

SUBSTANCE USE HEALTH STRATEGY

A WHOLE-CAMPUS APPROACH TO SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

UVIC



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INTRODUCTION

Introducing the Substance Use Health Strategy: A Whole-Campus Approach to Safety and Well-being

Substance use is a reality in British Columbia, including on post-secondary campuses. Universities and colleges across BC have work to do, collectively, to help safeguard our communities against the harms posed by the toxic drug crisis.

This Substance Use Health Strategy reflects a coordinated, whole-campus approach to safety and well-being, with a focus on education, training, coordination of services, policies and care. It is shaped by lived and living experience, grounded in research and public health guidance, and strengthened by diverse voices across campus.

We acknowledge the Province of British Columbia's leadership and guidance in advancing substance use health and safety across the post-secondary sector. We are grateful for their ongoing efforts to address the toxic drug crisis and supporting institutions in sharing knowledge, improving practices and building systems of care.

Our sincere appreciation goes to the Special Advisor on Substance Use Health, Campus Steering Committee, Research Panel, Students' Assembly, and university leaders, students, faculty and staff who contributed to this strategy. We also thank members of our broader community who shared their time, insight and lived experience to help shape this work.

Meaningful change requires courage, humility, and sustained collaboration. The University of Victoria is committed to the work ahead. We will continue to work across campus and alongside our post-secondary partners to reduce substance-related harms and support safe and healthy campus communities, where all can flourish.



Qwul'sih'yah'maht Robina Thomas, Acting President & Vice-Chancellor



Elizabeth Croft, VP Academic & Provost

OUR PURPOSE

This strategy aims to foster a health-promoting and inclusive campus where students, staff, and faculty can thrive. By reducing stigma, preventing substance-related harms, and embedding harm reduction and lived experience into our systems of care, UVic is taking a whole-campus approach to support substance use health as part of our commitment to advancing well-being.

Guiding Principles

Our strategy is shaped by the following guiding principles, which reflect UVic's core values and commitment to build a healthy, supportive, and inclusive campus for all.

- ▶ **Holistic:** Grounded in a whole-person, whole-campus view of health and wellness across the spectrum of substance use
- ▶ **Evidence-informed:** Draws on multiple forms of evidence, including research, practice, lived and living experience
- ▶ **Values lived experience:** Reflects the knowledge and insights of those directly impacted by substance use and related systems
- ▶ **Trauma-informed & culturally safe:** Recognizes historical and systemic harms, and supports equity-based practices
- ▶ **Non-stigmatizing:** Promotes compassionate, non-judgmental, person-centered approaches
- ▶ **Tailored & responsive:** Tailored to our campus strengths, settings, communities, and unique context
- ▶ **Participatory:** Shaped through inclusive, whole-campus engagement processes
- ▶ **Systems-oriented:** Rooted in the social and structural determinants of health
- ▶ **Aligned:** Integrates provincial harm reduction commitments, institutional policies, and service delivery
- ▶ **Agile & Iterative:** Sustained through continuous learning, reflection, and adaptation



Substance use health is a critical component of a supportive and inclusive campus environment.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Substance use health is a critical component of a supportive and inclusive campus environment. At the University of Victoria, we recognize the realities of substance use in all communities, including post-secondary campuses and the need for a compassionate, coordinated, and evidence-informed response. This strategy reflects our shared commitment to care for one another and to foster a campus where health, dignity, and safety are prioritized.

The toxic drug crisis was declared a public health emergency in BC in 2016 and continues to claim thousands of lives each year. The impacts and losses continue to be deeply felt across the province, including within

our own campus community. Many faculty, staff and students have been personally affected by this crisis. In early 2024, the UVic community experienced a profound loss that underscored the urgent need for coordinated, compassionate, and sustained action on our campus. Galvanized by this loss, students, faculty, staff, and university leaders came together to reflect and learn from this tragedy, and began laying the foundation for a more inclusive, coordinated, and proactive approach to substance use health.

This strategy is one outcome of that collective work.

Guided by UVic's institutional values and expressed in our [2023 Strategic Plan](#), we are committed to creating a welcoming, student-centered, and values-based environment. As a community-minded university grounded in ʔetalnəwáʔ | ÁTOL,NEUEL, we seek to uphold the rights of one another and be in right relationship with all things. Supporting substance use health and safety is part of that responsibility.

