



# How to respond to a student suicide

Suicide Safer guidance on postvention



# Contents

Forewords	2
Introduction	5
Postvention principles	6
1. Preparation and planning	7
2. Responding to student suicides	12
3. Reviewing, evaluating and learning	25
Acknowledgments	31
Tools to accompany this guide	32
Appendix 1: Membership of the Reference Group and Independent Review Group	33
Appendix 2: Further resources and support organisations	35



# Forewords

## **Ged Flynn, PAPYRUS and John de Pury, Universities UK**

This guidance on postvention provides practical advice on how to give compassionate, confident and timely support when a student death by suspected suicide takes place. It has been developed by those working on the frontline of student support and leading researchers, with key contributions from students, families and organisations with a focus on suicide and bereavement.

It sets out the critical importance of planning for actions and allocating responsibilities and emphasises the role of leadership to ensure a whole institution and whole system response.

The guidance aims, first and foremost, to support the work of student services teams and first responders in higher education settings. It will also be important for senior leadership to consider how to respond compassionately and appropriately to a student death by suspected suicide. Finally, it will be of interest to academic staff as well as students and their families and significant others. Most importantly, we hope that it will help us respond with kindness, to learn from each death and to save lives. We encourage every higher education provider to adopt and implement this guidance as part of our collective commitment to prevent student suicides.

## David Malpas, Director of Student Affairs, Middlesex University

Reflecting upon the experience of leading my institution's response to a suspected student suicide, led me to question:

- Have my actions been appropriate, covering all bases?
- Have I acted with sensitivity and compassion?
- What have I missed?
- What could I have done differently and better?

The uncertainty of the last question resulted in consultation of the Postvention section of the PAPYRUS / Universities UK Suicide Safer Universities (2018) framework. The Suicide safer universities guidance sets out what an institution should do. Whilst this was helpful, after a suspected student suicide, 'how' an institution could go about felt to me to be a more relevant question. What I was looking for was practical help and advice, from peers at other institutions in a similar position and I reached out to Universities UK to seek this. This is the origins of the document you are now reading, a practical resource 'by the sector, for the sector', to guide institutions through postvention processes and importantly, the principles that should underpin this. It is clear from the response we have received to the creation of this further guidance, that it is much needed and good postvention is an important element in student suicide prevention'.



## About this guide

This guide is designed to offer practical advice and support to senior leaders and staff working within student services. However, it will likely be of interest to anyone working in higher education who may need to be involved in responding to the death of a student. It has been produced by staff with direct experience of responding to student suicides and guided by the perspectives of bereaved parents, and students themselves. It builds on Suicide Safer Universities – a resource produced by Universities UK and PAPYRUS UK to support sector practitioners to prevent student suicides.



# Introduction

What higher education institutions do in the immediate aftermath of a death by suicide matters. Those leading a response are faced with the complex and sensitive task of providing support to family members, friends, staff, and a wider community who are often struggling to process and come to terms with what has happened

Postvention is an organised response that provides timely and appropriate support for those affected. Postvention efforts include:

- supporting the grieving and adjustment process and helping those affected by the death to process the immediate and longer-term trauma and grief
- addressing the immediate crisis to stabilise the situation, limiting the potential risk of further suicides and imitative suicidal behaviour
- assisting the community to start recovering from the initial intense trauma and gradually returning to some level of normality.
- reviewing and sharing learning from the death and postvention efforts to improve future prevention and postvention response efforts

In this guide, we set out a three-stage approach to defining your institution's response:

- **Preparation and planning** – including; developing a death response plan, and shaping a postvention team that can be brought together as soon as the institution is made aware of a sudden student death.
- **Responding to student suicides** – including; communicating with those affected, taking steps to prevent future suicides, and putting in place practical and emotional support.
- **Reflecting and learning** – including; carrying out a serious incident review, supporting tributes and memorials, and supporting an inquest.

# Postvention principles

- 1** Respond with compassion and respect, being receptive to distress and sensitive to the needs of others.
- 2** Be guided by the wishes of the family/significant others of the person who has died.
- 3** Ensure timely engagement at the right levels, reaching out and connecting early.
- 4** Avoid communicating publicly about methods and use appropriate and sensitive language about suicide to minimise potential knowledge about suicide methods increasing suicide risk for others.
- 5** Avoid sensationalising or normalising suicide and remain sensitive and factual in all communications.
- 6** Recognise that talking about suicide responsibly does not increase the likelihood of further suicidal behaviours.
- 7** Adhere to information sharing protocols providing clear information while protecting the privacy and dignity of those affected and in accordance with legal requirements.
- 8** Be sensitive to cultural and religious perspectives that may affect responses to a student suicide.
- 9** Aim to focus on the identity, life and memories of the individual rather than their death by suicide.



## 1.

# Preparation and planning

Those providing a crisis response when a student has died have to make sensitive and difficult decisions at a time when emotions are high, and when staff themselves are processing their own response to what has happened. For this reason, an effective postvention response needs to be planned in advance. It needs to assign staff clear roles and responsibilities. And it needs to build flexibility for staff to be able to respond compassionately to the individual circumstances in front of them.



