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From Compliance to Accountability: Strengthening Gender-based Violence Evaluation Under the National Higher Education Code

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Abstract

The introduction of the National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence (the Code) marks a landmark regulatory shift for Australia's higher education sector. For the first time, institutions are mandated to develop outcome frameworks to evaluate and evidence their prevention, support, and response efforts through whole-of-institution mechanisms. While the Code presents a powerful opportunity to strengthen institutional responses to gender-based violence (GBV), its effectiveness depends on universities building the evaluative capability to move beyond compliance towards victim-survivor-centred change. This paper critically examines how the Code positions evaluation. Although research exists on GBV in higher education and on effective evaluative practice, consideration of how evaluation practice can inform the Code's operationalisation is under-examined. Through qualitative document analysis and practitioner reflection, we identify five systemic challenges: evaluation as a governance function, fragmented data systems, under-specified outcome measures, risks of compliance drift through narrow outcome metrics, and dispersed evaluation requirements without a unifying framework. Our findings highlight that evaluation must function not only as a tool of regulatory accountability but also as a mechanism for enduring, victim-survivor-centred change. Effective implementation requires universities to move beyond compliance-driven reporting and embed evaluation as a learning-centred, justice-oriented practice. We outline policy implications and strategic recommendations to support policymakers, institutional leaders, and practitioners in translating the Code's ambition into practice.

Keywords

Evaluation; Gender-based violence; Higher education; Institutional accountability; National Higher Education Code; Student safety; Victim-survivor outcomes.

Introduction

The introduction of the *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence* (Department of Education, 2025; hereafter, the Code) marks a watershed moment in how Australia's higher education sector is expected to address gender-based violence (GBV). Enacted under the Universities Accord (National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence) Bill 2025 (Cth), the Code moves the sector from self-regulation and reputationally driven approaches toward enforceable national standards. For the first time, higher education institutions (HEIs) are required not only to develop GBV prevention and response policies, programs, provisions, and governance mechanisms but also to demonstrate their effectiveness through outcome evaluation and transparent reporting (Department of Education, 2025). The Code took effect on 1 January 2026 for Table A and B providers, with oversight and enforcement undertaken by a new specialist Gender-based Violence Reform Branch within the Department of Education.

The Code establishes a regulatory framework spanning governance, student support, staff training, prevention protocols, complaints management, student accommodation, and third-party arrangements. It mandates whole-of-institution responsibility and introduces enforceable undertakings and financial penalties for non-compliance, elevating the imperative for institutions to move beyond symbolic actions and adopt integrated systems capable of evidencing meaningful progress. While it offers an opportunity to transform the way universities approach GBV evaluation through compliance baselines, implementation raises challenges of culture, capacity, and competing demands. Past inquiries and reports, including *Respect@Work* (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2020) and the Universities Australia *Sexual Harm Response Guidelines* (2021), and academic critique (Henry, 2023), highlight persistent gaps including inadequate outcome measurement, fragmented data, and limited integration of lived experience. These weaknesses have historically driven reputational management over systemic change (Atkinson & Standing, 2019; Gardiner & Finn, 2023).

Introducing whole-of-institution evaluation may also expose uncertainties of ownership and responsibility where GBV prevention, reporting, and response remain siloed across staff and student portfolios, complicating governance and delaying implementation. Institutions may lack the infrastructure, strategic alignment, and internal capability required to conduct outcome-focused evaluations or to use findings to inform practice (McCall et al., 2024; McMahon et al., 2022; Searle et al., 2015). With the absence of previous regulatory scrutiny contributing to uneven sector readiness, HEIs may face limited preparedness to meet the Code's expectations and to evidence meaningful progress toward cultural transformation and justice for victim-survivors.

The Code's emphasis on evaluation presents both opportunity and risk. It offers a potential mechanism for sector-wide improvement through shared data and informed learning. However, it may also incentivise output-focused metrics and a satisficing mindset if implementation is not supported by clear frameworks, adequate resourcing, cultural readiness, and sustained leadership commitment. Without these conditions, HEIs may appear to meet the letter of the Code while falling short of its intent.

