

MATES Research Policy

Overview

This document details the steps a research team are asked to progress through when approaching MATES in Construction to partner on a research project.

The document details:

- The process for securing the initial support of the relevant MATES CEO
- The review undertaken by the Research Reference Group
- The broad scope of research projects that MATES has historically participated in
- The relationship between MATES research, the Program Logic, and the Construction Industry Blueprint for Better mental Health
- A research proposal template that researchers are asked to complete

If you have any questions on the processes detailed in this document, please contact the MATES National Research Manager, Laura Cox, on lcox@mates.org.au

Engagement with State CEOs and the Research Reference Group

Research projects involving MATES need to be industry-based, with a workplace focus: research may be undertaken with individual workplaces, but the design and purpose of the research needs to speak to the industry as a whole. It is incumbent on the research team to demonstrate how their proposed project holds implications for the industry when they submit a proposal for consideration.

Researchers interested in undertaking research with MATES need to first secure the sponsorship of a MATES organisation, through engaging with the relevant CEO (at state or national level, depending on the design and scope of the project). **We recommend researchers submit a proposal, using the template at the end of this document, for the consideration of the relevant CEO.** Please complete the contact form <https://mates.org.au/contact-us> as an initial step, to let the relevant CEO know that you will shortly be submitting a research proposal for their consideration.

Once the sponsorship of a MATES organisation has been secured, the research proposal will be submitted to the MATES National Research Reference Group for review. The RRG will provide the relevant CEO/s and the lead investigator with feedback on the quality and feasibility of the proposed project. The CEO and research team can address how to incorporate this feedback before moving forward

Application rounds

There are four distinct application rounds in a calendar year (one per quarter). Researchers seeking to partner with MATES on specific and time sensitive grant opportunities can submit a proposal for review outside of these application rounds. In general, however, our preference is for researchers to submit proposals in line with the application rounds. These dates hold for any given year:

Round 1: March 30

Round 2: June 30

Round 3: Sept 30

Round 4: Nov 15

We will endeavour to provide a response within one calendar month of each round deadline.

The scope of MATES research projects: evaluative and developmental research projects

Historically, research projects involving MATES broadly fall into one of three categories:

Foundational research investigates the ‘state of the nation’ regarding suicide among construction workers in Australia. Examples on the MATES research page (<https://mates.org.au/research>) include the ‘Economic cost of Suicide’ report series, and the ‘Suicide in the Construction Industry’ report series.

Evaluation research investigates an aspect of the MATES program. Evaluation projects can investigate outcomes, as well as process implementation. Examples on the MATES research page (<https://mates.org.au/research>) include evaluations of MATES case management, and program elements such as GAT, Connector, ASIST.

Frontier research identifies and speaks to ‘hot button’ issues for the industry, and highlights areas for program development. Example on the MATES research page (<https://mates.org.au/research>) include research that addresses the experiences of apprentices, bullying, critical incident planning, and the pivotal AISRAP report (2006) that informed the very architecture of the MATES program.

All research projects must address either a feature of the MATES Program Logic map (<https://mates.org.au/media/documents/Program-Logic-27.7.2020-%C6%92.pdf>), or the Australian Building and Construction Industry Blueprint for Better Mental Health (<https://www.constructionblueprint.com.au/>). Please examine both, as researchers are asked to detail how their research project aligns with either the Program Logic and/or Blueprint pillars (further detail on these below).

The Construction Industry Blueprint for Better Mental Health

The Australian Building and Construction Industry Blueprint for Better Mental Health and Suicide Prevention is an evidence-based framework that was designed by and for the construction industry. It is endorsed by all leading industry associations, and it constitutes a road map via which the Australian construction industry can become a world leader in the provision of safe and mentally healthy workplaces.

