

**SUICIDE PREVENTION:**

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# **A COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK**

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**FOR UNIVERSITIES**



***February 2022***



**UNIVERSITIES  
AUSTRALIA**



**Suicide Prevention  
Australia**

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Suicide Prevention Australia is the national peak body for the suicide prevention sector. We count among our members the largest and many of the smallest suicide prevention and mental health not-for-profits, practitioners, researchers and leaders. Together, we have developed a suicide prevention competency framework for universities. We are proud to publish this report in partnership with Universities Australia, who represent 39 member universities that educate 1.5 million students every year and employ over 100,000 staff.

This important partnership provides a structure that enables early intervention for staff experiencing suicidal behaviour, staff or students with a lived experience of suicidal behaviour, and people studying who may experience struggles or factors that cause significant distress.

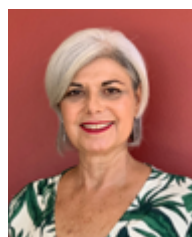
The suicide prevention competency framework will be evidence-informed, culturally accessible and hands-on in its support for universities to build on protective factors, while reducing risk within their communities.

Importantly, this approach will take into consideration the roles of non-clinical university staff and students in responding to the diverse and complex risk factors found in universities.

Partnerships like this have the capacity to make a real difference to the lives of many people. Offering suicide prevention solutions in this manner can save lives. Workforce training and cross-sector collaboration is a critical part of a community approach to suicide prevention.

Prior to this partnership, Suicide Prevention Australia, in collaboration with its members and stakeholders, developed *Suicide Prevention: A competency framework*, providing insight into the skills, knowledge and values of the non-clinical suicide prevention workforce in Australia. A copy of the [Framework](#) can be downloaded from our website.

We are excited to share this partnership and build on the original competency framework. Every step, every action, and every partnership, represents progress towards our ambition of a world without suicide.



**Nieves Murray**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Suicide Prevention Australia

## Universities Australia

Universities have an important responsibility to the health, safety and wellbeing of staff and students, and Universities Australia is proud to have partnered with Suicide Prevention Australia on the development of this competency framework.

As we are all too aware, the devastating impact of suicide on university communities is immediate and traumatic. This important partnership will help provide a structure that enables early intervention for staff experiencing suicidal behaviour, staff or students with a lived experience of suicidal behaviour, and people studying who may experience struggles or factors that cause significant distress.

The Framework itself is tailored for university communities, building on Suicide Prevention Australia's deep knowledge of suicide prevention. It brings together subject matter experts in suicide prevention and suicide prevention training. Our partnership with Suicide Prevention Australia ensures that the framework for universities is consistent with other sectors working on

these crucial strategies. As a result, this Framework is responsive to the diverse and complex needs of universities, and includes consideration of the role that non-clinical staff and students can play.

Universities Australia represents 39 member universities that educate 1.5 million students every year and employ over 100,000 staff. This framework builds on the longstanding work of individual universities to support the positive mental health of their communities, and complement existing partnerships between universities and organisations such as Orygen, headspace and Everymind.



**Catriona Jackson**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Universities Australia



Suicide arises from a complex interaction between many vulnerabilities and risk factors. Suicide can also be influenced by social and economic circumstances.

**The ABS Causes of Death Data 2021 identified 3,139 deaths attributed to suicide in 2020. Young and working age population are more likely to die by suicide, with 83.6% of people aged under 65 years<sup>1</sup>.**

In 2020, the overall suicide rate for people living in the lowest socioeconomic areas was double that of those living in the least disadvantaged socioeconomic areas<sup>2</sup>. In 2020, the suicide rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was approximately twice that of non-Indigenous Australians<sup>1</sup>. Other population groups who experience elevated risks of suicide compared to the general population include: males, LGBTIQ communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, young people, older people, veterans, people with complex mental illness, and people living in rural and remote areas.