This paper critically examines the positioning of evaluation within the Code, and the potential strategic misalignment between the ambition of the Code and institutional capability, which varies considerably across HEIs (McCall et al., 2024). Drawing on evaluation theory (Christie et al., 2023), we explore the evaluative implications of the Code and propose a set of principles to support its effective implementation. Rather than offering a prescriptive model, we highlight key risks, enablers, and system-level considerations required to ensure that evaluation functions not merely as a compliance tool but as a catalyst for victim-survivor-centred, evidence-informed transformation across the higher education sector.

Literature review

Policy and sector context

Efforts to address GBV in HEIs are unfolding within a rapidly shifting policy and regulatory landscape in Australia. The introduction of the Code intensifies scrutiny on how HEIs evaluate their prevention and response to GBV, exposing long-standing limitations. Across the literature, a clear gap emerges between institutional responses and the lived realities of victim-survivors (Coffey et al., 2023; Henry, 2024a). Policy rhetoric and reactive compliance have been widely critiqued for failing to deliver cultural transformation (Atkinson & Standing, 2019; Durbach & Grey, 2018).

Although public attention to GBV has grown and universities have made formal commitments to address it, these have not consistently translated into victim-survivor-centred practice. Evaluations highlight entrenched issues: underreporting, fragmented or poorly implemented prevention programs, opaque support pathways, and institutional cultures that prioritise reputation over support (Coffey et al., 2023; Gardiner & Finn, 2023; Henry, 2024a). National initiatives such as Respect@Work (AHRC, 2020), and publications such as the *Change the Course: National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities* (AHRC, 2017) and

Universities Australia's *Sexual Harm Response Guidelines* (2023) have promoted trauma-informed, inclusive approaches. Sustained advocacy by victim-survivor groups and civil society has also been pivotal in driving accountability and systemic change (Henry, 2024b).

These national efforts sit within a broader international rights-based framework. The Istanbul Convention and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) establish a rights-based imperative for systematic prevention and response to GBV (Whitfield, 2018). Both affirm the right of women and girls to live free from violence and discrimination, obliging states to ensure protection, remedies, and equal access to education and participation (Council of Europe, 2014; UN Women, 1992, General Recommendation No. 19). In Australia, this mandate is advanced through the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032* (Department of Social Services, 2022; henceforth, the National Plan) and operationalised through the Code, which links international obligations with national strategy.

Student impacts and victim-survivor experience

At the student level, research demonstrates that GBV directly undermines access, participation, and success in higher education. Sexual violence has been consistently linked to diminished wellbeing, reduced academic performance, and heightened barriers to continuation (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Bosco Damous & Guillopé, 2021; Jones, 2025). Institutional responses further shape these trajectories: reporting mechanisms and support processes influence survivors' experiences of shame, disconnection, and belonging, which, in turn, affect confidence and capacity to persist with study (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Burke et al., 2025; Jones, 2025). Against this backdrop, embedding transparent, survivor-centred outcome metrics is critical, not only to monitor institutional compliance but to ensure that evaluation frameworks drive improvements in student safety, trust, and educational outcomes rather than functioning as procedural risk management tools (Bosco Damous & Guillopé, 2021; Burke et al., 2022).

Regulation thus acts as both a catalyst and a constraint. Legal instruments such as the Code create ambitious mechanisms for reform, but success depends on institutional willingness and capacity to engage beyond minimum compliance. Richards and Kafonek (2016) and Whitfield (2018) caution that legal frameworks alone are insufficient for cultural change. Henry (2023) adds that community and sector advocacy has been crucial in driving university action, even as the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) have struggled to ensure transparency or accountability. While this article focuses on institutional conditions, success will also depend on external factors, such as legal and policy reform, that enable the Code to operate as part of a larger integrated system aligned with the National Plan.

