

TRAINER AND ASSESSOR GUIDE

FOR
TRAINERS
AND ASSESSORS
WORKING IN
THE VET
SECTOR

Supporting vocational education and training (VET) student mental health and wellbeing

PURPOSE:

Understand:

- your role as a trainer and assessor in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing.
- how to respond if you are concerned about a student's mental health (notice, ask and respond).
- how to respond if you are concerned a student is thinking about suicide.
- phrases to assist you to respond.
- how to build learning environments that support wellbeing.



UNDERSTANDING YOUR ROLE

As a VET trainer and assessor, you may be one of the first people within the organisation to identify that a student is struggling with their mental health (for example, because their grades are dropping or they are missing classes), or you might be someone that a student has identified as a trusted source of support and advice.

It can be challenging to know what falls within your role, when to intervene and when to seek professional help. These guidelines will help you recognise the early warning signs of mental ill-health and provide tips and advice for how to respond.

This resource will provide information and practical examples when responding to students experiencing mental ill-health.

As a trainer and assessor your role is to:



notice if a student is struggling with their mental health



ask if they would like to talk about it with you (or someone else)



respond supporting the student to seek appropriate help, rather than solving the immediate problem.

Content has been adapted from Universities Australia and headspace: Real Talk Framework for Universities (2021).

It is not your role or responsibility to provide mental health counselling, advice or treatment.

Information on the types of mental health services and supports in your community are outlined in the **Useful Contacts** resource.

These guidelines will help you recognise the early warning signs of mental ill-health and provide tips and advice on how to respond.

“Empathy and understanding are the universal antidotes to mental health difficulties.”

VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

HOW TO RESPOND IF YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT A STUDENT'S MENTAL HEALTH (3 STEPS)



1. Notice

Take notice of behaviours that seem out of character for a student or changes they've noticed in themselves and have described to you. As a trainer and assessor, you may notice a student has become agitated or distressed in conversations with you around course requirements or assessments. Changes that you might observe include:

- seeking to leave the course early
- Lower, or sudden decrease in attendance (that you can see in their attendance record)
- visible signs of distress in your casual observations of them while on site.

Warning signs refer to signs the student may be struggling and needs additional support. Common warning signs are listed in Figure 1.

If you notice something out of the ordinary, think about how long it's been occurring for, and how much it impacts on the student's daily functioning. The longer it's been occurring, and the more it disrupts their daily life, the more important it is to check in with them.

You might also notice warning signs that may pose a risk to oneself or others. These require a more immediate response. Warning signs of increased risk may include:

- statements or behaviours that show intent to harm oneself, or that indicate life isn't worth living
- statements or behaviours that reflect an intention to harm other people
- behaviours that might put someone in risky situations (for example, drug use, or reckless behaviours such as dangerous driving, risky sexual behaviours).

More detail about risk is provided below.

FIGURE 1: EXAMPLES OF COMMON WARNING SIGNS

FEELINGS	Sadness	Anxiety or fear	Emptiness	Anger	Irritability
THINKING	Difficulty concentrating (seeming detached or forgetful)	Confused thinking Rumination	Guilt, feeling like a burden	Preoccupation about things	Hopelessness (for example, "what's the point?")
BEHAVIOURS	Withdrawal from course	Excessive anger, agitation or aggression	Social withdrawal	Increased drug or alcohol use or risky behaviours	Poorer functioning
PHYSICAL CHANGES	Sleep disturbances (appear tired all the time)	Changes in appetite or diet, weight gain or loss	Low energy	Seeing or hearing things that aren't there	Poorer performance than usual

Adapted from beyondblue (online) Signs and symptoms of depression. Available from: <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/depression/signs-and-symptoms> accessed 31 October 2022

Noticing is about observation, but you can also use tools to help you.

For example, you could instigate a 'check-in' with students about their mental health at the start of each lesson or once a week. You might say: "On a scale 1:5 (where 1 is feeling good, and 5 is struggling), how is everyone travelling today? I'll go first, I'm sitting at about a two. I had a good night's sleep and have finished marking your essays so, yes, feeling pretty good!" This gives an opportunity for a student to convey they might need help without having to come and ask for help or go into details.