Substance use exists on a spectrum which includes non-use, low risk use, high risk use and substance use disorder. A public health approach, as outlined by the [Canadian Public Health Association](#), recognizes that substance use is shaped by complex individual and societal factors and carries both benefits and harms. A public health approach emphasizes equity, dignity, harm reduction, and human rights. Placing an explicit focus on substance use health and safety should not be confused with endorsing or encouraging substance use. Rather, it acknowledges that people do use substances. Our Substance Use Health Strategy proactively seeks to prevent harm, reduce stigma, and provide individuals with accurate information, support, and care to help them make informed decisions and stay safe.

At UVic, this translates into a whole-campus strategy that includes awareness, early intervention, harm reduction, health-promoting policies and practices, and coordinated response systems. It also reflects a broader shift in how we talk about substance use and related emergencies. As CAPSA (2024) notes, reframing these events as [Substance Use Medical Emergencies](#) helps shift our response from judgment to care, enabling a more accurate, compassionate, and person-centered approach. UVic is committed to using language that supports dignity, reflects the full spectrum of substance use health, acknowledges the importance of meeting people where they are at, and affirms that emergencies can happen to anyone. [\(See Definitions of Key Terms and Concepts\)](#)


Ultimately, this strategy builds on the efforts, insights, and collective engagement of our campus community. It reflects UVic's responsibility to lead with courage, compassion, and evidence-informed action - aligned with our institutional values of inclusion, lifelong learning, and community partnership. Together, we are working toward a university environment where all members are treated with dignity, where support is accessible, and where every person has the opportunity to experience health, safety, and belonging.

FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION

How We Got Here

This strategy is both a response to the toxic drug crisis and a long-term commitment to building a healthy, inclusive, and supportive campus. It reflects UVic's understanding that substance use health requires more than reactive or crisis-based solutions. Grounded in a whole-campus approach, our efforts are guided by five key goals:

1. Promote a culture of health, safety, and well-being across campus.
2. Prevent substance-related harms, including toxic drug poisoning and medical emergencies related to substance use.
3. Improve access to mental health and substance use information and supports, both on campus and in the wider community.
4. Strengthen awareness, education, and response through inclusive and informed approaches.
5. Foster collaboration, evaluation, and continuous improvement strengthening coordination and accountability.



The toxic drug crisis was declared a public health emergency in BC in 2016 and continues to claim thousands of lives each year.

What Informed the Strategy

A university priority, this strategy was developed under the leadership of a Special Advisor, appointed to guide and inform a campus-wide response to substance use health. In collaboration with a Research Panel and a Cross-Campus Committee, insights were gathered from across the university and beyond. The strategy integrates health promotion, harm reduction, education, crisis response, and policy alignment to promote shared responsibility across the UVic community.

It was informed by four key inputs:

1. **Critical Incident:** A tragic loss in our campus community, and the lessons learned from external reviews into the circumstances surrounding the incident, served as a catalyst for deeper reflection, underscoring the urgency for coordinated, compassionate, and sustained action.
2. **UVic Community Voices:** Engagement with students, staff, and faculty, including those with lived and living experience, helped identify priorities, gaps, and opportunities for a more supportive and informed campus culture.
3. **University Activities:** A scan of existing and emerging initiatives across campus helped identify what is already underway, where gaps remain, and how to align efforts with UVic's strengths, capacity, and long-term commitments.
4. **Expertise and Sector Knowledge:** A review of provincial guidelines, UVic's own research capacity, harm reduction expertise, and practices from other post-secondary institutions helped ensure the strategy is grounded in evidence and aligned with leading approaches across the education sector.

A Strategy Built to Evolve

Together, these inputs shaped a strategy that is reflective, responsive, and designed to grow with the needs of the UVic community. Annual priority setting will help keep our efforts grounded in core goals, principles, and outcomes - while remaining adaptable to emerging challenges and realities.

UVic is committed to upholding equity and fostering a culture of belonging, ensuring this strategy remains grounded in our shared values of inclusivity, equity, and support.



STRATEGIC AREAS OF FOCUS

UVic's strategy is organized around five key areas that will shape how we embed substance use health into campus systems, culture, and care. Informed by campus engagement, research evidence, lived experience, and ongoing reflections, these areas form the foundation of our commitment to continue to build a healthy, supportive, and inclusive university environment.

