



Photo: UNSW

**UNSW
Societal Impact
Framework
Case study**

Stride at UNSW: Improving mood through movement

Introduction



Figure 1. The UNSW Societal Impact Framework

The UNSW Societal Impact Framework

Embedded at the core of the *UNSW Strategy: Progress for All*, the Societal Impact Framework (SIF) seeks to elevate and understand the extent to which we are contributing to societal, cultural, economic and environmental impact (Figure 1). The SIF invites us to concentrate our efforts in four Impact Focus Areas that reflect currently pressing societal issues and challenges of public concern:

- Accelerating the transition to a sustainable society and planet.
- Advancing economic and social prosperity.
- Enabling healthy lives.
- Strengthening societal resilience, security and cohesion.

At its core, the SIF commits us to embed Indigenous peoples' ways of knowing, being and doing in our activities to improve society across all Impact Focus Areas. The Framework also embeds the cross-cutting themes of inclusion, integrity, and social justice to guide our work.

The SIF supports better understanding of the ways in which we contribute to positive societal impact through innovative research, transformative education, meaningful engagement and values-led operations and governance (Impact Pathways). Exploring and evidencing our progress towards impact through these core university activities will help us to demonstrate and improve how we contribute to positive change for society and the environment.

This case study explores areas of the Stride program at UNSW through the lens of the SIF, demonstrating both the program's societal impact and its institutional strategic alignment.

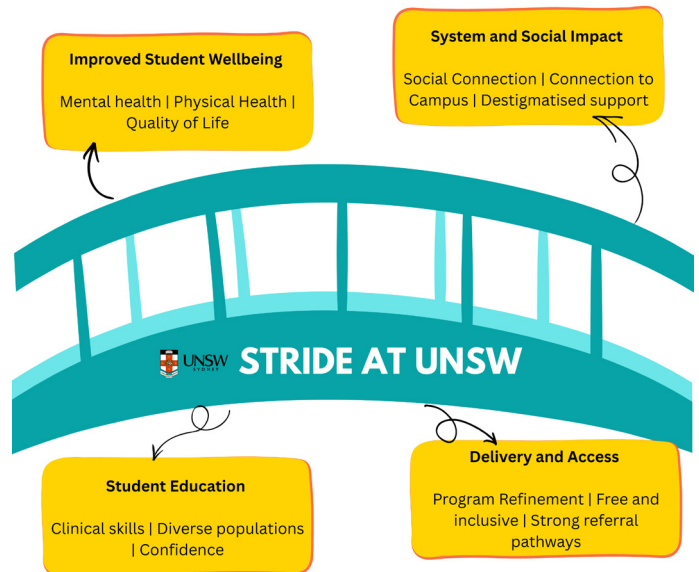


Figure 2. Stride research priorities

School of Health Sciences Faculty of Medicine & Health, UNSW

Stride is a 12-week peer-lead exercise program for students experiencing mental health challenges. It aims to provide students structured, accessible support through supervised exercise sessions delivered twice a week at the UNSW Fitness and Aquatic Centre and on Campus. The program is delivered by third and fourth year Exercise Physiology and Physiotherapy students, under the supervision of an Accredited Exercise Physiologist as part of a placement work-integrated learning.

Stride supports student wellbeing by combining physical activity, peer connection and individualised support in a safe environment. It has helped participants build routine, confidence, social connection and strategies to help with their wellbeing, while also providing placement students with valuable real-world experience in delivering inclusive and person-centred care.

Viewed through the UNSW SIF, Stride aims to enable healthy lives by supporting mental health and wellbeing through a gym-based activity lens. Here, Stride aims to reflect transformative education through the provision of placement experiences when working with diverse populations. Finally, Stride meaningfully engages with the needs of current UNSW student community.

Stride turns exercise into a bridge between mental health support, social connection and confidence – all while helping future health professionals learn how to provide care with empathy and purpose.



Photo: UNSW Sydney

| Stride at UNSW |

THE CHALLENGE

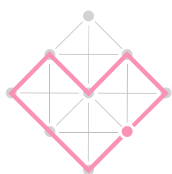
Tertiary student mental health

Higher education students experience disproportionate rates of poor mental health

One in four university students will experience poor mental health at some point during their studies.¹ In 2021, 20,000 appointments were for mental health reasons at UNSW.¹ Individuals pursuing higher education, often are more vulnerable to feelings of poor self-efficacy, academic failure, difficulties forming friendships or experiencing social exclusion.² International students face additional cross-cultural challenges such as disconnection from culture and religion, language barriers, and different social.^{3,4}

