

evaluation snapshot report



impact of the headspace University Support Program

summary

The headspace University Support Program (USP) has effectively supported university staff across Australia to build capabilities in mental health literacy and suicide planning and response.

Evaluation of the USP incorporated interviews with university stakeholders and surveys with university staff to assess immediate and sustained changes in knowledge, confidence and behaviour related to suicide postvention. Evaluation findings demonstrate positive learning outcomes and real changes to behaviours and systems related to postvention planning and response.

Participants were highly satisfied with the program and the authentic partnerships that were established. They were also positive about the expertise and support provided by the headspace consultants, and the tailored approach to planning and delivering activities which met the specific needs of universities.

The workshops prompted an increase in knowledge of suicide postvention guidelines, mental health support services, recommended referral pathways and safe language to use when talking about mental health and suicide. The workshops also improved the

confidence of university staff to recognise signs of distress in others and to have safe conversations with students and peers about mental health and suicide.

Evidence-based resources, such as safe language guidelines and the *Responding to Suicide: a toolkit to support Australian universities* were effective at building capability of staff and systems within universities to appropriately manage suicide postvention planning and response. Recommendations for growth and sustainability of the program were identified based on evaluation findings.

In the broader context, the USP highlights how suicide postvention is embedded in suicide prevention and is aligned with the strategic priorities of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy. Connecting universities with the Australian suicide prevention sector and support services is a critical enabler of the program.



headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

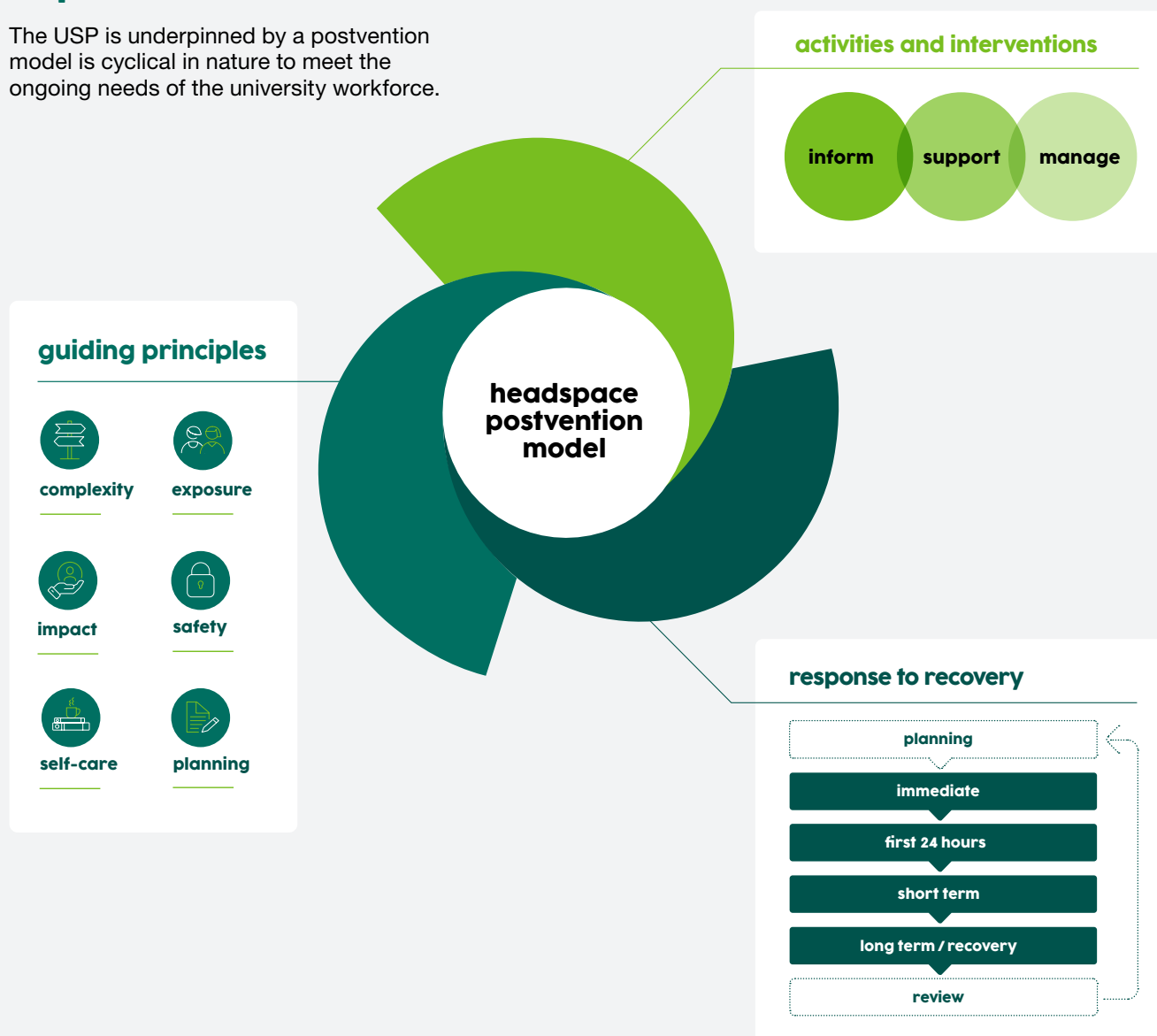
about the University Support Program and its postvention model