## Preparing for the unexpected death of a student

**“In the aftermath of an unexpected death of a student, we were ‘late off the starting blocks’ in mobilising postvention support. Managing the situation did not seem to fall into anyone’s area of specific responsibility and some of the academic staff in the deceased student’s faculty felt ‘out of their depth’.**

I want to be able to say that we did all we could ... but I can’t. This highlighted for me the importance of having identified leadership and a trained Postvention team with roles clearly defined for an effective and timely postvention response.”

Student support manager

### **In this section and its accompanying resources, we set out how you can:**

- plan your institution’s response to a sudden student death
- build and support a team who can quickly put this plan into action
- identify policies and processes that you will need to have in place



## Put in place a death response plan

A death response plan is a clearly defined and documented plan of action used in response to the report of a student death. It is agreed in advance by an appropriate and experienced group of staff. There is no ‘one size fits all’ blueprint and the plan for each institution must fit its own context, however you should aim for the plan to provide comprehensive and practical guidance for the staff navigating your institution’s response. That should include, for example, a protocol for communicating the news of a student’s death and contacting their family and others affected. It should also include advice on putting practical and emotional support in place for students and staff. You can find advice about what to consider as part of your death response plan in Section 2, as well as in the ‘Postvention checklist’ that accompanies this guide.

**“I suppose what we didn’t have at the time ... was more written guidance around suicide particularly about what to do ... that would, that would’ve been useful I think for me at the time.”**

**University team manager, Causer, 2020**

Alongside your plan, you should create a store of prepared documents and resources related to postvention so that teams can quickly find the support they need. You should also regularly review your plan to keep it up to date. The wider staff body should be made aware that a plan exists and who to contact if they are notified that a student has died.



## Appoint a dedicated team to respond to deaths by suicide

A postvention team is a group of staff who can be brought together immediately following the report of a student death. They should be responsible for overseeing the implementation of the death response plan. For more detailed guidance on forming and convening a postvention team [download our guidance](#)

The chair of the postvention team should be a senior member of staff who is on call and able to convene a meeting out-of-hours if required. You may need to identify more than one member of staff who can take on this role so that there is always cover available and be mindful of the need for anyone in this role to lead confidently with empathy and compassion. It is important that the chair is supported to focus fully on this work for as long as is needed to provide a timely and compassionate response. Members of staff who might be expected to take on this role should be given specific training in co-ordinating and leading a critical incident response.

The membership of the postvention team will depend on your organisational structure but should at the minimum include staff who can lead on care for students; care for staff; family liaison; and communications. The team should also include an experienced administrator. As postvention teams will need to act quickly and with no notice, it is critical that members should be identified in advance and given the level of training and support they need to take on their roles. For all staff involved in providing direct support, this should include training on speaking to and supporting people bereaved by suicide, training on working with people experiencing trauma, and guidance on navigating different cultural and religious sensitivities around bereavement and suicide.

In the immediate aftermath of a student death, the chair of the postvention team will likely need to seek support from a wider group of staff and must be given autonomy to act as they see fit. This could include, for example, representatives from the student's academic school or from the institution's counselling service. The chair may also establish sub-groups to take on responsibility for specific aspects of the response, for example liaising with the police, a student's accommodation provider, a coroner, or foreign embassy.

## **Provide staff with access to emergency funds**

Staff carrying out postvention work may need access to emergency funds to provide timely and compassionate support to family members and friends during a time of crisis. This might include, for example, needing to cover costs relating to travel expenses, accommodation, translation services, or staff cover at short notice. There may be some occasions where postvention teams need to secure approval for larger costs or make payments out of hours. There must be a quick and efficient process available for postvention teams to secure approval in these circumstances; with this authority ideally delegated to the postvention team chair.

## **Support staff to respond to a report of a student death**

The first report of a sudden student death could come from many sources, including staff, other students, family members, or social media. For this reason, all staff should receive training in what to do if they learn of a student death. This should include clear guidance to immediately contact the emergency services (if they have not already been contacted) as well as the chair of the postvention team. This training could form part of a higher education institution's wider suicide prevention and response training.

## **Build partnerships with other agencies involved in responding to deaths by suicide**

Many areas across the UK host local suicide prevention forums or other similar multi-agency groups. By playing an active role in these forums your higher education institution can make sure it has up-to-date information about the help available to students and relevant commissioning decisions. It can also quickly draw on advice and support from partners in the aftermath of a student death.

## **Review policies on bereavement leave and extenuating circumstances**

Consider any of your university's wider policies that may be relevant when responding to a student death including those relating to bereavement leave and extenuating circumstances. Students and staff may be cautious about asking for support and should be reassured that they will be treated with compassion and respect.





# 2. Responding to student suicides

As soon as the chair of your postvention team receives a report of a student death they should make sure the emergency services have been informed, before bringing together the team to put your institution's death response plan into practice. This section sets out the steps that should form a key part of that plan, including:

- Communicating compassionately with those affected and the wider community
- Putting in place practical and emotional support
- Responding to enquiries from the press and messages on social media

For more detailed guidance on forming and convening a postvention team [download our guidance](#)

## 2.1 Emergency response

### Inform the emergency services

Depending on the nature of the report, you may need to take some immediate steps to establish what has happened and to confirm the identity of the person who has died. You should immediately call the police and paramedics if this has not been done already and if staff were the first to learn of the death, or if it took place on the institution's property.