Depending on the dynamic of the class group you could either ask them to indicate this by communicating verbally or you might provide them with a piece of paper or an online quiz tool where they can put their name and their response and provide it to you in private.

Note: If you use this, make sure you follow up later if any students indicate they are not travelling so well. Find time to ask them separately: "Do you want to chat about what's going on?" or "How can I help?".

When students disclose

Sometimes students might directly disclose mental health issues to you as their trainer and assessor because they:

- are struggling with coursework and want to apply for reasonable adjustments
- are distressed or at crisis point and disclose spontaneously without thinking about it or having a plan or reason
- have developed some trust in you and feel they will be offered support, or that you might know where they can get help
- have a friend or peer who has had a positive experience of receiving help when they disclosed to you.

You can increase the likelihood that students will disclose mental health concerns in your role as trainer and assessor by:

- discussing/role modelling safe and helpful conversations about mental health and general wellbeing (eating well, sleeping well, exercise, nurturing supportive social networks, promoting help-seeking, normalising times of difficulty)
- discussing/role modelling stress management strategies (conflict resolution skills, relaxation, mindfulness)
- reiterating regularly that students should reach out for help if they need it.

As a trainer or assessor, you may have many demands on your time, including other students needing your attention, assignments to mark, and preparing for the next class. Being prepared with key compassionate responses that don't distress the student further is important.

Where possible, speak to students when they approach you in distress or with a mental health concern. If you are in a larger team, consider asking another staff member to take over from you while you speak to the student.

If the timing doesn't work for you and you can't talk to the student, make a time to do so. You could say: "I can hear this is important and I want to discuss it further. Can we meet at 1 o'clock to talk about it when I can give you my full attention?". Remember that it can be difficult for someone to ask for help. It is critical you convey that you care and will prioritise making a time to talk to the student.

If the student indicates they can't wait, it is important to ensure someone else can talk to them. Ask if they have a friend or family member they can call or provide them with a private place to call a support service (such as a helpline like Lifeline or Kids Helpline). Make sure to check in with them afterwards to see how it went. A list of organisations that can help is included in the **Useful Contacts** resource.



2. Ask

Promoting mental health begins with conversations. Sometimes we're uncertain when talking to students about their mental health because we fear that once we raise the topic, we must know how to respond or have all the answers. But supporting a student is as simple as starting a conversation with the student and listening to their concerns.

Key messages to convey

- The student's worries have been heard. Acknowledge their experience. For example, "That sounds really stressful, I can understand why you feel upset."
- You care about their wellbeing.
- Everyone experiences difficulties at various times in their lives.
- Asking for support is the right thing to do.
- Support is available (convey the hope that they can feel better). For example, "It sounds like a really difficult time, but I'm glad you told me, and we're going to work out a plan together to help you feel better/manage this."
- You can help them find the information and support they need.
- The conversation will be confidential unless the student or someone else is at risk. If so, you may need to talk to other supports but, where possible, will discuss with the student first.

"If there was a safe space opened up initially, I would be a lot more willing to talk about mental health. Teachers don't need to have solutions - just understanding and empathy."

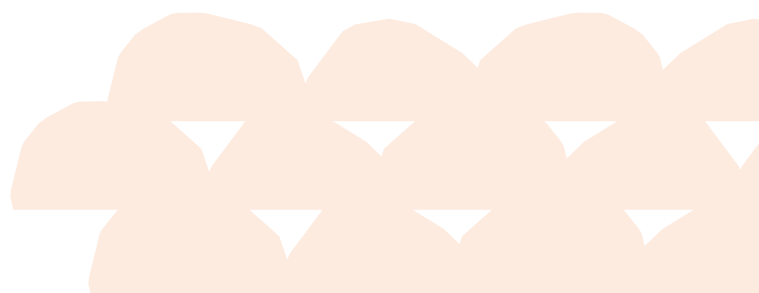
VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Key things to remember

