

Building Respectful Relationships on Campus: A Case Study of Student-led Training in an Australian Law School

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Abstract

Since 2023, the Melbourne University Law Students' Society (MULSS) has delivered a student-led Sexual Misconduct and Bystander Intervention Training (SMBIT) program aimed at fostering a safer and more respectful law school community. Mandatory for attendance at MULSS-ticketed events, the program has reached over 1,400 students and is facilitated in small groups by trained peers. Voluntary post-training surveys indicate increased student confidence in responding to disclosures and understanding university support services. While findings are encouraging, limited survey response rates limit the strength of our conclusions and constrain generalisability. This paper highlights the program's potential and argues for further research to inform best practice across Australian university sexual violence prevention initiatives.

Keywords

Sexual misconduct; Sexual misconduct prevention; Sexual misconduct training; University training programs.

Introduction

Sexual misconduct across Australian universities is a pervasive and persistent issue. Since 2023, the Melbourne University Law Students' Society (MULSS) has delivered a student-led Sexual Misconduct and Bystander Intervention Training (SMBIT) program to promote a safer community and equip students with the skills to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and assault. Participation in the training is mandatory for attendance at all MULSS-ticketed events and, as of May 2025, approximately 1,442 students have completed the program.

Supported by the Law Faculty and funded through faculty grants to student associations, the program is overseen by the MULSS Leadership Team—typically the President, Secretary, Treasurer, and/or Vice Presidents—who are responsible for securing funding, appointing facilitators, and managing program administration. The training is delivered in small-group sessions led by pairs of student facilitators, all of whom are previous participants in the program. A Sexual Misconduct Training Coordinator, with prior experience as a facilitator, oversees delivery and logistics, including facilitator training, rostering, scheduling, and managing exemption requests on victim-survivor grounds.

Training content covers legal and social definitions of sexual misconduct, prevalence data, and conceptual frameworks such as consent culture versus rape culture. It also addresses myths and misconceptions and provides bystander intervention strategies—such as “calling in” or “calling out” anti-social and harmful behaviours—enabling students to intervene when witnessing or learning of misconduct. Students are also informed about disclosure pathways, including both university-based and external support services. Internal contacts within the MULSS include the Sexual Misconduct Training Coordinator, who can assist with issues related to the training, vicarious trauma, or access to further support within and external to the university.

This paper first reviews what we know about the problem of sexual misconduct in Australian universities and provides an overview of prevention initiatives across Australian universities. It then presents an analysis of 77 survey responses gathered from the MULSS training program, followed by a discussion of the findings and directions for future research.

The problem

The 2021 National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) surveyed 43,819 students across Australian universities. One in six students surveyed reported experiencing sexual harassment since commencing university and one in 12 in the past year, while one in 20 reported experiencing sexual misconduct during their time at university (Heywood et al., 2022, p. 1). The NSSS also identified club and society events (25.8%) and university accommodation or residences (25.3%) were the most common settings for sexual misconduct (Heywood et al., 2022, p. 1).

Underreporting is also a significant concern at Australian universities. The NSSS revealed that half of all students knew little or nothing about their university's formal reporting or complaints process for sexual harassment (51%) or sexual assault (53.6%) (Heywood et al., 2022, p. 3). Nearly half were similarly unaware of where to seek support within the institution for both sexual harassment (46.7%) and assault (43.5%) (Heywood et al., 2022, p. 3). Common reasons for not reporting included perceptions that assistance was unnecessary, that the incident would not be taken seriously, or that it would be too difficult to prove (Heywood et al., 2022, p. 3). Moreover, just over half (54.8%) of students who witnessed sexual harassment reported taking action in response to the most recent incident they observed, while slightly fewer (47.8%) acted when they were told or suspected that another student had been sexually assaulted (Heywood et al., 2022, p. 4).