There will be other contacts who you will need to reach as early as possible. For example, if the person who has died was an international student, or if you have learnt of the death of a student abroad, then you should inform the relevant embassy once it is confirmed that the family or trusted contact have been informed. If the death took place in a student residence run by a third-party provider, then you will need to co-ordinate action to support the students affected, including potentially sourcing alternative accommodation. In Wales, HEIs are required to report serious incidents to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and other relevant regulators.

The police are responsible for notifying the student's family members or partner, but you may need to assist them by providing contact details. Ask the police to confirm when the student's next of kin have been informed. You should also make sure that the police are given details for a named staff member to pass on to the family in case they wish to make contact. It is unlikely that you would be approached by a student's family members before they have been notified by the police. If this does happen, you should respond compassionately and sensitively but cannot confirm any information. Instead, you should contact the police again and request that the family are informed as a priority.

### Establish a 'Single Source of Truth'

The postvention team should quickly establish a clear picture of what has happened, bringing together information from the emergency services as well as any reports from staff, students or family members. This process should include creating one place to store information about what has happened and what actions that different staff members and teams have taken so far. This practice of aggregating data from many sources and systems into one central repository for all staff involved in the response is often referred to as a 'Single Source of Truth'.

## Put in place support at the scene

If a student has died on campus or in student accommodation you should consider what immediate help you may need to provide to students and staff on the scene. This includes sending a senior representative to liaise with emergency services and making sure that trained staff such as wellbeing advisers can attend the scene to provide initial support. It is important to keep in mind that a large emergency services presence itself is likely to be distressing and you may need to find an alternative space to provide support for those affected. You may also need to find emergency accommodation for the housemates of the student who has died or help their accommodation provider to do so. Where appropriate, staff present should visually check the scene before they leave to minimise anything that might cause further distress. You can find more advice about providing practical and emotional support later in this section.

### Case study: Putting in place support at the scene

The Student Wellbeing Team were contacted by a member of the public who had been walking through an area of student housing and encountered a number of students in distress in response to a student death. Team members immediately went to the scene wearing ID, branded jackets, and a 'grab pack' of information, pre-prepared for a response to such incidents. They liaised with the local Community Police Officer and ascertained that there had been a student death by suspected suicide. The student was registered at a different HEI but living in shared accommodation. The team identified students at the scene to establish their link to the student who had died, ascertain the immediate impact and provide support. Given the context and the ongoing presence of emergency services, the Wellbeing Team spoke to a local hotel and secured a room with refreshments to move the students to a more private space.

Support included helping them understand the need for confidentiality until the next of kin was located, listening with compassion as they tried to process their shock, helping them phone family or other support and gain information on others who may also be impacted. The students present were from two HEIs, so the Wellbeing Team contacted counterpart colleagues in the other HEI. Following the incident, a multi-agency debrief took place including the police, the two HEIs and public health. The incident showed the benefit of being able to respond immediately, with compassion, as well as the importance of established relationships with local partners in the emergency services, public health, landlords and other HEIs in the area.

## 2.2 Communications

### Follow a prepared communications approach

Once you have had confirmation that the police have informed the student's family or partner, you should follow a pre-agreed communications protocol in order to make contact with family, friends, other close contacts, and the wider community. The postvention chair should identify leads for different types of communications. It is important to recognise that staff who knew the student most closely, including tutors and supervisors, are likely to be grieving themselves and should not be asked to lead on notifying others.

### Communicating following the death of a student

**“Faced with having to deliver a compassionate, thorough professional response to the news of a possible student suicide even experienced Student Services staff have an instant emotional reaction as the shock and sadness of the news effects them as caring human beings.**

In emotive and pressured situations, it can be extremely helpful to have a pre-arranged guide (written and thought through in calmer times) to focus the mind on the actions that need to be taken. Psychologically having a tangible set of guidance to pick up and hold in hand can be reassuring and clarifies the steps that need to be taken. Airline pilots and surgeons have checklists to hand to refer to for challenging situations and having an external guide helps ensure emotional human beings can deliver the required compassionate, thorough, professional response. I have used a sudden death checklist with my teams, and these are printed out in actual folders in people's offices and staff have found having a tangible checklist they can hold has been very helpful to guide them through what is always a challenging situation.”

Head of student services

The rest of this section contains further information about communicating with and offering support to different groups following a student's death. As part of your postvention planning you may want to keep a copies of guidance and example communications as part of the document store we reference in the first section of this guidance.

You can also [download our example communications](#) to help inform your approach



## Follow established guidelines when talking about a suspected death by suicide

Talking about suicide can be difficult. Students and staff may be struggling to make sense of the news, dealing with feelings of guilt or responsibility, and processing previous experiences of bereavement.

**“The emotional landscape' after a death by suicide can include anger, blame and guilt, and these are difficult to process and manage in a university setting which isn't set up, really, to deal with them.”**

Senior academic, Causer, 2021

Staff tasked with notifying people affected should not shy away from having these conversations in a way that is warm and empathetic, and that recognises the specific relationship between the student who has died and the person who is receiving the news. However, there are some general guidelines that are important for staff to keep in mind in any conversation about suicide. These are designed to reduce the likelihood of multiple suicides or imitative behaviour.