- Keep the conversation to what you have noticed and your concerns, without interpreting their behaviour. For example, "I've noticed you've stopped contributing in class and seem a bit down."
- You don't need to solve the problem or have all the answers right away.
- Listen without judgement and use respectful, empathic language.
- You don't need to seek details about the issue. Ask them to share with you briefly and encourage them to talk in more detail with a professional. This can assist them to get the right help as soon as possible and reduce the number of times they repeat their story.
- Follow up anything you offer to do and keep the student informed.
- Think about when and where you ask a student to discuss their wellbeing. Make sure it is a place and time the student feels comfortable with, that it is private, and that you also allocate enough time and are not rushed.
- Maintain the student's confidentiality (unless the student or someone else is at imminent risk).
- Look after your own wellbeing. At different times, we are more able to provide support than at other times, depending on what is happening in our own lives.
- Maintain professional boundaries. You don't need to provide support outside your work hours. For example, don't share your personal phone number or offer to check in with the student on the weekend.
- If you have an immediate concern about safety (the student or others), call 000 and seek advice. You don't need to wait for consent.

"We're a lot more than our diagnosis. I love it when teachers come with a strengths-based approach and focus on what we can do."

VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH



Things to avoid

- Multi-tasking (for example, completing other tasks during the conversation). You may experience enormous demands on your time and attention. If you are unable to provide the time and space to have a conversation with the student, then identify a colleague who can or ask the student if it is okay if you could make another time that is more suitable because what they have to say is very important to you.
- Abrupt responses and going into quick problem-solving mode to move the student, and their concerns, on quickly.
- Making decisions for the student rather than supporting them to make their own decisions.
- Making promises you can't keep and not following up on what you said you would do.
- Enquiring about painful or traumatic issues. You don't need to know the details to help the student find support.
- Labelling or diagnosing the student. Avoid using labels such as 'depressed' or 'mental illness'. Stigma may influence how someone responds (for example, if you say: "You seem depressed." and they consider mental ill-health a weakness, they may withdraw further). The **Mental Health 101** resource outlines appropriate alternatives to problematic language.
- Sending perceived 'bad news' to a student, such as funding support rejections or assessment outcomes, on a Friday afternoon when they may not have access to supports over the weekend.

Content has been adapted from Universities Australia and headspace (2021) Real Talk (p15)

“ Certain parts of my experience I don't share – I don't share the trauma which triggered these problems and I don't share my diagnosis. Only share what you're comfortable with. You don't have to share all the ins and outs.”

VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Stigma

Stigma refers to seeing someone in a negative way because of a particular characteristic or attribute (such as skin colour, cultural background, disability, or mental illness). You can reduce stigma by:

- improving your understanding of mental health and the impact of stigma
- reflecting on your own values, attitudes and beliefs about mental ill-health, and how these impact on your ability to be empathetic and supportive
- learning about and using destigmatised language (beyond blue, online).





3. Respond

The earlier a student gets support for mental ill-health, the better the outcome.

As a trainer and assessor there is a lot you can do to support this, particularly if a student has presented to you appearing sad, in distress, or you have concerns about their wellbeing. An example of a guided decision-making tool for how to approach responding to a mental health issue is provided below.

What a student says during your conversation will determine what they need from you. Typically, there are three categories of need and response that will emerge. These are outlined below in Figure 2, along with suggestions for how you can respond.

“Most people won’t say or are not proactive when they are overwhelmed and do not know where to go.”