As a result, university students are more likely to develop mental health conditions including stress, depression and anxiety.⁵ Alongside several physical implications, including high blood pressure and chronic pain⁶, poor student mental health is linked to lower engagement rates and poorer relationships on campus, both of which are factors that are associated with lower graduation rates.⁷

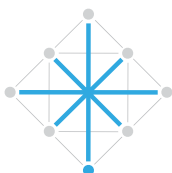
IMPACT FOCUS AREAS



Enabling healthy lives



Advancing economic and social prosperity



Strengthening societal resilience, security, and cohesion

THE SOLUTION

Peer-led exercise sessions for mental health

Building skills, routine, establishing social connection and improving student wellbeing

The Stride program is a peer-led physical activity program that began in 2020 and was developed for Australian university students.⁸ The program aims to provide free physical activity sessions as an adjunct intervention for the management of mental health challenges.⁹

Physical activity can be a practical and approachable form of mental health support, especially for young people or those from diverse background who may feel that traditional mental health services like counselling are not appropriate. Physical activity has been shown to improve mood – reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve sleep and support overall wellbeing.

Furthermore, peer-supported services and programs, encourage motivation and improve the delivery. Through the incorporation of structures fostering social connection and relationship building, peer-supported physical activity programs may offer a unique supportive environment for students to engage with regular exercise.

For some students, physical activity-based programs led by fellow peers, may feel less stigmatising, more accessible and easier to engage with than conventional mental health care.

"The most helpful part of Stride is having someone to share what you're going through with your life, on top of the workout as well."

–

UNSW Stride student mentee, 2026

PATHWAYS TO IMPACT

Leading research, innovation and knowledge translation

Development and adoption of programs relevant to societal needs

Structured exercise is a well-established approach for supporting mental health, however prior to Stride, such programs were rare within tertiary education settings and had limited evidence of feasibility or effectiveness.

As part of the University of Western Australia (UWA) research team, Associate Professor Kemi Wright addressed this gap by developing and trialling the Stride program.⁸ Results provided support for wider program adoption, including at UNSW (Figure 3), and more broadly for the efficacy of structured exercise programs to promote positive mental health and wellbeing on university campuses across Australia.⁹

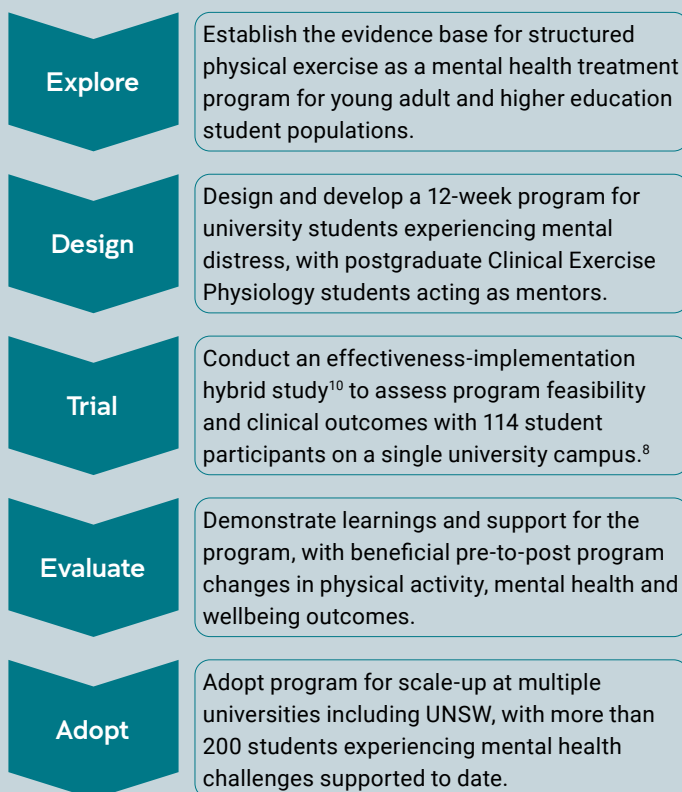


Figure 3. Stride development and adoption process

"It is excellent overall. In this program I embraced the local gym and exercised with people, it is meaningful as an international student."

—

UNSW Stride student mentee, 2026

Research-informed programs contribute positively to society

Improving mood through movement at UNSW

Stride is contributing to growing evidence on the benefits of exercise for mental wellbeing. Our preliminary findings suggest the program is leading to meaningful improvements in UNSW student mental health, with mentees reporting feeling lower symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress after taking part in the program (Figure 4). Students also reported noticeable improvements in their overall quality of life, including how they felt day-to-day and how well they were coping.