The Blueprint consists of five pillars. The industry is encouraged to adopt practices that align with these pillars, to create workplace cultures characterized by strong mental health and wellbeing. The elements of the MATES program also align with this framework. We ask that researchers wishing to partner with MATES develop their research design to also address one (or more) of the five Blueprint pillars, to ensure that the project addresses the needs of the industry. Below, we’ve presented summaries of the Blueprint pillars, and how they are realized in practice. We’ve also provided a table with exemplars of current research projects involving MATES, and how each of these address the Blueprint and/or program logic.

Research impact

MATES has a lengthy history of collaborating with research partners: the program itself was designed to respond to the recommendations of seminal research undertaken by AISRAP in 2006 ([online here](#)), and MATES as an organisation is dedicated to highlighting the connection between the program and an evolving empirical evidence base. As such, MATES invests in research relationships that are active and dynamic: MATES is dedicated to promoting and disseminating research outcomes widely. The team supports peer review publication efforts and will promote published work on the MATES website, and through social media channels. Research partners will also be invited to co-present at conferences, participate in podcasts and vodcasts, and research outcomes will be disseminated through onsite newsletters and other communications channels. Our aim is to ensure the value and implications of research activities reach a wide audience of industry stakeholders.

Summaries of the five Blueprint pillars

<p>HARM MITIGATION</p>	<p>RISK AND THE WORKPLACE</p> <p>Risk factors associated with the development or exacerbation of mental health issues in the workplace often fall within three categories. These categories are work content (the activities workers perform), work context (the conditions under which work is performed) and organisational culture (the patterns of assumptions and norms that shape relationships at work, and <i>how</i> work is performed). Work content, context, and culture can engender the development of mental health challenges.</p> <p>Additional stressors on site can also significantly impact mental health (e.g. accidents, near misses, redundancies and bankruptcies). Where possible, considered planning should seek to minimise the impacts of these stressors.</p>
<p>MENTAL HEALTH & SUICIDE PREVENTION LITERACY</p>	<p>ENDING STIGMA</p> <p>Suicide and mental ill health are arguably among the most stigmatised experiences in the industry. Stigma and fear of repercussions can hinder help seeking and help offering, with the result that individuals struggling with mental health challenges become isolated and disconnected.</p> <p>The empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that greater awareness and education can normalise and support help-seeking behaviour. Awareness can also create a stronger community ethos of help-offering, which can shift workplace cultural dynamics.</p> <p>Mental health and suicide prevention literacy can also be increased through contact and conversation with individuals who have experienced poor mental health, or suicidal thoughts. A diverse workplace can be a tolerant workplace, and a tolerant workplace is a more supportive workplace.</p>
<p>EARLY INTERVENTION</p>	<p>EARLY INTERVENTION IS POWERFUL</p> <p>Diagnosable mental health conditions, if addressed early, can often be effectively managed. In any given Australian workforce, one in five workers will experience a diagnosable mental health condition, one in 20 will experience suicidal thoughts, and around one in 300 will attempt suicide each year. Workplaces need to provide clear pathways through which workers grappling with mental health issues or suicidal distress can be identified and provided with appropriate care.</p> <p>Programs that aim to increase and facilitate help-offering can effectively target groups of people who traditionally don't seek help.</p> <p>Beyond addressing individual experiences of distress, early intervention is also about workplace relational dynamics and culture. It is important to encourage frank and open communication so that if workplace structural and relational dynamics become unreasonable or unhealthy, this can be addressed sooner rather than later to safeguard the health and wellbeing of workers.</p>
<p>RETURN TO WORK & ONGOING SUPPORT</p>	<p>HELPING WORKERS GET BACK TO WORK</p> <p>A work-related injury or illness can have a big impact on a worker's life. Research has shown that returning to work is important for health and wellbeing.</p>