**The potential loss or loss of a person as the result of suicide has an effect on colleagues, students and the community. Research indicates each suicide affects an estimated 135 people who may need further support<sup>3</sup>, and people bereaved by suicide raises suicide risk by two to five times the rate of the general population<sup>4</sup>.**

Providing people with proactive support and follow up care can reduce additional suicide attempts. Increasing staff and student awareness of suicidality will equip them with the skills and knowledge to respond to a person in distress. It will help to ensure their colleague or student is safe at that point in time and know where to refer them for ongoing help while maintaining self-kindness and healthy boundaries. This Framework encourages a safe and effective support to staff, students and volunteers.



Suicide Prevention Australia is committed to promoting and building the capacity of the university sector to provide compassionate, high-quality and sustainable suicide prevention and postvention initiatives.

It was recognised that there was a need to develop a specific suicide prevention competency framework that addressed the knowledge, skills, attitudes and attributes of university staff, students and volunteers. In 2019, Australian universities enrolled over 1.6 million students<sup>5</sup>. The health, safety and wellbeing of staff and students is of major significance for Australia. The 2016 National Tertiary Student Wellbeing Survey surveyed 3303 tertiary students and found 35.4 percent students reported thoughts of self-harm or suicide<sup>6</sup>. Universities need the support, tools, and capability to reduce risk and distress, particularly as the first time a person discloses their distress is a critical moment.

Suicide Prevention Australia has been working in partnership with representatives from Australian universities to develop an evidence-informed Suicide Prevention Competency Framework (the Framework) specifically for academics, professional staff, students and volunteers within universities nationally.

There is an increasing awareness within universities need to develop specific suicide prevention strategies. The Framework is designed to be culturally responsive and reflective of the diverse and complex risks found within universities. Implementing a whole-of-university approach to good mental wellbeing is a crucial component to creating a safe and inclusive university.

The Framework complements the work universities are already undertaking to create an environment that promotes wellbeing, mental health and supports staff, students and volunteers. Mental health and wellbeing are valuable resources which can affect the health, employment, education and social outcomes of staff, students and volunteers. University settings play a vital role in supporting the wellbeing of staff, students and volunteers. It is not expected that a colleague provides psychological professional support. However, the university needs to mitigate issues that impact on the staff or students' wellbeing.

## CURRENTLY, UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA HAS THE FOLLOWING PROGRAMS:

### headspace

Universities Australia partnered with headspace to launch *Real Talk: A Conversational Approach to Mental Health and Wellbeing in Australian Universities*, to support university staff to start a conversation about mental health with a student or colleague.

The resource was accompanied by over 50 online workshops for university staff. The workshop aimed to help people notice changes in a person's mood or behaviours that may indicate mental health difficulties; to start a conversation to ask if someone is ok; and to provide timely and appropriate support. The workshop introduced staff to the newly developed resource and supported staff to apply these in daily practice.

### headspace and Everymind

Universities Australia and headspace launched a toolkit to guide university responses to a death by suicide, called *Suicide Response Training for Vice-Chancellors*. To complement the toolkit, Universities Australia, headspace and Everymind partnered to deliver training to over 140 senior staff in suicide response planning to the sector. Participants received specialist advice on developing institutional suicide response plans and how to communicate safely about suicide and mental ill-health.

### Orygen

The Australian University Mental Health Framework provides guidance to universities to support positive mental health and wellbeing among students. This student-centred framework is designed to build capacity within the university setting. The framework focuses on the student experience and has the flexibility for universities to customise mental health and wellbeing programs and services to the needs of their students.

## WHAT IS COMPETENCY?

A competency is defined as:

**“The consistent application of knowledge and skills to the standard of performance required in the workplace. It embodies the ability to transfer and apply skills and knowledge to new situations and environments.”<sup>7</sup>**

Competency frameworks include the behaviours, knowledge and skills necessary for staff to perform their role.

## WHY COMPETENCIES IN SUICIDE PREVENTION?

Research highlights the criticality of compassionate offering of help to people in distress accessing appropriate and timely support. The pathway followed by someone in distress is altered by the ability of others to respond appropriately to the first disclosure of distress or suicidal behaviour. Ensuring people experiencing distress get the help they need is vital in preventing a future suicide attempt<sup>8</sup>.