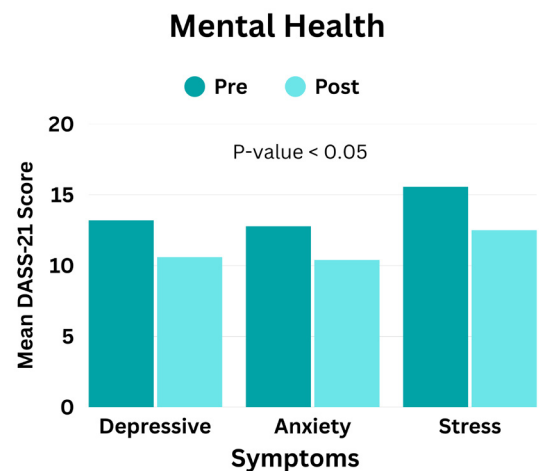


Figure 4: Pre-to-post program mental health outcomes

Providing connection and complementary support pathways beyond traditional mental health services

Stride offers an accessible and complementary pathway to traditional mental health services. For some students who feel uncomfortable accessing counselling or clinical services, physical activity may provide a more approachable and less stigmatising form of wellbeing support.

In addition to promoting physical activity, Stride enables participants to engage in weekly check-ins with a peer mentor. These regular points of contact monitor ongoing participant changes in mood, wellbeing, and medication use, supporting early identification of concerns and prompt referral back to health services when required.

Qualitative feedback has highlighted the value of Stride in improving motivation, supporting routine and fostering social connection. This feedback suggests that peer-led physical activity programs can play an important preventative role by helping students build positive habits, connect with others, and access support before challenges escalate.

"[Mentee] had disengaged from psychologist... the only service they have consistently engaged with is Stride."

—

UNSW Stride referrer, 2026

Photo: UNSW Student & Stakeholder Communications

| Stride at UNSW |

PATHWAYS TO IMPACT

Meaningful engagement and strengthened partnerships

Community engage with and inform our work

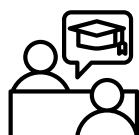
Establishing and strengthening referral pathways

The implementation of Stride has enabled the establishment of referral pathways within the UNSW support system, with 42% of participants in 2025 referred from the UNSW Health Service. This indicates Stride's role as a non-clinical pathway for students to engage with their wellbeing alongside existing care.

Interest in the program has also increased, with a 188% rise in expressions of interest in 2025. This suggests growing visibility and acceptability of Stride as a form of wellbeing support among students.

Together, the high proportion of referrals and increased student interest indicate that Stride is contributing to more connected support pathways on campus, providing a bridge between clinical mental health services and accessible, everyday wellbeing support.

In doing so, Stride helps connect formal care with opportunities for social connection, confidence-building and routine, supporting students to engage with wellbeing in ways that feel approachable and sustaining over time.



42%
direct referrals
from UNSW
health service



188%
increase in mentee
interest in 2025

Convened networks of multisector partners are mobilised to address student mental health challenges

The Stride Program at UNSW contributes to a multisector network spanning higher education, health services and community organisations, supporting the integration of exercise as a complementary mental health intervention.

The Stride program was co-developed through collaboration between the Mental Health and Exercise Research Group at The University of Western Australia and partners across higher education and community health, and has since been implemented at UNSW.

Its expansion to UNSW in 2024 reflects ongoing cross-institutional collaboration and the translation of research into practice, bringing together partners across universities, health services and community organisations.

Partnerships have enabled the co-design and delivery of a structured, referral-based exercise program embedded within university services. This has strengthened coordination across research, clinical care and student support, and provides a model for integrating exercise within mental health support in tertiary settings.

This work is anchored in the Mental Health and Exercise (MHEX) Research Group, bringing together UNSW, the University of Western Australia, the Kids Research Institute and partners including Thriving In Motion. A 2023 and 2025 Medibank Strategic Support Fund grant (\$290,000) and partnership with UNSW's student organisation Arc has supported feasibility evaluation and program expansion at UNSW, enabling cross-institutional implementation and strengthening shared ownership of the model.

As noted by UNSW lead Associate Professor Kemi Wright, the MHEX collaboration brings together "researchers, clinicians, and students... a powerhouse team... making exercise more accessible in mental health care."



10+
multisector
partners
engaged



THE UNIVERSITY OF
**WESTERN
AUSTRALIA**



PATHWAYS TO IMPACT

Empowering and transformative education

Learners engage with real-world learning experiences relevant to societal challenges and industry needs

Stride contributes to fostering clinical skills in undergraduate exercise physiology and physiotherapy students at UNSW through structured, work-integrated learning in a real-world mental health setting, supporting the development of discipline-specific clinical skills. Stride provides UNSW Exercise Physiology and Physiotherapy students with structured work-integrated learning in a real-world mental health setting, supporting the development of discipline-specific clinical skills.