	<p>Employers have an important part to play in assisting with return to work. Many people have misconceptions about mental health challenges, including the belief that recovery is unlikely, that challenges are caused by weakness, or that people negotiating mental health challenges are incapable of making decisions about their lives. Such assumptions can result in workplace discrimination (denial of employment opportunities, restricted access to services).</p> <p>While it is important for workers to have income protection against the financial consequences of ill health, many more people with mental health concerns would be able to participate in the workforce if effective treatment and support were available and appropriate accommodations were made at the workplace. As such, it is important that workplaces have clear and accessible return to work policies and processes.</p>
<p>PROMOTE WORK'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH</p>	<p>THE PROMOTION OF WORK'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH</p> <p>Being employed is generally associated with better mental health than being unemployed. Employment can have positive effects on people's mental health by promoting a sense of identity and achievement, offering a source of self-esteem, and facilitating social contact.</p> <p>Employers can take actions that enhance the positive aspects of work. This can include keeping workers informed of project progress and acknowledging the attainment of milestones, providing social engagement opportunities through events onsite, and scheduling in wellbeing activities that encourage health and connection.</p> <p>Developing a team-based approach can also help increase the positive aspects of working onsite. Fostering teamwork across trades on a worksite can increase workers' identification with the project objectives and their sense of connection to their work.</p>

How the Blueprint translates into practice: Suggested activities for companies

HARM MITIGATION	MENTAL HEALTH & SUICIDE PREVENTION LITERACY	EARLY INTERVENTION	RETURN TO WORK & ONGOING SUPPORT	PROMOTE WORK'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH
Peer support networks <i>As pathways to help</i>	Peer support meetings	Peer support networks <i>To provide multiple and diverse pathways to help</i>	Peer support <i>Encourage workers to maintain contact with colleague on-leave</i>	Policies that promote positive, collaborative culture & communication about progress, milestones
A plan for critical incident debriefing	External speakers <i>Industry peers addressing lived experience destigmatizes mental health & suicide</i>	Industry peer examples on recovery and return to work	Outreach <i>Ongoing inclusion of worker-in-recovery; invite to meetings & functions, send newsletters & announcements</i>	Team building <i>Peer support network can help with team building, cohesion, purpose</i>
Restricted access to high-risk sites	Information dissemination <i>Mh awareness module; visual display of key messages</i>	Onsite interveners <i>Workers trained in intervention</i>	RTW support <i>Sustainable duties plan; appropriate sharing of plan</i>	Purpose <i>encourage workers to focus on social value of project, where possible</i>
Clear policy & protocols <i>Addressing communication, fatigue management, rostering, role dimensions & expectations, interpersonal behaviour</i>	Workforce training <i>Mental health & suicide prevention; peer support; iterative awareness training</i>	Policies that encourage help seeking	Policies that promote & support mental health & wellbeing	Collaborative structure <i>Team-based approaches (more so than hierarchies) help workers to feel engaged onsite</i>