- Avoid sensationalising or normalising suicide
- Remain sensitive and factual in all conversations
- Never reference the method of suicide in any conversations
- Do not though be afraid to use the term 'suspected suicide' and avoid euphemisms

It is also important to avoid using language which goes beyond what has been confirmed by an inquest or in Scotland by the Procurator Fiscal's investigation. Until this point a student's death can only be considered a suspected suicide, even if the student has left a note or if means of death indicate that a death by suicide was likely.

You should be transparent about the guidelines you are following so that the wider community understands why you are not sharing certain details.

## Be sensitive to different cultural and religious beliefs around suicide

Be mindful that, in some cultures, suicide is not openly acknowledged or is even considered as taboo. It is not unusual in such contexts for family members to prefer to talk about an accident or unexplained death. There are also a range of customs and rituals – largely religious in nature – about how the body of the person who has died should be treated and the arrangements for their funeral. Be mindful, if asked, to recommend a local funeral director, that some firms will be more experienced in supporting particular faith and cultural groups than others.

## Communicating with family members and partners

You should contact the student's family members and partner as early as possible through the assigned family liaison lead. As soon as you have made contact, make every possible effort to be guided by the wishes of the student's family, including when it comes to what level of contact they would like from the higher education institution and how they would want to be kept informed.

In this first conversation, describe the situation with all possible compassion and be clear about what is known and not known. Offer practical and emotional support, encourage questions, and make sure that family members have a named contact who they can get in touch with if they wish to. This should be the person who made the initial call, families need consistency at this time, whoever makes the first call must be prepared to be their primary contact for as long as they need it. It may also be necessary to inform them about possible press and social media interest, and to offer help to navigate this. Later in this section, there is more information about navigating media enquiries, and about offering practical support.



## Why timely and compassionate communications matter

**“It was five weeks after losing our daughter when we called the school to ask if they would speak with us. There had been no contact initiated by the head of school before then which only added to the agony and utter desperation we had been plunged into. We very much felt our daughter's death was an inconvenience, something the University wanted to disappear.**

We received a very brief letter from the Principal that contained no invitation to meet to discuss what had happened, rather there was an air that he was fulfilling an obligation rather than sharing genuine concern. Never before had we felt that our daughter was so insignificant – she had been just a number. The absence of any senior management at her 'goodnight' served only to confirm that our daughter's life and death was of no great loss to the University.”

**Bereaved parent**

In your early conversations, it will be important to understand as much as you can about the different family members who may need support, the relationships between them, and the different lines of communication you will need to keep open. For example, if a student has two parents who are separated, then staff should make sure that both are kept informed in the same way, and each have the opportunity to express their views and wishes about any practical arrangements.

The level of support family members want and need from the higher education institution may change over time. If they decline an offer of support, it is important to sensitively make the offer again at a later point.

## Communicating with friends, tutors, and other key contacts

You will likely need to go through a process of ‘contact tracing’ to identify people who were close to the student who has died. There may be a few people in the student’s close circle of friends who would be able and willing to help with this. These contacts could include friends, neighbours in accommodation, shared society members, and academic tutors. They may also include people outside of the higher education institution, for example, colleagues on a work placement, or members of a shared faith or community group. Wherever possible you should try to inform key contacts face-to-face, acknowledge the distress they are likely to be going through, and talk through the support available. There is more information about offering practical and emotional support later in this section.

## Communicating with the wider community

News of the death of a student can spread quickly amongst the wider community. Higher education institutions can avoid speculation by providing timely communications to relevant groups of students and staff informing them about what has happened. As with one-to-one conversations, these communications should be empathetic and personal. They should come from a named individual and include references to sources of support being as specific as possible (not just signposting to a counselling team). HEIs in Wales are also required to provide information relating to student welfare in both Welsh and English. You should prioritise replying to any responses as soon as possible, even if this is a simple acknowledgment until you are able to provide a fuller reply.

There are some groups of staff who may not have known the student directly, but who should receive specific communications either because they are likely to be affected or because they may in turn need to address questions. Examples include facilities and security staff, staff working within the institution's counselling service, student union staff and multi-faith teams.

## Stop all central communications to the student who has died

You should stop all communications to the student who has died as soon as possible. That includes emails and letters sent from the higher education institution as well as those from any course-specific mailing lists. Bear in mind that in the days following a student's death, their family may access their email account and could find it distressing to see these communications continue. Social media posting should also be paused, as this can be perceived as insensitive.

## Plan how to respond to media enquiries

The risk of multiple suicides increases when media reporting explicitly describes the suicide method, uses dramatic or graphic headlines or images, gives repeated, extensive coverage, and sensationalises or glamorises a death. When responding to any media enquires you should keep in mind the Samaritan's Media Guidelines for reporting suicide and their specific guidance for reporting youth suicides and suicide clusters. Follow up on any media reporting about a death that does not respect this approach. Most publications will quickly update their copy. The Samaritans' media advice team can be contacted for advice and support if necessary.



You should also offer support to the student's family and friends to navigate media enquiries. If they have any concerns about approaches from journalists, signpost them to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). They operate a 24-hour harassment helpline providing advice to those who have been affected by suicide and do not wish to have contact with the press. IPSO can also issue a notice to the press advising them not to contact named individuals.

