

“Respect at Uni”: Working in Partnership Across the Sector to Promote Safety and Respect in Higher Education

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Abstract

Higher education institutions have a pivotal role to play in advancing societal change and a responsibility for ensuring safe, respectful, and inclusive environments free from sexual harm. Recognition of shared challenges across the sector has spurred increased collaboration and knowledge sharing. “Respect at Uni” aims to promote respect and prevent sexual harm, promote the availability of support and report services for those affected by sexual harm, and encourage participation and engagement in promoting safe and respectful environments. This paper illustrates how universities can work collaboratively through a Respect at Uni campaign to raise awareness of the program of work underway.

Keywords

Sexual assault, Sexual harassment, Collaboration, Student engagement, Respect

Introduction

Higher education institutions have a pivotal role in advancing societal change and a responsibility for ensuring safe, respectful, and inclusive environments free from sexual harm (Department of Education, 2024a; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2020). Sexual harm and other forms of gender-based violence have been of concern and focus within higher education settings for many years, with national student surveys and advocacy groups drawing attention to its high prevalence. Recognition of shared challenges in addressing prevalence and providing effective prevention, reporting, and support services within individual universities and across the sector has increasingly spurred collaboration and knowledge sharing amongst institutions. This paper provides an overview of how universities can work in collaboration as part of a shared “Respect at Uni” campaign to raise awareness of the program of work underway. This includes promoting respect and preventing sexual harm, promoting the availability of support and report services for those affected by sexual harm, and encouraging participation and engagement in promoting safe and respectful environments.

Sexual harm and gender-based violence in higher education

Sexual harm and other forms of gender-based violence have been a significant concern within university settings for over a decade, with a particular focus since the release of the *Change the course* report in 2017 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). The *Change the course* report detailed the results of the national independent survey of over 30,000 university students to gain insight into the nature, prevalence, and reporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities. Concerningly, amongst other results, one in five university students (21%) were sexually harassed in a university setting in 2016, and 1.6% of students were sexually assaulted in a university setting on at least one occasion in 2015 or 2016. The report outlined nine recommendations for change relating to leadership and governance, changing attitudes and

behaviours, university responses to sexual assault and sexual harassment, monitoring and evaluation, and residential colleges and university residences.

In 2022, the results of a second national survey, the National Student Safety Survey (NSSS), were released (Heywood et al., 2022). 48,813 students responded nationally with 1,835 students providing qualitative responses. NSSS results highlighted:

- the prevalence of sexual harassment (16.1%) and sexual assault (4.5%) within a university context,
- that few students who were sexually harassed (3%) or sexually assaulted (5.6%) had made formal complaints to their university,
- that students knew very little about formal reporting processes for harassment (51%) and assault (53.6%), and
- that large numbers of students knew nothing, or very little, about where to seek support or assistance for harassment (46.7%) or sexual assault (43.5%).

In addition to national statistics, universities were provided with institution-specific results. Despite variances, the survey reinforced that sexual harm remained of significant concern across the sector, with more work required to ensure student safety as part of the higher education experience.

Recent developments, including the *National plan to end violence against women and children 2022–2032* (Department of Social Services, 2022) and the *Action plan addressing gender-based violence in higher education* (Department of Education, 2024a), have outlined planned government actions strengthening the accountability of higher education providers. Actions within the latter Plan include the establishment of a National Student Ombudsman; a requirement for higher education providers to embed a whole-of-organisation approach to prevent and respond to gender-based violence; work to identify opportunities to ensure legislation, policies, and regulations prioritise victim-survivor safety; enhanced oversight of student accommodation; increased data transparency to demonstrate improvement; regular consultation, coordination, and review of progress; and the introduction of a National higher education code to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.

The *National higher education code to prevent and respond to gender-based violence: Issues paper* (Department of Education, 2024b), released in May 2024, outlines proposed standards for higher education providers to meet to ensure student safety. These include regulations relating to governance and leadership, organisational policies and practice, trauma-informed and safety-first procedures, evidence-based education and training, expert and timely support services, transparent data and reporting, and safe student accommodation. Once finalised, the National higher education code to prevent and respond to gender-based violence is anticipated to be legislated by 1 January 2025, with compliance required by 1 January 2026.

The National Student Safety Survey and formation of the Victorian Tertiary Primary Prevention Network

Recognition of shared challenges post-release of the *Change the course* report (2017) led universities across Victoria to form the Victorian Tertiary Primary Prevention Network (henceforth, referred to as the Network). The Network brought together practitioners in the sector as part of a community of practice, providing a forum for the exchange of information, knowledge, and expertise. In successive years, as increasing attention turned to sexual harm prevention within university settings, members of the Network met informally to discuss opportunities and share challenges.

Despite the value of connecting across institutional borders, the work of the Network stalled during COVID-19 as institutions turned inward to support students and staff throughout lockdowns and social contact restrictions.

A call to renew commitment to collaboration ensued in Victoria, led by Deakin University, and vice-chancellors at universities across the state voiced support for reinvigoration of the Network. A Network Coordinator position was created (held by Deakin University since August 2022). The role is responsible for leading the strategic direction of the Network, engaging practitioners across the state via regular meetings to explore opportunities for increased cooperation and partnership on agreed priority projects. The establishment and renewed commitment to the work of the Network is discussed as part of a previous paper (Burge & Marshall, 2023).

Role of awareness campaigns in primary prevention

Awareness-raising campaigns, particularly those involving social media, have become increasingly popular within university settings due to their capacity to reach a wide audience and low-resourcing requirements (Lee et al., 2022). Tertiary education is deemed a priority setting and sector by Our Watch (2017, 2021). They note its role in proactively shaping norms and practices, and building a future workplace that supports gender equality and access to audiences that may have more limited connections (for example, international students, students with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities). Our Watch also recognise tertiary institutions' large workforce and infrastructure to support change, potential to promote whole-of-organisation and community-led prevention strategies, and broad reach as places of learning.

Campaigns are typically used to increase knowledge of sexual harm; address attitudes, behaviours, or stereotypes; and promote positive social norms (Our Watch, 2021). Campaigns also provide information on available support services, resources, and avenues for reporting incidents of sexual violence; build literacy on topics such as consent and healthy relationships; and provide strategies, actions, and tools to promote bystander intervention (Our Watch, 2021). Where appropriate, campaigns can be tailored to respond to emerging issues.

As noted by Our Watch:

awareness-raising on its own will not produce the social, cultural and behavioural change that is needed to reduce the prevalence of violence against women and create a more equitable, safe and inclusive society. Nevertheless, it is an important first step in the overall task of addressing violence against women and can help provide an enabling environment for more change-oriented strategies. (2021, p. 57)

Banyard et al. (2004) also argue that increasing awareness of sexual and knowledge of bystander actions to support the prevention of harm is a critical requirement for changing university culture, highlighting the importance of fostering shared community responsibility for sexual violence prevention.

Limited research has been undertaken to review the effectiveness of existing awareness-raising initiatives. However, selected campaigns targeted at university students have been shown to provide promising outcomes, including change in certain attitudes, participation in prevention activities, and increased knowledge (Banyard et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2022). Campaigns that extend over several years involving sustained effort, reinforcement, and messaging consistency are noted as having greater effectiveness (Hooker et al., 2020; Our Watch, 2021). Active participation by students

through co-design and delivery also plays a key role in enhancing student learning. Contribution towards language and content of materials, delivery, and evaluation supports relevancy and appeal (Stanley et al., 2017; Universities Australia, 2023). Awareness-raising initiatives in university settings should engage a wide range of stakeholders, including students, staff, academics, specialists, and support services; take an intersectional approach; and involve tailored messaging and activities that consider the needs, knowledge, and experiences of specific cohorts (Banyard et al., 2004; Our Watch, 2017, 2021).

A coordinated Respect campaign

As part of a face-to-face Network forum in June 2022, practitioners from across the sector met to discuss opportunities for potential partnerships and collaborative action, and a whole-of-sector approach to address the prevalence of sexual harm within university settings. Attendees determined that an aligned “Respect” themed campaign would be of particular value to address limited student awareness of sexual harm prevention support and report services. This lack of awareness was a major concern arising from the student survey.

Several universities related existing institutional initiatives and campaigns conducted throughout the year (for example, Respect Now Always Week at Monash University, Respect Week at Victoria University, and Unlearn It at Swinburne University of Technology). Moreover, all agreed that working in collaboration would present the opportunity to highlight the shared responsibility for student safety, pool resources, and ensure greater reach and impact.

Following on from the forum, practitioners from nine universities (including Australian Catholic University, Deakin University, La Trobe University, Monash University, RMIT University, Torrens University, Swinburne University of Technology, the University of Melbourne, and Victoria University) met throughout the latter half of the year and into 2023 to design, plan, and deliver a coordinated and collaborative sector-wide respect campaign. Monash University volunteered to take responsibility for leading the project in its first year.

“Respect at Uni Week” was subsequently held in March 2023 for the first time at individual universities, subject to preferred timing, between Weeks 3–5 (13–31 March). An agreed logo (developed by staff from Torrens University) and collective statement were shared by participating universities on their websites and campaign materials as follows:

Victorian universities are joining forces to promote the importance of respect, equality and inclusion on our campuses and online spaces. Our communities should be safe and free from violence. The National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) has revealed universities must continue to improve their response to, and prevention of, sexual harassment and sexual assault. We invite students and staff at all Victorian universities to participate in the upcoming Respect at Uni Week activities and to help create a safe and respectful community. Preventing gender-based violence starts with a culture of respect – now and always. Find out more about the inaugural Victorian Respect Week activities on your campus by visiting [insert individual University website hyperlink].

As part of the campaign, universities facilitated a range of on-campus and online events and activities, with programs including guest speakers, online pledge walls, on-campus activations, webinars, and capacity-building and awareness-raising initiatives. Individual universities could elect to deliver events and activities as best suited to their level of resourcing, location, and cohort.

In addition to individual programming within each university, several events were also open to all students and staff across the state. Whilst students were the primary audience, many universities promoted to staff, members of the broader public, and alumni. Open events included a webinar facilitated by the Office of the eSafety Commissioner (Deakin University), a speaker series on the topic of Chivalry vs. Equity and Flip the Script Training (Monash University), a virtual film screening of *The Bystander Movement* (Swinburne University of Technology), and online privilege walk (Victoria University). Many also elected to deliver aligned social media campaigns, promoting their own program of events, policies, educational materials, support services, and messages of support from senior leaders, students, and staff.

Post-campaign, participating universities conducted an individual and collective review and reflection. Challenges for many revolved around the short lead-in and preparation time, scheduling alignment with existing campaigns, limited available resourcing, balancing on-campus and online programming, effective communication and promotion, and existing and ongoing challenges of engaging students with such content at a time of competing interests (for example, Orientation and the first few weeks of term). Despite such challenges, members and senior leaders agreed with the perceived value of the initiative and extended commitment to continue the campaign in future years.

A summary report of initiatives and metrics from each university was collated by the Network Coordinator and distributed to the broader Network and the Victorian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. The work of the Network and the Respect at Uni initiative was subsequently included as part of the Universities Australia *Primary prevention of sexual harm in the university sector good practice guide* and shared at a Universities Australia Community of Practice event in July 2023, yielding interest from across Australia and beyond.

Respect at Uni 2024

Following on from the success of the 2023 campaign, Victorian universities agreed to coordinate a second shared Respect at Uni campaign in March 2024. Of note was the commitment from universities across the state to deliver the campaign at the same time (the week commencing 18 March). Nine universities, including Australian Catholic University, Deakin University, Federation University, La Trobe University, Monash University, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, the University of Melbourne, and Victoria University met on six occasions throughout 2023 and into 2024 to plan for the second iteration. Deakin University provided leadership of the campaign, coordinating meetings and reporting.

Key learnings from the previous campaign, including central coordination (a nominated university lead for the project, shared theme, and agreed consistent messaging); open events and activities (available and promoted more broadly, where deemed appropriate); and increased student voice in design, planning, and delivery, were embedded as part of a set of “commitments” required of universities as part of involvement.

Commitments further outlined a requirement to use the shared logo, #respectatuni hashtag, and updated messaging to maintain consistency and visual recognition across all campaign materials. Some universities elected to create their own tailored Respect at Uni webpages featuring their calendar of events and activities for the week, whilst others added content and branding to existing sites. Practitioners were also required to provide an overview of events and activities as part of a shared event schedule. Data needed to be gathered through surveys or feedback mechanisms (during and post-programming) and other metrics (for example, registrations, attendance, and social media engagement) to evaluate the impact of the campaign and individual initiatives. Finally, those involved were required to provide a summary of their campaign, including any updates to their final

schedule, metrics, feedback, and any reflections via a standardised reporting template. This was designed to assist with the assessment of the collective impact of the campaign.

As was the case in 2023, each university was provided with the flexibility to coordinate and deliver its own program of events and activities based on resourcing and capacity; however, a set of shared objectives for the campaign were created. These included:

- raising awareness of the program of work underway within universities to promote respect and prevent sexual harm,
- promoting the availability of support and report services/options for those affected by sexual harm, and
- encouraging active participation and engagement of all members of our communities in promoting a respectful and safe environment.

Finally, based on feedback from those involved previously, a set of additional guidelines were also developed to support practitioners responsible for the delivery of the campaign within their institution. These included:

- planning and delivering a range of both on-campus and online events and activities catering to diverse student needs and locations;
- inviting broader engagement through students, staff, alumni, and community;
- promoting involvement in the campaign via an online presence (for example, a dedicated webpage, blog posts, or social media platforms); and
- where feasible, organising events open to staff and students from other universities.

From its launch on Monday 18 March 2024, individual universities across the state delivered their version of Respect at Uni. Events and activities included on-campus activations, webinars, guest speakers, panels, training, pledge walls, movie screenings, and executive briefings. Students were also encouraged to complete online e-learning modules and access capacity-building workshops. Over 37 large- and small-scale events and activities were held across the sector over the course of the campaign week.

Events open to all students, staff, and broader community included a series of training and capacity-building opportunities: Building Cultural Intelligence, Bystander Intervention, Family Violence and Sexual Harm — How to Support Others, and Putting Inclusive Language into Practice. Guest speaker, Chloe Hayden (Deakin University), conducted a presentation on neurodiversity and Australian student and sexual consent activist, Chanel Contos (University of Melbourne), presented a webinar, *Beyond Consent: The Role of Universities in Preventing Sexual Harm*.

Broader student populations were the primary audience for the majority of initiatives. However, some universities elected to tailor events for specific cohorts, including those living within on-campus accommodation (locating activities within the residential precinct), international students, or those in their first year of study (tailoring promotional materials or providing direct invitations).

Several universities elected to engage and collaborate with internal and external partners, including academic networks, student unions, sexual harm and family violence centres, community groups, expert guest speakers, and other specialist agencies (for example, QHub, FVREE [Free from Family Violence], The Men’s Project, Learning Consent, ACON, English Connect) to contribute to and strengthen their program offering. These partners supported planning, design, and promotion; delivered information or provided drop-in sessions; facilitated training and capacity-building workshops; or provided resources and materials for promotion and distribution.

Students were engaged in varying ways as part of planning, design, and delivery. Many universities engaged with students and representative bodies/unions via focus or advisory groups as part of planning. They sought feedback on prior or existing campaigns and initiatives, and insights as to ways of raising greater awareness and increasing engagement. Others sought qualitative and quantitative information on preferences and ideas through surveys and questionnaires (creating new forums or employing previously collected data) or facilitated design-thinking workshops encouraging co-creation of planned events and activities. Students were often further engaged as part of associated digital campaigns (responding to vox pops or interviewed on camera, promoting events and activities on social media) and more frequently as part of delivery, facilitating events, on-campus activations, or co-delivering training.

In addition to raising awareness of appropriate behaviours and expectations, fostering respect and inclusivity, and promoting support and reporting services for those affected by sexual harm, many universities released relevant action plans, training initiatives, and programs of work in alignment with the campaign. This included Federation University's *Respectful and inclusive communities action plan 2024–2026*, La Trobe University's Safe and Respected at La Trobe campaign, the University of Melbourne's new Preventing Sexual Misconduct e-learning module, and Swinburne University of Technology's Talking About Consent online learning module.

Post-campaign, participating universities again conducted an individual implementation evaluation of their Respect at Uni offering and gathered collectively to discuss key learnings. In addition to employing individual methods (including surveys, attendance and registration data, and social media engagement metrics), universities were invited to use an agreed sector-wide "question": "Attending this event/activity increased my awareness of support services and reporting pathways for sexual harm". Each university was enabled to obtain responses via their preferred method with most choosing to collect via online survey tools following the information sessions or capacity-building workshops. Data from six universities that elected to use the shared evaluation question were collated. Positively, of the 538 responses collected, 83% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement.

Reflecting on the second iteration, lead practitioners highlighted the value of delivering the campaign early in the year, capitalising on student engagement and on-campus activity, but equally noted challenges with demands on student time and competing messages (for example, orientation, class activities, other social events) during this period. Other key reflections included the importance of student involvement in planning and delivery to ensure relevancy and engagement, the value of merchandise or giveaways (for example, fridge magnets, tote bags, keep cups, and cutlery sets) which provided QR codes to support services or feedback avenues, and the effectiveness of tailored programming (for example, training for specific cohorts, a movie screening for residential students). On-campus activities that sought student involvement and engagement "on the spot" or as they walked by were most effective in comparison to events requiring registration in advance. Dedicated webpages and tailored peer-led social media posts were also noted as critical for clearly communicating and raising awareness of activities, messaging, and engaging with students.

Shared challenges faced across the sector included conveying key campaign messaging (including lack of channels and securing content on social media channels), securing student feedback (including those universities who elected to use the shared evaluation question), and limited resourcing (both staffing and funding).

As was the case in 2023, a summary report of initiatives and metrics from each university was collated by the Network Coordinator for distribution to the broader Network and the Victorian Vice-Chancellors' Committee.

The value of collaboration

Whole-of-sector collaborative campaigns involving multiple universities, like Respect at Uni, have the power to strengthen messaging, raise awareness, broaden reach and influence, increase visibility, and amplify commitment to the promotion of respect and prevention of sexual harm in university settings (Our Watch, 2021). Key benefits of a coordinated and collaborative campaign include the ability to leverage diverse expertise, with each university bringing unique strengths (including those of the practitioners and students involved), and shared resourcing (funding and staffing). Expanded networking between institutions, staff, students, and external partners also results in enhanced opportunities for learning, knowledge exchange, and innovation. Collaborative campaigns also provide the potential for long-term sustainability, fostering relationships and processes that outlast one-off initiatives and strengthen commitment, ensuring continued impact over time.

State-wide synchronisation of the campaign week in 2024 provided several benefits. These included coordinated planning and communications, enhanced promotion and visibility, increased engagement, and optimised resource allocation (including promotion of open events). There was also a stronger sense of unity and community in working towards a common goal at the same time. Synchronising the campaign also enabled streamlined evaluation and feedback. Practitioners were able to collectively assess the effectiveness of the campaign, share best practices, and identify improvements, leading to more informed decision-making and future planning.

Planning for Respect at Uni 2025

Planning for the third iteration of the Respect at Uni campaign has already commenced, with universities across the state expressing an ongoing commitment to the initiative. Deakin University will continue to provide leadership for the campaign into 2025.

As the program is now an established part of university calendars, practitioners commence planning well in advance, and universities continue to refine individual programs. Discussion is underway regarding the scheduling of the initiative, noting the challenges many universities (particularly dual sector) have faced with timing. Opportunities also present to enhance engagement with students in co-design and delivery, increase tailored programs for specific cohorts, build the campaign profile via social media, and strengthen partnerships with internal and external networks and specialist agencies. Particular attention will focus on enhancing reporting requirements and reviewing and refining individual and coordinated approaches to measuring value and impact. A formal evaluation framework will also be developed. Additional data collection would also be of value in guiding future planning and tailored engagement methods. This could include segmenting campaign audiences by gender, year level, and cohort (staff/student, domestic/international) and facilitating post-campaign focus groups to obtain qualitative feedback (Our Watch, 2021).

The forthcoming National higher education code to prevent and respond to gender-based violence is hoped to result in additional resourcing for universities, enabling increased engagement and capacity to support collaborative initiatives such as the Respect at Uni campaign.

Limitations and challenges

It is important to note that the Respect at Uni campaign is intended primarily as an awareness-raising activity and not a targeted or tailored behavioural or attitudinal change initiative. It is designed to raise awareness of sexual harm prevention and response support, reporting on the services within each university and providing opportunities for education and capacity building. The campaign also engages with students (and in some cases, staff and members of the broader

public) to share their perspectives of what respectful and safe university communities look like. This highlights the role that each individual can play in contributing to a positive and inclusive culture.

Whilst engagement data and student feedback from participating universities highlight that the campaign is welcomed and of value, the diverse nature of programming within each university presents difficulties in measuring overall impact and effectiveness.

Participating universities also acknowledge that there is an overwhelming amount of information presented to students in the first few weeks of the academic term. Consequently, it can be challenging to convey content of a more serious nature when student focus can be primarily directed towards orientation programs, class timetables, and university transition.

Conclusion

Victorian universities, through the support of respective vice-chancellors and senior leaders, have expressed ongoing support for the Respect at Uni campaign, recognising its growing impact and extended reach. This has been evidenced by increasing social media posts (using the #respectatuni hashtag), student engagement, and requests to use Respect at Uni branding, collateral, and guidelines by several other universities around Australia.

Improvements in process, planning, engagement, co-design, evaluation, and impact continue to progress as the Respect at Uni campaign evolves each year. It continues to utilise the diverse strengths, expertise, talents, and resources provided by practitioners and students involved from each participating university. Partnerships with external expert agencies and community groups have further strengthened offerings. The flexible nature of the campaign—requiring universities to commit to shared guidelines, objectives, shared messaging, and collateral, balanced with the ability to coordinate events based on resourcing and capacity—serves as an example of viable, scalable, and impactful sector collaboration.

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