**“Connect with me authentically; care, compassion, empathy, and being relatable are core requirements for anyone who helps me.”<sup>8</sup>**

Suicide prevention training and education within universities provides an opportunity for promotion, prevention, and early intervention in a large population. Suicide prevention programs that are targeted to a priority population demonstrate a reduction in suicide. Students who undertake psychoeducation to better understand mental health and wellbeing and develop help-seeking skills, combined with gatekeeper training and availability of acceptable support services, can reduce suicide ideation and attempts<sup>9</sup>.

It is essential that suicide prevention initiatives within the university focus on reducing the stigma of suicidal behaviour. Similar attitudes about suicide and suicidal behaviour have the potential to inhibit helpful behaviours towards a person at risk<sup>11</sup>.

Suicide prevention has the potential to have a positive effect when integrated into existing workplace health and safety activities<sup>12</sup>. Building compassionate, safe, and supportive environments, where staff, students and volunteers feel they can express distress without stigma and access the care they need.

**“Suicide prevention starts with recognising the warning signs and taking them seriously.... Encouraging these kinds of conversations is a powerful tool to reduce the fear and silence surrounding suicide and ultimately prevent deaths by suicide.”**

*Beyond Blue<sup>10</sup>*



## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

### Domains of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing - the body, mind and emotions, family and kin, community, Country, spirituality and culture.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people understand health and healing within a holistic model described as social and emotional wellbeing. This model is a “multidimensional concept of health that includes mental health, but which also encompasses domains of health and wellbeing such as connection to land or ‘country’, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family, and community”<sup>13</sup>. The impact of colonisation, the relocation of people, and forced removal of children has caused the dislocation and dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from family, kinship, community, culture, Country and spirituality. This has interrupted cultural practices and beliefs and negatively affected the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people die by suicide at double the rate of the rest of the Australian population, with 223 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people taking their own lives in 2020<sup>2</sup>.

This excess of suicide deaths can be attributed to: the experience of isolation and disconnection from culture, identity and Country; grief, loss and intergenerational trauma; and continuing social exclusion, disadvantage and systemic racism that are present manifestations of colonisation<sup>14</sup>. The social and emotional wellbeing domains are protective factors against suicide and suicide behaviour.

Effective support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needs to be embedded within a context of cultural knowledge and understanding. The key focal point needs to frame psychological health within the concept of social and emotional wellbeing. Universities Australia is committed to increasing the participation and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Universities provide programs, facilities and services that support and encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students throughout the student lifecycle, and it is essential that these are culturally responsive.





## CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Cultural responsiveness includes the ability to interact effectively and with respect with people from all cultures. Cultural competency is the attitudes, behaviours, knowledge, policies and processes that enable staff and students to work and study effectively across situations and to respond to the needs of a culturally diverse population - it is a continuum of learning.

Attitudes, attributes, and cultural principles addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing are embedded in the Framework and include the ability to engage with sensitivity, cultural awareness, care, and knowledge of Australia's colonial history and its continuing impact. These values and cultural competencies are a prerequisite for the Framework.

**"It is critically important that universities respond promptly and effectively to students and staff members who are experiencing distress. This includes an obligation for universities to be responsive to the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and faculty, recognising that distress, self-harm and suicide among Indigenous people are strongly linked to the history of colonisation in Australia through inter-generational trauma, and to continuing experiences of disadvantage and racism. I hope this Framework will help universities to respond appropriately to Indigenous staff and students, supporting their strengths and fostering success in higher education, research and careers."**

*Professor Pat Dudgeon,  
Director of the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal  
and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention at the  
University of Western Australia*

The Framework identifies the gaps and areas of need that can inform the wellbeing, education, and training program development within a university. The following sections provide an overview of a competency framework for university staff and students.





# A competency framework methodology

The methodology used in the development of the Suicide Prevention Competency Framework for Universities is highlighted in Figure 1 below.

Two rounds of consultations with 11 universities and 27 participants explored and informed the domains, common and important content topics, identified gaps, and the attitudes, knowledge and skills that are required for their university.