Families should also be made aware that the media may request a photograph of their loved one and should this request be denied that they are within their rights to obtain an image from a public source, including from social media accounts. To avoid further potential upset and to retain some control over what is published, we recommend that the family choose the image that they would like their loved one to be remembered by.

[Download examples of press statements](#) that universities and families can issue

## Plan how to respond to social media communications

Information about a student's death by suicide may spread quickly over social media. Some posts might be inaccurate, may lack information about sources of support, or may unintentionally risk encouraging imitative behaviour (e.g. by explicitly describing suicide methods). You should be prepared to respond via direct messages or public posts to correct any inaccuracies and make sure that people know where they can turn for support.

When having conversations with students and staff in the immediate aftermath of a student's death, you should encourage them not to post about what has happened on social media while key contacts and loved ones are still being informed.



## 2.3 Support

### Put in place practical and emotional support for people affected

There is no single exhaustive list of the kind of support that people affected by suicide might need or that your university may be able to offer. More important than systems and procedures, is an approach characterised by empathy and compassion. You may also need to be persistent – the right time for support is different for everyone.

While you should try to talk to people face-to-face wherever possible, it can be helpful to follow up with an offer of support in writing after the conversation to give them time to reflect and process. You should also be mindful of what continuing support different groups might need, including in the weeks and months following a student's death, throughout the inquest process, and around key dates such as the student's birthday or the graduation ceremony for their year. When discussing options for bereavement support it is important to offer people as much choice as possible including different channels of support (e.g. face-to-face counselling as well as help that can be accessed by text, email or a helpline).

### Supporting family members

When offering support to family members, consider what help they may need to:

- navigate systems including student finance
- handle the student's accommodation and belongings
- manage enquiries from the media
- get in contact with local suicide liaison services
- secure support for siblings at other higher education institutions
- make specific arrangements in the case of a student who has died while overseas
- visit the institution and speak to people who knew the student who has died
- put in place arrangements for the funeral or memorial service
- visit the local police/coroner/hospital teams'

Remember that people experiencing bereavement may find it very difficult to make decisions. Wherever possible you should reassure them that there is no immediate rush to make arrangements, for example about a student's belongings.

**“The four hour journey I made to that student room, the utter disbelief, confusion and emotional turmoil in which we gathered with my younger son’s hall of residence flatmates, still resides in my mind and body. That night, I lay in police arranged hotel accommodation wondering who could help us get through the next few days.”**

Mosse, 2021

## Supporting other students

Students in need of support may include those close to the student who has died, such as their partner, friends, housemates, and classmates. They may also include others who witnessed the events leading to the student’s death, who have previously been bereaved, or who were already vulnerable as a result of a mental health problem. When offering support, you should consider:

- Referral to counselling and mental health services
- Accommodation needs – including where a death has taken place in shared accommodation
- Support to extend academic deadlines or notify tutors of extenuating circumstances
- Compassionate leave from studies

As part of your death response plan, you should alert student services to the anticipated demand for support as soon as possible. It may be particularly helpful to provide them with a list of names of students who you understand to be particularly vulnerable so that they can be prioritised if they seek help at a later point. You should also notify tutors across all courses and ask them to identify actions that they may need to take in relation to academic deadlines, assessments, and extenuating circumstances.

**“It was in the middle of my year 2 exams. I have done badly in all of them and I am worried about not reaching 3rd year. I can’t revise and I get anxious and uncomfortable. I then worry about the exam and I get worse. I fear for my education.”**

Pitman, 2018

In some situations, there may be students from other higher education institutions who need support, for example where students from multiple local HEIs share the same accommodation. In these circumstances, the postvention team chair should assign a member of staff to liaise with the accommodation provider and other HEIs to provide a coordinated response.

## Supporting staff

As with students, staff members who knew the person who has died well are not the only people who may need practical or emotional support. Others include staff who were first responders at the scene, or who work near where the death took place, and those with their own experiences of bereavement or mental health problems. It is also important to recognise that staff involved in carrying out postvention work or delivering wellbeing services may themselves be in need of support.

**“As academic staff we have little training in pastoral care, and especially no training or support in how to ensure we look after our own mental health to deal with the issues that arise in relation to student mental health... When these events occur, we are ‘knocked for six’ and often expected to be the strong ones in front of students, this can be extremely harrowing without proper support being in place.”**

University academic, Causer, 2021

Support staff to access external sources of mental health and wellbeing support – including any help available through employee assistance programmes. Give particular consideration to any staff who responded to the incident, for example, security teams, as well as those heavily involved in supporting students directly. Staff in these circumstances may be experiencing trauma themselves, could benefit from the opportunity to debrief in the immediate aftermath, and may need ongoing psychological support.

**“The thoughts take a long time to go away. Even now when I am on the residential site it is always there... so I don't think it ever goes from your mind.”**

University domestic cleaner, Causer, 2021

Staff may also need to make use of bereavement leave policies. You should encourage line managers to make a plan with affected staff so that they have regular opportunities to check in for support, and if they wish, to receive communications about the funeral or any tributes or memorials.