The Code compels institutions to develop and mature the evaluative infrastructure and capability required. Considerable uncertainty remains about how quickly and effectively universities can build this capacity (McCall et al., 2024). Henry (2023) critiques current regulatory mechanisms for enabling performative compliance rather than accountability. Reviews warn against mistaking output measures, such as event attendance or policy dissemination, for outcome effectiveness as such metrics obscure deeper relational and contextual dynamics (Guedes et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2021; Morrison et al., 2007). These tendencies are reinforced by neoliberal university logics—marketisation, reputational sensitivity, and hierarchical management—which privilege auditability over victim-survivor outcomes (Gardiner & Finn, 2023; O'Connor et al., 2021).

Reframing evaluation

Effective and meaningful evaluation must integrate the voices of victim-survivors into the design and assessment of experience. Bull (2024) argues that victim-survivor input should be embedded throughout design, implementation, and interpretation, not added retrospectively. Coffey et al.

(2023) highlight the long-term educational consequences of GBV, advocating person-centred reforms. Evaluation approaches that centre positive victim-survivor experiences of disclosure and institutional response as a primary measure of success are therefore essential.

This victim-survivor-centred orientation contrasts with output-focused models of evaluation. Reviews warn against mistaking activity counts for effectiveness, as such metrics obscure relational dynamics of safety, care, and trust (Guedes et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2021; Morrison et al., 2007). Kearney et al. (2016) and Trochim and Urban (2021) advocate adaptive evaluation embedded institution-wide, supporting real-time learning. Donaldson et al. (2018) and Hewett et al. (2023) emphasise whole-of-sector approaches incorporating gendered, intersectional, systemic analyses. In this view, evaluation is not only a mechanism to track progress but to enable change.

From an evaluation perspective, Picciotto (2020) argues that evaluation must move beyond ritualistic reporting toward institutional learning and transformation. Yet, in practice, evaluation often prioritises image over accountability and can be weaponised as an instrument of control (Dahler-Larsen, 2024; Picciotto, 2020; Power, 1997). As Forss (2018) notes, some approaches preserve existing systems rather than challenge institutional power, producing superficial accountability that fails to support cultural transformation.

In response, diverse approaches have advanced empowerment, social justice, and reflexivity (Christie et al., 2023; House & Howe, 2000). Participatory and empowerment models recognise organisations and programs as dynamic and contextually situated, emphasising iterative learning and stakeholder involvement in contrast to narrow audit logics (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Hall et al., 2012, 2020; Mertens, 2021; Patton, 2008, 2011). Empowerment evaluation redistributes power through democratic practice (Fetterman, 1994, 2023), while culturally responsive evaluation centres equity, context, and lived experience (Donaldson, 2022). Developmental and systems-oriented approaches emphasise adaptive, iterative learning across complex institutional environments (Patton, 2011). These approaches reposition evaluation as centred on human experience, learning, and change.

Institutional readiness

Institutional capability and mature evaluative infrastructure are essential enablers of this work. Building such infrastructure requires not only technical systems but also political, organisational, and data capacity. Bamberger et al. (2012) emphasise the importance of evaluability readiness and ongoing capacity development as foundations for sustainable evaluation practice. Drawing on the data ecosystem framework (Driver-Linn & Svenson, 2017), McMahon et al. (2022) demonstrate how integrated, multi-source data can inform and support responsive services and interventions in higher education. Henry (2024a), however, highlights the patchiness of current practices, with many institutions yet to demonstrate even baseline alignment with good practice standards. Searle et al. (2015) point to the need for cross-functional strategies, skilled staff, and internal coherence to support meaningful evaluation.

The spirit of the Code and contemporary evaluation literature points to a shift toward approaches that are victim-survivor-centred, relational, and structurally embedded. While there is a growing body of research on GBV in HEIs and on participatory, victim-survivor-centred evaluation approaches, to our knowledge, no published analysis has yet examined how these traditions intersect with the regulatory framework introduced by the Code. This paper responds to that gap by examining the strategic evaluation challenges HEIs face in aligning with the Code. It proposes strategic recommendations to support the development of outcome-oriented, victim-survivor-informed systems that reflect the intent—not merely the letter—of the new regulatory framework.