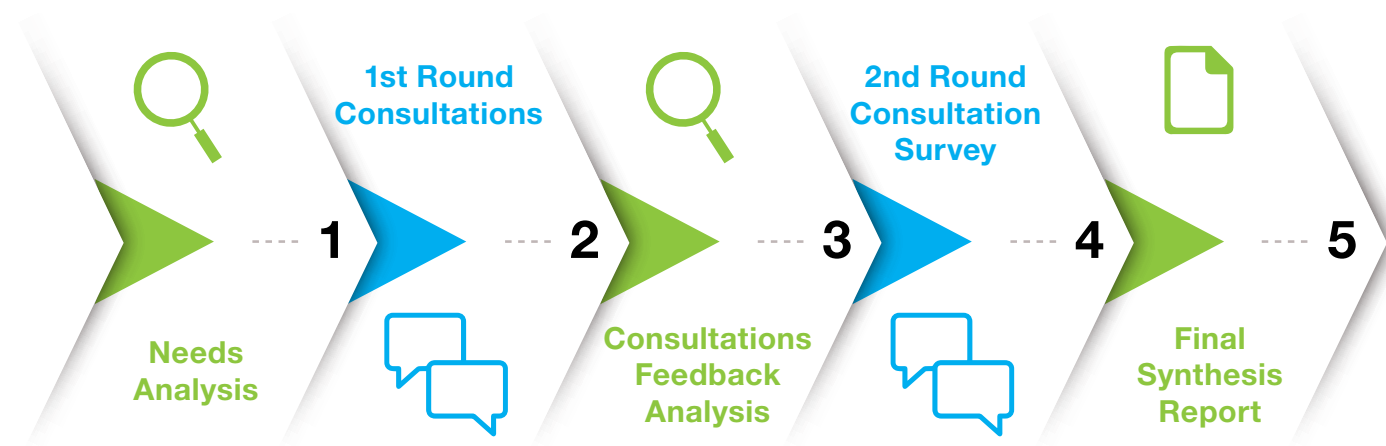


Figure 1 Suicide Prevention Competency Framework for Universities methodology

## A SUICIDE PREVENTION COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK FOR UNIVERSITIES

**“This competency framework is a huge step forward in supporting universities in building confidence in all staff to identify and support our students at risk. It increases our capacity to reach those students who may not know how to, or feel unable to access support.”**

**Sally, Universities Australia member**

The Framework builds on the evidence of ‘what works’ regarding the knowledge and skills required for a university. Participants in the consultation identified that a suicide prevention competency framework would complement the mental health and wellbeing programs and strategies that have been implemented. A competency framework was required in suicide prevention to describe activities that need to be brought together to support staff and students who have suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

The Framework provides a guide for staff induction and workforce development in suicide prevention. The Framework is intended to be applied to the specific needs of the work context, role and university workplace conditions. The Framework recommends the essential competencies for a university, their staff, students and volunteers, to work safely and effectively to reduce suicidal behaviour.

**“As practising psychologists in university settings, it was great to provide input into the UA’s Suicide Prevention competency framework. It has provided an opportunity for us to reflect on our existing university practices in supporting our students whilst identifying opportunities to further educate all members of the university community on the importance of suicide prevention. For instance, it’s further highlighted the value of enhancing education at induction.”**

*Karen and Nicole, Universities Australia members*



These competencies create the foundations that support staff and student wellbeing and provide pathways to appropriate resources, education and training. Suicide prevention initiatives are more effective when they are based on the beliefs, values and needs of groups. These initiatives should be responsive and respectful to the group’s beliefs and their cultural and linguistic needs.

Suicide can affect people across the lifespan, ethnicity, race and sexual orientation. A higher risk of suicide was identified in national policy for three priority populations:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people
- Culturally and linguistically diverse people.

