy fell in 13 countries and rose only in Finland. The report notes that "despite widespread educational expansion, average skill levels have not increased accordingly".
- **Age.** Literacy among 16 to 24 year olds improved only in Norway, Finland and England, and fell in eight countries, by more than 20 points in New Zealand, Lithuania, Poland and the Slovak Republic.
- **Migration.** Foreign-born adults scored 44 points below native-born adults in literacy on average. About half the gap is explained by factors such as lower education and lack of proficiency in the language of the assessment.
- **Family background.** Adults with low-educated parents scored on average 50 points lower in literacy than adults with highly educated parents, and that gap widened in half of the countries.
- **Gender.** Literacy declined more among men than women, and women now have higher literacy on average. Men still outperform women in numeracy by about 10 points.

Skills, qualifications and VET

The international report groups adults by level of education rather than by whether their qualification was general or vocational. Its "upper secondary" category covers ISCED levels 3 and 4, which is where most vocational certificates sit internationally. Short-cycle tertiary programmes (ISCED 5, which includes many diplomas) are counted as tertiary.

Table 3. Average proficiency of adults aged 25 to 65 by highest level of education, OECD average, 2023

Highest education	Literacy	Numeracy	Adaptive problem solving
Below upper secondary	206.8	207.0	209.1
Upper secondary (ISCED 3 and 4)	250.0	253.5	242.4
Tertiary (ISCED 5 to 8)	282.7	288.0	267.6

Source: OECD (2024), Survey of Adult Skills 2023, Figure 2.8 data (StatLink for Chapter 2), drawing on Annex Table A.2.5.

The gaps are large: about 76 points in literacy between the lowest and highest attainment groups on average, roughly one and a half times the 50-point width of a proficiency level. They are not destiny, though. In Sweden, adults with below upper secondary education averaged 240.6 in literacy, within 10 points of the OECD average for adults with upper secondary education.

The report also shows that skills carry value beyond qualifications. A one standard deviation increase in numeracy (58 points) is associated with a 1 percentage point greater likelihood of employment and 9% higher wages, compared with 16% higher wages for three additional years of education. About a third of workers across OECD countries are mismatched to their jobs by qualification, skills or field of study; 23% are over-qualified and 9% under-qualified, and 10% of workers say they lack some of the skills their job requires.

What Australia's own data say about VET qualifications

Because Australia was not in the 2023 round, the best available Australian evidence on the skills of adults with VET qualifications comes from the ABS release of the first cycle. Those data cover Australians aged 15 to 74 in 2011 and 2012, so they are not directly comparable with the 2023 international figures, which cover ages 16 to 65 and use an updated assessment.

Table 4. Australians at higher proficiency levels by highest non-school qualification, 2011 to 2012

Highest non-school qualification	Literacy Level 3 or above	Numeracy Level 3 or above	Problem solving (technology-rich) Level 2 or above
Postgraduate degree	81.8%	76.8%	50.2%
Bachelor degree	77.5%	68.5%	50.3%
Advanced diploma or diploma	62.1%	47.5%	29.7%
Certificate III or IV	49.9%	40.2%	21.2%
Certificate I or II	44.6%	30.9%	18.8%
No non-school qualification	44.2%	34.2%	21.6%

Source: ABS, Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011 to 2012, "Education attainment".

Read carefully, this table says that roughly half of Australians whose highest qualification was a Certificate III or IV were below Level 3 in literacy, and about six in ten were below Level 3 in numeracy. Adults whose highest qualification was a Certificate I or II had literacy and numeracy profiles very similar to adults with no post-school qualification. The pattern held among current learners too: in 2011 and 2012, 54% of people studying a Certificate III or IV had literacy at Level 3 or above, compared with 80% of those studying for a bachelor degree and 34% of those studying a Certificate I or II.

These figures describe the people who hold or are studying for qualifications. They do not show what VET courses add or fail to add, because people choose and are selected into different levels of study partly on the basis of prior skills. Field of study also matters: the ABS notes that 47% of people with qualifications in architecture and building had literacy at Level 3 or above, and links this partly to the higher share of vocational qualifications in that field.

Australia's overall picture in 2011 to 2012

Table 5. Australians aged 15 to 74 by proficiency level, 2011 to 2012

Level	Literacy	Numeracy
Below Level 1	3.7%	6.5%
Level 1	10.4%	15.3%
Level 2	30.1%	32.5%
Level 3	37.9%	31.3%
Level 4 or 5	15.7%	12.3%

Source: ABS, Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011 to 2012, "Skill levels". Level 4 and 5 combined by us from the ABS figures.

At that time, around 14% of Australian adults were at or below Level 1 in literacy and about 22% in numeracy. Whether Australia has followed the declining trend seen in many countries since then, including New Zealand, is unknown until Cycle 2 results for Australia are available.

Limits of the evidence

The survey is the most rigorous international measure of adult skills available, but the OECD itself flags several cautions.

- **Lower response rates.** Response rates in 2023 ranged from 27% to 73%, compared with 45% to 75% in the first round of the first cycle, and only Korea exceeded 70%. The OECD ran non-response bias analyses, and its Technical Advisory Group concluded that data from all countries were of sufficiently high quality for publication. Lower participation still increases the risk that respondents differ from non-respondents.
- **Different intervals.** Trend comparisons span 11 years for most countries but 8 or 6 years for others, so the size of changes cannot be compared directly across all participants.
- **Country cautions.** Poland's results carry a caution because of a high share of respondents with unusual response patterns.

- **Associations, not causes.** Links between skills, education, earnings and wellbeing are correlations, sometimes adjusted for background characteristics. The survey does not show that a particular programme raised skills.
- **No current Australian data.** Any statement about Australian adults' skills today relative to other countries goes beyond the evidence.

It is also worth separating the OECD's findings from its recommendations. The findings are the scores and trends above. The OECD's policy messages include continued investment in adult learning, attention to the lowest performers and better alignment of workers' skills with jobs. Our own interpretation follows.

What this means for your practice

Our interpretation, not the OECD's or the ABS's.

1. **Assume foundation skills needs in every cohort.** On the most recent Australian data, around half of adults with a Certificate III or IV as their highest qualification were below Level 3 in literacy. Pre-training review should identify learners who need support, and that support should be built into delivery rather than treated as an exception.
2. **Embed literacy and numeracy in vocational content.** Adults at Levels 1 and 2 can work with short, explicitly signposted texts but struggle with long or distracting ones. Write workbooks, assessment instructions and online materials to be clear and well structured, and teach the reading and calculation demands of each unit explicitly.
3. **Focus effort on the lowest performers.** The 2023 results show the international decline is concentrated in the bottom of the distribution. Targeted support for learners with the weakest skills is likely to matter more than general enrichment.
4. **Do not treat a qualification as proof of skill.** The survey shows qualifications and measured skills diverge, and that skill levels have not kept pace with rising attainment. Assess what learners can actually do, including when granting credit or recognition.
5. **Plan for adults with different language backgrounds.** Foreign-born adults scored 44 points lower in literacy on average, partly because of language. Clear English, glossaries and language support can make vocational learning accessible without lowering standards.
6. **Use numeracy as a lever.** Numeracy had the strongest association with employment and wages. Units that involve measurement, quantities, costing or data are opportunities to build numeracy deliberately.
7. **Prepare for new Australian data.** Australia's Cycle 2 main data collection is scheduled to begin in December 2027. Providers and policy makers should plan to compare their learner profiles with those results when they appear.