Methodology

This study undertakes a qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009) of the Code, treating it simultaneously as a regulatory instrument and as a policy artefact signalling shifts in accountability regimes within Australian higher education. Document analysis provides a systematic means of interpreting policy texts, illuminating both explicit provisions and the underlying assumptions they encode (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003). To deepen interpretation, we drew on interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000), which attends to the meanings, values, and symbolic dimensions of policy. This framing positions the Code not simply as a technical directive but as a communicative artefact that shapes institutional responsibilities and expectations.

Our approach is grounded in our positionality as an evaluation practitioner and a primary prevention practitioner, both actively engaged in systems-level change within the higher education sector. This dual perspective informs the analysis: as practitioners, we bring insider knowledge of institutional dynamics, regulatory pressures, and the challenges of embedding evaluation in prevention work. Positioning ourselves reflexively in relation to the Code highlights both our commitment to strengthening accountability mechanisms and our recognition of the practical constraints faced by universities.

We conducted a close reading of the Code, extracting clauses referencing evaluative activity. Rather than formal content analysis or itemised coding, we developed an interpretive matrix to identify evaluative assumptions across the seven Standards. We then used deductive thematic mapping to group requirements into categories informed by the Code’s structure and practitioner insights. Iterative discussion and thematic clustering (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) ensured interpretive rigour. The aim was not to produce a definitive coding schema, but to surface how the Code frames evaluation within institutional constraints and opportunities, providing the foundation for the thematic findings.

Analysis and findings

The analysis revealed that while reporting requirements are often explicit, evaluative expectations related to outcomes such as victim-survivor trust, fairness, or cultural change are more implicit. This uneven expression of evaluative functions raises questions about their alignment with institutional capability, infrastructure, and sector-wide coherence. Situating the Standards within an evaluative frame highlights systemic tensions that institutions are likely to encounter in implementation, elaborated through five interrelated challenges identified across the Code.

The Code consistently frames evaluation as a driver of accountability, learning, and cultural change, yet these ambitions assume institutional readiness, expertise, and infrastructure. Some Standards provide clearer direction—for example, governance oversight (Standard 1) and data systems (Standard 6)—while others remain open to interpretation, leaving scope for uneven practice and variability in victim-survivor experience.

From this analysis, five interrelated challenges emerge that cut across the Standards. These themes highlight where the Code embeds evaluative expectations likely to present practical and systemic challenges for institutions, and they structure the findings that follow.

To guide the interpretation of findings, Table 1 presents an integrated summary of the five thematic challenges and their corresponding evaluation implications. It highlights how each theme reflects both the ambitious and the practical constraints embedded within the Code’s evaluative architecture.

Table 1

Integrated Summary of Thematic Findings and Evaluation Implications

Thematic Finding	Summary	Illustrative Clauses	Evaluation Implication
Evaluation as a Governance Function	Evaluation is positioned as a strategic accountability mechanism, requiring governing bodies and executives to not only receive findings but integrate them into oversight and decision-making.	1.1–1.5, 6.2	Elevates evaluation to governance oversight but exposes cultural and capability gaps. Risks reliance on compliance artefacts (plans, reports) instead of genuine learning, limiting its potential as a tool for accountability.
Fragmented Data Systems Limit Evidence-based Action	Anticipates integrated data across incidents, demographics, prevention, and services, but most institutions operate siloed systems, limiting systemic insights into effectiveness and impact.	1.9–1.10, 6.1–6.6	Fragmentation and siloing impede evidence-informed decisions and undermine comparability. Without cross-system investment, data may remain compliance-driven. Risks privileging data delivery over quality and undermining victim-survivor trust.
Victim-survivor-centred Outcomes Need Clearer Operationalisation	Anchors victim-survivor-centred, trauma-informed practice and requires engagement in policy/service design, periodic service evaluation, and reporting on experience-adjacent indicators (e.g., engagement satisfaction/awareness). Outcome definitions are broad and uneven across Standards, making victim-survivor experience (safety, trust, fairness) hard to compare across HEIs.	2.5–2.6, 4.1–4.6, 5.7–5.23, 6.8–6.13	Without direction on appropriate victim-survivor-focused outcomes, institutions may default to activity/output metrics. Capacity for qualitative and relational evaluation is needed to evidence cultural change and process legitimacy, not just compliance.
Compliance Metrics Risk Narrow Evaluation	Institutions are required to evaluate outcomes but are permitted to set their own indicators. This flexibility can lead to reliance on low-resolution or easily collected metrics that satisfy reporting requirements without assessing impact.	3.10–3.13, 5.15–5.23, 6.7–6.13, 7.1–7.7	Risk of performative compliance. Tight procedural timelines may prioritise speed over quality victim-survivor-focused outcomes. Lack of guidance on prevention and cultural change indicators risks skewing evaluation toward compliance over transformation.
Dispersed Evaluation Without a Unifying Framework	Evaluation requirements appear across all seven Standards, spanning governance, training, services, data, and accommodation, but no unifying framework ensures coherence or comparability.	1.7, 2.5, 3.6, 4.9, 5.29, 6.7, 7.8	Signals intent to embed evaluation across all domains, but without a unifying framework it risks fragmented, duplicative evaluation and unclear ownership. A sector-wide framework could strengthen accountability and comparability.

