

Empowering Respectful and Inclusive Placement Experiences

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Abstract

Research from the Australian Human Rights Commission (2017) and the National Student Safety Survey (Heywood et al., 2022) revealed the prevalence of sexual harm experienced by students during internships and placements, with perpetrators often being colleagues and clients outside the university. The Action Plan Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education (Department of Education, 2024a) identifies placements as high-risk environments, prompting action to address this issue. Over several years, Deakin University's sexual harm prevention and response teams have partnered with Work Integrated Learning staff to enhance awareness of support and report services. This has included the implementation of a university-wide module to educate students on their rights, responsibilities, and personal safety during internships and placements. This paper provides an overview of the design, development, and initial launch of the module with discussion of future directions.

Keywords

Placement, Work Integrated Learning, Respect, Harassment, Discrimination, Sexual harm

Introduction

Sexual harm has long remained an area of focus within university settings, with two nation-wide surveys—Change the Course in 2016 and the National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) in 2022—highlighting prevalence and driving calls for action. This focus on sexual harm has recently expanded to include all forms of gender-based violence in the *Action Plan Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2024a).

Sexual harm in university-related contexts

The *Change the Course* report (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017) detailed the results of the 2016 national independent survey of over 30,000 university students into the nature, prevalence, and reporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities. Data within the report highlighted the high prevalence of sexual harm in university settings, mirroring statistics within the broader community. Sexual harm commonly occurred in on-campus locations, including university grounds, teaching spaces, and social spaces. However, incidents were also reported in university-related off-campus locations, including professional placements, field trips, and study tours. Of those who had been sexually harassed in a university setting in 2015 or 2016, 2% had noted the location of the most recent incident as a “workplace as part of university studies (professional placement)”. Colleagues and clients were highlighted as perpetrators, with behaviours including intrusive questions, sexual jokes, and unwelcome sexual advances.

Survey data further revealed significant underreporting of instances of sexual assault and sexual harassment, with low levels of awareness of support services or report options. A lack of knowledge among students about reporting mechanisms and procedures was identified as a significant barrier, resulting in very few students making a formal report or complaint to their university.

Highlighting the need for universities to better prevent and respond to sexual violence, the report provided nine recommendations on five areas of action. These related to leadership and governance, changing attitudes and behaviours, university responses to sexual assault and sexual harassment, monitoring and evaluation, and student accommodation.

A second survey, the NSSS, was conducted in late 2021, with results released in March 2022 (Heywood et al., 2022). A total of 48,813 students responded, with 1,835 students providing qualitative responses. Authors of the NSSS noted that the two surveys' results were not directly comparable due to revised wording of questions, timing (during COVID, when many students remained off campus), and changed sampling method. However, similar trends were observed in both surveys.

Consistent with the 2016 survey findings, common locations of sexual assault and sexual harassment remained general campus areas, university lecture theatres or computer labs, university libraries, clubs and societies' events or spaces, and student accommodation. Work experience or professional placements were also referenced, with 5.9% of students reporting being sexually harassed and 4% sexually assaulted while on work experience or placement. Students participating in work experience or professional placements were also more likely to indicate that they were "not at all confident" or only "slightly confident" in their universities' reporting processes for sexual assault and sexual harassment.

Overall, the NSSS results reinforced the prevalence of forms of sexual harm and gender-based violence within university-related contexts, that few students had made formal complaints or knew about formal reporting processes, and that awareness levels of support services remained low. Amongst other areas, professional placements and work experience were identified as an area of concern.

The *Action Plan Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2024a) further identified placements as high-risk environments, prompting action to address this issue.

Placements as high-risk environments

Employers are legally obligated to ensure a safe working environment for their employees (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020). Similarly, educational institutions are responsible for safeguarding students from workplace violence during their placements. Professional placements or Work Integrated Learning (WIL) are a core and increasingly expected component of many university programs, playing a key role in students' learning, personal and professional growth, networking, and future employability (Australian Collaborative Education Network [ACEN], 2021; Ferns et al., 2014; Rowe & Winchester-Seeto, 2013; Smith et al., 2014; Universities Australia, 2019). They also form an exciting part of students' university experiences, providing an opportunity to practice learning and gain a better sense of future career options (ACEN, 2021; Universities Australia, 2019).

For many students, these experiences are rewarding and affirming; however, placements and internships can involve considerable change and transitional challenges for students. These may include adjustment to workplace environments; increased professionalism and performance expectations; exposure to unfamiliar experiences; navigation of workplace relationships with new colleagues; and interactions with clients, customers, or patients (Brown et al., 2020; Keating, et al., 2010, Mackaway, 2022; Seibel & Maurer, 2010).

Navigating interpersonal dynamics and conflicts with colleagues or supervisors can be challenging and stressful, and students participating in placements can face various challenges relating to power differentials (Brown et al., 2020; Seibel & Maurer, 2010; Smith et al., 2023). In most workplaces,

there is a clear hierarchy which can create a power imbalance. Students may feel intimidated by senior colleagues and are reliant on supervisors for evaluation or assessment, impacting their academic and professional future. Pressure may also exist as part of placements that require students to provide a level of care or service to patients, clients, or students, with fear of a complaint impacting progression (Smith et al., 2023). This imbalance and dependence may discourage them from voicing concerns regarding unfair treatment, unsafe environments, or behaviours of concern they may experience (Brown et al., 2020; Budden et al., 2017; Moylan & Wood, 2016).

Students also may find themselves in new and unfamiliar environments where they may not be aware of policies, procedures, or workplace culture. They may find it difficult to identify and respond to inappropriate behaviours or feel pressured to accept unwanted advances or comments, fearing that speaking out or voicing concerns may jeopardise their placement (Keating et al., 2010; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Smith et al., 2023). Concerns about retaliation, including negative evaluation, failed assessment, or loss of opportunity, might also prevent students from reporting harassment (Brown et al., 2020; Budden et al., 2017; Emslie, 2010; Seibel & Maurer, 2010).

Finally, students may enter placements without adequate training or education on recognising and addressing forms of harassment (Budden et al., 2017; Seibel & Maurer, 2010). Some may choose to tolerate, minimise and ignore, expect such behaviours in certain workforce settings (for example, nursing and social work), or perceive that little action may be taken should they choose to make a report (Moylan & Wood, 2016; Smith et al., 2023). Others may be unsure of where to seek support or make a formal report, uncertain as to whether this should be via their placement organisation or university. Such a lack of preparation may leave them vulnerable or unsure of how to respond in the event of experiencing such behaviours.

The impact of students experiencing negative or inappropriate behaviours can be significant, including mental health and wellbeing concerns, physical effects (headaches, nausea, fatigue), loss of confidence, disengagement with the placement or broader university experience, negative impacts on learning and performance, attrition, burnout, and reconsideration of future career choices (Budden et al., 2017; Emslie, 2010; Smith et al., 2023).

Respect and sexual harm prevention and response at Deakin University

Dedicated prevention and response (Safer Community) teams are responsible for a whole-of-organisation approach to respect and sexual harm prevention at Deakin University. The prevention team is responsible for leading, coordinating, and delivering activities outlined within Deakin University's annual respect and sexual harm action plans. Safer Community provides advice, support, and information to students, staff, and associates impacted by sexual harm, family violence, and/or behaviours of concern.

A significant program of work has been undertaken at Deakin University to improve the university's approach to prevent, respond to, and support those affected by sexual harm. This has included the creation of a free, confidential, and professional primary point of contact for sexual harm-related matters via the Safer Community service, and the implementation of a confidential internal database to record disclosures of sexual harm. A Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Group has also been established, which governs and reviews plans and activities, and various education and capacity-building offerings have been delivered, including online modules and face-to-face training for staff and students.

Empowering respectful placements

Following the release of the NSSS findings, in late 2022, Deakin University prevention staff consulted with university WIL teams to discuss opportunities to address low awareness of support

and report services. As an initial starting point, communications and materials provided to students participating in professional placements were reviewed. Noting faculty pre-placement requirements varied, a two-page *Respectful and Inclusive Workplace* flyer was created and distributed for inclusion in respective communications. The flyer detailed students' legal rights in the workplace, outlined sample case studies, and detailed available support services within and beyond the university. Deakin University's *Student Placement Procedure* was also updated to include an explicit requirement for the university to inform students of who to contact if a student experienced concerning behaviour on placement, including feeling unsafe or any form of discrimination or sexual harm.

Following these enhancements, a desktop review of pre-placement practices within universities in Australia and beyond was conducted in July 2023. The review was limited to publicly available information and interactions with colleagues within the sector. It highlighted that few, if any, universities had centralised or formal arrangements in place for students participating in WIL or placements to highlight the prevalence of sexual harm experiences. Furthermore, it indicated a lack of clear and consistent forums to raise awareness of support and report services. Simultaneously, an internal audit of communications within Deakin University was also undertaken and WIL staff were requested to outline the information and methods by which they communicated support and report options to students. This revealed inconsistencies in the provision of support services information.

Following discussion with key stakeholders, a recommendation was made to design and implement a university-wide module to educate students on their rights, responsibilities, and personal safety during internships and placements. Creating a university-wide module offered several benefits in terms of scalability, access, and consistency. A module is accessible to all students, regardless of their location, academic schedule, or mode of study. Through standardisation of content and delivery, a module further ensures that all students receive the same foundational knowledge, reinforcing key messages and understanding. Moreover, a centralised approach further enables quality control and updates based on new research, legislation, industry standards, or policy changes. Finally, a single unified module enables participation tracking, assessment of learning outcomes, and measurement of impact across the student body.

Endorsed by the Vice-Chancellor's Sexual Harm Advisory Committee, a project team involving prevention and response staff commenced design work in early 2024. Development and implementation of the module underwent three phases over approximately nine months, as outlined in Table 1—design (Jan–May), consultation (June–July), and official launch (August onwards).

Table 1

Module Development Phases

Phase	Primary Activities	Stakeholders	Outcomes
Design (Jan–May)	Research and development of module content including case studies and design work to promote learner engagement.	- 4 respect and sexual harm prevention content creators - 1 Learning Design team member	- A module including 12 sub-sections (4 case studies).
Consultation (June–July)	Review of content, gathering of general feedback and assessment of meeting module objectives, and enhancements and edits.	- 30 WIL staff - 3 Sexual Assault and Family Violence Centre (SAFV) staff - 5 Safer Community advisors	- 33 individuals accessed the module. - 15 individuals provided feedback via an embedded evaluation. - 4 internal staff and 3 external practitioners provided feedback via email.
Launch (22 August–27 September)	Promotion of module, development of supporting resources, and assessment of effectiveness.	- All students and staff	- 320 individuals accessed the module. - 50 individuals provided feedback.

Design phase

Led by the project group, primary activities during the design phase included research, development of module content, and design work. Four members of the respect and sexual harm prevention and response teams and a member of the Learning Design team were involved during the design phase.

Key objectives of the module were identified, including:

- advising students of their rights to a respectful and inclusive workplace experience,
- helping students understand where to seek advice and support, and
- providing case study examples to consolidate student understanding.

Content was drafted to meet the objectives, including coverage of relevant legislation, intersectionality, power, definition of sexual harm, when to seek advice or support, and internal and external support and report services. Activities were included within each section to promote student learning and understanding of key concepts, including drag and drop, interactive diagrams, and multiple-choice questions. Videos and imagery were embedded throughout, including a tailored video promoting Deakin University’s Safer Community Service and outlining the process students might expect if they contact the service.

A content warning was included at the commencement of the module to note that the material includes hypothetical scenarios outlining examples of possible family violence, child abuse, and sexual harm, and highlighting available support services.

Interactive case studies canvassing four scenarios—workplace adjustments, bullying, child safety reporting obligations, and sexual harassment—were incorporated as part of the module to support student learning, understanding, and application. Each case study featured an interactive image that enabled learners to read in first-person voice, the experiences of a case study subject—Aya, Rodney, Soth, or Ella. Care was taken to ensure a diversity of representation. After learning more about each case study subject’s scenario, students were asked to respond to multiple-choice questions that queried potential concerns and options for advice and support.

A downloadable handout detailing university and external support services was made available, and an optional embedded evaluation was also provided toward the conclusion of the module. Students could also elect to download a certificate of completion.

Consultation phase

Following the design phase, the project group reached out to relevant stakeholders to review content, evaluate whether the module met the stated objectives, and invite general feedback. Thirty staff responsible for WIL across all faculties in the university and five Safer Community Advisors were provided with access. Practitioners from a local sexual assault and family violence centre were also invited to review and provide feedback on the module to ensure a trauma-informed approach. Thirty-three individuals accessed the module during the consultation period. Of these, 15 provided feedback via the optional embedded evaluation, which asked staff to state their level of agreement that the module met the stated objectives and provided the option to suggest improvements. Seven staff provided detailed feedback via email.

Feedback included:

- a request for additional interactive elements;
- additional information to reassure students that most placement experiences are positive, content regarding grooming, and a reminder that voicing concerns will not affect assessment;
- positive support for the inclusion of case studies and diversity of case study scenarios and subjects; and
- commendation on the length, content, resources provided, and value of the module.

Additional queries were raised as to whether the module could be embedded or included as part of existing pre-placement resources (for example, incorporated as part of an existing module, handout, or website), if the module could be completed multiple times before each placement experience, and the level of reporting available to determine student completion.

Updates and edits were made as deemed appropriate to the module, and those involved in the consultation phase were provided with a high-level summary of the feedback and resulting changes. The embedded survey used to collect feedback during the consultation was also removed and replaced with a commencement and conclusion survey. The option for participants to download a certificate of completion remained.

Initial launch

Following consultation and required edits, the module was reviewed and tested a final time by the project team to ensure functionality and accessibility. It was then transferred from development to the live site within the university learning platform in late August, to enable access for all students and staff via self-enrolment.

Communication about the availability of the module was distributed to all staff involved in the consultation phase and promoted via relevant internal working group distribution lists or Teams sites. This included distribution to members of the Vice-Chancellor's Sexual Harm Advisory Committee. Staff were encouraged to self-enrol and to promote the module to colleagues and students. Promotion of the module also included publication of a staff article and student blog, and briefings to various stakeholders at team meetings and tailored sessions. These included discussions of opportunities and further actions required to explore embedding the module within selected first year subjects. Following the launch, WIL teams have included or embedded links to the module as part of pre-placement communications or existing educational offerings.

Whilst the module has been designed for multiple visits and year-round access, the learning resource continues to be reviewed to ensure content remains engaging and up to date. Participant feedback is continuously gathered via two embedded and linked Qualtrics surveys at the commencement and conclusion of the module. No identifying data beyond whether a participant is a student or staff member is collected. Participants are advised that both surveys are voluntary and anonymous; that results will be used to ensure relevancy, guide module improvements, and evaluate effectiveness; and that high-level results may be included in reports, articles, or promotional materials.

A commencement survey requests participants reflect on their knowledge of their rights to a respectful and inclusive placement and awareness of support services. The concluding survey repeats these questions to test any change in knowledge, and additionally asks participants to state their level of agreement with three statements: “I learnt new and relevant information”, “I found the content engaging and interesting”, and “I would recommend this module to other students”. All questions use a six-point Likert scale (unsure, strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree).

From the date of launch (22 August) to the conclusion of Trimester 2 (27 September), a total of 320 participants accessed the module. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with participants highlighting that the module was informative and user-friendly, content was engaging, and included case studies were relevant and practical.

Future directions

The module will be re-launched and re-promoted in early 2025. Future directions and priorities for the next iteration of the module include:

- **Relevancy and alignment:** Work is underway to review feedback and evaluation data provided by those who have completed the modules. Feedback will be used to guide amendments or enhancements to the module to ensure relevancy and alignment with the forthcoming National Code, as tentatively outlined in the *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence: Issues Paper* (Department of Education, 2024b).
- **Extended content:** Additional content will be considered for incorporation into the module to cover relevant topics, for example, health, safety, and wellbeing; cultural competency; unconscious bias; and inclusive practice. Supplementary materials will be further explored to support student cohorts who may face additional challenges or barriers to support (for example, students on rural or remote placements).
- **Evaluation and sector-wide learning:** Ethics approval is currently being sought by the project team to enable discussion of survey results and the transferable principles of the module to benefit other institutions who may be seeking to develop a similar educational offering.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge that this module is only one component of supporting students on placement and the broader program of work underway at Deakin University to promote respect, prevent sexual harm, and support those affected. Additional activities, specifically in relation to WIL, have included professional development briefings to relevant staff, and training for students to further build upon case study examples and reiterate the availability of support services.

Conclusion

The prevalence of sexual harm and gender-based violence during student placements should be a cause for serious concern and immediate action. Ensuring student safety and wellbeing across all aspects of their experience is not only essential for compliance with the National Code but is also an integral part of establishing appropriate standards of behaviour with students, as future employees and leaders. This module offers a scalable and adaptable educational tool that can be easily made accessible to all students. It ensures a baseline understanding of their rights to a respectful and inclusive workplace environment, while also raising awareness of where to seek advice and support if needed.

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