To date, Stride has supported 1845 hours of work-integrated learning for 20 students, with 82% of mentors reporting positive experiences related to their clinical development. These placements provide supervised opportunities to apply knowledge in practice, including exercise prescription, client monitoring and communication with individuals experiencing mental health challenges.

Through peer mentoring, students develop clinical confidence, communication and rapport-building skills, empathy, and experience working with diverse participants.

This experience aligns with growing recognition of the role of exercise physiologists in mental health care. Mental health is now among the top five primary areas of practice for Accredited Exercise physiologists¹¹, reflecting the profession's expanding role within multidisciplinary teams. As recent national guidance affirms, exercise physiologists are increasingly recognised for their role in supporting people with lived experience of mental health challenges through structured, evidence-based exercise interventions.¹²



1845+
hours of work-integrated learning completed



82%
mentors felt Stride developed their clinical skills

"I believe I was able to make a meaningful contribution to making my clients feel more confident and safe in the gym and at uni."

—

UNSW Stride mentor, 2025



Photo: Stride Program

Learner wellbeing is cultivated and supported

Both participants and their mentors valued the social connection Stride helped foster

As of June 2026, 67 mentees have been supported through Stride at UNSW. Participant feedback highlights that Stride supports social connection and peer relationships, not just physical activity. Students valued having someone to talk to and appreciated building a supportive relationship with their peer mentor in a relaxed, non-clinical environment.

This was especially meaningful for students who may feel less connected to campus, including international students and neurodivergent students. Feedback suggests that exercising or walking with a peer mentor helped participants feel more comfortable, included, and able to be themselves. Overall, Stride appears to strengthen belonging, reduce isolation, and improve connection to campus through shared physical activity.



65+
student mentees supported through Stride at UNSW

"My overall experience in the Stride program was positive especially with [Mentor] who has neurodivergence like me and I felt like with him I could be myself and share about some stuff about how I truly feel about certain things and issues of the world while being in the gym or walking with him."

—

UNSW Stride student mentee, 2026

From theory to practice: developing capabilities to support wellbeing through exercise

Isabelle's learning journey

Isabelle is a third-year Bachelor of Exercise Science/Master of Physiotherapy and Exercise Physiology student who completed a placement with Stride in 2026.

Working directly with clients in supervised, on-campus sessions, Isabelle translated theory into practice, developing professional capabilities including client communication, professional judgement and boundary setting.

The placement supported growing confidence in her skills and chosen profession, preparedness for exams and future practice, and provided opportunities to contribute to peer wellbeing and belonging.

Isabelle felt her learning and wellbeing were supported by the program design and environment:

"It's really up to you to step up and facilitate as much of the placement as possible... The supervisors were really supportive... and give you as much of their time and advice as possible... it's nice to have someone with experience in the field going, 'no, you do know what you're talking about, you're doing really well'."

"There was a certain understanding because the people that you were seeing were also students, they understood that you were also a student... there was that... reciprocal relationship of like, I'm learning, you're learning, and we're both here to help each other."

Isabelle developed practical skills and transferable capabilities to support her studies and future career:

"The things that I think you get taught in class at university are great for setting you up for those situations, but aren't always wholly transferable... you really have to be thinking on the fly a lot... I think that Stride definitely helped with getting comfortable with those situations..."

"Knowing where to set those professional boundaries... going home and knowing when to switch off. When we learn [about] empathy fatigue as healthcare students... it was interesting to then understand, 'oh, I get it now'... I think that that's something that's probably going to take a little bit more practice."

Isabelle valued the opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing and belonging of her peers:

"Feeling as though I was able to both simultaneously complete placement hours that I needed... but also give back to the student community going through mental health issues."

"The main thing ... I really liked about Stride was just getting to know each individual and feeling as though in a small way you were maybe making their day a little bit lighter."

-
Isabelle M., UNSW Stride mentor, 2026

Photo credit: Isabelle M



Future directions

Key learning

- Stride's dual-benefit model is its strongest asset. It improves student wellbeing while building clinical skills in the next generation of Exercise Physiologists and Physiotherapists, making the case for institutional investment self-evident.
- For students who find clinical services inaccessible or stigmatising, peer-led physical activity works. Connection and belonging drive engagement as much as the exercise itself.
- Referral pathways are the backbone of reach. More than 40% of 2025 participants referred directly from the UNSW Health Service, meaning integration with clinical services is what makes scale possible.

Opportunities ahead

- Embed Stride across UNSW's health, wellbeing and student support services, making it a core part of campus life from orientation through to graduation.
- Build the longitudinal evidence base to move beyond pilot phases and secure the sustained funding needed for long-term delivery.
- Scale the Stride model nationally, with targeted pathways for underserved cohorts where the program's non-clinical format shows the greatest promise.

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