

# PASTORAL CARE INTRINSIC TO THE LEARNING APPROACH

## VFA LEARNING – A SKILLS FIRST TRAINING PROVIDER CASE STUDY

---

VFA Learning offers a unique pastoral care and learning support program to maintain student engagement so they successfully complete their education and training.

Approximately 1,000 students enrol in the training provider's childcare, fitness and massage courses each year at its Geelong, Melbourne CBD and Narre Warren campuses.

The individual attention and care each student receives is an approach that VFA Learning's Director, Justin Healy, transferred from his teaching days in the Catholic school system.

It seemed logical to Justin that pastoral care was vital to student learning and progress when he established VFA Learning 20 years ago. Most students who enrol with VFA Learning are aged 16 to 24 years and are transitioning into independent adulthood.

### The SWAP framework

VFA Learning offers supported progression for students who have completed school, with a unique pastoral care service called SWAP (Student Wellbeing Assistance Program).

SWAP is focused on assisting students throughout their studies by supporting good study habits and attendance at classes.

It starts on the first day of each course, when each class is assigned a dedicated homeroom trainer. These trainers become a regular touch-point for students, providing individual encouragement and monitoring.

During orientation, each homeroom trainer sets out the support that VFA Learning offers, as well as student obligations required to succeed. A representative from the youth mental health provider Headspace also talks to students to highlight services available if they need further support or assistance during their studies.

---

*"We're seeing other education providers catch up as they realise the importance of pastoral care to student engagement and learning."*

Justin Healy, Founding Director, VFA Learning

---

Homeroom trainers are allocated time each week to attend to the pastoral care of their students. They also receive training on topics including mental health first aid, understanding different generations and training difficult clients.

Individual student attendance, and coursework completion and results are tracked through VFA's Learning Management System. If a student's attendance drops off or their coursework achievement reduces, their homeroom trainer approaches them to see if any barriers or issues have arisen that the student needs assistance with. VFA Learning refers to this process as 'falling stars'.

### Targeted support

This means that at-risk students are identified early and VFA Learning intervenes to offer appropriate support. This might involve assisting them with study habits or additional learning support, or even personally taking them to Headspace to receive extra support. If the student decides to withdraw from their studies, VFA Learning supports them in that too.

Students are also individually matched with practical work placements that best suit them. VFA Learning has strong relationships with placement providers to ensure that VFA Learning's training meets these providers' evolving needs.

## Flipped learning

VFA Learning also offers a flexible learning ‘flipped’ program. Flipped learning allows students to reduce on-campus hours by enabling completion of some coursework online.

Justin says this has proved highly successful as many students juggle their studies with part time work. It also means more class-time for ‘hands-on’ practical exercises, which is what engages students the most – and which potential employers find the most useful

## Pathways

Justin says the ‘hands-on’ caring approach of VFA Learning is a key reason for the high completion rates of students. The average national completion rate for VET courses commenced in 2015 was just under 50 per cent<sup>1</sup>. VFA Learning’s average completion rate was 74 per cent<sup>2</sup>.

The longer-term outcomes for VFA students are very positive. The close partnerships it’s built with regional-based tertiary providers, Deakin and Federation universities, enable VFA Learning to design many courses to support entry into their courses, so VFA Learning students who subsequently apply for university are usually successful and some receive course credits.

VFA Learning has also established a reputation for quality among local employers for its focus on developing ‘the whole student’. Its graduates report strong success in gaining full-time work, or if they choose to continue their studies, part time employment.

Justin believes that VFA Learning’s model of quality training with personalised support is part of the future for VET and tertiary education, particularly those with younger students. Students engage more with learning, their learning is deeper and broader, and they’re ultimately better prepared for employment.

---

*“The soft skills of our teachers and trainers are just as important as their vocational skills and experience. We expect they have some personal investment in helping their students to achieve.”*

Justin Healy, Founding Director, VFA Learning

---

---

<sup>1</sup> Completion rates for 2011-2015, published by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2017

<sup>2</sup>VFA Learning 2014-16