

## Introduction

During the past two decades, drug induced deaths in Australia continue to be a serious public health issue, with 2016 registering the highest number<sup>1</sup>. This issue's longevity is rooted in the lack of education, freedom and the social stigma associated with drug use, not to mention the political storm that drug checking<sup>2</sup> and supervised injecting facilities have made. For the University of Melbourne community, it's important to support all students, including those who use drugs.

In what was a slew of high profile tragedies over the past year; tainted GHB at the Electric Parade Festival<sup>3</sup>, overdoses of MDMA at Revolver Nightclub<sup>4</sup> and Victoria's heroin death toll reaching a 16 year high<sup>5</sup>, the matter for a holistic drug and alcohol policy focusing on harm reduction principles is much overdue. This has been echoed in the 'Inquiry into drug law reform' report that was tabled to the Victorian Parliament in March 2018.<sup>6</sup>

We acknowledge that the University of Melbourne and the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) does not condone the use of illicit substances or the misuse of prescription drugs. However, UMSU in 2015, passed a unanimous motion to support harm reduction principles and the distribution of re-agent pill testing kits ^6. This approach is in line with Australia's longstanding National Drug Strategy of Harm Minimisation, under which harm reduction is an 'equal pillar', and the provision of reagent kits as part of this policy approach has received the approval of the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, through the secondary health provider Harm Reduction Victoria.

This proposed project and its underlying principles harnesses strong support from academics, politicians, civil society, NGOs, and the international community.

## What is Harm Reduction?

Harm reduction is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use. Harm Reduction is also a movement for social justice built on a belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs.

Harm reduction incorporates a spectrum of strategies from safer use to managed use, addressing conditions of use along with the use itself. Because harm reduction demands that interventions and policies designed to serve drug users reflect specific individual and community needs, there is no universal definition of or formula for implementing harm reduction.

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<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/3303.0~2016~Main%20Features~Drug%20Induced%20Deaths%20in%20Australia~6>

<sup>2</sup> In this proposal, "drug-checking" and "pill-testing" are used interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.news.com.au/national/victoria/crime/its-the-highest-number-of-overdoses-we-have-seen/news-story/b200127eb4b6eef2fe48faa1623b1b0>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-16/three-people-die-from-drug-overdoses-in-melbourne/8185134>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-27/spike-in-heroin-deaths-in-victoria-safe-injecting-rooms/9092660>

UMSU believes in the following principles of Harm Reduction<sup>7</sup>:

1. Accepts that licit and illicit drug use is a part of our community and chooses to work to minimise its harmful effects rather than simply ignore or condemn them;
2. Understands drug use as a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that encompasses a continuum of behaviours from severe abuse to casual use, and acknowledges that some ways of using drugs are clearly safer than others.
3. Establishes quality of individual and community life and well-being—not necessarily cessation of all drug use—as the criteria for successful interventions and policies.
4. Calls for the non-judgmental, non-coercive provision of services and resources to people who use drugs and the communities in which they live in order to assist them in reducing attendant harm.
5. Ensures that drug users and those with a history of drug use routinely have a real voice in the creation of programs and policies designed to serve them.
6. Affirms drug users themselves as the primary agents of reducing the harms of their drug use, and seeks to empower users to share information and support each other in strategies which meet their actual conditions of use.
7. Recognizes that the realities of poverty, class, racism, social isolation, past trauma, sex-based discrimination and other social inequalities affect both people's vulnerability to and capacity for effectively dealing with drug-related harm.
8. Does not attempt to minimize or ignore the real and tragic harm and danger associated with licit and illicit drug use.

## Similar Programs

UMSU Students' Council's affirmation of a harm reduction program was the first in Australia, of its kind. The program proposal takes aspects of these researched programs.

**Newcastle University Students Association Australia** has started to give out free drug checking kits as part of their welfare program.

The procedure for interested students is set out on their website, but they have alleged that no policy has been created. Students must sign up on an online form to attend 1 of 3 workshops conducted by a Drug and Alcohol Counsellor set up by the University of Newcastle. Kits will only be given out once a workshop has been completed. Their workshops include education on how to handle bad reactions, who to ask for help, your rights and responsibilities around law enforcement, and how to test the drug in the kit. This program is running in response to the 2018 summer festival season.

**Newcastle University in the UK** have amended their zero-tolerance drug policy and have asked their student union to provide drug checking kits for the nominal price of 3 pounds. This program is met

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<sup>7</sup> <http://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>

with a campaign for more progressive drug policies in the UK as well as lobbying the University to allow the use of gas spectrometry for better breakdown of what is in a drug.

