

From Pillar to Post: The “Safe and Respected at La Trobe” Social Marketing Campaign

Kellie Muir
La Trobe University

Mel Fineberg
Mel Fineberg Marketing Communications

Cuong La
La Trobe University

Rosilie Wimbush
La Trobe University

Emma Wearing
La Trobe University

Abstract

La Trobe University developed and delivered a social marketing campaign, Safe and Respected at La Trobe, to address high rates of sexual harm and low help-seeking behaviour among students, as identified in the 2021 National Student Safety Survey (Heywood et al., 2022). The campaign formed part of the university’s comprehensive Sexual Harm Prevention and Response Action Plan and aimed to increase student awareness of what constitutes sexual harm, and how to seek support or report incidents. Co-designed with students and implemented in collaboration with a social marketing consultant, the campaign took a bold, text-only approach to avoid stereotyping and maximise relevance across diverse student populations. It was delivered across six campuses and used La Trobe University’s internal communication channels. The campaign was evaluated using a range of methods including focus groups, communications metrics, and relevant service data. Despite some challenges, the campaign successfully achieved its objectives and contributed to increased visibility for prevention work. This paper reflects on lessons learned and highlights the potential for cross-institutional collaboration to scale similar initiatives. This is a timely approach as universities prepare to meet new obligations under the forthcoming National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence.

Keywords

Social marketing; Communication campaign; Gendered violence; Gender-based violence; Sexual harm; Prevention; University; Higher education; Tertiary institutions; National Code; Primary prevention.

Introduction

Preventing and responding to gender-based violence in universities is complex work which requires a comprehensive approach. Social marketing campaigns have a key role within that comprehensive approach, as an important tool or lever for change. They can provide significant advantages as a tool, effectively reaching a large audience to implement social or behavioural change (Lee et al., 2022).

Background

Awareness of gender-based violence as a critical and preventable public health issue has significantly increased in Australia over the past decade (Department of Social Services, 2022). As that awareness has grown, sectors such as health and education have identified gender-based violence as a problem within their setting (Hegarty et al., 2022).

The Australian university sector’s response to gender-based violence has accelerated in recent years, shaped by the influence of both international and local movements (Universities Australia, 2023a). International campaigns such as #MeToo and End Rape on Campus set a global agenda by exposing the widespread nature of sexual violence and calling for structural and cultural change. Local activism — such as the Hunting Ground Australia and the STOP campaign — translated this momentum into the higher education context, directly challenging universities to reform their policies and practices. While international movements created the conditions for change, local activism ensured accountability and maintained pressure for tangible action within the Australian higher education sector.

The university sector has placed particular emphasis on sexual violence, often referred to as sexual harm. As defined by Universities Australia (2023b), sexual harm encompasses any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, and sexual abuse.

Two National Student Safety Surveys (NSSS) conducted in 2016 and 2021 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017; Heywood et al., 2022) highlighted the extent of sexual harm in universities. The 2021 NSSS (Heywood et al., 2022) found that many university students had experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault, with sector data reported as follows:

- One in six (16.1%) students had been sexually harassed since starting at university and one in 12 (8.1%) had been sexually harassed in the past 12 months.
- One in 20 (4.5%) students had been sexually assaulted since starting at university and 1.1% had been sexually assaulted in the past 12 months.

The data demonstrated that experiences of sexual harm were associated with gender and age: women and gender diverse students experienced higher rates of sexual harm, as did students aged between 18–24 years. Students with disabilities and First Nations students were also reported as being disproportionately affected by sexual harm (Heywood et al., 2022).

In addition to the confronting trend of high prevalence, there were also issues of low support-seeking behaviour and under-reporting. Few students who had experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault in a university context had sought support or assistance from their university:

- Only one in six (16.8%) students who were sexually harassed sought support or assistance.
- Only one in four (25.5%) students who were sexually assaulted sought support or assistance.

Even fewer students who had experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault in a university context had made a formal report or complaint to their university:

- Only 3.0% of students who had experienced sexual harassment, and 5.6% of students who had experienced sexual assault, had made a formal report about their most impactful incident to their university.

This highlights a significant gap between student experiences and formal institutional response systems, suggesting systemic barriers in reporting.