Sexual misconduct in Australian universities disproportionately affects specific student groups, including women, younger students (aged 18–21), students with diverse gender identities and sexualities, international students, students with disabilities, and First Nations students (Heard et al., 2024, p. 80; Tarzia et al., 2025). Most victim-survivors of sexual assault reported that the most impactful incident involved male perpetrators (85.7%), most commonly from their own university (58.8%), and in two-thirds of cases (65.7%) it involved someone they knew (Heywood et al., 2021, p. 3).

Findings from the NSSS and related qualitative research highlight the profound impact of sexual misconduct on students, including disruptions to education and significant harm to mental wellbeing, with some victim-survivors disengaging from their studies entirely (Heywood et al., 2022, p. 5; Nisbet et al., 2022). Victim-survivors are also more likely to engage in risky behaviours such as binge drinking and drug use (Blayney et al., 2019), experience lower academic success (Molstad et al., 2023), and report poorer mental health outcomes (McQueen et al., 2024).

Sexual misconduct prevention initiatives in Australian universities

Recent Australian research has begun to explore the effectiveness of sexual violence prevention initiatives in tertiary education settings, with a focus on bystander intervention, consent education, and support service awareness. Collectively, these studies provide emerging empirical evidence that highlights both the potential and the limitations of current strategies.

An online educational module aimed at enhancing university students' knowledge and confidence regarding consent, bystander intervention, response to disclosures, and awareness of support services was evaluated by Heard et al. (2024). Using a mixed-methods approach that combined pre- and post-module surveys with semi-structured interviews, Heard et al.'s (2024) evaluation demonstrated significant positive shifts in participants' beliefs and confidence across all areas. Findings emphasised the value of the module's accessibility, privacy, and self-paced format, with

participants valuing its interactive and relevant content that was applicable to real-world situations. The evaluation suggested that the module improved knowledge about available support services and potentially strengthened participants' ability to support peers disclosing sexual violence. Heard et al. (2024) highlight the importance of involving students alongside experts and stakeholders in module development to ensure social relevance, as well as the need for active learning strategies and opportunities for critical self-reflection. Participants also expressed the importance of integrating the module within broader institutional initiatives to maximise its impact (Heard et al., 2024, p. 87).

Another study (Labhardt et al., 2024) explored university students' perceptions of sexual assault and bystander intervention across two institutions—one in the United Kingdom (UK) and one in Australia. Through semi-structured interviews with 39 students, the researchers identified two primary themes: navigating the complex dynamics of sexual assault and decisions surrounding intervention. Participants emphasised the role of nonverbal cues in conveying consent, often interpreting active consent as nonverbal willingness alongside the absence of a refusal. Australian students tended to rely on more obvious cues of nonconsent, whereas UK students were more attuned to subtle indicators, such as intoxication impairing consent capacity. This influenced students' willingness to intervene. Additionally, positive peer support emerged as a critical facilitator of intervention. The authors recommended future research to measure helping behaviours, focusing on factors such as intoxication's impact on intervention, as well as highlighting the role of peer support in reducing ambiguity and increasing bystander confidence (Labhardt et al., 2024).

Kania and Cale (2021) provided preliminary insights into bystander intervention behaviours among Australian university students, identifying critical factors influencing responses to potential sexual violence. Their study of 380 undergraduates revealed that the most prevalent barrier to intervention was the failure to recognise situations as risky or harmful. Students were more likely to intervene when assisting a friend in distress, indicating that personal connection and perceived clarity of harm significantly affected intervention decisions. Importantly, endorsement of rape myths was not linked to missed opportunities, suggesting that rape myth acceptance may not directly impact intervention when a clear opportunity arises. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Banyard, 2008; Banyard et al., 2007; Brown et al., 2014; McMahon, 2010), males demonstrated lower willingness and actual rates of intervention, more missed opportunities, and higher rape myth acceptance than females. The findings also suggest that Australian students may have limited awareness of sexual assault risk markers, particularly in party settings where social distractions reduce risk recognition. Kania and Cale (2021) advocate for developing bystander measures tailored to the Australian university context, emphasising the potential benefit of promoting social identification across campus to enhance intervention rates.