It is interesting to note as well that the University is working collaboratively with the student union in this situation. A spokesperson has said: "The university does not condone any illegal activity, and students who are found to be using or possessing drugs or other illegal substances are subject to robust disciplinary procedures. Nevertheless, we recognise that some students do use, or plan to use, drugs and would strongly encourage them to seek support through our Student Well-being Service. An emphasis on education and harm reduction is an important part of our approach."<sup>8</sup>

The student association at the **University of California, Santa Barbara**<sup>9</sup> uses a loan system of 30 kits. Interested students send off an email to make an appointment. The University then gives a location and time to pick up the test kit. Students use their student ID card as a deposit to ensure the kits return. They are then asked to take it back to their residence and test there as to not bring illicit substances onto campus grounds. These kits only test MDMA and not the usual pill portfolio of ketamine, MDMA and ecstasy.

## Program Vision

### Objectives

The overall objective of the project is to provide a holistic harm reduction policy for UMSU to strengthen its commitment to the program as well as establish a framework that gives appropriate oversight and governance. Underpinning the policy, the specific objectives are:

1. To provide a free drug checking kit program for University of Melbourne students;
2. To support national lobbying for drug legislation that aligns with harm reduction principles;
3. To provide appropriate, honest and evidence-based education around drug use including a week long campaign highlighting drug safety and addressing the stigmas associated with drug use; and
4. To provide literature and easy access information on safe drug use.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3580676/University-students-given-access-cheap-drug-testing-kits-check-illegal-substances-taking-dangerous-not.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://thebottomline.as.ucsb.edu/2017/05/student-run-initiative-rolls-out-free-mdma-test-kits>

It is acknowledged that this program will be a pilot program, and proof-of-concept. Expansion of the program will rest on the success of the pilot program.

UMSU recognises that the sale and/or possession of illegal drugs is a criminal offence, and reminds participants that their participation in this program does not exempt them from liability and individual responsibility under the law.

## Procedure of Drug Checking Kit Program

In order to achieve these objectives the project will work through these steps to create a pilot Drug Checking Kit program:

1. University of Melbourne students interested in a drug checking kit will attend an hour long workshop run in partnership with DanceWize (Harm Reduction Victoria) and UMSU. No personal details will be collected and they need to flash a University of Melbourne ID card to enter the workshop.
  - a. Over the course of six months from the commencement of the program, at least three workshops will be facilitated, resource-dependent.
2. Once the workshop is complete, students will receive a dated token from UMSU, which shall expire two weeks after the workshop date, that can be exchanged for a free drug checking kit.
3. Students can then go to Harm Reduction Victoria, situated off-campus in North Melbourne, where they can pick up 2 reagent kits of mandolin and marquis and an accompanying safety glove.
4. The kits will come with literature and online resources that outline harm reduction, pill testing, re-agent kit limitations, and advice on safer Ecstasy use.
5. Students will only have access to two kits when they go to a workshop. If students need more kits, access to online websites will be given to them through the literature.

## The Workshop

The Workshop will cover:

1. What to do in the event that you, a friend or even a stranger might be having a bad reaction to a drug. This includes who to seek in the event of an illness, behavioural abnormalities or over-dose (EMTs, Security, Police).
2. Education on the legal rights that an individual has
3. How to test the drug in question
4. Reminders and literature of the Counselling and medical services available on campus.
5. Strong Reiteration on not bringing drugs on campus
6. How to dispose of illicit substances when the result is unexpected

## Benefits

The following benefits for the University of Melbourne community are outlined below. Overall, this program will be better for students than the current approach.

1. Students who use drugs, particularly MDMA, will be more informed about what they are taking. Research indicates this leads to an overall reduction in harmful drug consumption.<sup>9</sup>
2. Students will trust that the wider student and University community cares about their welfare.
3. Students of the University of Melbourne who use drugs will, through this program, will be among the first in Australia to receive specific education about international best practice in both harm reduction policy & safer MDMA consumption, representing these in wider social circles.
4. Is likely to Reduce preventable drug related deaths among people who use substances.
5. Increased referrals to treatment programs and health and social services
6. The ability to receive feedback and survey the health of students

## Budget

I believe that for the 2019 UMSU budget, a separate budget should be created for the Harm Reduction Program. Otherwise, money from the “Whole of Union” budget line should be set aside from the beginning of the 2018 season for the program.

Item	Amount (\$ AUD)	Category	Comment
Pill testing kits	\$1000.00	Pill testing	
Booklet printing	\$2000.00	Printing	
Special projects	\$2000.00	Events	Harm Reduction Week
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$5000.00</b>		

## Evaluation

After the conclusion of the six-month pilot period, we will evaluate the progress and success of the program. We will do so by measuring:

- Effectiveness and satisfaction with the information distributed in the workshops (via survey, completed immediately post-workshop)
- How many spots were available in workshops
- How many spots were filled
- How many tokens and kits were distributed

We will also distribute two optional surveys (due to the nature of distribution, within kits):

- Satisfaction and effectiveness of the drug checking kits
- Satisfaction and effectiveness of the literature distributed with drug checking kits

From this, a report will be generated and circulated to the relevant stakeholders before further action is decided upon.