The Five Strategic Areas of Focus are:



1. Engagement and Communications



2. Education and Training



**3. Crisis Readiness, Response,
and Recovery**



4. Support, Services, and Partnerships



**5. Research, Policy, and Continuous
Improvement**

Each area includes a clear goal, a shared approach, and long-term outcomes. Together, they provide a roadmap for action. Annual priority setting will identify key priorities, guide specific initiatives, track progress, and ensure the strategy evolves with the needs of our diverse campus community.

Strategic Area 1: Engagement and Communication



Goal

Increase awareness, reduce stigma, and build a shared understanding of substance use health, harm reduction, and available supports.



Approach

Through inclusive, consistent, and compassionate communication, UVic will make information easy to access and act on - supporting a safer, more informed campus.



Outcomes we aim to achieve

- a)** The university's approach to substance use health - including its strategy, initiatives, and values - is clearly communicated and widely understood, building trust, encouraging use of supports, and reinforcing a shared commitment to well-being.
- b)** Foundational knowledge about substance use health and harm reduction is built into orientation and onboarding - creating a more informed, prevention-focused campus culture from day one.
- c)** Harm reduction information including supplies, crisis response protocols, and available supports, are clearly communicated through accessible and inclusive messaging, ensuring everyone can find what they need before, during, and after a substance-related emergency.
- d)** Students, staff, and faculty are supported with clear information and guidance to recognize and respond to substance use emergencies, reducing confusion and enabling timely, compassionate action.
- e)** Timely drug alerts and risk updates are shared through trusted channels, improving real-time awareness and supporting informed decisions.
- f)** The campus community has opportunities to explore and engage in open, judgment-free conversations about substance use, reducing stigma and helping strengthen a culture of care and support.

Strategic Area 2: Education and Training



Goal

Increase access to regular education and training opportunities that promote substance use health and safety, decrease stigma, and promote compassionate and informed decision-making.



Approach

UVic will provide a diverse range of learning opportunities tailored to the roles and realities of students, staff, and faculty - fostering a culture of shared responsibility, preparedness, and informed decision-making.



Outcomes we aim to achieve

- a)** Substance use health education is integrated into UVic's broader health and wellness learning, helping the campus community understand substance use through a spectrum model and fostering non-judgmental conversations that reduce stigma, strengthen relationships, and encourage early access to support.
- b)** Campus members have access to formal and informal education and skill-building opportunities to deepen understanding of substance use as a public health issue, clarify support roles, and build practical skills through shared responsibility and ongoing learning.
- c)** Harm reduction and crisis recognition and response are embedded into student orientation, staff and volunteer onboarding, and ongoing training, ensuring the campus community has the knowledge, skills, and confidence to identify and respond to substance related medical emergencies.
- d)** Frontline staff with first aid responsibilities as part of their job descriptions, receive enhanced and ongoing support and education to respond to substance-related medical emergencies, ensuring consistent, compassionate, and stigma-free care across all campus settings.
- e)** Participation in training and learning events is tracked and reviewed, enhancing accountability, identifying gaps in readiness, and informing resource and program planning.
- f)** Students, staff and faculty can easily identify and access training opportunities, educational resources, and reference tools through a centralized platform, supporting continuous learning and reinforcing culturally safe, harm reduction practices.

Strategic Area 3: Crisis Readiness, Response, and Recovery



Goal

Strengthen UVic's capacity to prepare for, respond to, and recover from substance-related medical emergencies with clarity, care, and coordination.



Approach

UVic will enact a trauma-informed, non-punitive approach to crisis response that prioritizes care, safety and campus-wide consistency.



Outcomes we aim to achieve

- a)** The campus community is supported by a clear, well-communicated crisis response framework that outlines when to act, what to do, and who to contact - reducing confusion, building awareness, and enabling timely, coordinated action.
- b)** Frontline staff across roles and settings receive consistent, ongoing training to respond confidently and compassionately to substance-related medical emergencies, ensuring safety and trauma-informed, culturally responsive care.
- c)** Crisis response infrastructure - including overdose kits (e.g., naloxone, AEDs, oxygen), signage, and emergency maps - is visible, accessible, and aligned with local and provincial emergency service protocols, supporting timely interventions in high-risk areas.
- d)** A campus-wide crisis response protocol is clearly documented and operationalized - enhancing coordinated and communications by clarifying roles, standardizing procedures, and reinforcing accountability during high-risk critical incidents.
- e)** Crisis response protocols - including policies and practices - are embedded in a living framework that is regularly reviewed, scenario-tested, and continuously improved to build campus-wide preparedness and a culture of accountability and learning.
- f)** Post-crisis supports such as trauma-informed psychological care, peer debriefing, and family liaison are offered - promoting recovery, emotional safety, and well-being after a crisis.