## Responding to multiple student suicides ('suicide clusters')

A suicide cluster is usually three or more deaths that occur unexpectedly closely in time, place, or both. Young people are at higher risk for suicide clusters. Earlier in this section, we set out steps you can take to help prevent suicide clusters, by taking a proactive approach to responding to sensationalist coverage in the press and social media, and by identifying students and staff who may be vulnerable and making an active offer of support.

If there are concerns about a possible suicide cluster, you should immediately contact your local public health suicide prevention lead. Two suicides occurring in young people in a higher education institution over a short time period should trigger concerns about potential links, even if the deaths appear unconnected. Guidance from Public Health England requires that the suicide prevention lead convene a 'Suicide Cluster Response Group' meeting. This brings together local agencies to assess the situation, agree a proactive response, and identify how to monitor the situation without increasing institutional anxiety.

As part of this response, you should review any particular circumstances that may be making a cluster more likely. This could include access to a particular means of suicide or particular messages and conversations circulating online that may be increasing the risk of multiple suicides. Staff and students should know who to contact if they are concerned about any online messages.

It can be difficult to know when to step down from a cluster response. Some individuals may require continuing support and you will need to remain vigilant around anniversaries, graduation, and the inquest process.



# 3.

## Reviewing, evaluating and learning

Following your immediate response to a student's death, it is crucial to create a space to learn from what has happened and to take action to prevent future suicide. Those who knew the person who has died may also be looking for ways to come together and pay tribute, and your institution can play an important role in supporting them to create these spaces. This section sets out how you can:

- Review the student's time at your institution and identify actions to prevent future suicides
- Support the inquest process with candour and empathy
- Help families, friends, and staff members pay tribute to the person who has died



## Case study: Reflecting and learning

Over a two-year period, we experienced a number of student deaths by suicide. Each death had a profound impact on families, students, and staff, and those of us directly involved in the postvention efforts have often reflected since on what was helpful or unhelpful in our responses at the time. We found that having identified staff with the skills and capacity to respond to often challenging and distressing events in a compassionate and sensitive way was of key importance, alongside having procedures and policies in place around the death of a student which helped to facilitate a coordinated and effective response across the institution. Looking back, there were also things we could have done much better, such as more proactively reaching out to work with and support bereaved families.

Suicide-Safer Universities Project Lead, England

## Carry out a serious incident review

The purpose of a serious incident review is to capture learning to prevent future suicides and to make sure that the higher education institution is equipped to provide compassionate and timely support in response to any future student deaths. It should be led by a senior member of staff who has not had prior involvement in supporting the student who has died (though they may have been involved in postvention efforts). It's crucial that the way the review is carried out is guided by the needs and wishes of family members and includes in its scope all of their questions.

**“The future will be safer if we learn from the past, what went well, what did not, and what we can do differently. If universities are defensive a parent will hear ‘we learn nothing from your child’s death’. If they are open to learning and change, a parent will hear “there is hope for a better future and my child’s death was not in vain...”**

Bereaved parent

The 'SAFER' approach is a way of thinking about a serious incident review that has been developed by the LEARN network – a group of families who have been bereaved by suicide. It sets out an approach informed by the experiences of parents who have been through the process.

**Student Story** – Establish the story of the events that happened in the student's life leading up to their death. Consider academic and non-academic factors and attempt to understand the root causes of what has happened.

**Anonymous** – Outputs from the review should protect the identity of the people involved including students, family, and friends. Produce an anonymous version that can be shared across the higher education sector in order to help prevent future deaths.

**Fault-Free** – Do not aim to apportion blame. Everyone involved should be supported to reflect honestly about what has happened.

**Effective** – Ask whether staff followed relevant policies and procedures, and whether those procedures themselves were effective.

**Recommendations** – Identify learning points and concrete actions that could prevent future deaths. You should share these widely within your institution and within the wider higher education sector through relevant networks. You should also provide them to the coroner as part of any inquest.

For detailed information about carrying out a serious incident review [download our guidance](#)



## Support the inquest process with candour and empathy

In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland sudden deaths are investigated by a coroner whose role is to establish who has died, when, where and how they died. As part of this process, they will convene an inquest – a fact-finding inquiry in a court.

There is no inquest system in Scotland however sudden or unexplained deaths are reported to the Procurator Fiscal who has legal responsibility for the body of the person who has died, usually until a doctor has written a death certificate and given it to the nearest relative. At the time of writing, pilot work has been undertaken to develop a multi-agency process for reviewing all deaths by suicide with the aim of translating learning into action plans at a local and national level.

The role of an inquest is not to blame in a criminal or civil sense. But a coroner can be critical of an individual institution and has certain powers if they identify systemic failings that could contribute to further deaths. Staff may be asked to provide witness statements in advance of the inquest, and these will usually be made available to the student's family. A senior representative and other staff members may also be called to give evidence during the inquest itself. These witnesses often play a key role in helping families to understand the background to what has happened. Families are very rarely legally supported, so think carefully before using legal representation for your institution. Above all, you should approach the inquest process with candour and empathy.

Consider what help family members, students, and staff may need around the time of the inquest. At this point, much more information about the circumstances of the case may become publicly available. Family members may need additional support to manage intrusive media requests, and anyone affected by the student's death may find this period particularly distressing. See Section 2 of this guide for advice about providing support.