Evaluation as a governance function

The Code positions evaluation as a strategic function embedded within institutional governance, elevating it from administrative monitoring to a mechanism of executive accountability. Clauses such as Standard 1.5, which requires governing bodies to oversee the effectiveness of whole-of-institution prevention and response plans, and Standard 6.2(d), which establishes provider accountability for data reporting, locate evaluation squarely within governance structures. Similar requirements are also evident in Standard 7, which extends oversight responsibilities into accommodation contexts. These provisions locate evaluation at the highest decision-making levels. At the same time, sector preparedness to meet this expectation appears uneven, with many institutions lacking the evaluative maturity, resourcing, and integration mechanisms needed to embed evaluation effectively as a governance function. While this elevates evaluation to the level of executive accountability, uneven sectoral preparedness and delivery pressures risks reducing it to compliance artefacts such as plans and reports, rather than embedding it as a vehicle for substantive learning.

Fragmented data systems limit evidence-based action

Standards 5.29, 6.2, and 7.8 require reporting on process data, incidents, demographics, and student accommodation contexts. These provisions presume a level of cross-system integration that is not typical in current institutional practice, where case management, student records, prevention training, and service access data remain siloed. As a result, the capacity to generate systemic, disaggregated insights into the prevalence and effectiveness of prevention and response efforts is constrained. This fragmentation not only constrains evidence-informed decision-making but also risks privileging quantitative compliance data over victim-survivor-centred measures. Without significant investment in infrastructure and governance, the evaluative potential of the Code will remain unrealised. These structural limitations also intersect with the challenge of operationalising victim-survivor-centred outcomes, where the absence of shared frameworks risks further fragmenting practice.

Survivor-centred outcomes need clearer operationalisation

Although victim-survivor-centred outcomes are articulated across the Code, their translation into practice remains limited. The requirements emphasise accessible processes, fairness, timeliness, and periodic evaluation of services (e.g., Standards 4 and 5), alongside broad expectations around training and awareness. Many reporting clauses note that "the Secretary may require a Provider to report on how it has complied with its obligations under this Standard in a manner and form to be prescribed by the Secretary" (Department of Education, 2025), which signals future direction but provides little present guidance. In the absence of shared outcome indicator frameworks, institutions are required to develop their own measures within short compliance cycles, often defaulting to activity or output counts (e.g., training numbers, service use, case handling). This constrains the sector's ability to demonstrate contributions to victim-survivor outcomes and creates inconsistency in data quality and comparability. The limitation lies not in the Code's intent but in the absence of sector-wide operationalisation. Unless explicit attention is given to victim-survivor trust, fairness, and cultural change, relational outcomes central to the Code's purpose risk being overlooked. This challenge is compounded by the tendency for compliance reporting to privilege procedural metrics, raising concerns about whether evaluation can capture the depth of cultural transformation envisioned by the Code.

