

Gender-based Violence on Campus: UniSport's Experience With the Role of Sport in Driving Lasting Change

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Abstract

This article outlines UniSport Australia's experience with representing sport in 43 higher education institutions in Australia. It posits that sport and recreation not only present challenges but also serve as critical opportunities for universities to enact meaningful, campus-wide interventions against gender-based violence (GBV). The article recognises sport and recreation services on campus as both a potential setting for problematic behaviours and a unique platform for driving positive cultural change. It articulates UniSport Australia's initiatives in driving change around alcohol-fuelled violence and trauma; its commitment to ongoing investment in equity-focused programs, affordable initiatives, and targeted staff training; and its support for research aimed at fostering healthy, inclusive campuses. The article identifies areas where further research could allow higher education institutions to address their obligations to create safer environments for students, staff, and communities.

Keywords

Universities; Higher education; Sport; Gender-based violence; UniSport Australia.

Introduction

UniSport Australia (UniSport), as the peak body for sport in higher education in Australia, recognises that it has a unique opportunity and responsibility to partner with Australian universities to address gender-based violence (GBV).

For more than 15 years, UniSport has been actively focusing on ways to address alcohol-fuelled violence and antisocial behaviour around sporting events. It has identified sport and recreation as potentially effective mechanisms for universities to quickly create positive change across the entire institution and campus life. This experience has shown that sport should be a key focus for universities seeking a campus-wide solution to address, and to demonstrate how they are addressing, GBV.

This paper outlines UniSport's experience as a membership organisation representing 43 partner organisations in the higher education sector. It identifies opportunities for sport and recreation facilities and programs to assist universities in comprehensively responding to GBV on campus. UniSport is not an academic organisation, and this paper does not purport to make a contribution to academic literature. It seeks to demonstrate the potential for tertiary institutions to use these sport-related opportunities to meet their obligations under the Australian Government's *Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2024; the Action Plan).

It is also important to note that UniSport's expertise does not extend to GBV. However, through its work, UniSport has identified opportunities where further research could be conducted to explore any link between campus sport and GBV.

This paper aims to consider how universities respond to GBV within the context of the entire continuum of gender discrimination and all its touchpoints for sport on a healthy campus. Higher education and society in general cannot consider effective ways to address GBV without

considering and addressing all areas of gender discrimination, as these upstream issues perpetuate the systems and attitudes that lead to GBV. As such, this paper will outline some areas where sport can help universities bring meaningful change to areas of gender discrimination as well as GBV.

Opportunities offered by sport on campus

A growing body of evidence indicates significant improvements in graduate outcomes, academic results, and well-being for students who participate in on-campus sport and recreation activities (Zhou et al., 2022).

However, recent studies in the Australian context have identified a potential link between sexual assault and clubs and societies, demonstrating that sport and recreation should be key foci for Australian tertiary institutions in responding to GBV (Heywood et al., 2022).

UniSport's experience of working with its 43 member institutions demonstrates that sport and recreation also offer universities a valuable and sustainable pathway for delivering on their responsibility to create meaningful and lasting change and showcase the good work they are doing in this space.

University sport and the Australian Government's Action Plan

In 2024, the Australian Government elevated the issue of GBV with the release of the Action Plan, endorsed by all state education ministers.

Ten principles laid out in the Action Plan guide institutions in implementation and ongoing accountability. Of these, five relate directly to the contribution that UniSport and sport can make to help universities meet and exceed their obligations:

- (1) There is a collective commitment from the higher education sector to lead and collaborate on long-term social and cultural change to prevent gender-based violence.*
- (4) Work to address gender-based violence will be co-designed with students, staff, experts, services providers and local communities and shared across providers to maximise impact.*
- (5) Providers will take an inclusive and intersectional approach to implementation.*
- (7) Action will reflect and respond to existing and emerging evidence, using the best research and contributing to new knowledge about what works.*
- (10) Governments and relevant agencies will collaborate and work in partnership throughout implementation of actions. (Department of Education, 2024, p. 7)*

Importantly, the Action Plan requires that higher education providers, affiliated organisations and associations, and student accommodation providers be accountable for achieving whole-of-organisation performance in preventing and responding to GBV, informed by the evidence base (Department of Education, 2024, p. 5).

Sport is an integral part of campus life and students expect universities to provide facilities and opportunities for a range of sport and recreation activities. In a 2019 University of Melbourne Student Wellbeing Survey, 82% of the more than 10,000 respondents indicated that they considered this provision to be Important or Very Important (Melbourne University Sport, 2020, p. 13).