**“While suicidal behaviour can be experienced by anyone, some population groups can be disproportionately affected. It is important to consider all the factors that may increase distress and work to address these through targeted responses where required<sup>15</sup>.”**

**“Each person’s experience of suicidal distress is unique, the social, economic and physical environments in which we live also shape suicidal behaviours. The relevant factors are frequently in the social determinants of health and wellbeing and include: economic, employment and housing security; safety from violence, abuse and discrimination; and social connection and participation in community life<sup>15</sup>.”**

Participants identified the core competencies required for the university in suicide prevention (see Figure 2 on the next page).

This Framework is not to replace or be used as a ‘self-help’ or clinical tool to aid university staff, students, visitors or community members who may be experiencing suicidal distress. These competencies are aimed to strengthen and support interactions between people and create meaningful connections and understanding.

# UNIVERSITIES

## 1 INDUCTION AND CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

- Ability to provide a 'do-no-harm' approach to workplace health and safety policy and duty of care.
- Develop and maintain safety and respect of diversity and inclusion strategies.
- Knowledge of consent and privacy policy.
- Contribute to a culture of safety, inclusion and reduction of stigma.
- Develop and maintain organisational suicide prevention policies and practices.
- Knowledge of and ability to refer to formal and informal support pathways including escalation relative to risk.
- Ability to provide accessible self-care and self-kindness.
- Maintain professional development and learning.
- Contribute to a stigma-free culture of promotion, prevention, early intervention and postvention.

## 2 PRIORITY POPULATIONS

- Knowledge of prevalence of suicidality in priority populations, including:
  - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
  - Culturally and linguistically diverse people
  - LGBTQI+ people
  - At-risk demographics, occupations, and industries
- Cultural sensitivity in promotion, prevention, early intervention and postvention.
- Identify cultural strengths and include strengths in safety planning.

## 3 KNOWLEDGE

- Knowledge of suicidal ideation and behaviours across the lifespan.
- Knowledge of risk of suicide during particular points in the student life cycle.
- Knowledge of services and wellbeing supports to assist a person in distress.
- Knowledge of own values regarding suicide.
- Knowledge of suicide warning signs and understand the contributing factors that may lead to thoughts or behaviours of suicide.
- Knowledge and application of suicide prevention.
- Knowledge of suicide risk for early intervention.
- Knowledge of suicide postvention.
- Knowledge and applications of protective factors.
- Knowledge and application of how to respond to a death by suicide.
- Knowledge and understanding of role boundaries.
- Knowledge and understanding of the unintended consequence of communicating a death by suicide.

## 4 COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- Ability to practice self-care and self-kindness.
- Ability to effectively use verbal and non-verbal communication skills.
- Safe and meaningful inclusion of people with lived and living experience.
- Ability to effectively and safely communicate.
- Explore immediate safety and help the person in crisis be safe.

## 5 COLLABORATIVE SUPPORT

- Meeting diverse needs – aligning to a specific person (e.g. physical and emotional requirements).
- Ability to recognise power differentials, privilege and act responsibly.
- Ability to work within diverse teams to promote inclusivity.
- Ability to work within a team and across the university faculties and services.

## THE COMPETENCIES ARE GROUPED IN THE FOLLOWING FIVE KEY DOMAINS:

### 1. Induction and continuous development

This domain focuses on the staff, students and volunteers and the requirements to actively promote, monitor, evaluate and improve the safety of individuals by tailoring of organisational policies and procedures. The emphasis of this domain is how to support onboarding staff in the first few days from orientation and induction into universities and continuing for their tenure.

This domain describes the skills and knowledge, stigma, the duty of care to 'do-no-harm', suicide prevention policies and procedures. This includes respecting difference, privacy and confidentiality.

### 2. Priority populations

The intent of this domain focuses on cultural and social factors. This domain describes the knowledge and skills required to explore the prevalence of suicide in priority populations including: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; culturally and linguistically diverse people (including overseas students); LGBTIQ+ people. This domain will identify the risk demographics associated with the priority population. This domain will further explore cultural sensitivity in promotion, prevention, early intervention and postvention; and the use of cultural strengths and appropriate communication.

### 3. Knowledge

The intent of this domain focuses on the individual's knowledge required to support a person who is experiencing a crisis.