VET STUDENT

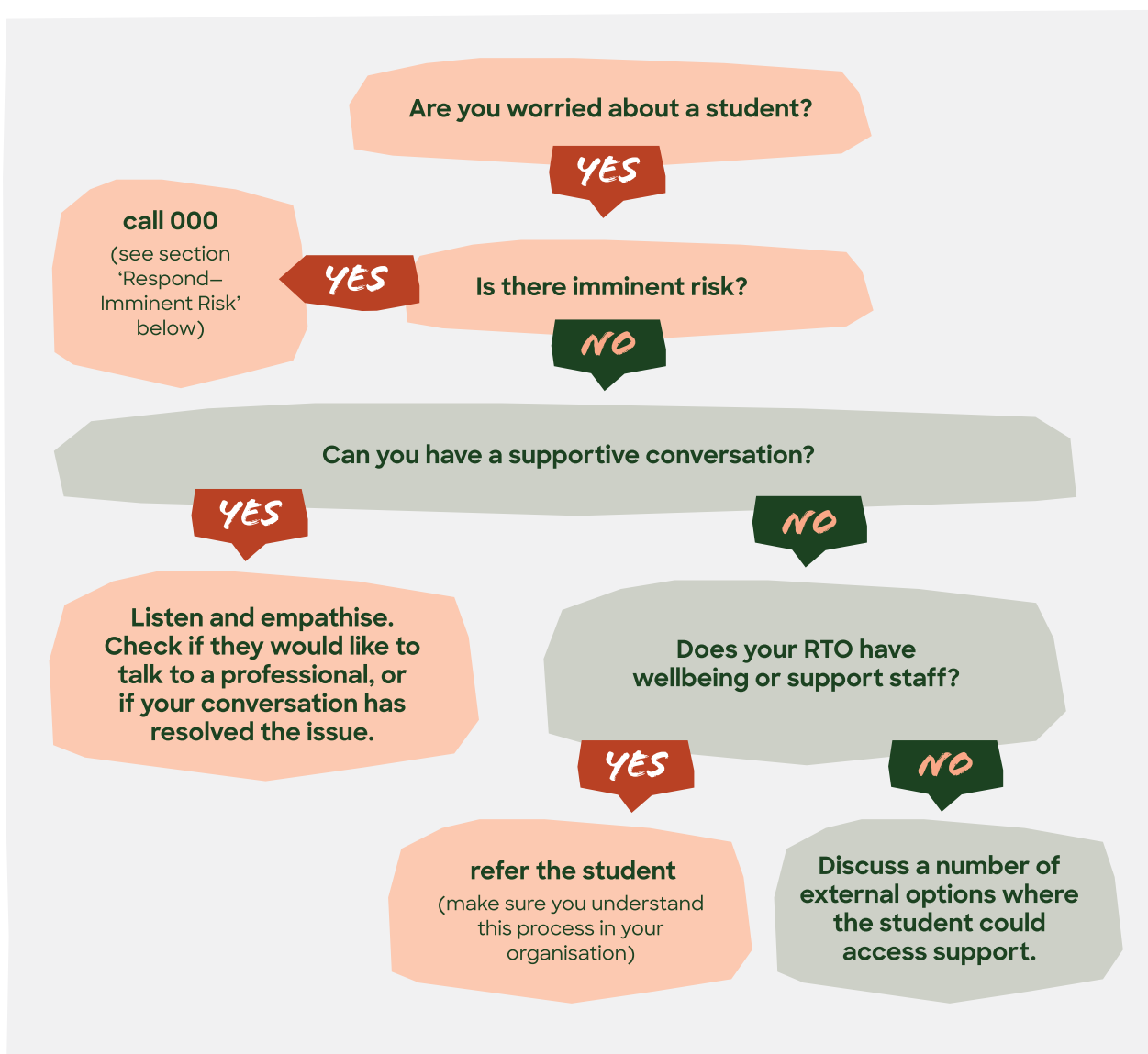


FIGURE 2: CATEGORIES OF NEED AND RESPONSE

WHAT THE STUDENT TELLS YOU.	HOW TO RESPOND (SUMMARY)	HOW TO RESPOND (IN DETAIL)
<p>1. Everything is okay (For example, the student seems withdrawn and anxious, but tells you they are fine).</p>	<p>Continue to follow up and check in regularly</p>	<p>If everything seems to be fine you can follow up with the student later to check in with them about how things are going. This is important, as it conveys you care about their wellbeing, that your support is ongoing, and that you can help build a supportive and trusting relationship.</p> <p>This creates the opportunity for them to talk to you later if they feel things are changing or getting worse.</p>
<p>2. There are some concerns (For example, the student seems withdrawn and anxious, and tells you they can't cope with all the assignments due).</p>	<p>A. Have a supportive conversation</p>	<p>If the student discloses a concern, your response will depend on what they tell you.</p> <p>Sometimes, a conversation will be enough to help a student. Not every concern warrants a referral to a mental health professional. Sometimes showing you care, listening, and helping the student problem-solve is enough.</p> <p>Consider ways you can be flexible with their class requirements besides reasonable adjustments. For example, providing class materials ahead of time might help with their anxiety or providing information in written form as well as verbal.</p> <p>Don't underestimate your skills in supporting someone. Afterwards, you can ask them: "Has this helped you, or would you like to explore further supports?"</p>
	<p>B. Refer to support services if required</p>	<p>If the student wants to explore further supports or if you have some concerns about their mental health (for example, where things have been deteriorating over time or they appear significantly distressed), you can suggest they seek help from local support services such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your RTO student support service/office (if available) • A general practitioner (GP): GPs can provide a mental health treatment plan and provide or link to psychological services. • headspace centres: provide ongoing counselling, with Medicare rebates and/or low out-of-pocket costs for 12-25 years old. • Community mental health services. <p>Information on the types of mental health services and supports in your community are outlined in the Useful Contacts resource. Encourage the student to involve their support networks, such as family or friends.</p> <p>After referral, continue to monitor and follow up with the student.</p>