Providing support after a suicide, known as postvention, has been identified as a critical element of suicide prevention for individuals, families, and communities (World Health Organization, 2014). Building the capability of university staff and systems to recognise and effectively respond to students and colleagues in distress can contribute to providing a safe work and study environment and reduce suicidal behaviours (Universities Australia, 2022).

The USP is funded by the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. The program aims to build mentally healthy university communities across Australia through suicide prevention and postvention training, planning and support. A critical incident response workforce is available to assist universities to appropriately respond to critical incidents, including suicide.

A nuanced response to postvention

The USP is underpinned by a postvention model is cyclical in nature to meet the ongoing needs of the university workforce.



our workshops

The USP comprises four workshops that provide training across all stages of the postvention model and are delivered, online or in-person, to university staff or teams on request.



Responding to suicide: A Toolkit to support Australian universities

Targeted at university staff directly involved in suicide postvention response, such as those in mental health, support, student services, and wellbeing roles. The workshop is based on the *Responding to Suicide: a toolkit to support Australian universities* resource and provides support and guidance on planning and managing a death by suicide within a university community.



Real Talk 1: A conversational approach to supporting university students and staff

Aims to increase the knowledge and capability of all university staff to have safe conversations about mental health, using the NIP it in the Bud (*Notice, Inquire, Provide*) framework to facilitate conversations.



Real Talk 2: Applying Real Talk in your university

For all university staff to learn about strategies for supporting their university community following a death by suicide.



Equipping university staff: Tools for suicide recovery and prevention

An interactive workshop that builds on knowledge and skills through practice.

engagement with the higher education sector

The USP successfully engaged with the university sector, reaching 98 per cent of Australian universities from commencement of the program (1 July 2022) to 30 June 2025. An additional five colleges that have an affiliation with an Australian university also participated in the program.

A total of 939 workshop and training activities were delivered, online and in-person, to 6,048 participants across a diverse range of university staff roles. The program is attracting ongoing engagement, with about one-third of university staff registering to attend multiple workshops.

The USP has effectively collaborated with peak bodies, such as Universities Australia, to develop evidence-based resources and promote the program to university leadership and key departments.



95%

of survey respondents reported being very satisfied or satisfied with the USP workshop they attended.

University stakeholders highlighted the top three elements of the program they valued most



Vital support

Stakeholders reported that the USP has equipped university staff to better respond to critical incidents.

Facilitating a community of practice for university representatives was suggested as a way to share experiences and receive continued support.

"The support from headspace is brilliant."

"I found without them, I would have felt a lot more lost."



Valuable partnerships

The USP consultants were praised for being knowledgeable, flexible and supportive. Partnerships formed with the universities were valued. Stakeholders suggest exploring further partnerships with universities and peak bodies to embed and expand the program opportunities.

"The University Support Program is absolutely one of those critical partners we engage with."

"The USP consultant has been absolutely invaluable. The resource, the support given, the training, one-on-one debriefs, and ongoing feedback has just been exceptional. I'm grateful for the USP consultant's support, expertise and guidance."



Evidence-based guidance and resources

The workshops and meetings opened a dialogue for universities on best practice for managing suicide postvention. It provided evidence-based resources and a framework for guiding postvention planning and management. Stakeholders suggest proactively engaging with university leadership to gain buy-in for continued education and guidance in postvention planning.

"Having the resource for suicide postvention planning was excellent. I have shared that and incorporated it into the university's critical incident procedure."



Impact of the program on knowledge

University staff report an increase in immediate and sustained knowledge

One of the aims of the USP was to increase knowledge of suicide postvention principles and response mechanisms within the university sector.