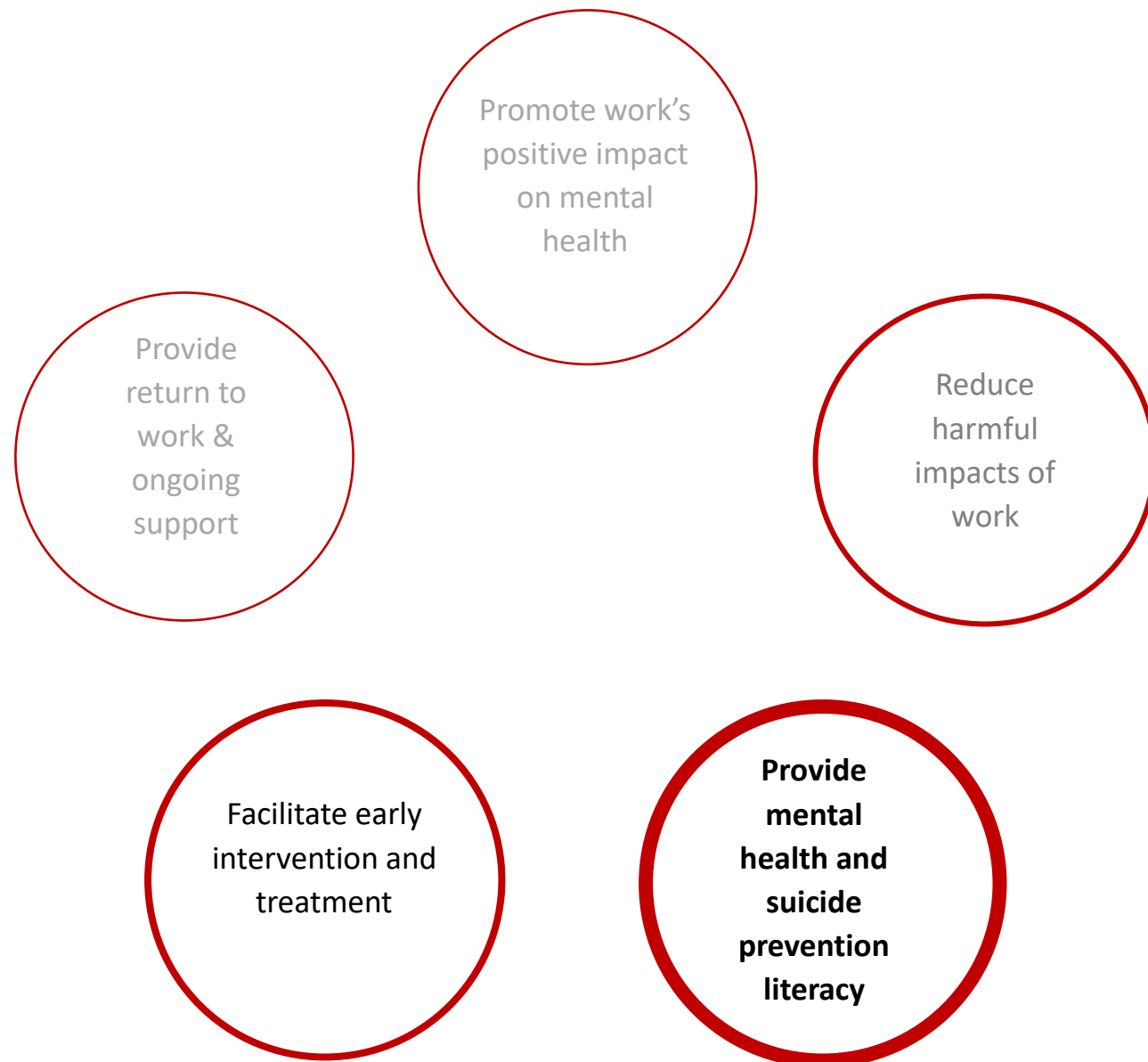
How can research activities align with the Blueprint pillars and Program Logic? Examples of existing research projects involving MATES in Construction

Existing projects	BLUEPRINT PILLARS					MATES PROGRAM LOGIC
	HARM MITIGATION	MENTAL HEALTH & SUICIDE PREVENTION LITERACY	EARLY INTERVENTION	RETURN TO WORK & ONGOING SUPPORT	PROMOTE WORK'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH	
<p>Apprentices research project</p> <p>Led by: MATES QLD & AISRAP</p> <p>Research design: a mixed-methods (surveys + focus groups) research project involving engagement with apprentices and industry stakeholders.</p> <p>Aim: Investigate the experiences of workplace bullying and psychological distress among construction industry apprentices in Queensland, Australia.</p>	<p>Unpacks apprentices' experiences at work, including experiences & events detrimental to their wellbeing. Helps to understand where harm mitigation efforts need to be directed.</p>	<p>Project addressed attitudes and knowledge of mental health and suicide in the workplace among apprentices. Helps to understand how to communicate with apprentices, and specifically what myths or assumptions need to be addressed.</p>	<p>Provides insight into areas that can be targeted with early intervention (e.g. drug and alcohol use, employer conduct, apprentices' employment conditions and wages)</p>		<p>Provides insight into potentially protective factors for apprentices (e.g. supervisors with high quality supervision and mentoring capacities)</p>	<p>Industry stakeholders asked to help articulate a response to pervasive bullying. The project supports a) the MATES aim of cultivating an industry-wide response to worker mental health and wellbeing and b) the embedding of MATES values across the industry</p>
<p>MATES Mobile</p> <p>Led by: Uni of Melbourne & MATES Aus</p> <p>Research design: a randomised controlled trial, involving three participant groups: one group received GAT, a second received GAT + a new mobile phone app, a third received no MATES contact</p> <p>Aim: to understand if a mobile phone app intervention leads to improved literacy, attitudes, help seeking and help offering</p>		<p>The app as a tool for reminding workers about key program elements, taken from GAT, Connector and ASIST materials</p>	<p>The app prompts users to reflect on how they are faring, facilitates straightforward connection to MATES helpline (pushing a button to call the 1300 line)</p>			<p>Over the short to mid term, do we see a) an increased willingness to seek help & b) improved suicide prevention literacy among those exposed to MATES, and those exposed to MATES + app, compared to the control group?</p>