Strategic Area 4: Support, Services, and Partnerships



Goal

Improve access to substance use-related supports on and off campus by strengthening service integration and community partnerships.



Approach

UVic is committed to ensuring students, staff, and faculty have access to timely and appropriate supports across the care continuum.



Outcomes we aim to achieve

- a) Campus community members can easily identify and access supports for mental health, harm reduction, and recovery, both on campus and in the broader community.
- b) Campus support and services are coordinated through a person-centered model that integrates academic, social, cultural, and health needs, supporting holistic and responsive care.
- c) Partnerships with Island Health, Indigenous-led services, and community-based organizations expand UVic's capacity to offer diverse, culturally safe, and community-informed care options, resulting in more accessible support.
- d) Peer support networks or ambassadors are accessible and visible across campus, increasing relatability, reducing stigma, and promoting a culture of shared care and safety.
- e) Low-barrier options such as accessible resources, peer-led initiatives, and trauma-informed care, are visible, helping reduce stigma and improve support for equity-deserving populations.
- f) Faculty and staff clearly understand available campus supports and can effectively guide students to resources and information, improving access and contributing to student well-being.

Strategic Area 5: Research, Policy, and Continuous Improvement



Goal

Build a culture of learning and accountability by embedding campus-based research, inclusive policy development, and continuous evaluation into UVic's substance use health strategy.



Approach

UVic will integrate campus-wide insights, research, and evaluation into substance use health initiatives, ensuring informed decisions and adaptive progress.



Outcomes we aim to achieve

- a)** Diverse campus representatives provide ongoing guidance and oversight of substance use health initiatives, promoting transparency, inclusive decision-making, and sustained institutional commitment.
- b)** UVic's internal expertise and research partners, such as CISUR, generate campus-specific evidence and apply emerging research to improve program design, inform policy decisions, and strengthen overall health and wellness. These insights are translated into practical tools and guidance that enhance transparency and evidence-informed decision-making across campus.
- c)** Policies and practices are aligned with provincial standards and legal protections (e.g., Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act), improving consistency, trust, and clarity for students, faculty, staff, and the community.
- d)** University policies related to substance use, harm reduction, crisis response, and student conduct are regularly reviewed and updated to remove contradictions, reduce punitive language, and promote a health- and equity-informed environment that reflects the evolving needs of the campus community.
- e)** Innovative harm reduction approaches, such as on-campus drug checking, are tested, evaluated, and refined to improve safety, assess feasibility, and evidence-based scaling. UVic contributes to broader learning by sharing research, practices, and insights with other post-secondary institutions.
- f)** Priority setting, evaluation metrics, and continuous feedback loops are embedded across all aspects of implementation, ensuring progress is tracked, gaps are identified, and data is used to guide decisions, allocate resources, and drive ongoing improvement.

IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

UVic is committed to a transparent, inclusive, and responsive approach to substance use health. This strategy is a living document, designed to be flexible and adaptable to reflect the realities of our campus, evolving research, provincial guidance, and the voices of students, staff, faculty, and community partners.

To ensure the work has lasting impact, the strategy will be supported by a campus-wide governance approach that enables shared leadership, coordinated implementation, and continuous improvement across campus systems. This includes:

1. **Collaborative Governance:** Shared leadership ensures that diverse voices and expertise – including executive, staff, students, and faculty – inform decision making. Coordinated structures will support alignment across departments and foster collective ownership of the strategy.
2. **Strategic Alignment:** The strategy's focus areas and outcomes are grounded in evidence, diverse perspectives, and lived experience. They are aligned with UVic's institutional goals to guide long-term planning and informed decision-making.
3. **Action Planning:** Clear priorities will be developed, guided by the strategy's focus areas, and supported by defined activities, accountable leads, timelines and measurable indicators of success.
4. **Ongoing Engagement:** Regular reflection and feedback opportunities will be embedded to support continuous learning and adaptive improvements.
5. **Transparent Reporting:** Progress will be tracked and shared through public updates and engagement opportunities, strengthening accountability and trust.