The post survey findings indicate that this was achieved:

- 96 per cent of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that the Responding to suicide toolkit workshop prompted an increase in their knowledge of suicide postvention principles.
- 85 per cent strongly agreed/agreed that the workshop improved their understanding of the universities role in enacting a postvention response following a suicide.

For 90 per cent of respondents, the USP workshops increased their knowledge of the barriers to seeking help and effective ways to promote help-seeking among students or staff in need of support.

Many of the universities had well established internal support services and referral pathways and the USP added value by reinforcing the preferred internal referral pathways among university staff. For universities or colleges that didn't have internal support services,



the USP introduced the staff to headspace services and local support services that they could refer students to.

Most university staff strongly agreed/agreed that the USP workshops increased their knowledge of available mental health support services at their local level, as well as at state and national levels (Figure 1).

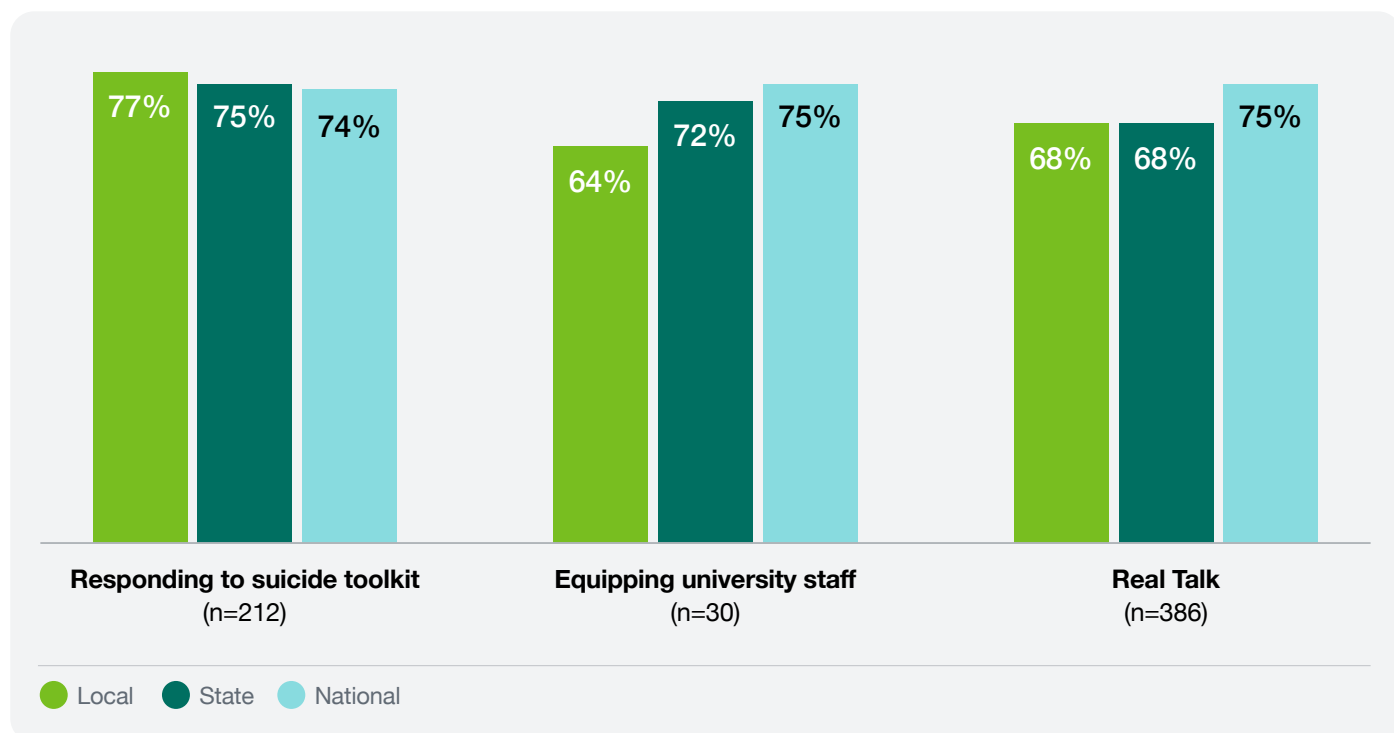


Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who strongly agree/agree that their knowledge of local, state and national support services has increased, by workshop type

impact of the program on knowledge

Most university staff who responded to the follow-up survey reported sustained increases in knowledge about:

Referral pathways for additional mental health support

84%

Common barriers to seeking help for mental health concerns

84%

Ways to support help-seeking

88%

The knowledge that university staff gained from the USP workshops about recommended support services and referral pathways was translated into positive action. About one-third of survey respondents reported referring more students to recommended mental health resources and support services in the 6-9 months since attending a USP workshop (Figure 2).