Sources

- OECD, *Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World? Survey of Adult Skills 2023*, OECD Skills Studies, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1787/b263dc5d-en
- OECD, Chapter 2 data workbook (StatLink), *Survey of Adult Skills 2023*, 2024, https://stat.link/qi3pwc

- OECD, *Survey of Adult Skills 2023: Reader's Companion*, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1787/3639d1e2-en
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011 to 2012*, 2013, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/programme-international-assessment-adult-competencies-australia/latest-release
- Jobs and Skills Australia, *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies*, page last modified 22 October 2026, https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/research/piaac

TEACHWISE

The Global Picture, UNESCO and Education Worldwide

By Sukh Sandhu

With four years left before the 2030 deadline for Sustainable Development Goal 4, UNESCO's latest monitoring shows a world that is enrolling more learners than ever but still leaving 273 million children and young people out of school. The 2026 Global Education Monitoring Report concludes that countries will not achieve access for all by 2030, while arguing that the progress made should not be dismissed. This article summarises what the two most recent GEM Reports found, what the SDG 4 indicators show, the scale of the global teacher shortage, what UNESCO's TVET centre network looks like, and what all of this means for educators in Australia.

At a glance

Report	Publisher	Year	Method	Sample
Access and equity: Countdown to 2030 (2026 GEM Report)	UNESCO GEM Report team	March 2026	Global monitoring of SDG 4 indicators plus policy review	UIS and survey data; 35 country case studies
Leadership in education: Lead for learning (2024/5 GEM Report)	UNESCO GEM Report team	October 2024	Policy review, literature review, country profiles	211 PEER country profiles on leadership
The teachers we need for the education we want (factsheet) and *Global Report on Teachers*	UNESCO and Teacher Task Force	2023 and 2024	Projections of teacher requirements to 2030	New UIS dataset of country teacher requirements
UNEVOC Network directory	UNESCO-UNEVOC	At November 2026	Directory of member centres	263 UNEVOC Centres

What the GEM Report is

The Global Education Monitoring Report was established in 2002 and is described by UNESCO as editorially independent, hosted and published by UNESCO. It has the mandate to monitor progress towards SDG 4, which commits countries to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030.

Each edition combines a statistical monitoring section on the ten SDG 4 targets with a thematic section.

At November 2026, the two most recent main editions are:

- the **2024/5 GEM Report**, *Leadership in education: Lead for learning*, released on 31 October 2024 at the Global Education Meeting in Fortaleza, Brazil; and
- the **2026 GEM Report**, *Access and equity: Countdown to 2030*, launched on 25 March 2026 in Paris. It is the first of a three-part Countdown to 2030 series, with quality and learning scheduled for 2027 and relevance to follow.

The GEM team has also published regional and spin-off reports in 2025 and 2026, including a 2026 youth report, *Lead with youth*, prepared with the United Nations Youth Office.

The 2026 report: access and equity

More learners, but out-of-school numbers rising again

The 2026 report starts with a paradox. Enrolment has surged: there were 1.4 billion students in school in 2024, an increase of 327 million, or 30%, in primary and secondary education since 2000. Pre-primary enrolment rose by 45% and post-secondary enrolment by 161% over the same period.

Yet after falling by 33% between 2000 and 2015, the out-of-school population has risen for a seventh year in a row. It reached 273 million in 2024, up 3% since 2015, meaning that one in six children, adolescents and youth worldwide are not in education. The report adds that this is undercounted by at least 13 million if humanitarian data are used to fill gaps in the ten countries most affected by conflict (2026 GEM Report summary, p. 7).

Out-of-school population, 2024	Number
Total	273 million
Boys	140 million
Girls	133 million
Primary school age	79 million
Lower secondary age	64 million
Upper secondary age	130 million

Source: 2026 GEM Report, Monitoring education in the SDGs (Chapter 7), Target 4.1.

The out-of-school rate has been stable at around 17% since 2015, ranging from 3% in high-income to 36% in low-income countries. A note on comparisons: UNESCO's October 2024 launch materials gave a figure of 251 million. The two editions draw on different data releases and estimates, so the difference should not be read as a rise of 22 million in a single year.

Completion is improving, slowly

Completion tells a more encouraging story than enrolment. Since 2000, completion rates have risen from 77% to 88% in primary, 60% to 78% in lower secondary and 37% to 61% in upper secondary education. At current rates, though, the report estimates the world would reach 95% upper secondary completion only by 2105.

Key SDG 4 indicators

Indicator (global, 2024 unless stated)	Value
Primary completion rate	88% (low-income: 60%)
Lower secondary completion rate	78% (low-income: 37%)
Upper secondary completion rate	61% (low-income: 20%)
Students at minimum reading proficiency, end of primary	58% (not updated since COVID-19)
Students at minimum maths proficiency, end of primary	44% (not updated since COVID-19)
Participation in organised learning one year before primary	About 75% (only about 60% after adjusting for early entry)
Tertiary gross enrolment ratio	44% (19% in 2000)
Youth (15 to 24) participation in TVET	3.7% (2.7% in 2000)
Adult (25 to 64) participation in education and training	2.4% (2% in 2000)
Youth literacy	93%
Adult literacy	88%
Median public education spending	4.2% of GDP; 12.6% of public expenditure

Source: 2026 GEM Report, Monitoring education in the SDGs (Chapter 7), Targets 4.1 to 4.6 and Finance; summary, pp. 7 and 22.

Several of these figures come with UNESCO's own warnings. The pre-primary indicator overstates preschool attendance because 27% of the five year olds counted were already in primary school. The tertiary gross enrolment ratio overstates progress because many students never graduate: the graduation ratio rose only from 17% to 27% between 2000 and 2024, and attainment among 25 to 34 year olds is consistently about 60% of the enrolment ratio a decade earlier. In several middle and high-income countries, between 15% and 20% or more of first-year bachelor's students drop out. The report recommends tracking tertiary attainment among 25 to 29 year olds instead (summary, p. 22).

Equity and finance

Wealth remains the strongest driver of inequality. In low-income countries, for every 100 young people from the richest fifth of households who complete upper secondary school, only 13 from the poorest fifth do. Even in high-income countries the figure is 66 per 100.

Financing is moving in the wrong direction. Among 159 countries with comparable data, 54% had reduced education spending as a share of GDP between 2015 and 2023. Only 41 of 183 countries (22%) met both international benchmarks of at least 4% of GDP and at least 15% of public expenditure. Aid to education fell by 8% between 2023 and 2024, and aid to basic education by 16%. A new index in the report finds fewer than one in ten countries have a sufficiently strong equity focus in their finance mechanisms.

Policy has shifted, especially on inclusion

The report documents real change in the laws and policies behind access. Since 2000, the share of countries with inclusive education laws has risen from 1% to 24%, and the share whose laws call for children with disabilities to be taught in inclusive settings from 17% to 29%. Between 2020 and 2025, the proportion of countries with a definition of inclusive education grew from 68% to 84%, and among those, the share whose definition extends

beyond disability rose from 51% to 69%. Among 158 countries, the share with 12 years of compulsory education rose from 8% in 1998 to 26% in 2023.

Learning environments remain a concern. In 70 of 83 countries with data, more than half of lower secondary students reported being bullied. In 2024, 3,909 attacks on education were recorded in 69 countries, the highest number since the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack began reporting in 2013. On a more positive note, school meal programs reached 466 million children in 2024, a 20% increase since 2020.

What the report says about policy

The 2026 report resists simple answers. It argues that factors outside education policy, such as women's labour force participation, migration prospects and peace, often explain long-term expansion. It also cautions against paying "too much attention" to short-term impact studies that try to identify "what works" while ignoring the institutions needed to sustain change. Its policy reviews favour "coherent, context-specific and balanced policy packages".