Sport is an important part of the higher education environment and student experience and therefore must be considered as universities address their whole-of-organisation responsibilities under the Action Plan.

In *The Value of Sport*, UniSport (2021) outlined the ongoing benefits that sport is providing to universities and their students and staff in the Australian context, supported by international research from the sector. In this document, UniSport articulated its definition of “sport”:

Sport ... includes recreation as well as activity, and comprises all of the physical-exertion based extra-curricular clubs and formal activities that students engage in under the umbrella of their university. For some students, that means seeking the opportunity to represent their university in competition, others prefer no competitive element. However a student chooses to engage, this social engagement yields results that enhance the research and learning ambition of the university. (p. 4)

UniSport’s (2021) definition of sport also encompassed:

- *the countless hours of volunteer work undertaken by students in managing campus clubs and events – experience that is translating to better graduate outcomes for them,*
- *the outstanding physical assets that universities provide to students, staff and the community,*
- *the related opportunities for engagement with the broader community which build the university’s reputation (p. 4)*

Reducing alcohol-related risks in university sporting events

UniSport has been actively addressing the issue of alcohol-fuelled violence for more than 15 years. Anderson’s pivotal 2009 study examined alcohol consumption at the Australian University Games, highlighting a concerning trend: excessive alcohol consumption was linked to increased incidents of GBV on campuses. Anderson’s research underscored the need for stringent policies and preventive measures to mitigate these risks. It emphasised the critical need for university administrations to address alcohol-related issues as part of their broader strategy to combat campus violence.

In response to the alarming findings and growing concerns, UniSport (then called Australian University Sport) made a pioneering decision in 2009 to ban all alcohol sponsorship and branding associated with the Australian University Games. This move was not without its challenges as it resulted in the loss of \$110,000 per annum in sponsorship. However, the decision reflected a commitment to prioritising student safety and well-being over financial gains.

The ban on alcohol sponsorship had far-reaching implications. By removing alcohol branding from university sporting events, UniSport aimed to reduce the prevalence of excessive drinking and its associated risks. This policy change sent a strong message about the importance of creating safer environments for all students, particularly in the context of GBV.

In addition to eliminating alcohol sponsorship in 2009, UniSport implemented several other strategies aimed at reducing high-risk behaviours associated with binge drinking at events. These programs were designed to reduce risk for all students, not specifically to reduce the risk of GBV.

Be the Influence (BTI) was established in 2012 by UniSport, in partnership with PricewaterhouseCoopers. The program aimed to tackle binge drinking by providing students with leadership skills in risky situations often associated with binge drinking. More than 2,000 student leaders participated in the workshops.

However, despite the ban on alcohol sponsorship, BTI, and other initiatives, a study undertaken during the 2016 Australian University Games found no change in attitudes or behaviours around binge drinking (Knapp, 2017). More than 52% of respondents reported that they engaged in binge drinking during the event (Knapp, 2017, p. 6).

By 2018, UniSport had also implemented the following actions to address the issue:

- Rebranding of UniSport Nationals
- Introduction of member education, incorporating the requirement for risk management plans for staff and students leaving the campus for events
- Rollout of team captain education “Be the Leader”
- Removal of all alcohol
- Removal of an official social program which included party-based events. These events were replaced with alcohol-free or “dry” activity-based events
- Elevation of Fair Play awards
- Exclusion of students who attended events under the influence of alcohol
- Development of sector-wide awareness and support of these initiatives

While it is difficult to measure success, some measurable metrics are encouraging:

- In 2017, 12 people involved in the events were taken to a police station. In 2023, this had reduced to 0
- Incidents reported and investigated reduced from 45 in 2017 to just 2 in 2023
- Student event approval ratings increased from 66.7 to 88.5

In this period, the standard of competition also increased.

UniSport has continued to evolve in this space since 2018, introducing measures such as:

- A change of sport programming to include evening fixtures — we have observed that student athletes generally limit their alcohol consumption until after they have competed. By making the events later in the day, the incidence of athletes drinking heavily through the day has been reduced
- A requirement for all participating universities to adhere to strict behavioural conduct standards
- Development of *Gender-based Violence Good Practice Guidelines* for members. This template for university sporting events is discussed further in detail later in this paper

It is important to acknowledge the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032* states that increases in reported incidents may reflect that women are feeling more

supported to come forward and seek help (Department of Social Services, 2022, p. 16). Thus, further research is required into the decrease in reported incidents at UniSport Nationals.