Stories of impact

"The workshop created a great opportunity to identify and discuss as a team the issues we face and support we can access."

"It had a significant impact on the emotional load of academics and student-facing staff because they now know they can refer people on to these resources. Being aware of them, they can say 'you know there are these resources to support you' and then they feel more comfortable that they have been able to help."

"I learned some useful phrases to use within the university setting."

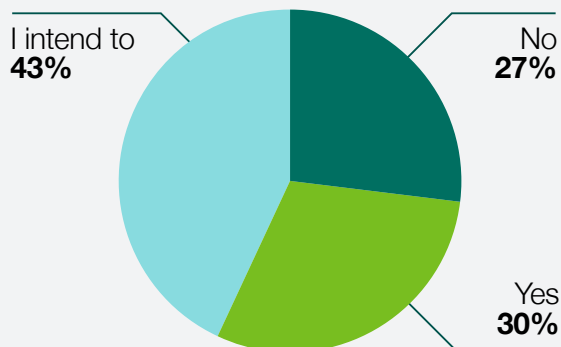


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who referred more students to recommended resources and services since participating in a workshop 6-9 months prior (n=113)



impact of the program on confidence

University staff reported an increase in confidence that was sustained

94% of university staff strongly agreed/agreed that the Real Talk workshops increased their confidence to recognise signs of distress in students or peers

Six to nine months after participating in a USP workshop, 80 per cent of survey respondents reported a sustained improvement in their level of confidence to recognise signs of distress in students and peers.

University staff agreed that the USP workshops had increased their confidence to have safe conversations about mental health and suicide. This increase in confidence was sustained, with 83 per cent of survey respondents reporting continued improvement in their confidence to have safe conversations with students 6-9 months after attending a workshop.

The program also demonstrated a positive impact on behaviour, with 52 per cent of respondents reportedly using the safe language guide 6-9 months after attending a workshop, to increase their use of safe language when talking to students and colleagues about mental health and suicide (Figure 3).



Stories of impact

"It encouraged people to identify and engage comfortably with students in distress."

"Staff felt more confident that they could help students and refer them on to a support service."

"We now feel more confident approaching someone we were worried was having mental health issues."

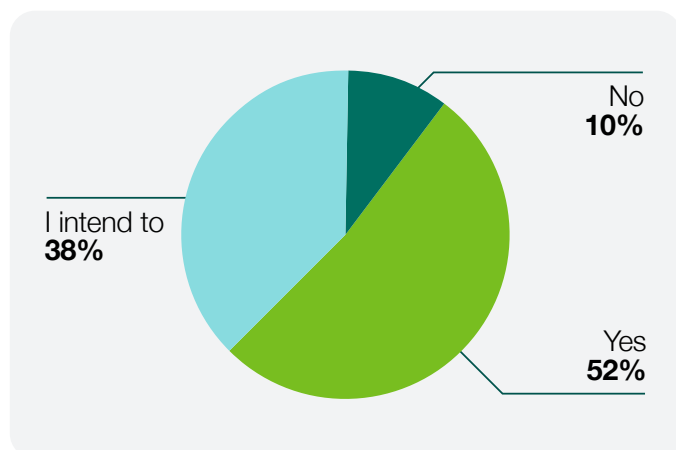


Figure 3: Percentage of respondents using the safe language guide 6-9 months after attending a USP workshop (n=113)

Impact of the program on building capability

University staff report improved individual and organisational capability to manage suicide postvention

About 38 per cent of respondents to the follow-up survey indicated that their university or college had an existing suicide response plan. This gap provided the USP with an opportunity to provide the guidance and support needed for universities and affiliated colleges to embed suicide postvention principles into policies, procedures and frameworks.

During the interviews, several university stakeholders indicated having embedded suicide postvention principles into university policies or procedures. This was possible due to the expert advice offered by the USP consultants, validation provided by the evidence-based *Responding to Suicide: a toolkit to support Australian universities* resource and engaging leadership in a dialogue about postvention planning.

The headspace University Support Program *Responding to Suicide: a toolkit to support Australian universities* resource was mentioned by most of the university stakeholders interviewed as being helpful in guiding and supporting them to develop their own postvention response plans. The evidence-based step by step guide also gave university staff the confidence that they would be able to respond more appropriately and effectively to a suicide event.