The evaluation of Monash University's *Recognising and Responding to Sexual Violence* training program, developed by the Department of Forensic Medicine, assessed the effectiveness of accredited courses tailored for health professionals and frontline workers (Ninnes et al., 2023). Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study gathered quantitative data via feedback forms, closed-ended interview questions, and an impact survey, alongside qualitative data from open-ended responses (Ninnes et al., 2023, p. 16). The findings indicated that the majority of participants perceived the training as substantially enhancing their knowledge, understanding, confidence, and skills. Importantly, the course demonstrated meaningful influence on individual professional practice, with approximately 80% of respondents reporting at least some medium-term impact on their work behaviours six to eight weeks post training (Ninnes et al., 2023).

Many Australian universities have implemented initiatives aimed at preventing sexual misconduct, often through the inclusion of compulsory online training modules such as *Consent Matters* as part

of student orientation (Universities Australia, 2023). Some institutions have developed tailored programs. For example, since 2019, Monash University has mandated consent and respectful relationships training for all students. In 2023, the Australian National University (ANU) introduced a *Sexual Violence Prevention Toolkit* (Radcliffe et al., n.d.), providing a practical guide for institutional change. Monash has also delivered BRIGHT (Bystander Intervention, Respect, Intimate Partner Violence and Gender in Higher Education Training), a peer-led, interactive program designed to promote respectful relationships within the university community. This training is compulsory for student leaders, including those involved in student organisations, clubs and societies, residential advising, and residential committees (Universities Australia, 2023).

While these initiatives reflect significant innovation in institutional responses to sexual violence, there remains a lack of publicly available evidence evaluating student perceptions of their effectiveness or their success in achieving stated objectives. The limited number of recent studies in the Australian context underscores the need for continued research to evaluate and strengthen sexual violence prevention efforts in tertiary settings. Further, it highlights the need for greater clarity and evidence regarding effective approaches to sexual violence prevention and response within university contexts.

Method

Since its inception, the MULSS Sexual Misconduct and Bystander Intervention Training program has collected student feedback through voluntary post-training surveys, offering valuable insights into participant perceptions and areas for improvement. In the post-training surveys, students were asked to rate their confidence on a 5-point scale both before and after the session in relation to two key domains: (a) knowledge of the university's available support systems and (b) capacity to respond appropriately to disclosures of sexual misconduct. In addition to these quantitative measures, participants were invited to provide open-ended feedback on how the program could be improved, offering valuable qualitative insights into the training's perceived effectiveness and relevance.

Participation in the feedback survey was encouraged but not compulsory, resulting in 89 responses. Of these, 12 were excluded from analysis as the students had not completed the training. This left a total of 77 valid responses from students who had completed at least one part of the survey, with between 72 and 74 students completing the pre- and post-training confidence ratings. For each participant, confidence scores in each domain were totalled and mean scores calculated for both pre- and post-training responses. These averages were used to assess changes in perceived confidence following the training. As part of the evaluation, students were also invited to provide open-ended feedback on how the training program could be improved. Forty students responded to this prompt, offering a range of perspectives on the program's content, delivery, and relevance. A brief thematic analysis was conducted to identify common patterns and key themes within the responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with recurring ideas grouped into broad categories reflecting positive reception, mixed or neutral responses, and suggestions for improvement.

Results

Student confidence measures before and after training

Students were asked to rate their confidence (out of 5) before and after the training in relation to (a) knowledge of the university's support systems and (b) responding to disclosures (see Table 1). Average confidence scores increased from 3.04 to 4.46 for knowledge of support systems, and from 3.37 to 4.38 for responding to disclosures, indicating a significant enhancement in student understanding following the training.