While reasons for not seeking support and not making a formal report vary, the NSSS (Heywood et al., 2022) uncovered a gap in knowledge which had an impact on this behaviour. Students had limited knowledge of where to seek support or assistance or of the formal report or complaints process within their university:

- Almost half of those surveyed said they knew nothing or very little about where they could seek support or assistance within the university for sexual harassment (46.7%) or sexual assault (43.5%).
- One in two students also indicated that they knew nothing or very little about their university's formal report or complaint process for sexual harassment (51.0%) or sexual assault (53.6%).

These results provided universities with strong evidence for required change to prevent and respond to sexual harm, including the need to increase awareness of how to seek support and/or make a formal report/complaint to the university.

Universities Australia (2022) published the Australian university sector's statement responding to the second NSSS findings, committing to doing more and improve across multiple domains of prevention and response work.

A comprehensive approach

A comprehensive whole-of-institution approach is needed to address the reality of sexual harassment and sexual assault. This is recommended by Our Watch, Australia's leader in the primary prevention of violence against women, in their evidence-based frameworks, *Change the Story: A Shared Framework for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women in Australia* (2021a) and *Educating for Equality* (2021b). Our Watch note, "A comprehensive and holistic approach to violence against women must involve a continuum of interdependent and interlinked strategies, with efforts across the spectrum" (2021a, p. 57).

To best provide for this comprehensive approach, Our Watch (2021a) reference the need for efforts to include four clear domains: Primary Prevention, Early Intervention, Response (often referred to as Tertiary Prevention), and Recovery.

The *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* (Department of Social Services, 2022) is the Australian Government's overarching national policy framework to guide actions towards ending violence against women and children. This National Plan also highlights the need for an approach that encompasses these same four domains.

The Australian Government's *Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2024; the Higher Education Action Plan) is a multi-pronged approach to create higher education communities free from gender-based violence through seven actions. One of those actions requires higher education providers to "embed a whole-of-organisation approach to prevent and respond to gender-based violence" (Department of Education, 2024, p. 8). Other actions include a National Student Ombudsman and a National Code which will provide increased regulation of higher education providers in meeting the Higher Education Action Plan requirements.

The role of social marketing within a comprehensive approach

In efforts to shift culture, attitudes, social norms, and behaviours, social marketing is a critical component of a comprehensive prevention approach.

Social marketing is defined by the Australian Association of Social Marketing (AASM) as a practice which "seeks to develop and integrate marketing concepts with other approaches to influence behaviour that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good" (Australian Association of Social Marketing [AASM], n.d., para. 1).

In the prevention of gender-based violence, social marketing campaigns have been recognised as effective or promising by Our Watch (2021b). Universities Australia’s (2023a) *Primary Prevention of Sexual Harm in the University Sector - Good Practice Guide*, for example, recommends the use of social marketing as a key prevention technique. It advises institutions to “Consider a broad range of primary prevention techniques”, including communications and social marketing campaigns (Universities Australia, 2023a, p. 5). Well-designed campaigns can amplify leadership messaging and challenge the stereotypes and norms that enable sexual harm.

Comprehensive approach at La Trobe University

La Trobe University has over 39,000 students and a total of seven campuses located across Victoria and New South Wales (NSW). A quarter of La Trobe University students have a regional, rural, or remote background and over 40% of students are first in their family to study at university (La Trobe University, 2025). The 2021 NSSS findings showed that La Trobe University students experienced similar rates of sexual harm and low rates of reporting and knowledge of where to report or seek help, compared to the national average. The university reviewed its sexual harm prevention and response initiatives following the release of the NSSS findings. A Respect at La Trobe Taskforce was established with staff and students from across the university. The Taskforce provided strategic direction, developing the *Sexual Harm Prevention and Response Action Plan 2023–2026* (La Trobe University, 2023), comprising 33 actions across four domains, to prevent and respond to sexual harm. Drawing on the evidence base from Our Watch, the *Sexual Harm Prevention and Response Action Plan* called for the development of a whole-of-university campaign to prevent sexual harm.

Implementing a whole-of-university social marketing campaign

An external social marketing consultant was engaged to support and assist the La Trobe University team across the life cycle of the campaign. The life cycle involved the development of a strategic approach encompassing creative design, campaign planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Campaign development

A campaign working group was established with key partners and subject matter experts from across the university and included a student representative. The group informed the strategic direction of the campaign, messaging development, and implementation. The campaign’s strategic approach and creative content was tested and co-designed with students via focus groups, surveys, and student representatives.