On post-secondary education, the report notes that vocational education can be "a potentially powerful indirect route" into higher education for under-represented groups, depending on quality, relevance, flexible pathways and recognition. Australia is named, with Argentina and Canada, as a country where transferable credits, joint programs and flexible admissions turn colleges into "stepping stones rather than dead ends" (summary, p. 26). The same section notes that even in Europe only about one in ten students enter university through non-standard paths, and that micro-credentials expand participation only if they are integrated into qualifications frameworks.

The 2024/5 report: leadership in education

The 2024/5 GEM Report examined leadership at school, system and political levels. It identified four dimensions of effective leadership: set expectations, focus on learning, foster collaboration and develop people. A global review of principal preparation programs found that barely half focus on any of these four, and only one third on all four.

Finding	Figure
Share of variance in student outcomes linked to principal and teacher leadership inputs (US estimate)	Up to 27%
Countries with open, competitive principal recruitment	63%
Countries requiring principals to be fully qualified teachers	76%
Countries regulating induction of new principals	31%
Principals' time on routine management tasks (survey in 14 middle-income countries)	68%
Secondary principals overseeing teaching, high-income countries	81% (2015) to 77% (2022)
Education ministers since 2010 leaving office within two years	Half
Education ministers with school teaching experience	23%
Countries with measures on gender diversity in principal recruitment	11%

Source: 2024/5 GEM Report summary, Key messages, pp. 1 to 2.

The report's message, in its own words, is that "school leaders should not be heroes". It argues for shared leadership involving assistant principals, teachers, students and parents, yet only half of countries explicitly emphasise teacher collaboration in leadership standards. It also found that almost half of principals in richer countries receive no training before appointment.

Much of the evidence on leadership impact comes from correlational and observational studies, and several figures come from single-country studies or surveys of particular country groups. The report presents them as indicative rather than universal.

The global teacher shortage

UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 estimate that the world needs 44 million additional primary and secondary teachers to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030. This figure first appeared in a 2023 factsheet and was confirmed in the first *Global Report on Teachers*, released in February 2024. It is down from an estimate of 69 million made in 2016.

Region	Additional teachers needed by 2030
World	44 million
Sub-Saharan Africa	15 million
Southern Asia	7.8 million
Europe and Northern America	4.8 million
Eastern Asia	3.4 million
Latin America and the Caribbean	3.2 million

Source: UNESCO and Teacher Task Force, The teachers we need for the education we want, factsheet (2023), pp. 3 to 4. Regions not listed are omitted.

Two details matter for understanding the number.

- **Most of the need is in secondary education.** Globally, 31 million of the 44 million (seven in ten) are secondary teachers and 13 million primary. In sub-Saharan Africa, 10.7 million secondary teachers are needed compared with 4.4 million primary.
- **The reasons differ by region.** In sub-Saharan Africa, 9.4 million (62%) of the gap comes from new posts for a growing school-age population. In Europe and Northern America, 94% of the shortage relates to anticipated attrition, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, 89% (factsheet, pp. 4 to 5).

That second point is the one closest to Australian experience. In wealthy countries the shortage is mainly about keeping teachers, not growing the workforce. UNESCO reports that primary teacher attrition globally nearly doubled from 4.62% in 2015 to 9.06% in 2022, with many teachers leaving within their first five years. The 2026 report adds that the share of professionally qualified primary teachers in high-income countries fell from 97% to 92%.

The projections are model-based estimates using country-reported requirements. They depend on assumptions about enrolment, pupil-teacher ratios and attrition, and they cover school teachers, not VET or tertiary educators.

TVET in the global picture

What the indicators show

Technical and vocational education is a small but growing share of global participation. The 2026 report finds that participation in TVET among 15 to 24 year olds rose from 2.7% in 2000 to 3.7% in 2024. Adult participation in education and training rose more slowly, from 2% to 2.4%. High-income countries have both the highest level and the fastest growth, rising from 4.6% to 6.7%, while participation has stayed at 1.2% in lower-middle-income countries.

The skills indicator is also revealing. In the median country with data for 2022 to 2024, 68% of adults participated in social networks, 54% could copy and move files, 33% could prepare electronic presentations, 24% verified online information and just 6% had programming skills. UNESCO cautions that 85% of reporting countries are upper-middle or high-income, so these figures are not globally representative.

UNESCO-UNEVOC

UNESCO's International Centre for TVET, UNEVOC, based in Bonn, coordinates a global network of TVET institutions. At November 2026, its network directory listed 263 UNEVOC Centres across 152 countries and territories.

UNEVOC Centre type	Number
National bodies	74
Training centres	66
Ministries	65
Universities and research institutions	58
Total	263

Source: UNESCO-UNEVOC Network directory, at November 2026.

Australia has four UNEVOC Centres: NCVER, TAFE Directors Australia, RMIT University and Griffith University's School of Education and Professional Studies. New Zealand's Waikato Institute of Technology and two Fijian centres give the network a presence in the wider Pacific. UNEVOC's work sits under UNESCO's TVET strategy, framed around transforming TVET for "successful and just transitions".

UNEVOC is primarily a knowledge and capacity network rather than a statistical agency, so most global TVET numbers, including the SDG 4 participation indicator, come through the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the GEM Report.

Limits of the evidence

- **Data gaps are large.** The 2026 report notes that while nearly 95% of countries have recent out-of-school data, coverage is much weaker for other indicators. One in three countries do not report urban and rural disparities and one in two do not report wealth disparities.
- **Learning data are old.** The global minimum proficiency estimates for the end of primary school have not been updated since COVID-19.

- **Estimates are revised.** Out-of-school and teacher projections are model-based and change as data improve, which is why the 251 million and 273 million figures are not directly comparable.
- **Global averages hide Australia.** Most headline figures are dominated by low and middle-income countries with large populations. Australia rarely appears in the summary tables.
- **Leadership evidence is mixed in quality.** Several leadership figures come from single-country studies and are correlational.

It is worth separating findings from recommendations. The indicator values and projections are findings. The GEM Report's calls for equity-oriented financing, fair principal recruitment and shared leadership are recommendations. Our own interpretation follows.

What this means for Australian educators

Our interpretation, not UNESCO's.

1. **Use global data for perspective, not comparison.** Australia sits among high-income systems where out-of-school rates average 3%. The global numbers are most useful for understanding the learners who arrive in Australia from systems where completion was not assured.
2. **Plan for interrupted schooling.** Many migrants and refugees come from countries where upper secondary completion is low or late. Foundation skills, language support and recognition of prior learning matter more than assumptions about prior schooling.
3. **Treat retention as the workforce issue.** UNESCO's analysis shows shortages in wealthy regions are driven by attrition. For VET providers, that points to induction, mentoring and manageable workloads for new trainers, not only recruitment.
4. **Invest in leaders who lead learning.** The 2024/5 report's finding that principals spend most of their time on routine administration has an obvious parallel in RTO management. Protect time for training managers to observe teaching and develop staff.
5. **Strengthen pathways.** The 2026 report holds up Australian credit transfer and flexible admissions as an example. Make articulation from VET into higher education visible to learners, and support those who use it.
6. **Watch the completion gap, not just enrolment.** UNESCO's warning that enrolment overstates progress applies at home. Measure completion and outcomes as carefully as commencements.
7. **Connect to the network.** With NCVER and other Australian institutions in UNEVOC, practitioners have a route into international TVET practice and comparative research.