Table 1*MULSS Sexual Misconduct and Bystander Intervention Training Program Confidence Measures*

Confidence Measure	Number of Respondents	Average Score (out of 5)
Start of training — Knowledge of university support systems	74	3.04
End of training — Knowledge of university support systems	74	4.46
Start of training — Confidence responding to disclosures	73	3.37
End of training — Confidence responding to disclosures	72	4.38

Open-ended responses

As part of the evaluation, students were invited to provide open-ended feedback on how the program could be improved. Forty students responded to this prompt, offering a range of views. A brief analysis of the comments (positive, mixed or neutral, and constructive suggestions for improvement) indicates a generally positive reception of the training, alongside constructive suggestions for improvement.

Ten participants responded with “no” or “N/A”, which correlated with high confidence scores post training, with three of these including affirmations such as “great job” or “no suggestions for now”. An additional 11 responses expressed positive sentiments, focusing on the quality of content, effective facilitation, appropriate duration, and the balance between theory and practice. For example:

Slides were great and so was the energy! No suggestions. (Participant 14)

Excellent delivery of some very difficult material. (Participant 13)

*I think it was very good, the duration running for around 1 1/2 hours is ideal.
(Participant 11)*

Five responses offered both praise and suggestions for improvement. These related to increasing student engagement, enhancing content clarity, and adjusting facilitation style:

*Training was very helpful and included tangible steps. Asking people who have not spoken yet to contribute if they would like [to] may be helpful to hear from more people.
(Participant 86)*

The program is informative, but I think there could be more information regarding acts that constitute sexual harassment/misconduct, as I feel some people can still be confused about whether what they’ve experienced is sexual harassment. (Participant 77)

The facilitators were great and ran through everything really well. I think possibly less interaction - I know activities are a good learning task but I think a lot of people in my group didn’t seem comfortable with them. (Participant 38)

Content of the training - it was good in terms of touching on socio-political context and power dynamics in regard to consent. Felt a bit rushed and missed some nuanced [sic] but it's been one of the better trainings I've been to. Could have gone through university services a bit better. (Participant 30)

Fourteen responses were wholly constructive and suggested key areas for potential development. Nine students commented on accessibility and delivery. Of these, six students requested more flexible scheduling and three suggested offering an online version of the training:

Potentially offering an online class would make it more accessible for students to attend. I personally had to take work off. (Participant 3)

More accessible training dates and times! Majority of times released especially early in the semester were during the day when many people either work or have class. More night sessions in the first few weeks of [semester] would have been great! (Participant 42)

Two participants commented on “mandatory attendance”. They both expressed discomfort with the requirement to attend training to access MULSS events, describing it as coercive:

I appreciate that this is a program that needs to be publicised to students, but truth be told I wasn't a huge fan of being coerced into doing it (given that I won't be able to attend future events). (Participant 16)

Attendance was via coercion and threats that you wont [sic] be able to attend events. (Participant 90)

Five students made suggestions for changes to program content. Suggestions included increasing the focus on bystander training, offering clearer definitions and examples of misconduct, and addressing the role of alcohol in sexual violence:

I was pretty surprised that there was 0 mention of the SpeakSafely/Elker portal, when that's such a good resource. (Participant 49)

Much more bystander training with examples and details to help. (Participant 61)

Perhaps include examples of what constitutes sexual assault and what doesn't. (Participant 72)

Drinking culture is arguably a large part of rape culture. MULSS appears to primarily run drinking based events. The impact of drinking to the incidence of sexual assault was not covered nor was practical advice on staying safe/keeping others safe when drinking. In fact there was very little practical advice in two hours. The focus seemed to more be culture wars than things that will make an immediate difference. This training would likely alienate would be perpetrators instead of changing attitudes. (Participant 90)

Program responses to participant feedback

Since 2023, all survey responses have been reviewed by the Sexual Misconduct Training Coordinator and shared in de-identified form with the MULSS Leadership Team to inform program development. This feedback has led to several adjustments to the training content, including the inclusion of additional information on support services and more practical guidance on bystander intervention strategies.