<p>3. There is imminent risk (For example, the student describes a specific and imminent plan to end their life; behaves in a way that is risky or violent toward others; behaves in an unusual manner that makes you concerned for their safety; and/or tells you there is a threat to their safety.)</p>	<p>Involve emergency services</p>	<p>Sometimes when talking with a student, they might say something which suggests they are a risk to themselves or others, or they are in danger.</p> <p>Responding to imminent (immediate) risk:</p> <p>Contact 000 for an emergency services response. This should be the first contact for situations of safety, such as an imminent risk to self or others.</p> <p>If it's safe to do so, tell the student what you are doing. For example: "I can see you're very distressed. I'm worried about your safety, and I'm going to call for someone to come and support you now." Sometimes telling them you are calling for support might not be appropriate or might escalate the situation. Use your judgement as to whether to tell them, or to call without telling them.</p> <p>If it is safe to do so, stay with the student until help arrives. Be guided by emergency services.</p>

If you are worried a student might be thinking about suicide

In this situation, it's appropriate to ask directly about suicide or self-harm.

For example, the *Universities Australia and headspace Real Talk Framework 2021* suggests "you could ask: "Are you having thoughts of self-harm?", "Are you thinking about taking your own life?" or "Have you thought about how or when you'd do it?" Be sensitive but direct, calm and non-judgemental." (p14)

It is important to remember that asking about suicidal thoughts or feelings won't put the idea in someone's head or encourage them to act on these thoughts (more information is available in the **Mythbuster resource**). Instead it can have the opposite effect of allowing a person to talk about how they are feeling and ask for help.

If the student is at imminent risk, you should follow the appropriate steps described in Figure 2.



HELPFUL PHRASES TO ASSIST YOU TO RESPOND

If a student opens up to you, validate them by responding with:

- I'm glad you told me.
- That sounds really hard.
- You're not alone with this.
- I'm glad you were able to ask for help.
- It can be difficult to ask for help. You've done the right thing reaching out for some support.

Some questions to steer the conversation toward supports:

- I can hear this is tough for you. Is it ok if we think about finding a service that might be able to provide you with some support right now?
- We will find the right person to help you with this.
- I really want to help you, but I don't think I know the best course of action from here. Do you mind if we ring someone to see what they think?
- It sounds like there is a lot going on for you right now. Is there a plan we can come up with to help you feel less overwhelmed?
- While we look at getting you some professional supports, are there things that have helped you in the past that might help now?