Stakeholders agreed that the USP has helped to build the capability of university staff by increasing their knowledge of postvention and level of confidence to have difficult conversations about mental health and suicide.

From a more individual perspective, 83 per cent of respondents who attended the Equipping university staff workshop were more aware of the benefits of practicing self-care and the flow-on effect that had on building their resilience to manage suicide postvention. The Real Talk workshops also served to improve respondent understanding of their own capacity to support someone experiencing mental health concerns (91%).

62%

of university staff who completed the follow-up survey strongly agreed/agreed that the USP workshops had increased their ability to identify the activities required for their university to effectively manage and respond to a suicide event.



Stories of impact

"We found the Toolkit very useful, especially linking to policy and procedures, and sharing with people that here is a tool that can be used in these situations."

"The conversations we've had created a demonstrable shift and gave people that 'aha' moment that led to them saying we must do that. That led to us writing something that is very much based on headspace material that has been approved to go into the university policy."

"Our manager of student wellbeing has said the headspace and Universities Australia Responding to Suicide Toolkit is her bible."

"After we had the training, we did have a sudden death. I had the resource, and we did use that resource. I felt really grateful to have that guide and reinforcement of evidence-based practice."

growth and sustainability of the program

The headspace University Support Program has demonstrated its value in building the knowledge, confidence and capability of university staff in suicide prevention and postvention. A natural progression of the program could incorporate extending the mental health literacy training to students and expanding the program into other higher education settings.

University stakeholders suggested the following ways to grow the program and continue to provide that value-add for the higher education sector:



Extend the Real Talk training to university students to build mental health literacy and peer support capability.



Develop and deliver training and resources specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and multicultural audiences that better meet their needs.



Proactively engage with university leadership to gain buy-in and support for the USP and postvention planning.



Expand the program into TAFE, which is a high demand setting, to build mental health literacy and address the need for suicide postvention planning and response.



Facilitate a university network or communities of practice for university staff in similar roles to be able to share experiences and resources.



Explore partnerships with the higher education sector and peak bodies to embed and expand program opportunities.

Methods

- Program data were used to monitor and report on the activity reach and engagement between the Grant agreement start date of 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2025.
- Post workshop surveys were used to measure satisfaction and short-term impacts related to knowledge and confidence. University staff who attended a workshop were invited to complete the survey via a QR code provided at the end of the session, or an anonymous link sent in a follow-up email one-week after the workshop. Surveys were collected from the commencement of the workshops in 2022 to 31 May 2025. There were 386 responses to the Real Talk survey, 212 responses to the Toolkit survey and 30 responses to the Equipping university staff survey. The surveys were hosted on Qualtrics, and data were cleaned and analysed using Excel and SPSS.
- A follow-up survey was developed to measure the medium-term impacts of the workshops relating to knowledge, confidence, capability and actions. An email invitation that included an anonymous link to the survey was distributed to about 1700 Australian university staff six to nine months after their original workshop registration. The survey was distributed in four rounds between November 2023 and December 2024. A total of 113 completed responses were collected (response rate of 7 per cent). The survey was hosted on Qualtrics, and data were cleaned and analysed using SPSS.
- Semi-structured interviews with key university stakeholders were conducted via video-conferencing software. Twenty-nine interviews were conducted between 30 September 2024 and 5 March 2025, with 31 university contacts across 21 universities. A representative from Universities Australia was also interviewed to obtain feedback on the partnership with headspace. Interviewees were asked to provide feedback on their university's experience of the USP activities. The interview data were analysed per question and coded into common themes.



headspace services operate across Australia, in metro, regional and rural areas, supporting young Australians and their families to be mentally healthy and engaged in their communities.



headspace would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First People and Traditional Custodians. We value their cultures, identities, and continuing connection to country, waters, kin and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and are committed to making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, by providing services that are welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate and inclusive.



headspace is committed to eliminating all forms of discrimination in its programs and services. headspace celebrates and values all identities, experiences, cultures, abilities, faiths, bodies, sexualities, and gender identities through continuous reflection and ongoing improvement. headspace celebrates and values the diverse and intersectional living experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, intersex, queer and asexual (LGBTIQ+) young people, family and communities.

References

1. Universities Australia 2022, *Suicide prevention: a competency framework for universities*, www.suicidepreventionaust.org, viewed 24/04/2023.
2. World Health Organization 2014, *Preventing suicide: a global imperative*, WHO Press, Geneva.