This domain describes the knowledge and skills required for the promotion of wellbeing and support; the prevention of suicidal behaviour; and postvention for people affected by suicide. The collection of these competencies explores how to recognise the warning signs, the benefits of protective factors, the risk factors during particular points in the student life cycle, responding and connecting to appropriate services and understanding role boundaries.

### 4. Safe communication

The intent of this unit focuses on the individual's ability to effectively communicate with care, compassion and safe language.

This unit describes the communication techniques which may include open and transparent conversation, deep listening and being present with the person. Importantly the ability to practise self-care and self-kindness. This unit explores how to keep a person safe.

### 5. Collaborative support

The intent of this unit focuses on engaging in positive, trusting and open relationships.

This unit describes the engagement of staff within faculties. This includes active, respectful and sensitive support that addresses the diverse needs of the person, with the ability to recognise power differentials, privilege and act responsibly. This competency explores how, where and who to refer a person in distress to, whether internally within the workplace and/or external services.





# How to use the Framework

Universities Australia and Suicide Prevention Australia encourage universities to apply the Framework to meet their specific needs. The Framework provides a guide to suicide prevention that is centred on continuous quality improvement. To develop such a culture, education, training and resources are critical and requires a coordinated and proactive approach to build the capability and capacity of the university across the key domains of the Framework.

It is recommended that universities embed the Framework through the following:

- **Use this Framework to ensure that the university structures and the induction and training programs that they provide meet the competencies.**
- **To build the capacity and capability of the competency by utilising Suicide Prevention Australia's Best Practice Directory to ensure consistent, high-quality and safe programs and services.**
- **Human resource and work health and safety structures incorporate the Framework into existing mental health and wellbeing strategies.**
- **Engage with lived experience and/or living experience of suicide to co-design with priority populations and utilise best practice for programs and services.**
- **Incorporate the competencies into policy and procedures, including a process of formal and informal support and referral pathways that are communicated throughout the university.**



# Conclusion and next steps

The Framework provides a starting point for universities to consider what they need to know to promote wellbeing and to effectively intervene to reduce distress and suicidal behaviour. The Framework is intended to be applied to the specific needs of the staff, students, volunteers and university to be safe and reduce suicidal behaviour.

Getting started with the Framework requires incorporating the Framework into existing policy and practices and leadership commitment to encourage staff and student mental health and wellbeing.

The next steps to build the capability and capacity of staff, students and volunteers in suicide prevention are to:

- Incorporate the Framework into existing policy, procedures and practices.
- Conduct a needs analysis and tailor levels of competencies to specific roles.
- Provide and ensure the continuing education and learning of staff with up-to-date skills and knowledge of suicide prevention, intervention and postvention.
- Develop a competency and resource template that aligns with best practice to ensure safe, quality and efficacy of suicide prevention programs and services.

Implementation of the Framework through education and training will support early intervention of an individual's distress in universities.

A culture of suicide prevention continuous education and learning will support learning-based programs for individuals to identify learning needs and effectively apply that learning through evidence-based training and resources. A continuing education and learning program is an important resource for universities to implement the Framework by providing an individualised pathway and access to ongoing learning.

Universities can access Suicide Prevention Australia's Best Practice Directory for programs and services that meet or are undertaking a formal independent assessment to ensure suicide prevention training programs and resources are safe, high-quality and effective. <https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/directory-of-programs/>

**Suicide Prevention Competency Framework for Universities promotes a caring and collaborative focus to reduce suicide risk. We are striving to ensure that every person who needs support can access consistent, high-quality and safe standard of care.**



# Acknowledgements

Suicide Prevention Australia and Universities Australia acknowledge and thank the following participating universities and organisations who have contributed to the development of the Suicide Prevention Competency Framework for Universities.

Professor Pat Dudgeon

Centre for Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP)

Universities Australia's Deputy Vice-Chancellors/Pro Vice-Chancellors Indigenous Committee

Deakin University

Flinders University

The University of Adelaide

The University of Melbourne

The University of Newcastle

The University of Sydney

The University of Western Australia

University of South Australia

University of Sunshine Coast

University of Wollongong

Western Sydney University

## Further Information:

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