Recognising this, in December 2024, UniSport introduced more rigorous standards around competition that apply during games and events and at all social events, both official and unofficial, associated with UniSport Nationals. These standards are articulated in the *UniSport Nationals Code of Behaviour*, acceptance of which is included in the individual participation agreements required to be completed by all competitors, spectators, officials, and staff before competition. The Code of Behaviour stipulates compulsory reporting of incidents of non-compliance and requires students and staff to be trained in incident response management.

UniSport has also developed and rolled out *Gender-based Violence Good Practice Guidelines* for our members. UniSport commits to, among other things, this document being reviewed on an annual basis, or more frequently should relevant national legislation or emerging good practice resources require.

Addressing high-risk areas

Clearly there is more work to be done, not just in the context of large sporting events. UniSport is committed to playing a leadership role for continuous improvement in this space.

In 2022, the *National Student Safety Survey: Report on the Prevalence of Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault Among University Students in 2021* (Heywood et al., 2022) was released. Of the 43,819 Australian tertiary students who participated in the survey, 16.1% had experienced sexual harassment since starting university and 4.5% had experienced sexual assault in the same period. In both cases, female students, transgender, and non-binary students reported significantly higher rates than male students (Heywood et al., 2022, p. 14).

The survey found that the events and facilities of university clubs and societies were the most common locations students reported experiencing their most impactful incident of sexual assault (25.8%), followed by university student accommodation or residences (25.3%), then private homes or residences (18.4%) (Heywood et al., 2022, p. 3).

This overrepresentation of clubs and societies demonstrates the opportunity to create change in GBV by focusing attention on these areas. It also highlights the particular responsibility of universities to consider the welfare of their student athletes. This responsibility stands notwithstanding the results of a 2022 study which determined that there was not a significant difference in the risk of sexual violence victimisation between university athletes and non-athletes (Parent et al., 2022).

Studies from the United States of America (USA) have found that student-athletes are disproportionately represented in sexual violence cases reported through university disciplinary systems (Crosset et al., 1996).

While it is not clear how directly these findings transfer to the Australian context, the media will often portray negative stereotypes of student athletes and a prevailing “bro culture” as a common part of the university experience. Assessments of over 20,000 male and female student athletes in the 2012 NCAA Social Environment Study and 2008–12 iterations of the National College Health Assessment identified a link between training to compete with aggression on-field and male athletes exhibiting more aggressive behaviours outside of the competitive arena (Bell & Paskus, 2014).

This is consistent with an Australian study demonstrating that alcohol-related aggressive and antisocial behaviours were more prevalent among male Australian university sportspeople/athletes than among their female and non-sporting counterparts (O’Brien et al., 2012).

Universities have a responsibility to all students, including those participating in elite sports programs.

Leveraging sport to challenge gender biases and promote equality

The opportunity presented by driving change through on-campus recreation goes beyond student athletes.

While there must be a focus on driving attitude change among participating students, it is critical that the student volunteers running these clubs and societies are supported in creating and maintaining a healthy and safe culture.

When we consider the broad definition of sport articulated above, we see that engagement with sport in universities allows us to work with future leaders in our society. We see students engaged in physical activity but also those volunteering or engaging as sports administrators, student journalists seeking experience at events, students studying sports medicine, and more.

The opportunity for universities to use on-campus sport to drive the cultural change necessary to address GBV and discrimination is immense.

An Australian-first study by La Trobe University found women physiotherapists and doctors working in elite and professional sporting environments gain less pay, receive fewer opportunities for work, and encounter more harassment than their male counterparts (Cowan et al., 2024). The survey of 223 people — predominantly physiotherapists working in elite sport with near-equal representation of men and women — highlighted that “It’s hard to be a woman in the elite sport and exercise management workplace” (Cowan, as cited in La Trobe University, 2024, para. 6).

A 2022 study by Boczek et al., “Gender Byline Bias in Sports Reporting: Examining the Visibility and Audience Perception of Male and Female Journalists in Sports Coverage”, included a content analysis of sports coverage across a range of international markets and found that fewer than 10% of articles named female reporters (Boczek et al., 2023).