For more detailed guidance on preparing to give evidence to an inquest [download our inquest advice](#)

## Consider what support you can offer for funeral arrangements

When it comes to providing support for funeral arrangements you should be guided at each stage by the wishes and needs of the student's family. Ask them if they welcome staff and student attendance at the funeral and wake. Be prepared to suggest a member of staff who knew the student who has died to speak at the funeral. If no one knew the student well enough, the head of a faculty or a member of the senior leadership team (eg principal, vice-chancellor), should offer to attend. Where practical, arrange and fund transport for staff and students to the funeral. If the family wish to have a private funeral, then you may need to organise a memorial event on campus to allow staff and students to remember the person who has died and honour their life.

## Support families and friends with tributes and memorials

Everyone who knew and cared for the person who has died can play an important role in preserving their identity and memory. Family and friends may appreciate spaces where they can hear from others who appreciated that person's character, talents, and the impact they had on those around them.

**“I wanted to have contact with those who knew him; teachers who had written shining references, saw his talent and recognised the unspeakable loss of his early death. I was deeply moved by the letters I received... telling me about their classroom and supervision encounters with Jake, and their affection for him. That he was known, cared about and appreciated... mattered a great deal in those weeks following his death. Later, I received letters from Jake's undergraduate head of department and the university; but it was these warm personal messages from his teachers that meant the most.”**

Mosse, 2021



The most appropriate way to pay tribute will always be specific to the person who has died and the wishes of those close to them, however some ways you could support include:

- Offering to connect the family to members of staff who knew them
- Setting up a tribute book (this could be a physical book or hosted online)
- Providing logistical support for events organised by their friends or the student union
- Holding a memorial service on campus for students and staff
- Marking the loss in the wider community – e.g. through a one-minute silence
- Providing academic recognition for the student
- Where appropriate offering the family or guardians their coursework or grades
- Considering an annual award or internship in their name

Families will not always want to be involved in further communications about tributes or memorials and you should make sure to establish and respect their wishes. It is also important to consider the privacy of the student who has died. There may be aspects of their life that they did not want to be disclosed to the people around them and you should make sure that any tributes and memorials respect those wishes.



# Acknowledgments

This guide was developed and edited by David Malpas (Middlesex University), Dr Simon Merrywest (University of Manchester), Professor Jo Smith (University of Worcester), Ged Flynn (PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide), and John de Pury (Universities UK). We are grateful for funding received from the Office for Students.

The advice contained in this guide has been produced together with a reference group of more than 50 higher education professionals, suicide postvention experts, parents, and students. We are grateful to the many individuals who contributed their time, knowledge, and expertise through writing chapters, giving feedback, and providing advice. You can find a full list of contributing authors and reference group members at Appendix 1 (p 33). We are grateful to Professor Steve West and Professor Jo Smith for chairing Reference Group meetings, and to Roz Dupigny (Middlesex University) for providing administrative support to the Reference Group.

The editors wish to, particularly thank and acknowledge the input from members of the Student Minds Student Advisory Committee: Daisy Shearer, Elizabeth Mullenger, Mia Brady, Dan Marshall, and Ruth Day.

# Tools to accompany this guide

**Postvention checklist** – A step-by-step checklist that sets out specific actions to take in the immediate aftermath of a student's death, in the following days, and in the longer term.

**Forming a postvention team** – A short resource for those involved in setting up and running a postvention team. It includes role descriptions, person specifications, and a template first meeting agenda.

**Communications following the sudden death of a student** – Examples of the kind of communication that you may need to send to the wider community and in response to media enquiries.

**Carrying out a serious incident review** – A guide to setting up and running a serious incident review, with template forms to help you capture information, and structure your findings.

**Giving evidence at an inquest** – An overview of what to expect when giving evidence at an inquest, including practical advice to help staff prepare and present their evidence.

**Communications considerations** – This list covers some of the areas you will need to consider in your approach to communications after the death of a student.

**Responding to a suspected student suicide: support for security staff** – This resource outlines the support that should be put in place for security staff.

# Appendix 1:

## Membership of the Reference Group and Independent Review Group

Author contributors from the Reference Group included:

Dr Hilary Causer	University of Surrey
Isabella De George	Positive Changes in Placements
Clare Dickens	University of Wolverhampton
Fiona Drouet MBE	EmilyTest Scottish charity and member of National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group, Scotland
Dr Deirdre Flynn	Marino Institute of Education, Dublin
Lorna Fraser	Samaritans
Evan Grant	Cameron Grant Memorial Trust
Rebecca Hayhurst	Unite Students
Prof Ann John	Swansea University
David Malpas	Middlesex University
Dr Ian Marsh	Canterbury Christ Church University
Dr Simon Merrywest	University of Manchester
Prof David Mosse	SOAS University of London
James Murray	Kooth
Sally Olohan MBE	University of Westminster
Geoff Rickson	Samaritans HE Postvention Advisor
Lisa Roxby	PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide
Prof Jo Smith	University of Worcester
Nic Streatfield	University of York
Michelle Stebbings	Support After Suicide Partnership

We also received advice and feedback from the following Reference Group and Independent Review Group members:

Aled Blake	University of Wales
Simon Blake	MHFA and Chair of the Support After Suicide Partnership
Sarah Cavendish	University of Leicester
Tahmina Choudrey	Middlesex University Students' Union
Dr Alexandra Pitman	UCL Institute of Mental Health and Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust
John de Pury	Universities UK
Emma Douthwaite	Office for Students
Roz Dupigny	Middlesex University
Hamish Elvidge	The Matthew Elvidge Trust
Ged Flynn	PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide
Mark Fudge	Charlie Waller Trust
Amy Hatt	Department for Education
Ryan Stokes	HEFCW
Benjamin Hunt	Office for Students
Kris Irategeka	Middlesex University Students' Union
Tim Jones	University of Worcester
Estelle Kane	Office for Students
Lauren Knight	Universities Scotland
Keith King	Samaritans
Sharon Mallon	Open University
Lily Makurah	Office for Health Improvement and Disparities
Helen McNeely	Queen's University Belfast / AMOSSHE
Jacqui Morrissey	Samaritans
Amy Norton	Office for Students
Gerry Rice	University of West England
Prof Ross Renton	Anglia Ruskin University Peterborough
Dominic Smithies	Student Minds
Alan Stuart	The Calzy Foundation
Prof Steve West	University of West England
Jill Stevenson	AMOSSHE
Vicky Groves	Heads of University Counselling Services
Janette Nhangaba	Middlesex University



# Appendix 2:

## Further resources and support organisations

### Preventing and responding to student suicides

#### Step-by-Step (Samaritans)

Samaritans offer a free postvention support service to education settings, including HEIs, called 'Step by Step'. It provides practical support to help HEIs prepare for and recover from a suspected or attempted suicide. This includes expert advice, guidance and downloadable resources to support grief in students and staff and minimise the risk of further suicide.

#### Suicide Safer Universities

Guidance for university leaders and practitioners on developing a suicide prevention strategy. It covers topics including steps to prevent student suicide, intervening when students are in difficulty and best practice for responding to student suicides.

### Support in the aftermath of a bereavement

#### Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse Bereavement Care offers free, confidential support, face to face, via email, web support and a nationwide bereavement support helpline for anyone who is bereaved. They also have services specifically for bereaved children and young people.

#### Winston's Wish

A charity for children and young people bereaved by the death of a parent or sibling providing practical support and guidance throughout the grieving process, including a national helpline.

#### Child Bereavement UK

Child Bereavement UK supports bereaved children and young people aged up to 25yrs and anyone affected by the death of a child of any age. They provide confidential support including a national helpline, email responses and live chat via their website.

### Support following a death by suicide

#### Samaritans

Samaritans provides confidential emotional support in the UK and Ireland day and night, 365 days a year for anyone who is struggling. Whoever you are and whatever you're facing, they're here to listen so you don't have to face it alone. Samaritans can be contacted by telephone, email, letter or face to face in many local branches.

#### PAPYRUS

PAPYRUS provides a confidential support and advice service to young people, aged up to 35 yrs, who may be at risk of suicide and to those concerned about a vulnerable young person. Support can be accessed via their confidential helpline (HOPELINEUK), by email and text.

#### Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide

SOBS is a national charity which offers free support to adults (aged 18yrs+) bereaved by suicide via a helpline, self-help groups and a peer support online forum.

#### Help is at Hand

This guide contains information about what may happen after a suicide or sudden traumatic death, including; feelings and emotions that bereaved people may experience, coping advice, sources of support and useful reading material. The booklet also provides information for professionals to assist in providing help and finding support for themselves. There are versions available for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

#### After a Suicide (SAMH)

This Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) booklet provides contact details of relevant organisations in Scotland.

## Reporting a death by suicide

### **Notifying agencies/organisations when someone has died (Suicide Bereavement UK)**

Suicide Bereavement UK has compiled a checklist of organisations/professionals who may need to be informed when someone has died and is available as a downloadable form.

### **Tell us Once (Gov.uk)**

The 'Tell Us Once' is a free government service through which you can report a death in Scotland, England and Wales (this service is not available in Northern Ireland). This enables most government departments to be automatically informed of a person's death.

## Communicating following a death by suicide

### **Media Guidelines (Samaritans)**

Samaritans' media guidelines for reporting suicide and online resources reinforce industry codes of practice, supporting the highest standards of coverage of suicide.

## The inquest process

### **Coroners Support Service**

The Coroners' Courts Support Service is an independent voluntary organisation offering emotional support and practical help to bereaved families and witnesses attending an inquest at a coroner's court in England and Wales (this service is not available in Scotland or Northern Ireland).

### **Inquest Handbook**

This free guide for bereaved families, friends and advisors gives detailed information on the investigation and inquest procedures after a death in England and Wales.

### **Official guidance**

The Ministry of Justice have produced their own guide to coroner services in England and Wales. Similar guidance is available from the Coroner's Service for Northern Ireland, and the Procurator Fiscal Service in Scotland.

Universities UK is the collective voice of 136 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world; maximising their positive impact locally, nationally and globally.

Universities UK acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution.

Designed by [Effusion](#)



Woburn House  
20 Tavistock Square  
London, WC1H 9HQ

☎ +44 (0)20 7419 4111

✉ [info@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:info@universitiesuk.ac.uk)

🖱 [universitiesuk.ac.uk](https://universitiesuk.ac.uk)

🐦📘📷 @UniversitiesUK



December 2022

ISBN: 978-1-84036-500-9