Governance Approach

UVic's approach to substance use health is guided by a flexible governance approach that supports shared leadership, coordinated implementation, and inclusive engagement.

- Strategic leadership and support from the Executive, the cross-campus committee, and key advisors ensures alignment with institutional priorities, tracks progress over time and signals a university-wide commitment to this work.
- Cross-functional teams and ongoing collaboration across units will help translate the strategy into coordinated action, with workplans and activities grounded in internal expertise and aligned with broader campus goals.
- Ongoing engagement, through the creation of advisory circles or by leveraging existing groups of students, Indigenous communities, people with lived experience, and other partners, helps ensure the work remains inclusive, and grounded in the lived realities of those most impacted.

This approach is designed to adapt over time, while remaining focused on accountability, impact, and continuous learning.

DEFINITIONS

Language shapes how we understand, respond to, and support one another. It has the power to reduce stigma, foster dignity, and reflect our shared values of compassion, equity, and inclusion. Throughout this strategy and in the actions and outcomes it guides, we strive to use language that is non-judgmental, person-centered, and rooted in public health principles. The following terms are used across the strategy to promote a shared understanding of substance use health and to guide consistent, respectful communication across our campus community.

- [1] **Substance Use Health:** Substance use health is a way of thinking about why and how we form relationships with substances and how these relationships can impact our broader sense of physical, social, and mental well-being.
- [2] **Substance Use Spectrum:** Substance use exists on a spectrum, ranging from non-use to substance use disorder, with varying levels of benefit and risk. It recognizes that people's experiences with substances can shift over time and individuals use substances like alcohol, cannabis, nicotine, and other drugs for many reasons - including medical, personal, cultural, pain management, performance, pleasure, or coping purposes. This spectrum supports a health-focused, non-judgmental understanding of substance use.
- [3] **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 strategies are useful for anyone who uses substances, with the goal of "meeting people where they are at" to promote safer use and opens the door to a wide range of health and social services including treatment.
- [4] **Substance Use Medical Emergency:** A critical health situation caused by substance use that requires immediate medical attention.
- [5] **Toxic Drug Crisis:** The toxic drug crisis, often referred to as the opioid crisis, refers to the ongoing public health emergency in British Columbia fueled by the prevalence of contaminated and illicit drugs, primarily opioids.
- [6] **Lived and Living Experience:** In this context, lived experience refers to individuals in recovery from substance use, while living experience refers to those currently using substances. Their perspectives are vital for understanding substance use and informing approaches to care, recovery, and harm reduction.
- [7] **Trauma-Informed Care:** An approach that recognizes many people may have experienced trauma and works to create safety, trust, and choice in every interaction. It focuses on acknowledging the possible presence of trauma and avoiding actions that could cause harm or re-traumatization.
- [8] **Cultural Safety:** Refers to an outcome based on respectful engagement that recognizes and strives to address power imbalances inherent in the health care system. It provides an environment free of racism and discrimination, where people feel safe when receiving health care.

- [9] **Healthy University:** As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), a Healthy University aspires to create a learning environment and organizational culture that enhances health, well-being, and sustainability, enabling everyone to reach their full potential. It is guided by a whole system approach.
- [10] **Whole-Campus Approach:** An integrated framework that engages all parts of the campus- students, staff, faculty, leadership, services, policies, and systems - in promoting health, safety, and inclusion. It recognizes that health is shaped not only by individual behaviors but also by the broader university system, structures, and settings.
- [11] **Students Assembly:** A students or citizens assembly is a representative group that deliberates on a complex issue using expert input, lived experience, and data to develop informed, inclusive recommendations. It fosters meaningful engagement, thoughtful dialogue, and collective problem-solving to guide policy and drive real-world solutions.
- [12] **Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act:** The *Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act* is a federal Canadian law that provides legal protection to individuals who seek emergency help during an overdose. It protects them from charges for simple possession of controlled substances and certain related violations. The law is designed to encourage people to call 911 without fear of arrest, helping to save lives during a substance use medical emergency.



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