Objectives and target audience

The primary audience for the campaign was young students (aged 18–24 years) at La Trobe University — in particular, women and gender diverse students. This was informed by the NSSS results showing high prevalence of sexual harm in these age and gender cohorts (Heywood et al., 2022).

The campaign objectives were to increase awareness of sexual harm, and where to report or seek support at university following a sexual harm incident.

Creative approach and channels

The campaign creative concept was developed by the social marketing consultant, with design executed by the internal La Trobe University Brand and Creative team. The content was

specifically designed to be bold and eye-catching, with messaging that was very clear and direct. It included content which reassured victim-survivors that they would be listened to and believed if they came forward.

The campaign used text only (no photographs or visual images) to ensure a broad, inclusive campaign which was relevant to all students. Avoiding imagery was also an important strategy to help avoid unintended consequences such as stereotyping perpetrators or victim-survivors or creating a campaign which may alarm or distress people.

The campaign included a suite of materials to encompass a range of messages and behaviours. Instead of including one single campaign image, there were 14 separate images developed. These included general messages such as “Sexual harm is never okay”, examples of sexual harm such as “Sexual harm is unwanted touching”, and reassuring messages such as “It’s not your fault”.

The campaign was first executed for 10 weeks in Semester 1, 2024, from 26 February 2024 to 5 May 2024. The campaign exclusively used La Trobe University’s digital and physical channels. These included the Student Communications MyLaTrobe-branded blogsite, weekly newsletter, and Facebook and Instagram accounts. The campaign was also featured on the public-facing university Facebook and Instagram accounts. Staff were informed of the campaign and its progress across the 10 weeks through the internal Staff Communications all-campus weekly newsletter and two dedicated all-staff emails.

The campaign was displayed physically on A3 posters and A5 coreflute signage in high-traffic areas on each campus, often on pillars and noticeboards and in vendors’ shops.

The campaign strategy did not include paid advertising or earned media.

Supporting information and aligned work

The campaign was linked to supporting information and resources, such as the campaign website. QR codes on the posters directed viewers to the website so they could access further information on the campaign and related resources and services.

Other mutually reinforcing activities within the *Sexual Harm Prevention and Response Action Plan* also continued, including the delivery of training for staff and students on related topics, such as Gender Equality & Bystander Intervention, and Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Harm, Bullying & Discrimination. Delivering interconnected and aligned interventions across the university to build individual awareness and confidence contributes to shifting cultural norms within La Trobe University. This is necessary for policy and system change to take effect (Our Watch, 2021b).

Key concepts in the campaign were reinforced in the training, and the training concepts were reinforced in the campaign. While training and general communications have reach and impact, this can be time limited. The social marketing campaign provided a much larger reach and impact. While this benefit was primarily observed in relation to the key objectives of the campaign, it had a secondary gain of significantly raising the profile of the Prevention and Inclusion team, and the Respect at La Trobe body of work within the university.

In 2024 and 2025, La Trobe University leveraged Respect at Uni Week to further promote the Safe and Respected campaign through its shared objectives. Respect at Uni Week is a shared student activation and engagement approach across Victorian universities, led by the Victorian Tertiary Primary Prevention Network (Burge, 2024). This leveraging included promoting specialised online safety videos, promotion of specialist support services, student-run activations, an art therapy workshop, and promotion of training to staff and students.

Limitations

This was La Trobe University’s first experience of a campaign focused on sexual harm, so it required significant engagement and collaboration across the organisation to build understanding and support.

The La Trobe University team were inexperienced in social marketing campaign development and management. This necessitated bringing in external expertise.

The direction of the campaign evolved over time. Initially, it was designed to focus on masculinity. Significant work was undertaken over several months, including strategic planning, stakeholder consultation, creative development, user testing, and evaluation design. However, following constructive feedback and further reflection, the campaign direction was revised at a late stage to focus on encouraging reporting of sexual harm. This redirection was considered necessary to build a foundational knowledge and understanding in the university community first, before being able to consider a more nuanced primary prevention approach at a later date.

The necessary pivot of the campaign meant the content had to be reworked under very tight timeframes. This had flow-on effects to other elements.

Ethics approval was not obtained for the evaluation of the campaign, as the evaluation was primarily undertaken to inform internal work processes. This means that there is limited opportunity to share the campaign results and impact to a wider audience.