While attitudes towards women in the workplace are complex and entrenched, engaging with gender issues in university sporting clubs offers an opportunity to seed change in workplaces of the future. The elite and professional sport physiotherapists, doctors, and journalists of the future start as students at universities, often developing their professional credentials through experience gained in university sporting clubs. Their university experience can set the groundwork for their attitudes in the workplace.

In a Canadian context, the 2021 *Courage to Act* report showed that a key component to supporting the social change needed to prevent and address GBV is education (Khan et al., 2019). Khan et al. (2019) identified three key elements of the education required:

- *Gender-based violence prevention education needs to be ongoing and adaptable to address the ever-evolving landscapes of post-secondary institutions and consider the lived experiences of campus community members in its development and execution.*
- *Multiple programs, tools, pedagogical approaches and techniques are needed to deliver effective educational programming.*
- *Students, faculty and staff should be exposed to consistent prevention messages and education at multiple points over their tenure at post-secondary institutions. (p. 15)*

Sporting clubs, associations, events, and facilities on Australian campuses provide an opportunity to drive this education beyond the classroom.

Sport as a continuing solution

Violence against women and girls is not an issue created by, or limited to, sport. It is a deeply entrenched social issue stemming from gender inequality, discrimination, and cultural norms that privilege men, normalise violence, and allow impunity for perpetrators (Liao & Craig, 2023, p. 11).

Yet, sport also offers a powerful platform to promote gender equality and challenge these norms by fostering inclusivity, accountability, and positive role models. Ultimately, violence against women and girls must be addressed both within sport and across society, as progress in one cannot occur without progress in the other (Liao & Craig, 2023, p. 11).

UniSport's initiatives for promoting student well-being and safety

The Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire (FISU) Healthy Campus program is an internationally recognised initiative devised with the objective of enhancing the well-being of students and staff by encouraging mental health support, supporting sustainable campus environments, and promoting physical activity and healthier lifestyle choices. UniSport has driven the uptake of this program in Australia and now boasts the highest percentage of universities engaged in the program worldwide.

Although international research, particularly from North America and Europe, has long established the benefits of sport in higher education, Australian research in this area is still developing. The *Value of Sport in Higher Education* study, however, uncovered numerous university-led initiatives that collectively demonstrate the importance of sport in enhancing the student experience in Australia (Knapp & Carter, 2018).

However, the link between sexual assault and clubs, societies, events, and spaces indicates a need to explore the link between on-campus sport and GBV.

In response to this need, in 2025, UniSport is rolling out *Gender-based Violence Good Practice Guidelines* for its member institutions.

This document details best practice for prevention of and response to GBV and is designed to complement each university's policies and directives in this space. The guidelines include easy-to-use checklists for staff and students involved in running sporting organisations and events at universities to assist in reinforcing the safety measures available.

Unisport Australia: Driving change through sport

UniSport is committed to working with members to meet obligations under the Action Plan.

The organisation believes that the unique positioning of sport and recreation services on campus represents not just a focus area for problematic behaviours and attitudes but also a key opportunity for creating lasting change. In addressing GBV on campus, and specifically in high-risk areas, universities can build on the demonstrated benefits of sport to academic results, graduate outcomes, and graduate well-being.

By making sport on campus safer, we can expect higher student involvement and better student outcomes. This will build confidence and create lasting change which students will take beyond the campus and into broader society.

UniSport is committed to supporting our members in this space and playing a leadership role in addressing GBV.

As such, UniSport will continue to invest in equity programs, including low-cost programs that its members can roll out alongside other university initiatives. UniSport will continue to invest in developing policies and training that support programs aimed at reducing GBV, as well as investing in and supporting research and programs to support healthy campuses.

UniSport is not an academic research organisation and this paper does not purport to meet the standards of academic investigation. Nonetheless, the experience of representing sport across 43 member institutions has highlighted the opportunities outlined in this paper that warrant further research. UniSport will continue to seek ways to communicate its learnings and work towards creating safer campuses for all students and staff.

Universities seeking genuine campus-wide solutions to address, and show how they are addressing, GBV should exploit the opportunity presented by the sport and recreation facilities and clubs that their staff and students are already engaging with and building trust around. UniSport is ready to support that.

Declaration of interest

The authors of this article are employees and consultants paid by UniSport Australia (UniSport), the peak governing body of university sport in Australia.

UniSport's focus is providing expertise and leadership in university sport. We deliver and integrate national policy that enhances and facilitates opportunities for competitive participation in sport for students at regional, national, and international levels. We also lobby and represent the voice of our members and the sporting needs of Australia's university students.

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