If a student seems reluctant to talk, but you are concerned about changes in their behaviour*:

- If you're not feeling ready to talk that's ok. If that changes, remember I am here to listen.
- Is there someone else you might like to talk to instead of me? If you think of anyone and would like my help to get in touch please let me know.

*In this scenario, make sure you check in again at another time. It is likely that showing you remember and care will support the student to seek help when they are ready.

Seek support yourself

An area often overlooked is the potential for staff to feel overwhelmed themselves after speaking with students.

Staff who are managing difficult issues with students should check in with a work colleague or seek professional supervision to help debrief and not to be emotionally overburdened themselves.

HOW TRAINERS/ASSESSORS CAN BUILD LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS THAT SUPPORT WELLBEING

Develop your classroom culture

- Emphasise that all students learn better when they are in an environment they experience as safe and supportive.
- Consider *how* you teach the subject matter, as well as the content. Giving students the opportunity to experience positive leadership, contribute to the classroom and engage with others supports a positive culture.
- Celebrate diversity and a positive culture. Let everyone know it is a safe and inclusive space by displaying posters, flags and signs for all student groups.
- Convey key mental health and wellbeing information in your classroom and, where possible, source information in relevant languages to post in your classroom, on your website or in newsletters (for example, some services have information flyers in many languages).

“It would be great if there was something to bring visibility to mental health, like pointing out to people how many people in a room would have experience with mental ill-health on average.”

VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Be a role model

- Model respectful behaviour and language.
- Do not tolerate racism, bullying, labelling or other denigrating language or behaviour in your classroom. Reinforce positive norms in the classroom in a calm and clear manner if behaviour is inappropriate. Avoid personal comments and refer to your institution's policies and class rules.
- Within what is available in your teaching role, offer times for students to approach you individually if they need to discuss their learning or wellbeing needs with you.

Educate yourself

- Be interested in students' experiences. Conduct brief surveys on a regular basis to give students the opportunity for constructive suggestions and feedback about the classroom or area you are responsible for. Communicate the responses to the students (anonymously) and what actions will be taken as a result.
- Make use of programs, training and resources developed by community-based organisations across a range of topics (including mental health), cultural competence training, and read resources to educate yourself on working with students from a range of backgrounds and experiences.

“They were understanding of my situation and there were times it was difficult to concentrate on tasks and they were empathic toward that.”

VET STUDENT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Students with additional barriers to seeking support

Research shows people from certain groups are at greater risk of experiencing mental health challenges, including stigma, discrimination and inequality. These include (but are not limited to):

- First Nations students
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students (including international students)
- Rural and remote students
- Apprentices
- Young males.

Tertiary education students may also experience additional risk factors, such as financial stress, lack of sleep, poor nutrition, balancing work and study responsibilities, increased autonomy and responsibility (if there is inadequate support), and pressure to excel (Orygen, 2020).

A summary on the needs of these groups can be accessed in the **Understanding Students who may be at increased risk of mental ill-health** resource.

REFERENCES

Beyondblue (online) Be You: Understanding and reducing stigma. Available from: <https://beyou.edu.au/stories/implementation-support/understanding-and-reducing-stigma> accessed 27 June 2022

Orygen (2020) Australian University Mental Health Framework report. Melbourne: Orygen 2020.

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Disclaimer The 'supporting VET student mental health and wellbeing' resources (the Resources) are designed to assist registered training organisations (RTOs) to understand relevant legislation and policy, as well as the application of that legislation/policy to the provision of vocational education and training to support student mental health and wellbeing.

The information contained in the Resources is intended only as a guide to relevant legislation and policy and does not constitute legal advice, impose additional legal obligations on RTOs or purport to provide binding interpretations of legislative obligations (for example, those under the *2025 Standards for Registered Training Organisation (RTOs) (Commonwealth)*, the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Commonwealth)*, and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Commonwealth)*).

The information contained in the Resources is accurate as at the date of publication. RTOs should seek legal advice specific to their individual circumstances to understand their legal obligations. For any questions about the Resources, please contact the [Department of Employment and Workplace Relations](https://www.deewr.gov.au).

Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