Student capacity and engagement in the first iteration of the campaign was somewhat limited. Students were seen to be over-surveyed, hence a quantitative survey evaluating the campaign in Semester 1, 2024 was not undertaken. Limited numbers of students opted to join the focus groups, and they were not necessarily representative of the broader university population.

While support for the campaign was evident from staff and students, some staff expressed concerns that the campaign could be triggering. The campaign team were able to respond appropriately to these concerns, which took time and consideration but did not hinder the campaign progression.

Continuing and optimising the campaign

As social marketing aims to address deeply held beliefs, attitudes, and social norms, for social marketing campaigns to be effective, they require a long-term approach. Even when a campaign is seen to have a short-term impact, sustained change requires sustained activity.

As such, a second iteration of the Safe and Respected at La Trobe campaign ran for 5 weeks in Semester 2, from 22 July 2024 to 25 August 2024. Drawing on the evaluation of the first iteration, some adjustments were made, including the introduction of two new images translated into multiple languages, and a shorter campaign duration of 5 weeks. The campaign dissemination was expanded to include additional channels via La Trobe Sport.

The second campaign was evaluated using similar methods, with the additional inclusion of a student survey. The results were consistent with those from Semester 1 in meeting the stated objectives.

The success of the first two iterations of the campaign means it is now a “business-as-usual” campaign run across the year. This demonstrates the extent of organisational support for the campaign, the authorising environment, and readiness established through the campaign and other strategies. The evaluation of each iteration continues to inform future activities and ensure an evidence-based approach to improvement — and therefore greater impact — over time.

Evaluating the campaign

Ethics approval was not sought for the campaign evaluation. This discussion focuses primarily on how we evaluated the campaign — it does not include specific discussion of the results.

Methodology

Campaign evaluation combined both quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate the campaign's impact. Quantitative measures included campaign performance metrics such as website visits, click-throughs, and social media engagement (impressions, reach, and interactions). Service data were also reviewed, with particular attention to the number of students who sought support from Safer Community and Wellbeing Services during the campaign.

Qualitative insights were drawn from anecdotal feedback, focus groups with students, and reflections from the working group and the direct campaign team.

The focus group discussions were promoted to students through the MyLaTrobe blog, newsletter, and Facebook and Instagram channels, and via email to student representatives.

Participation was incentivised and the focus group discussion guide was designed to understand participants' awareness of the campaign, message understanding, action taken in response to the campaign, and perceptions of the campaign.

A total of three focus groups were held in 2024. Each focus group comprised three elements:

1. Participants were asked to complete an online survey to enable quantitative data collection and private responses (which the rest of the group did not see/hear).
2. A focus group discussion was held with questions posed to the group.
3. Participants were asked to complete a written reflection at the end of the group, providing an opportunity to add any further thoughts privately.

Together, these measures provided both breadth and depth, allowing us to evaluate not only the reach of the campaign but also its perceived effectiveness and areas for development.

Campaign impact

The evaluation showed that campaign performance was exceptionally strong in terms of meeting its stated objectives.

Much of the anecdotal feedback was also very positive, demonstrating the impact and reach across the community as well as the positive reception.

A practical demonstration of the campaign's reach and impact occurred in the second iteration of the campaign in August 2024. A vendor on one of the campuses had a campaign poster displayed in their shop. They noticed some male high school students outside their shop teasing a fellow female high school student who they thought looked uncomfortable. The shop vendor notified the students' supervisor about the behaviour, then took the whole group to see the campaign poster and pointed out that La Trobe University does not tolerate this kind of behaviour.

Discussion

La Trobe University devoted significant resources to establish a social marketing campaign to prevent and respond to sexual harm. Significant knowledge, expertise, and social and technical infrastructure and systems are now in place to create further campaigns to support behavioural and social change.

The team learned a number of lessons throughout the process of developing, implementing, and evaluating the Safe and Respected at La Trobe campaign. It is hoped these learnings may benefit others looking to do similar work.

Social marketing role and expertise

The team — and the university community more broadly — has a greater appreciation for the important role of social marketing in a comprehensive approach to address sexual harm and gender-based violence.

There is also a greater understanding of the deep skill and expertise required to develop, deliver, and evaluate a social marketing campaign effectively. Engaging an external consultant to support and direct this work was key to ensure an evidence-based approach which maximised impact and limited risk and unintended consequences.