Sources

- UNESCO GEM Report team, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2026: Access and equity, countdown to 2030*, 2026, https://www.unesco.org/reports/gem-report/en/2026
- UNESCO GEM Report team, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2026 summary: Access and equity, countdown to 2030*, 2026, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000397735_eng

- UNESCO GEM Report team, *Monitoring education in the SDGs* (2026 GEM Report, Chapter 7 summary), 2026, https://www.unesco.org/reports/gem-report/en/2026-monitoring-sdg4
- UNESCO GEM Report team, *2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report, Leadership in education: Lead for learning*, 2024, https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/leadership
- UNESCO GEM Report team, *Summary, 2024/5 GEM Report: Leadership in education: lead for learning*, 2024, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391758_eng
- UNESCO, "251M children and youth still out of school, despite decades of progress (UNESCO report)", press release, 2024, https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/251m-children-and-youth-still-out-school-despite-decades-progress-unesco-report
- UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, *The teachers we need for the education we want: the global imperative to reverse the teacher shortage; factsheet*, 2023, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387001
- UNESCO, *Global report on teachers: what you need to know*, 2024, https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/global-report-teachers-what-you-need-know
- UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, *Global Report on Teachers: Addressing teacher shortages and transforming the profession*, 2024, https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/global-report-teachers-addressing-teacher-shortages-and-transforming-profession
- UNESCO-UNEVOC, *UNEVOC Network*, accessed November 2026, https://unevoc.unesco.org/home/UNEVOC+Network

TEACHWISE

The VET Teaching Workforce in the Research: Who Teaches, What They Hold and How They Are Employed

By Sukh Sandhu

Australia's VET system depends on a workforce it has never properly counted. The best estimates of how many people teach in VET differ by tens of thousands depending on the data source, and the last national survey of the workforce is now seven years old. Yet the research that does exist paints a consistent picture: an older, dual-qualified, often part-time and casual workforce, paid less than teachers in schools and universities, and shrinking while demand grows. This article brings together the main Australian studies and their published data. It does not revisit the policy content of the VET Workforce Blueprint; it focuses on what the research measured.

Report	Publisher	Year	Method	Sample
VET Workforce Study	Jobs and Skills Australia	October 2024	Census 2021, ABS linked tax data (PLIDA), TAFE data, vacancy and survey data	Whole Census population in VET occupations and industry
Understanding the Australian vocational education and training workforce (Knight, White and Granfield)	NCVER	2020	National survey of RTOs, workforce at February 2019	3,635 RTOs in scope; 40% response
Building capability and quality in VET teaching (Misko, Guthrie and Waters)	NCVER	2020, revised 2021	Literature review, framework scan, stakeholder interviews, three case studies	Peak bodies, RTOs, unions, regulators
Effective teaching and learning: teacher perspectives on what works best for whom (Griffin and Davidson)	NCVER	March 2025	Interviews and focus groups	16 teachers recognised for teaching excellence; 5 focus groups (20 people)
Strengthening teaching practice and psychosocial support	NCVER	October 2026	Survey, interviews, workshops	956 survey responses

The counting problem

Every study in this field begins with the same warning: there is no regular national collection of VET workforce data. The JSA *VET Workforce Study* opens by setting the competing estimates side by side (p. 6).

Source	What it counted	Estimate
Productivity Commission, 2011	Total VET workforce	223,000
NCVER National VET Workforce Survey, February 2019	Total RTO workforce	246,167
NCVER National VET Workforce Survey, February 2019	Trainers and assessors	71,379
ABS Census 2021	Workers in the TVET industry	58,000
ABS Census 2021	VET teachers across all industries	32,000
JSA analysis of Census and PLIDA	VET workforce	over 110,000

Sources: JSA 2024, p. 6; NCVER 2020, p. 7.

The numbers diverge because each source sees a different slice. The Census records only a person's main job, so an electrician who teaches two days a week may appear as an electrician. The 2019 NCVER survey asked RTOs, not individuals, about their staff; it had a 40% response rate and excluded trainers working in schools and businesses under third party arrangements, so NCVER itself described its trainer count as likely to be an underestimate. JSA found that one in five Census-identified VET teachers (20.3%) worked in one of 243 industries outside education and training, from correctional services to iron ore mining (Table 1.1, p. 8).

The 2019 survey also showed how the teaching share of the workforce rises with provider size: trainers and assessors made up 19.9% of staff in small RTOs, 21.9% in medium, 40.3% in large and 59.0% in very large RTOs (NCVER 2020, p. 7). JSA's Census analysis put just under half of the VET workforce (48.5%) in "teach, train and assess" roles (p. 13).

Who teaches in VET

The most consistent demographic finding is age. In the 2021 Census the average age of the VET workforce was 47.3, against 40.1 for all Australian workers, and 46.5% of VET workers were 50 or older, compared with 20.2% of the wider workforce (JSA 2024, p. 33). The teaching segment is older still.

Characteristic (Census 2021)	Teach, train and assess	Whole VET workforce	Australian workforce
Female	51.1%	57.2%	48.5%
Average age	48.1	47.3	40.1
First Nations	1.8%	2.1%	2.2%
Born overseas	31.4%	33.0%	32.4%
Language other than English at home	18.2%	20.5%	23.4%

Source: JSA 2024, Table 2.2, p. 31.

Within teaching, public providers skew older: 58.3% of VET teachers in public providers were over 50, compared with 48.7% in private providers (p. 33). JSA explains the age profile by career pattern. Most VET teachers arrive after an industry career, and Certificate IV TAE students are older on average than other students at that level.

The lower share of teachers who speak a language other than English at home, and the First Nations share of 1.8%, matter because the student body is more diverse than the staff room. JSA's *First Nations VET Workforce Research Paper*, released on 17 March 2026, reports that the First Nations VET workforce grew 18% between 2016 and 2021 but still represents 2% of the workforce against a 3.8% population share, and that First Nations learners show stronger engagement and completion when taught by First Nations educators (JSA web summary, 2026).

Dual professionals: what qualifications teachers hold

Under the Standards for RTOs, VET teachers need both vocational competence and a training and assessment credential. That dual requirement is the defining feature of the workforce, and it is exactly what Census data cannot see, because the Census records only a person's highest qualification. The 2019 NCVER survey remains the only national source that separated the two (NCVER 2020, Tables 6 and 9, pp. 16 and 18).

Qualification held by trainers and assessors, February 2019	Share
Certificate IV in Training and Assessment as highest teaching qualification	77.1%
Any diploma or higher teaching qualification	16.2%
Certificate IV TAE or higher (total)	93.3%
Working under supervision	9.4%
Diploma or above in their vocational field	37.6%
Certificate III or IV in their vocational field	51.8%
Certificate III or higher in their vocational field (total)	89.4%

Source: NCVER 2020, Tables 6, 7 and 9.

TAFE trainers were more likely than private provider trainers to hold a diploma or higher teaching qualification (19.3% against 15.0%), and 97.8% of TAFE trainers held the Certificate IV or higher, against 90.6% in private providers (Table 8). JSA later reported that Victorian TAFE staff are more highly qualified again, with 33.1% holding a diploma or above as their teaching qualification (p. 37), which NCVER's 2026 support document links to a Victorian award that pays more for higher teaching qualifications.

The Census adds another layer. Almost half the VET workforce (49.4%) holds a bachelor degree or higher, compared with 35.4% of all workers, and 74.2% of the teaching segment holds a diploma or above (JSA 2024, p. 35). But only 35.9% of VET teachers with a diploma or higher had an education-related field as their highest qualification, implying that much of this attainment comes from their vocational discipline rather than from teaching.