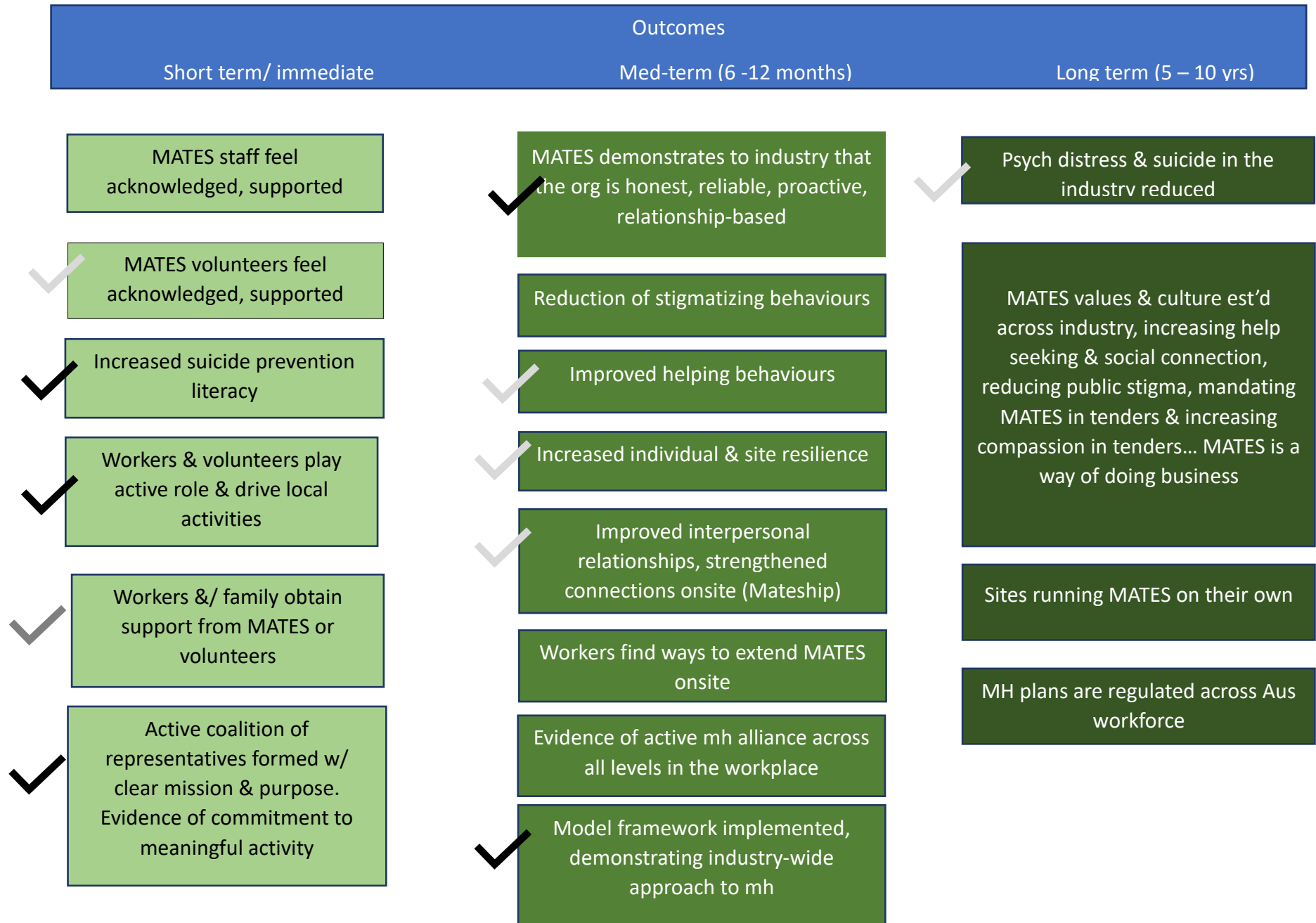
MATES research and the Blueprint pillars: Research saturation