In response to concerns raised by participants regarding uneven participation in sessions, facilitator training has been revised to encourage broader engagement while remaining sensitive to students' comfort levels. Facilitators are now instructed to check in with quieter participants during session breaks or after the session concludes. Feedback has also informed the inclusion of more concrete examples of sexual misconduct during discussions, particularly within the "Consent Continuum" exercise.

Participant feedback has led to the integration of additional information on available support services, including the university's *Speak Safely* portal. A participant's call for more actionable bystander guidance informed the inclusion of expanded bystander strategies in the 2025 training update. Similarly, feedback also prompted the inclusion of more robust content addressing the impact of alcohol on consent, including references to the appointment of sober wellbeing officers at MULSS events.

In terms of delivery, while in-person sessions remain the preferred format, Zoom-based sessions are now available under a "partial exemption" model to accommodate students facing health issues, regional isolation, or work commitments. Additionally, scheduling has been adapted since 2024–25 to align with the students' summer subject commitments, reducing scheduling conflicts noted by participants.

Mandatory participation was introduced in response to two primary concerns: the prevalence of sexual misconduct at MULSS events, aligning with national data from the 2021 NSSS, and victim-survivors' concerns that an opt-in model would be unlikely to engage those most in need of the training. This mandate has been explicitly endorsed by the Law Faculty. Importantly, the requirement applies not only to social events but also to professional ones, such as the MULSS-managed Meet the Profession (MTP) event. This reflects recognition of the ongoing relevance of sexual violence within the legal profession (Victorian Legal Services & Ipsos, 2019).

Moreover, mandatory training is not unique to the MULSS context, as noted in the introduction. The University of Melbourne currently requires all incoming students to complete *Preventing Sexual Misconduct*—a mandatory eLearning module for all commencing undergraduate and graduate coursework students, and all commencing graduate researchers. Students are expected to complete the module in their first semester of study. Students who do not complete the module or have not been granted an exemption by the required completion date are unable to view their end of semester subject results until the module is completed (University of Melbourne, n.d.). Furthermore, organisations such as the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) mandate

that at least two executive members of each affiliated club complete misconduct prevention training, a policy similarly informed by NSSS findings.

These changes reflect an ongoing effort to respond meaningfully to participant feedback while balancing intended aims and learning outcomes.

Discussion and conclusion

The MULSS program offers an innovative way to ensure students are aware of the university's support systems and increases capacity and confidence in responding to disclosures of sexual misconduct. This article offers a preliminary insight into the potential efficacy of the MULSS sexual misconduct training program, particularly in enhancing students' confidence in their knowledge of university support services and their ability to respond to disclosures. These findings are encouraging and suggest that the program may be meeting some of its intended objectives. However, the limited number of survey responses (N = 77 out of approximately 1,442 students who have completed the training) represents a small sample and limits the strength of our conclusions and the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the data are largely confined to the 2023 cohort, highlighting the need for more current evaluation data, particularly in light of the programmatic changes introduced in response to earlier feedback. Ongoing and more robust data collection will be essential to assess the impact of these refinements and to ensure the training continues to meet student needs effectively.

Future research could include a follow-up survey distributed to all students who have completed the training. This would allow for the collection of longitudinal data, particularly from the 2023 cohort, who may be able to reflect on the longer-term impact of the training on their experiences throughout their degree. Additionally, the collection of in-depth qualitative data through interviews or focus groups could provide more nuanced insights into participants' experiences and perceptions. Such methods may help to identify areas for further refinement and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the program's effectiveness as it continues to evolve. Given the limited number of peer-reviewed studies evaluating comparable training programs, such research would offer much-needed insight into both the strengths and limitations of student-led sexual misconduct prevention initiatives. It would also contribute to a broader evidence base for designing and evaluating similar programs across Australian universities, helping to inform best practices and support sector-wide learning and improvement.

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Ethics approval

This research has received ethics approval from the University of Melbourne Human Ethics Committee (2025-32683-68448-5).

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