The working model used, with the external consultant effectively working as part of the university campaign team to guide and direct the work, had an added benefit of coaching and upskilling the Prevention and Inclusion team in social marketing.

This project has also had the added benefit of raising the profile and appetite for engagement with our team and our health promotion work.

A staged approach to primary prevention

This campaign laid foundational groundwork in increasing awareness and visibility of reporting pathways and support services at La Trobe University. As part of a comprehensive, staged approach to primary prevention, future campaigns will hopefully build on this platform to address deeper cultural and attitudinal drivers of sexual harm on campus.

The importance of consultation

The team has learned the importance of engaging early, with the right stakeholders, at the right times to ensure a successful campaign. Trust comes when relationships are built over time, and it is critical to establish these connections for the long term instead of using a transactional approach.

Opportunities for collaboration

The interest this campaign garnered, both internally within La Trobe University and externally with other universities, has been high.

Universities often work individually and separately on preventing and responding to gender-based violence. Significant progress could be achieved through enhanced resource sharing for the benefit of the broader community. Specialist groups such as the Victorian Tertiary Primary Prevention Network are examples of what can be achieved when universities collaborate, such as the Respect at Uni Week initiative, for the benefit of students (Burge, 2025; Burge & Marshall, 2023).

Commitment and resourcing to collaborate across universities would increase the size of the campaign audience, which would provide additional data and results to improve understanding. There would be capacity to compare and contrast campaigns and results across campuses, including the opportunity to A/B test different iterations. It would allow for a sharing of resources which would minimise waste and duplication. This could also enable greater innovation.

The forthcoming National Code ¹

The Australian Government has recently introduced legislation to Parliament to establish the *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence*. The National Code specifies that universities must “promote and widely disseminate evidence-informed prevention communication and key messaging across its study, work, living and social environments” (Department of Education, 2025, s. 3.5). It also specifies that prevention initiatives, including programs and campaigns, must be evidence-based and evaluated and must inform future prevention initiatives.

As the sector prepares for the forthcoming National Code, there is great opportunity for universities to reflect, learn, and plan together. Increased cross-sector collaboration could increase preparedness for the new requirements and, more importantly, readiness to achieve the desired change, so everyone can learn and study in safety.

Conclusion

Social marketing is an important lever for change and an effective tool in the comprehensive approach to change in the prevention of gender-based violence including within the university sector. There are a range of enablers critical to success for such efforts, as outlined below.

For those in the higher education sector wanting to include social marketing within their approach to preventing gender-based violence, the following steps are recommended to ensure campaigns are impactful and sustainable:

- Access specialist social marketing expertise to guide campaign strategy, development, delivery, and evaluation.
- Ensure sufficient staff resources to project manage and deliver such work, enabling staff to truly focus their efforts.
- Allocate sufficient time and budget to allow for consultation, co-design, testing, and refinement.
- Secure institutional authority and leadership endorsement to support bold and consistent messaging.
- Develop monitoring and evaluation frameworks early to enable effective impact measurement and to inform future activities.
- Early ethics approval is critical to ensure the campaign impact can be broadly shared to build understanding across the sector.
- Begin with response-focused messaging to build foundational understanding, then progress to deeper cultural and attitudinal primary prevention change efforts to address the underlying drivers of gender-based violence.
- Future campaigns should explore cross-university collaboration to maximise reach, reduce duplication, streamline resources, build deeper insights, and share learning. The forthcoming National Code provides a timely framework to support this alignment and encourage joint action.

¹ Noting this article was written in early 2025. The Universities Accord (National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence) Bill 2025 (Cth) passed Parliament on 25 August 2025.

Moving forward, social marketing should be embedded within a whole-of-institution approach to preventing gender-based violence, not as a standalone tactic. With growing national focus and cross-sector momentum as the sector prepares for the forthcoming National Code, universities have a unique opportunity right now to lead cultural change — together.

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In keeping with good practice in participatory program delivery and professional scholarship, we recognise the importance of appropriate authorship and acknowledgment of all contributors. We encourage shared authorship in future publications that document co-produced initiatives of this nature, particularly where cross-unit collaboration has shaped design, implementation, and evaluation.

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The authors may be contacted via:

Kellie Muir — respect@latrobe.edu.au

Melanie Fineberg — mel@melfineberg.com

Cuong La — respect@latrobe.edu.au

Rosilie Wimbush — respect@latrobe.edu.au

Emma Wearing — respect@latrobe.edu.au

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