To date, most research efforts have addressed the pillar 'provide mental health and suicide prevention literacy', followed by 'early intervention'. There is an emerging body of research that speaks to the pillar 'reduce harmful impacts of work', while the remaining two pillars have received minimal research coverage.

If your proposed research project addresses a pillar that has already received extensive research focus, you will need to clearly stipulate how your research is innovative and (if relevant) meaningfully contributes to the body of evidence that we have for the MATES program. Please review the research section of the MATES website for an understanding of the existing body of MATES research.



The below figure illustrates where existing research efforts have addressed Program Logic outcomes. The darker the tick, the greater the research saturation. An absence of ticks = no (or very limited) research evidence for this specific desired outcome.



Factors to consider when deciding on a possible research project: What do MATES look for?

1. A research project that addresses suicide prevention, intervention, or postvention within the construction industry
2. An overall research design that aligns with the MATES model and mission (raising awareness, building capacities in 'grassroots' practical help offering, community engagement and development) – *refer to the MATES website and Program Logic*
3. A research project that responds to a need or area of interest that you have identified in your specific state
4. A research project that holds implications for practice in the construction industry: projects are to be industry-based, with a workplace focus.

Elements to address in a brief research proposal (*not more than five pages*)

1. Project summary: the research aim, the method to be used, expected outcomes
2. How does the proposed project address suicide prevention, intervention or postvention within the construction industry?
3. Briefly discuss the development that this proposed project has gone through to date (e.g. has a literature review informed the project scope? Has funding been sought or secured for the project? If you are a student: has this proposal undergone a process of review and development with your supervision panel?)
4. Respond to one or both of the following, as appropriate:
 - a. How does the project evaluate a program outcome, process, or relationship articulated in the program logic?
 - b. How does the proposed project align with one, or more, of the Blueprint pillars?
5. How does the project align with the MATES model and mission?
6. What do you anticipate as the role of MATES in your research project? (e.g. assistance with a distinct project phase such as recruitment; partnership on project from design through to completion; a request for access to MATES program data, etc)
7. What is the rationale for the proposed project? Are you responding to a gap in existing knowledge/understanding, or a specific need or area of interest in your state?
8. Have you identified any possible risks in your proposed project? If so, how do you plan to mitigate these?
9. Translational possibilities:
 - a. how might the research findings inform the refinement of the MATES program?
OR
 - b. how might the research findings inform the development of new activities to support strong workplace mental health, in line with the Blueprint pillars?
10. If you are seeking a financial contribution from MATES: please detail a budget and provide a brief rationale for the budget and the requested contribution from MATES. *The rationale must be included in the body of the proposal, though the budget breakdown can be included as an appendix*

Proposal marking rubric

Criteria	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Exemplary
Eligibility criteria: suicide prevention, intervention, postvention			
Feasibility of methodological approach			
Project relationship with Blueprint or Program Logic			
Alignment with MATES model, mission, values			
The anticipated role of MATES in the project			
Rationale for the project			
Translational possibilities			
Research budget			

Overall feedback / final comments: