

From Compliance to Creativity: How Boundary Spanning and Moonshine are Shaping Gender-based Violence Prevention at the University of the Sunshine Coast

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Abstract

On 25 August 2025, the Australian Parliament passed the Universities Accord (National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence) Bill 2025 (Cth), establishing the National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence (“the National Code”). Its release marked a critical shift in the way Australian universities address gender-based violence. It is not only a compliance obligation but also a shared cultural and institutional responsibility. Yet, meaningful progress remains constrained by outdated engagement models and tokenistic approaches to student partnership. This paper critiques traditional opt-in approaches to gender-based violence prevention and argues for reframing gender-based violence as a wicked problem that demands creativity, collaboration and courage. Drawing on Williams’s boundary spanning theory, the Our Watch Change the Story framework on the drivers of violence and innovation principles such as Boeing’s Moonshine innovation model, the paper examines how the University of the Sunshine Coast has embedded co-design into gender-based violence prevention by shifting from consultation to transformative collaboration.

Keywords

Gender-based violence; GBV, Higher education; Co-design; Boundary spanning; Wicked problems; Student partnership; Innovation labs; Prevention strategies.

Introduction

The phrase “The National Code” is echoing through university corridors and meeting rooms. Responses vary from relief at long-awaited clarity to cognitive dissonance and dereliction. For practitioners on the front line of gender-based violence prevention, however, the National Code represents something far more powerful. It is considered the long-awaited vehicle for transformation that positions safety and respect at the centre of university culture, policy and practice.

This cultural shift requires recognition that creating safe, more respectful universities is not the responsibility of compliance officers alone. It is the responsibility of all staff, students and leaders. While regulations provide important scaffolding, meaningful change requires approaches that are collaborative, student-centred and grounded in prevention theory.

Defining gender-based violence and the national context

Gender-based violence refers to harmful behaviours directed at individuals based on gender, gender identity or sexual orientation.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) defines gender-based violence as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (para. 1). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2021a):

(GBV) is “an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private”. (para. 1)

In Australia, gender-based violence remains a persistent and pressing issue. The national prevention agency Our Watch (2025) states one in three Australian women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and one in five have experienced sexual violence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 36 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence.

Although much public discussion has centred on sexual harassment and assault, gender-based violence takes many forms. Coercive control, stalking, financial abuse and technology-facilitated violence have all received growing attention. Recent reforms in Queensland to criminalise coercive control underscore the seriousness of these non-physical forms of harm. For example, the Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce recommendations, adopted by Queensland Government in 2022, established new criminal offences for coercive control and strengthened protections for victim-survivors. These reforms demonstrate how systematic recognition of non-physical violence can shift both community understanding and institutional responsibility.

Our Watch (2021) defines four key drivers of gender-based violence:

- Condoning of violence against women.
- Men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence.
- Rigid gender roles and identities.
- Cultures of disrespect towards women.

These drivers are directly relevant to higher education contexts. For instance, rigid gender roles may be reinforced through campus social life and student clubs, and cultures of disrespect may manifest themselves in hazing rituals or sexist humour. Universities can therefore either reproduce the societal drivers of violence or deliberately disrupt them through prevention strategies that embed equality, respect and shared leadership.

Gender-based violence in the higher education sector

On 25 August 2025, the Australian Parliament passed the Universities Accord (National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence) Bill 2025 (Cth), establishing the *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence* (Department of Education, 2025; “the National Code”). The National Code makes compliance a legal requirement for all higher education providers and sets out minimum standards in governance, prevention, reporting, training and student accommodation. It introduces clear accountability mechanisms and empowers regulators to enforce compliance, including the potential for penalties where obligations are not met. By embedding consistent, sector-wide expectations, the National Code represents a transformational shift: moving gender-based violence prevention and response from discretionary good practice to legislated, mandatory practice.

The National Code defines gender-based violence as:

any form of physical or non-physical violence, harassment, abuse or threats, based on gender, that results in, or is likely to result in, harm, coercion, control, fear or deprivation of liberty or autonomy. (Department of Education, 2025, p. 34)

This definition is consistent with global frameworks, such as the World Health Organization's framing of gender-based violence as harmful acts targeting individuals or groups based on gender, and UNHCR's recognition of violence that disproportionately affects genders or identities. However, the National Code extends and contextualises these definitions by:

- Explicitly naming coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse as forms of gender-based violence, reflecting their growing prevalence in Australian contexts and university student populations.
- Including domestic and family violence within the scope of gender-based violence, acknowledging that harm is not limited to campus incidents but also affects students' capacity to learn, participate and remain enrolled.
- Positioning gender-based violence as both an individual and institutional responsibility, requiring universities to act as prevention leaders rather than relying solely on external systems.
- Making the definition enforceable through legislation, embedding accountability and consistency across all higher education providers.

By building on WHO and UNHCR definitions, the National Code ensures that gender-based violence is not understood narrowly as sexual assault or harassment, but as a systemic and cultural issue that universities must address holistically through governance, culture and daily practice.

The 2021 National Student Safety Survey revealed that one in six university students had experienced sexual harassment and one in 20 had experienced sexual assault (Universities Australia, 2021). Rates were significantly higher among LGBTQI+ students, students with a disability and those from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Despite the scale of the problem, many institutional responses have remained limited to policy development and compliance mechanisms. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), the national regulator, has reinforced that universities must demonstrate proactive, student-centred action and not rely on minimal compliance.

The National Code did not emerge in isolation. It was shaped by a series of catalysts that exposed systemic failures and heightened public and regulatory pressure for reform:

- 2017 — *Change the Course* report (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017): revealed widespread sexual assault and harassment in Australian universities.
- 2021 — National Student Safety Survey (Heywood et al., 2022): confirmed the persistence of these issues, with little progress since 2017.
- 2022–2023 — Regulatory and government pressure: TEQSA issued stronger expectations for student safety, while government and advocacy groups called for binding national standards.
- 2024 — Draft National Code introduced: mandating whole-of-institution approaches to prevention, support and accountability.

- 2025 — National Code passed into law: transforming compliance from guidance into legislated obligation and establishing a sector-specific definition of gender-based violence.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate a growing recognition that gender-based violence in higher education cannot be addressed through piecemeal or compliance-only responses. Instead, they set the stage for universities to reframe gender-based violence as a wicked problem — one that requires creativity, collaboration and cultural transformation across all levels of institutional life.

Gender-based violence as a wicked problem

Gender-based violence can be recognised as a wicked problem — a complex, multifaceted issue that resists simple solutions and requires a coordinated, adaptative response. Unlike “tame” problems that can be solved through a linear process, wicked problems are characterised by overlapping causes, contested definitions and shifting political, cultural and social contexts (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Within higher education, gender-based violence embodies these qualities; it is driven by intersecting factors such as gender equality, power imbalances, alcohol and drug use, cultural norms and institutional structures that can enable or obscure behaviours.

The National Code advances this framing, embedding a sector-specific definition of gender-based violence that acknowledges both the structural and situational drivers of violence in university contexts. This represents a departure from broader definitions such as those of the WHO or UNHCR. While the WHO frames gender-based violence primarily in terms of public health impacts, UNHCR defines it as violence directed against a person based on gender that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm. The National Code, by contrast, highlights behaviours unique to the sector such as coercion in student clubs, harassment in learning spaces and abuse facilitated through online platforms.

Acknowledging gender-based violence as a wicked problem allows universities to move beyond reactive or compliance-driven responses. While policy development, training, awareness raising, support services and reporting mechanisms lay essential foundations, these measures alone do not address the deeper societal and institutional cultures that make gender-based violence possible. More integrated and student-centred approaches are required to reflect the complexity of gender-based violence prevention in the modern university context. With their transient, diverse populations and layered structures, universities are uniquely placed to implement innovative, whole-of-institution strategies that embed prevention into everyday practice (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

Addressing gender-based violence means confronting the root drivers of harm by:

- Ensuring policies and procedures are up to date and responsive to the needs of diverse and vulnerable groups.
- Reducing disparities in how incidents are reported, disclosed and handled.
- Creating equitable and survivor-centred experiences that are fair, accessible and trustworthy.

More importantly, it requires the time, space and resources to challenge deeply embedded norms and behaviours through ongoing reflection, continuous improvement and properly resourced cultural transformation across all levels of an institution. Only when every layer of the university recognises gender-based violence as a wicked problem can meaningful lasting change occur. Within this approach, co-design with students and staff emerges as a powerful mechanism for transformation, embedding prevention, innovation and cultural change into the lived experience of the university community rather than treating gender-based violence as a discrete or procedural issue.

The case for co-design

Co-design is a powerful tool for cultural change when understood and implemented with integrity. Increasingly, it is being used within universities not only for communications or service development but in shaping institutional culture itself. When applied to gender-based violence prevention, co-design can generate inclusive, contextually relevant strategies that reflect the lived experiences of students.

In the higher education context, co-design is recognised as a process that moves beyond consultation, centring students' voices in shaping policies, services and culture. Dollinger et al. (2022) emphasise co-design as a student-centred, participatory approach that allows the authentic capture of students' lived experience and empowers them to partake meaningfully in designing initiatives and resources.

Co-design requires relational trust, shared decision-making and respect for marginalised voices, and the National Code emphasises trauma-informed approaches and the redistribution of power to ensure student participation is meaningful rather than symbolic. In practice, this means moving away from top-down campaigns and executive-led policy processes toward a genuinely student-centred approach. Students are not merely recipients of services; they are the ones navigating systems, reporting experiences and advocating for cultural change. Their knowledge is essential, particularly that of students disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, including LGBTQI+ students, students with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and international students.

However, true co-design is often challenged by resource constraints and organisational pressures. The term "co-design" is sometimes used as a buzzword, resulting in tokenistic engagement. As Arnstein (1969) argues in her ladder of participation, there is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having real power to influence outcomes. Too often, consultation or tokenism occurs, where students are informed or superficially consulted but rarely have genuine influence over decisions.

To be effective, co-design must also meet students where they are. Traditional opt-in activities tend to engage only the most motivated students, excluding those whose voices are critical for shaping inclusive initiatives. Universities must create a "third space" — a neutral, generative environment where institutional knowledge meets lived experience. Without this third space, power remains centralised, and meaningful student insight is lost. Going to where students are located, listening to their perspectives and creating accessible engagement opportunities ensures that co-design is authentic, inclusive and impactful.

Co-designing gender-based violence prevention through tutorials

Gender-based violence prevention in higher education presents complex challenges that require an innovative, inclusive and student-centred approach. Engagement through traditional opt-in approaches frequently fails to capture the full diversity of the student population. Such approaches rely on students volunteering additional time and energy outside of their core academic commitments. This is particularly challenging for commuter, part-time or online cohorts, many of whom balance external responsibilities such as employment, caregiving or family obligations. The dispersed nature of multi-campus institutions can limit the accessibility and visibility of on-campus engagement opportunities. TEQSA expects providers to understand and address the support needs of all student cohorts, as discussed in its *Wellbeing and Safety* guidance note (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2018). In contrast, traditional "opt-in" engagement models risk privileging already motivated students, potentially excluding those who balance work, caring or study commitments.

The University of the Sunshine Coast's Safe and Respectful Campuses Project has implemented a co-design approach to address these challenges. Boundary spanning practice and Moonshine innovation principles have been combined to actively involve students and staff in creating meaningful, contextually grounded gender-based violence prevention initiatives. The following case study illustrates how this approach was applied in tutorials across four interconnected phases, demonstrating the integration of theory and practice, recognition of gender-based violence as a wicked problem and alignment with the National Code.

Phase 1: Staff-to-staff boundary spanning

The Safe and Respectful Campuses Project team began by establishing connection between project staff and the broader university community. The springboard was the established Respect @ UniSC Staff Network, a network of staff committed to gender-based violence prevention across all University of the Sunshine Coast environments. This network exemplified boundary spanning in practice, enabling staff to collaborate across silos and build shared understanding before engaging with students.

Staff operationalised Williams's (2012) boundary spanning roles:

- Reticulist: Acting as connectors to foster relationships and enable information to flow between otherwise disconnected teams.
- Communicator: Working together to understand different perspectives (academic versus professional services) to build trust and understanding.
- Coordinator: Aligning resources, timelines and responsibilities for effective collaboration.
- Entrepreneur: Identifying opportunities to embed gender-based violence into the curricula and student-facing initiatives. In this case, tutorials.

This groundwork ensured that structural and relational conditions were in place to support meaningful student co-design. It demonstrated that boundary spanning is critical for addressing wicked problems like gender-based violence, which require negotiation, cross-disciplinary thinking and adaptive institutional strategies (Ritel & Webber, 1973).

Phase 2: Pre-tutorial engagement — Context and drivers of violence

Prior to tutorials, students received preparatory materials designed to embed reflection and context into the co-design process:

- Campus observation tasks to assess physical safety, visibility of support services and inclusivity.
- Gender-based violence content pertinent to their discipline.
- Content on the drivers of violence, including power imbalances, gender norms, social and cultural expectations, and systematic inequalities, to provide a foundational understanding of the structural and relational factors underpinning gender-based violence.

This pre-tutorial work operationalised boundary spanning in practice. Students were positioned as connectors and interpreters, linking knowledge of gender-based violence drivers to institutional structures. It also promoted a student-centred approach, recognising students as active contributors aligning with the National Code's emphasis on iterative, meaningful engagement.

Phase 3a: Tutorial — Observation, reflection and drivers of violence

The first half of the tutorial focused on physical and digital observation. Students walked around campus, examined online resources and critically assessed:

- Accessibility and visibility of support services.
- Safety and inclusivity of physical spaces.
- Clarity and accessibility of reporting mechanisms.
- Indicators and potential drivers of gender-based violence in campus environments, such as gendered space usage or messaging that could reinforce inequality.

During this phase, students assumed boundary spanning roles:

- Reticulist / Connector: Linking observations to institutional knowledge and identifying gaps.
- Communicator / Interpreter: Translating peer experiences and observations of potential drivers of violence into actionable insights.
- Coordinator / Entrepreneur: Proposing feasible solutions for immediate experimentation.

Embedding students in real-world observation and reflection addressed gender-based violence as a wicked problem, recognising the need for context-specific understanding of both behavioural drivers and systemic factors, negotiation and adaptation. It also ensured outputs aligned with National Code requirements, promoting accessibility, inclusivity and student-centred engagement.

Phase 3b: Tutorial — Innovation, co-design and addressing drivers of violence

In the second half of the tutorial, students applied Moonshine innovation principles to translate observation and reflection into actionable interventions. The Moonshine Lab, established by Boeing in 2001 in response to failing production lines, delayed deliveries and declining profits, served as the conceptual inspiration for this approach. As the Director of Manufacturing at the time, Larry Loftis (as cited in Austin et al., 2007), described it: “a very special group of people we pulled off to the side to be really creative and innovative and try not to get bogged down with the way it has always been done” (p. 5). The Moonshine Lab operated outside traditional processes, allowing small teams to work quickly, take creative risks and test ideas in low-bureaucracy environments.

The Safe and Respectful Campuses Project team adapted these principles to higher education, recognising the limitations of formal co-design spaces and embedding innovation directly into everyday student environments. Students were encouraged to:

- Design prototypes for student-facing reporting campaigns and prevention initiatives.
- Engage in iterative testing and discussion, prioritising “prototyping over perfection”.
- Generate creative solutions within low-stakes parameters, guided by Moonshine principles: autonomy from red tape, fail-fast experimentation, cross-functional collaboration and bricolage.

These activities were explicitly tied to the drivers of violence identified in Phase 3a, including:

- Challenging harmful gender norms through messaging and campaigns.
- Enhancing inclusivity and visibility of support services for marginalised student groups.

Simultaneously, students enacted boundary spanning competencies (Williams, 2012), interpreting observations, coordinating co-creation and innovating actionable solutions. This dual application of boundary spanning and Moonshine innovation operationalised theory in practice, demonstrating how students can meaningfully shape gender-based violence prevention strategies while addressing the structural, cultural and behavioural drivers of violence.

Phase 4: Cementing ideas — Quick wins from student co-design

The final phase focused on refining and institutionalising student-generated prototypes, ensuring that interventions addressed drivers of violence, remained feasible and visible, and aligned with the National Code.

Key outcomes included:

1. Strategic communication enhancements (addressing norms and knowledge gaps)
 - Canvas pop-up integration: Embedding gender-based violence prevention messages into course platforms to challenge harmful gender norms and improve visibility for all students.
 - Refined messaging channels: Leveraging preferred digital and physical platforms (QR coded posters, social media) for accessible and timely information.
 - Inclusive language campaigns: Co-designed to reflect diverse student experiences and counter stereotypes, discrimination and marginalisation, particularly for LGBTQI+ students, international students, students with a disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
2. Physical presence and visibility (addressing environmental drivers)
 - Observation-informed interventions: Posters and signage positioned in high-traffic areas, for example, bathrooms and lecture theatres, reducing blind spots where students may feel unsafe.
 - Pop-up events and activations: Engaging students in inclusive, interactive spaces, with incentives designed to model respectful behaviours and counter norms that enable gender-based violence.
3. Re-engagement and education opportunities (addressing behavioural drivers)
 - Iterative module refreshers each academic year: Short, online modules such as Upstander training, designed to shift student behaviours around bystander intervention and reporting.
 - Interactive campaigns: Student prototypes targeting bystander inaction or under-reporting, ready for trial and ongoing adaptation.
4. Innovative tools and resources (addressing cultural and structural drivers)
 - Creative merchandise: Flashlight keychains, coffee cups and other items reinforcing prevention messaging and promoting a culture of care.
 - Prototype-driven initiatives: Low-resource, high-impact solutions that address structural barriers to reporting and support, including accessibility, inclusivity and the visibility of services across all campuses.

These “quick wins” demonstrate how student-led co-design, boundary spanning and Moonshine innovation principles produce tangible, sustainable outcomes that actively respond to the drivers of violence, integrate student insight, foster cross-institution collaboration and support inclusive approaches. By embedding interventions into both everyday student experiences and institutional structures, the project ensures that gender-based violence prevention moves from abstract policy to practical, context-sensitive action, aligned with the National Code and responsive to the wicked problem nature of gender-based violence.

Discussion and recommendations

The introduction of the National Code establishes important regulatory scaffolding for higher education institutions. However, the risk lies in treating compliance as an end rather than a foundation. A compliance-only mindset can reinforce tokenistic consultation, where student voices

are invited but not empowered. Without meaningful engagement, institutions risk undermining the very cultural change the National Code seeks to achieve.

The University of the Sunshine Coast case study demonstrates that embedding engagement into the curriculum, rather than relying on extracurricular opt-in models, broadens participation and captures seldom-heard voices. This approach reframes students as co-creators of solutions rather than passive consultees. It also aligns with research that shows opt-in mechanisms often privilege motivated cohorts while excluding diverse perspectives critical to systemic change (TEQSA, 2023).

Boundary spanning has proven critical in enabling this shift. Staff who connect across silos create the relationships, trust and shared purpose necessary for genuine co-design. However, boundary spanners require institutional recognition and protection of time to sustain their work. Without this, innovation risks being isolated and unsustainable.

The Moonshine Lab approach further illustrates how gender-based violence prevention can benefit from small-scale, low-bureaucracy experimentation. By prioritising rapid prototyping and learning over perfection, the Moonshine method creates psychological safety for both staff and students to test ideas and adapt them to context. Importantly, these approaches do not reject compliance; rather, they position compliance as a baseline that enables creativity and responsiveness.

From this analysis, three recommendations emerge:

1. Invest in boundary spanners
Formally identify, resource and recognise staff who work across silos to connect students, academics and professional services in prevention efforts.
2. Shift from opt-in to embedded models
Integrate co-design and engagement into curricula, peer-led activities and lived campus environments to ensure inclusivity and relevance across diverse student groups.
3. Apply Moonshine principles
Establish low-risk spaces for experimentation where students and staff can collaboratively test prevention strategies, valuing adaptability over bureaucracy.

Together, these recommendations call on universities to treat students as partners in prevention and to move from static compliance to dynamic systems of cultural change.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence is not a tame or isolated issue that can be resolved through linear procedures or compliance alone. It is a wicked problem — systemic, relational and deeply embedded in culture. Addressing this complexity demands more than policies, awareness campaigns or consultation checklists. It requires universities to reconceive their role — not simply as policy enforcers, but as cultural architects.

The National Code offers a necessary foundation, but it should be understood as a floor rather than a ceiling: a catalyst for transformation, not an end point. To respond meaningfully to the realities of gender-based violence on campus, universities must embrace creativity, collaboration and courage. This means moving beyond outdated opt-in engagement models that fail to capture the lived realities of students most affected by gender-based violence — including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, LGBTQI+ students, students with a disability and international cohorts.

The University of the Sunshine Coast Safe and Respectful Campuses Project demonstrates that transformative engagement is possible when institutions act as boundary spanners. Its success rests

on reflexivity and iteration, grounded in the recognition that students must not be consulted after decisions are made — they must be co-creators in the design and delivery of prevention strategies.

Drawing on the Moonshine Lab model, this work shows that innovation in gender-based violence prevention is not only possible but essential. When teams are supported to test, fail, adapt and collaborate across disciplinary and positional boundaries, co-design shifts from a procedural exercise to a practice of shared power — one capable of reshaping the cultural conditions that enable harm.

To truly prevent gender-based violence, universities must embed prevention into the everyday — curriculum, leadership structures, peer relationships, campus spaces and service systems. At the same time, they must invest in the extraordinary — boundary spanners, innovators and cultural change-makers who can hold space for complexity and resist the pull of the status quo.

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