The newest NCVER study shows what this qualification profile looks like from the inside. Interviewees described the Certificate IV as strongly compliance focused and weak on teaching practice, classroom management and supporting diverse learners (NCVER 2026, p. 54). That is opinion data, not a test of teaching quality, but it is consistent across studies going back more than a decade.

Part-time, casual and multiple jobs

Both major sources show insecure employment well above the national average, though they measure it differently.

Employment basis, trainers and assessors (NCVER, February 2019)	Permanent	Contract or temporary	Casual or sessional
TAFE	38.7%	10.2%	51.1%
Private training providers	47.9%	21.2%	30.9%
Community education providers	47.0%	14.8%	38.2%
Enterprise providers	88.0%	6.5%	5.5%
All providers	53.5%	13.9%	32.6%

Source: NCVER 2020, Table 5, p. 15.

The TAFE figure surprises many readers: by headcount, just over half of TAFE trainers in 2019 were casual or sessional. JSA's 2021 data, drawn from the ABS Employee Earnings and Hours collection, show 55.8% of VET teachers permanent, 14.8% fixed term and 27.3% casual, against 69.8%, 5.0% and 21.1% for the Australian workforce (Table 2.6, p. 44). More VET teachers work part-time (37.4%) than the Australian workforce (32.9%), and women make up 63.4% of part-time VET teachers despite being about half of all VET teachers (Tables 2.5 and 2.7).

One widely held belief did not survive the data. Linked tax records showed that 31.5% of VET teachers declared income from more than one job in 2021/22, slightly below the median across all occupations (32.8%) and below secondary school teachers (32.3%). The figure has fallen from 33.2% in 2012/13 (JSA 2024, p. 45). JSA notes the limitation: tax data only classify someone as a VET teacher if that is their highest-earning occupation, so people who teach as a sideline are missed.

Both NCVER in 2020 and the Productivity Commission in 2011 drew the same inference from high casual rates: casual staff may get fewer chances to develop their teaching. The evidence for that link is mostly from stakeholder views rather than measurement. In its October 2025 discussion paper, JSA describes a mixed-methods research project to quantify casual and fixed-term employment across provider types and examine its drivers and its effects on delivery.

Pay

On JSA's figures, VET teachers earn more than the average Australian worker but less than other teachers (pp. 46 to 51).

- Median weekly total cash earnings for VET teachers were $1,886, 11.1% above the all-worker median of $1,697. Secondary school teachers earned 14.8% more than VET teachers, and university lecturers and tutors 44.9% more.
- VET teachers in public institutions earned 24.4% more than those in private RTOs.
- The estimated gender pay gap was 17% for the teaching segment overall, narrowing to 7% for full-time workers, which JSA says shows that the higher share of women in casual roles widens the gap. JSA describes this as an estimate with considerable limitations.
- Under the Educational Services (Post-Secondary Education) Award 2020, the published range ran from $58,363 to $76,391, while entry rates for Certificate IV holders in the TAFE enterprise agreements JSA listed ranged from $72,702 to $89,198 (Table 2.10).
- Collective agreements set pay for 61.7% of VET teachers, against more than 95% of school teachers.

Shrinking supply, rising demand

JSA's supply data are the most striking in the study. Linked tax data show the number of VET teachers fell by 5,214 (18.1%) between 2011/12 and 2020/21, while the Census shows a 10.7% fall from 2011 to 2021, during a period when the overall workforce grew (p. 27). Projections commissioned by JSA suggest VET teacher employment will need to grow by 12% (3,800 people) in five years and 21% (6,900) over ten.

Occupation (SERA, Jan 2021 to Aug 2023)	Vacancy fill rate	Applicants per vacancy	Suitable applicants per vacancy
Vocational education teacher	50%	5.09	1.23
Early childhood teacher	50%	5.81	1.42
Primary school teacher	74%	8.49	3.19
Secondary school teacher	75%	6.17	1.72
University lecturer	81%	14.19	2.93

Source: JSA 2024, Table 4.1, Survey of Employers who have Recently Advertised.

The training pipeline is not as large as enrolment numbers suggest. Certificate IV TAE completions fell by 5,166 (23.9%) between 2016 and 2021, and preliminary 2022 figures were lower again (Table 4.2, p. 112). And most graduates were not new entrants: in the 2022 Student Outcomes Survey only 26.3% of Certificate IV TAE graduates did it to get a job, start a business or change career, while 67.6% did it as a job requirement, for skills in their current job or for promotion (p. 115). Only one in three graduates working outside teaching and education found it highly relevant to their job. Completions of skill sets allowing delivery under supervision grew more than sevenfold from 2016, a quick route in that JSA found was not yet translating into more full Certificate IV completions.

NCVER's 2026 completion data add a further detail: of the 26,035 commencing enrolments in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment in 2021, 61.1% completed within four years, down from 63.6% for the 2020 cohort (*VET qualification completion rates 2025*, Table 1).

Where do VET teachers come from and go? Over 2011/12 to 2019/20, 28.3% of those entering VET teaching came from other education occupations and 16.5% from vocational occupations; of those leaving for a known role, most moved into other education jobs, with 7.2% returning to vocational work (Table 4.6, p. 125). Almost half of inflows and over half of outflows had no known occupation, which limits the conclusions.

Capability frameworks: wanted, but not prescribed

On how teaching quality should be defined and developed, the research is mostly qualitative. Misko, Guthrie and Waters (NCVER 2020, revised 2021) scanned capability frameworks and standards and interviewed peak bodies, RTO leaders, union representatives, regulators and education deans. They found:

- broad agreement that teaching quality in VET is variable, and that dual professionals struggle to keep both industry and teaching currency, with heavy workloads and casual employment working against development;
- strong support for capability frameworks as tools for self-evaluation, reflection and development planning, but limited appetite for a nationally prescribed framework, with a set of locally adaptable core capabilities proposed instead;
- that the IBSA VET Practitioner Capability Framework was widely used but "somewhat dated";
- mixed views on mandatory registration of VET teachers, with the majority questioning its value.

Six years later, the 2026 NCVER study reports the same split. Some RTOs use established frameworks and others build their own, and the authors suggest an updated sector-wide framework published online as a living resource, mainly for providers without the means to develop one (p. 76).

Griffin and Davidson's 2025 study took a different angle, asking 16 teachers recognised for excellence, plus five focus groups, how they cater for different learners. These teachers had largely moved beyond matching instruction to "learning styles", for which the authors note there is little evidence, and focused instead on learning needs and relationship-building. Learning from colleagues was the main way they built higher-level skills, and the authors identified three conditions for spreading good practice: structured induction for new teachers, dedicated time to learn and apply new skills, and recognition of the human side of VET teaching.

Older survey data on professional development remain the most detailed available. As summarised in NCVER's 2026 support document, a 2016 national survey (Tuck and Smith 2017) found 80% of VET teachers paid at least part of their own professional development costs, only 6% did all their development in work time, and 85% undertook development out of self-motivation. The data were collected in 2016, and NCVER notes that updated figures would be informative.

What the evidence cannot yet tell us

The limits here are serious and the researchers say so.

- **No regular collection.** The workforce figures rest on a 2019 RTO survey with a 40% response rate and a 2021 Census that misses secondary jobs.
- **Dual qualifications are largely invisible.** Only the 2019 survey separated teaching from vocational qualifications, and it relied on RTOs reporting for their staff.
- **Casualisation effects are inferred.** The claim that insecure work harms teaching quality is plausible and widely shared, but it has not been measured directly against learner outcomes.
- **Teaching quality is not measured.** No national study links teachers' qualifications or development to learner results; the frameworks literature is built on stakeholder views.
- **Change is coming.** JSA's discussion paper flags occupational mapping work, a data strategy and a research program, and its study notes that more fit-for-purpose occupational classifications were likely to be implemented for 2026. Today's picture will be revised.

What this means for your practice

The points below are our interpretation of the research, not recommendations from JSA or NCVER.

1. **Know your own workforce data.** The national gap means each RTO's records matter. Track headcount, employment basis, teaching and vocational qualifications, years of teaching and turnover for your trainers each year; you will know more than the national statistics do.
2. **Plan for retirements now.** With almost half the VET workforce aged 50 or over and the teaching segment oldest of all, succession in your hardest-to-fill vocational areas is a near-term issue, not a distant one.
3. **Give casual and sessional trainers a development path.** If half of TAFE trainers and nearly a third of private provider trainers are casual or sessional, a PD program open only to permanent staff misses a large share of teaching hours.
4. **Treat the Certificate IV as a starting line.** Most holders have no higher teaching qualification. Support for the Diploma of VET, peer observation and mentoring is how teaching skill grows after entry.
5. **Use a capability framework for conversations, not compliance.** The research supports frameworks as self-assessment and planning tools. Pick one, adapt it to your context, and use it in annual development discussions.
6. **Recruit from education as well as industry.** Tax data show more people move into VET teaching from other education jobs than from vocational occupations. Former school teachers and education aides are a real pipeline, alongside industry experts.
7. **Look at your First Nations and multilingual staffing.** The workforce is less diverse than its learners. Targeted recruitment and support for First Nations educators is backed by JSA's 2026 evidence on learner engagement and completion.

Sources

- Jobs and Skills Australia, *VET Workforce Study*, 2024, https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/studies/vet-workforce-study

- Jobs and Skills Australia, *Building a better understanding of the VET workforce: discussion paper*, October 2025, https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-10/JSA%20Discussion%20paper%20%27Building%20a%20better%20understanding%20of%20the%20VET%20workforce%20%281%29.docx
- Jobs and Skills Australia, *First Nations VET Workforce Research Paper*, 2026, https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/first-nations-vet-workforce-research-paper
- NCVER (Knight G, White I and Granfield P), *Understanding the Australian vocational education and training workforce*, 2020, https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/understanding-the-australian-vocational-education-and-training-workforce
- NCVER (Misko J, Guthrie H and Waters M), *Building capability and quality in VET teaching: opportunities and challenges*, 2021 revision, https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/building-capability-and-quality-in-vet-teaching-opportunities-and-challenges
- NCVER (Griffin T and Davidson N), *Effective teaching and learning: teacher perspectives on what works best for whom*, 2025, https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/effective-teaching-and-learning-teacher-perspectives-on-what-works-best-for-whom
- NCVER, *Strengthening teaching practice and psychosocial support* and support document, 2026, https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/strengthening-teaching-practice-and-psychosocial-support-report
- NCVER, *VET qualification completion rates 2025*, 2026, https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-qualification-completion-rates-2025

TEACHWISE

Student Wellbeing and Mental Health in Tertiary Education

By Sukh Sandhu

Almost two in five Australians aged 16 to 24 had a mental disorder in the previous year, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' most recent national study. That is the age group filling TAFE classrooms, apprenticeships and first-year university courses. Yet the research on tertiary students, and on VET students in particular, is thinner and older than the scale of the issue suggests. This article brings together the national prevalence data, what Australian and international studies say about tertiary learners, what NCVER research found about VET students and disclosure, and which support approaches have evidence behind them.

At a glance

Report	Publisher	Year	Method	Sample
National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2020 to 2022	ABS	2023	Household survey with diagnostic interview	15,893 fully responding households (52.0% response)
National Tertiary Student Wellbeing Survey 2016	headspace and National Union of Students	2017	Online self-selected survey	3,303 students from 70 institutions
WHO World Mental Health International College Student Project	Auerbach and colleagues, *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*	2018	Web-based screening survey	13,984 full-time first-year students, 19 colleges, 8 countries
Who's supporting us? and *Unfinished business*	NCVER	2008 and 2012	Qualitative interviews and focus groups	113 TAFE staff; 20 students and 20 staff
2025 Student Experience Survey	QILT (Australian Government)	2026	National online survey	324,547 responses, 153 higher education institutions

The national picture: young Australians

The ABS National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing was conducted between December 2020 and October 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It used a diagnostic interview to estimate whether people met criteria for a mental disorder in the 12 months

before interview. The sample was deliberately designed to over-select people aged 16 to 24 to improve estimates for this group.

Overall, 21.5% of Australians aged 16 to 85 had a 12-month mental disorder, and 42.9% had experienced one at some time in their life. Young people stood out.

Age group	Males	Females	Persons
16 to 24	32.4%	45.5%	38.8%
25 to 34	22.8%	29.6%	26.3%
35 to 44	16.7%	23.8%	20.3%
45 to 54	16.5%	24.0%	20.2%
55 to 64	16.0%	19.6%	17.9%

Source: ABS, National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2020 to 2022, "12-month mental disorders, by age and sex".

Within the 16 to 24 group:

- 31.8% had a 12-month anxiety disorder, including 40.4% of young women and 24.4% of young men.
- 13.5% had a 12-month affective disorder such as depression.
- 7.8% had a 12-month substance use disorder, the highest rate of any age group.
- 6.0% had self-harmed in the previous 12 months; among young women, 27.9% had self-harmed at some point in their life.

Help-seeking is incomplete. Of Australians aged 16 to 85 with a 12-month mental disorder, 45.1% saw a health professional for their mental health, and the gap between the sexes is wide: 51.1% of women with a disorder sought professional help, compared with 36.4% of men. The gap is relevant to training in male-dominated trades, where a struggling learner is statistically less likely to be receiving professional help. Among people aged 16 to 34, 22.9% saw a health professional for their mental health in the year, and 8.2% accessed other services by phone, internet or digital technology.

The study does not report results by whether someone is a VET or university student, so these figures describe an age group, not a student population. They nonetheless tell a trainer that in a class of twenty 18 year olds, several learners are likely to be managing a diagnosable condition.

Tertiary students in Australia

The 2016 national student survey

The most widely quoted Australian dataset specifically on tertiary students is the *National Tertiary Student Wellbeing Survey 2016*, run by headspace and the National Union of Students (Rickwood, Telford and colleagues). Students were invited through student union representatives and social media.

Measure (students aged 16 to 25)	Result
High or very high psychological distress (K10)	65.2%
Rated mental health as fair or poor	67.3%
Said no mental health symptoms affected study	1.6%
Had accessed on-campus counselling	27%

Measure (students aged 16 to 25)	Result
Comparison: 18 to 24 year olds in the general population with high or very high distress (ABS 2014 to 15)	20% of females, 11% of males

Source: headspace and NUS (2017), pp. 5 and 20.

Money was a recurring theme. Among the young adult students, 82.4% earned less than $400 a week, a third found it difficult or very difficult to meet their living needs, and 47.2% of women and 35.0% of men said they constantly experienced financial stress while studying. More than half (56.4%) had gone without textbooks because of cost.

Among the students aged 16 to 25, the most common symptoms affecting study were feeling stressed (83.2%), low motivation (82.1%), feeling anxious (79%) and low mood (75.7%). Among students aged 26 and over, 53% reported high or very high distress.

The limitations are significant and the authors state them plainly: the participants "are not representative" of the tertiary student population. Only 3.3% of respondents were studying at TAFE, so this is essentially a university survey. Self-selected online surveys about wellbeing tend to attract people for whom the topic is salient, which may inflate prevalence.

Orygen's work on university and VET students

Orygen, the national centre of excellence in youth mental health, published *Under the radar: The mental health of Australian university students* in 2017. It argued that university student mental health had been largely overlooked in national policy, despite about three in five university students being aged 18 to 25. It also summarised evidence on help-seeking: one Australian study found 39% of students with high distress sought professional help, and in another, 25.3% of participants with mental health difficulties said they had not sought help because they were afraid, anxious, embarrassed or ashamed. The Australian Government subsequently funded Orygen to develop the *Australian University Mental Health Framework*, which was released in December 2020.

Orygen's separate policy brief on VET student mental health (prepared in 2017 and updated in 2018) is blunter about the evidence gap. It notes "a paucity of published research and data" on VET students' mental health. It cites VET provider survey results published by NCVER in 2011, in which 11.7% of VET students who reported a disability identified a mental illness, which Orygen calculated as roughly one per cent of all VET students. Set against population prevalence, Orygen concluded this "suggests significant underreporting".

Why students consider leaving

The Student Experience Survey, run each year across Australian higher education, offers the most current national signal. In 2025, 16.8% of undergraduates and 15.1% of postgraduate coursework students said they had seriously considered leaving their institution, the lowest rates since 2017. For undergraduates the figure had sat between 18.3% and 19.9% every year from 2017 to 2024. Among those who had considered leaving, the reasons were dominated by wellbeing.

Reason for considering leaving, 2025	Undergraduate	Postgraduate coursework
My stress levels	40.0%	33.3%
My mental health	38.4%	26.1%
Financial difficulties	35.9%	32.5%
Difficulty with study workload	33.6%	31.3%
Study/life balance	30.8%	26.7%
Paid work responsibilities	24.6%	24.8%

Source: QILT, 2025 Student Experience Survey National Report (September 2026), Figure 24, p. 21. Selected reasons; students could select multiple reasons.

The survey covers higher education providers, not RTOs, and asks about considering leaving rather than actual withdrawal. QILT notes the measure is linked to subsequent attrition.

VET students: what NCVER found

NCVER's research on mental illness in VET is qualitative and now dated, but it remains the most direct Australian evidence on how VET learners and staff experience the issue.

Outcomes for students reporting a mental illness

In *Who's supporting us? TAFE staff perspectives on supporting students with mental illnesses* (Miller and Nguyen, 2008), NCVER set out the training profile of students who reported a mental illness in the public VET system in 2005.

Measure, 2005	Reporting mental illness	All reporting a disability	Total VET population
Unemployed before training	34%	26%	12%
Enrolled in Certificate I or II	33%	32%	21%
Completed an AQF qualification	12%	15%	18%
Subject completion rate	68%	76%	83%

Source: NCVER, Who's supporting us? (2008), Table 1, p. 12 (NCVER unpublished data).

These figures are two decades old, and the share of students willing to report a mental illness has likely changed since. They still show a consistent pattern: students who disclose a mental illness start further from the labour market, enrol at lower levels and complete less.

What TAFE staff said

The 2008 study interviewed 113 staff across six TAFE institutes. Its key messages were:

- The biggest issue was responding to students who do not disclose. Without disclosure, students cannot access disability support services.
- Staff were unclear how far their role extended. They accepted a duty of care but agreed their roles should not cross into providing personal support.

- Staff wanted practical, ongoing professional development and chances to debrief with experienced colleagues. Mainstream teachers felt more overwhelmed than specialist teachers, and casual staff missed out on training.
- Mental health promotion on campuses was underdeveloped, and staff were concerned about the capacity of community mental health services.
- Many agreed that "TAFE should be concerned with delivering education and training, not therapy".

What students said about disclosure

Unfinished business: student perspectives on disclosure of mental illness and success in VET (Venville and Street, 2012) interviewed 20 VET students with a diagnosed mental illness, enrolled at Certificate III or above, and 20 staff across four institutes. Only five of the 20 students had disclosed their illness at enrolment.

Students named the fear of stigma, prejudice and rejection as reasons not to disclose. For most of those who did, "the desire not to fail" again was the main reason. Students valued self-reliance and wanted to blend in rather than be identified by their illness. Staff, by contrast, mostly expected students to disclose and tended to read reluctance as unwillingness to take responsibility. Students and staff did agree on the factors that support success: being in the right course, having clear goals, and having support in place outside VET. The NCVER foreword drew the logical conclusion: support and reasonable adjustment for all students, not only those who disclose, would overcome the disclosure barrier, though it would require resources.

The international picture

First-year students across eight countries

The WHO World Mental Health International College Student project surveyed incoming first-year students at 19 colleges in eight countries, including Australia. Among 13,984 full-time students, 35% screened positive for at least one common lifetime disorder and 31% for at least one 12-month disorder, across major depression, mania or hypomania, generalised anxiety, panic, alcohol use and substance use disorders. Most conditions had begun in early to middle adolescence, before students arrived.

A companion paper using the same sample (Alonso and colleagues, 2018) found that 20.4% of students reported severe role impairment, rising to 42.9% among those with at least one disorder, compared with 10% of those without. Major depression, generalised anxiety and panic disorder carried the highest odds of severe impairment.

The pooled response rate was 45.5%, and the screening tools are self-report rather than clinical interviews, so prevalence may be over- or under-estimated. The consistent message is that much of the distress educators see is not created by tertiary study but arrives with the student.

What the evidence says about support

There is more evidence about what helps than about how many students need help, though most of it comes from universities rather than VET.

Review	Scope	Main finding
Conley, Durlak and Kirsch (2015), *Prevention Science*	103 controlled universal prevention programs for higher education students	Skill training with supervised practice: mean effect size 0.45; skill training without practice 0.11; information only 0.13
Worsley, Pennington and Corcoran (2022), *PLoS ONE*	27 reviews of interventions for college and university students in high-income OECD countries, 1999 to 2020	Mindfulness, CBT and technology-delivered interventions effective against passive controls; psychoeducation less effective and effects did not endure
Morgan, Ross and Reavley (2018), *PLoS ONE*	18 trials of Mental Health First Aid training, 5,936 participants	Improved knowledge (d 0.31 to 0.72), confidence (d 0.21 to 0.58) and amount of help provided (d 0.23); small reductions in stigma

Sources: abstracts of the three reviews, as listed under Sources.

Three findings stand out for educators.

Practice beats information. Conley and colleagues found that programs teaching skills such as relaxation, cognitive restructuring or social skills worked well only when students practised them with feedback. Information-only programs had small effects. Worsley and colleagues reached a similar conclusion about psychoeducation. A wellbeing week of posters and talks is the format with the least evidence.

Some therapeutic approaches have solid support. Mindfulness-based and cognitive behavioural interventions, including digital versions, reduced common mental health difficulties compared with no intervention. These are delivered by trained practitioners or validated programs, not improvised by teaching staff.

Staff training improves helping, within limits. Mental Health First Aid training improved knowledge, recognition and confidence for up to six months, with smaller and less certain effects later and unclear effects on the quality of help given. The review authors note collaborations with the program's founders, which readers should weigh.

Worsley and colleagues also identified a gap in review-level evidence on setting-based approaches and on students attending colleges in UK settings, which are further education providers. That is the part of the system closest to Australian VET, and the evidence there is weakest.

Limits of the evidence

- **VET is under-researched.** The NCVER studies are qualitative and from 2008 and 2012. There is no current national prevalence estimate for VET students specifically.
- **Disclosure distorts administrative data.** Provider data rely on students reporting a condition, which the research shows many choose not to do.
- **Self-selection.** The 2016 student survey was not representative and was almost entirely university students.
- **Pandemic timing.** The ABS study was conducted between December 2020 and October 2022, when lockdowns, remote learning and other COVID-19 restrictions were in place in parts of Australia.

- **Narrow screening.** The WHO college study screened for six disorders only, so conditions such as eating disorders, post-traumatic stress and psychosis are not captured in its prevalence figures.
- **Universities dominate the intervention evidence.** Program effects measured with full-time, campus-based undergraduates may not transfer to part-time, workplace-based or online VET learners.

It is also worth separating findings from recommendations. The prevalence figures and trial results are findings. Orygen's calls for national VET guidelines, NCVER's suggestion of universal adjustments and QILT's prompt to examine wellbeing are recommendations. Our own interpretation follows.

What this means for your practice

Our interpretation, not that of the ABS, NCVER, Orygen or the review authors.

1. **Design for the learners who will not tell you.** The research consistently finds that many students do not disclose. Build flexibility into assessment timing, attendance and resubmission for everyone, so support does not depend on a diagnosis.
2. **Make the path to help obvious and repeated.** Put support contacts in the unit outline, the learning management system and the first-week induction, and mention them again before assessment peaks. In the 2016 survey, a third (33.5%) of students who sought campus counselling waited more than a week, so name external options too.
3. **Know your role and its boundary.** Staff in the NCVER study wanted clarity: notice, respond respectfully, refer, and follow up on study arrangements. Treatment belongs with health professionals. A written referral protocol helps casual and new staff most.
4. **Prefer skills with practice over information sessions.** If your organisation runs wellbeing activities, the evidence favours practical skill training with rehearsal and feedback, or validated programs, over one-off talks.
5. **Train staff, and keep it current.** Mental health first aid style training has evidence for improving staff knowledge and confidence, with effects that fade. Refresh it, and include trainers and assessors, not only student services.
6. **Watch the pressure points.** Stress, mental health, money and workload top the reasons higher education students consider leaving. In VET, work placements and assessment deadlines are obvious points to check in.
7. **Build relationships with local services.** NCVER found TAFE staff worried about community service capacity. Smaller RTOs especially should establish referral links with headspace centres, GPs and community providers before they are needed.
8. **Collect better data, carefully.** Ask about wellbeing in learner surveys in a way that is voluntary and confidential, and use the results to adjust delivery, not to label individuals.

A note on support

If this article raises concerns for you or someone you work with, support is available. **Lifeline** offers 24 hour crisis support on **13 11 14**. **Beyond Blue** offers support on **1300 22 4636**. In an emergency, call 000.

Sources

- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2020 to 2022*, 2023, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing/latest-release
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing methodology, 2020 to 2022*, https://www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing-methodology/2020-2022
- Rickwood, D., Telford, N., O'Sullivan, S., Crisp, D. and Magyar, R., *National Tertiary Student Wellbeing Survey 2016*, headspace and National Union of Students, 2017, https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/headspace-NUS-Publication-Digital.pdf
- Orygen, *Under the radar: The mental health of Australian university students*, 2017, https://orygen.org.au/Policy/Policy-Reports/Under-the-radar
- Orygen, *Australian University Mental Health Framework*, 2020, https://orygen.org.au/Policy/University-Mental-Health-Framework
- Orygen, *Vocational Education and Training (VET) Student Mental Health*, policy briefing, 2018, https://orygen.org.au/Policy-Centre/Policy-Areas/Employment-and-education/Education/VET-student-mental-health
- Miller, C. and Nguyen, N., *Who's supporting us? TAFE staff perspectives on supporting students with mental illnesses*, NCVER, 2008, https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/whos-supporting-us-tafe-staff-perspectives-on-supporting-students-with-mental-illnesses
- Venville, A. and Street, A., *Unfinished business: student perspectives on disclosure of mental illness and success in VET*, NCVER, 2012, https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/unfinished-business-student-perspectives-on-disclosure-of-mental-illness-and-success-in-vet
- Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, *2025 Student Experience Survey National Report*, 2026, https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2025-ses-national-report.pdf
- Auerbach, R.P. and others, "WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders", *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 127(7), 2018, https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000362
- Alonso, J. and others, "Severe role impairment associated with mental disorders: Results of the WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project", *Depression and Anxiety*, 35(9), 2018, https://doi.org/10.1002/da.22778
- Conley, C.S., Durlak, J.A. and Kirsch, A.C., "A meta-analysis of universal mental health prevention programs for higher education students", *Prevention Science*, 16(4), 2015, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-015-0543-1
- Worsley, J.D., Pennington, A. and Corcoran, R., "Supporting mental health and wellbeing of university and college students: A systematic review of review-level evidence of interventions", *PLoS ONE*, 17(7), 2022, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0266725
- Morgan, A.J., Ross, A. and Reavley, N.J., "Systematic review and meta-analysis of Mental Health First Aid training: Effects on knowledge, stigma, and helping behaviour", *PLoS ONE*, 13(5), 2018, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0197102

STAY CONNECTED

Follow us on LinkedIn

Enjoyed this edition? Each of these newsletters publishes new pieces on LinkedIn. Subscribe, like and share to read them first, and join the conversation in the comments.



Letters of the Heart

Real stories, timeless wisdom, and soul-deep inspiration.

Subscribe on LinkedIn

https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/letters-of-the-heart-7329273590376210432/



The Hope Dispatch

Uplifting news, inspiring stories, and positive change from around the world.

Subscribe on LinkedIn

https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/the-hope-dispatch-7338912777081638914/



The HealthTech Herald

The latest breakthroughs at the intersection of health and technology.

Subscribe on LinkedIn

https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/the-healthtech-herald-7338913774701027328/



Connecting the Dots

Where compliance, risk management, digital innovation, and bottom-line growth intersect.

Subscribe on LinkedIn

https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/connecting-the-dots-7397392757360648192/



Truth, Translated

Plain language for a complicated world: education, geopolitics, political accountability and Big Tech.

Subscribe on LinkedIn

https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/truth-translated-7450724196525035520/

Follow the author: Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu on LinkedIn

BACK PAGE

About TeachWise

TeachWise is an independent magazine that reads the research on education and training, in Australia and around the world, so that educators can use it: what each study asked, how it was done, what it found and what it means for practice. It is one of a family of independent titles: LeadWell, RiskWise, How They Rose, Wiser Days and TeachWise.

Contribute

Tell us about research you would like explained in a future edition. Write to sukh@sukhsandhu.com.

Disclaimer

This publication provides general information only. It is not legal, financial, investment, medical, migration or regulatory advice. Check current requirements with the relevant regulator, department or a qualified adviser before acting. Information is current at November 2026; fees, thresholds and figures change, so check each source before relying on it.

Copyright

Copyright Sukh Sandhu 2026. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the publisher's written permission, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Material quoted from Australian Government publications is used under the terms of their licences, including Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 where stated by the publishing body.

TeachWise | teachwisemag.com | sukh@sukhsandhu.com

Masthead

Publisher: TeachWise

Editor-in-Chief: Sukh Sandhu

Edition: 1, July 2026

Website: teachwisemag.com

Contributions, corrections and enquiries: sukh@sukhsandhu.com

Sister titles: LeadWell, RiskWise, How They Rose, Wiser Days and TeachWise

TeachWise explains research on education and training for trainers, teachers, assessors and education leaders. Every figure is taken from the report itself and cited. Our interpretation is labelled as ours. Nothing in this magazine is professional, medical or legal advice.