Compliance metrics risk narrow evaluation

Strict timeliness requirements strengthen accountability but also risk privileging speed over quality in the absence of adequate resourcing. Clauses across Standards 2, 6, and 7 establish reporting obligations that can be satisfied through binary or low-resolution indicators, such as whether policies exist, reviews have been completed, or data submitted. While these measures demonstrate compliance, they provide limited insight into effectiveness or impact. The analysis also highlights an asymmetry between prevention and response. Standards 3, 4, and 5 contain detailed evaluation expectations for training outcomes, support services, and complaint processes. For example, Standard 3.9 specifies learning outcomes for training participants, and Standard 4.2 requires evidence of accessible, person-centred support services. By contrast, prevention and culture change initiatives receive comparatively little evaluative guidance. The imbalance risks reinforcing a reactive evaluative orientation, where resources are directed toward demonstrating procedural compliance in response systems, rather than investing in the longer-term evaluation of prevention and cultural change efforts. Over time, this risks skewing resourcing and evaluative attention toward more easily measured activities, while leaving systemic and relational outcomes under-examined. This asymmetry highlights the importance of an overarching evaluative architecture capable of balancing immediate compliance assurance with long-term cultural change.

Dispersed evaluation without a unifying framework

Evaluation-related requirements are embedded across all seven Standards of the Code, spanning governance oversight (Standard 1.5), policy and prevention activities (Standard 2), training outcomes (Standard 3), support service monitoring (Standard 4.9), procedural compliance (Standard 5), data reporting (Standard 6.12), and accommodation arrangements (Standard 7.8). This dispersal reflects the Code’s intent to embed evaluation in all aspects of institutional prevention and response. However, the absence of a dedicated standard or overarching evaluative framework creates the risk that evaluation will be operationalised as a series of disconnected tasks, for example, training feedback, policy review, or compliance reporting, rather than as a coherent strategy. This challenge is especially acute in areas of operational complexity, such as accommodation, where provider arrangements, contractual constraints, and uneven capacity make consistent implementation more difficult. Without sector-wide coordination and a unifying evaluative architecture, evaluation risks being operationalised as a collection of disconnected tasks rather than as a coherent strategy. This gap speaks to a broader tension: the Code aspires to embed evaluation across all domains, yet provides limited scaffolding to ensure coherence, comparability, and victim-survivor-centred accountability.

Findings reveal the evaluative tensions at the heart of the Code. While the Code establishes an ambitious and necessary regulatory framework designed to elevate institutional accountability, its dispersed evaluative requirements, fragmented data expectations, and under-specified outcome measures create systemic risks. The analysis points to a deeper misalignment between the Code’s transformative ambition—to foster a culture of safety, prevention, and accountability—and the sector’s uneven evaluative readiness. Realising its intent will require investment in institutional capability, coherent evaluative frameworks, and sector-wide guidance to support meaningful evaluation of impact, outcomes, and cultural change. Without this, universities risk treating baseline compliance as the finish line rather than the starting point for excellence.

Discussion

This analysis reveals that the Code presents a critical opportunity for institutional transformation. This potential, however, will only be realised if universities can engage with evaluation as a strategic and cultural function, rather than a compliance task. While the Code embeds expectations for governance oversight, data integration, and outcome-focused evaluation, its language remains open to interpretation, and the sector lacks consistent infrastructure and capability to enact its intent (Bamberger et al., 2012; Henry, 2024a; McCall, 2024).

From compliance to culture change

As the evaluation literature cautions (Dahler-Larsen, 2024; Picciotto, 2020), evaluative systems that prioritise demonstrable activity can inadvertently privilege accountability signalling over substantive cultural transformation. This dynamic is evident in the Code's design. In higher education, this tendency is reinforced by the performativity of institutional commitments (Ahmed, 2012), where meaningful and substantive transformation is often replaced by symbolic compliance. Without evaluative mechanisms that capture quality, contextual relevance, and long-term victim-survivor impact, institutions may satisfy minimum requirements while missing opportunities for genuine learning or reform. Under such conditions, the Code risks reinforcing compliance drift, where reporting obligations are met superficially rather than cultivating authentic accountability. Unlocking its potential as a lever for transformation requires reframing evaluation—not only as assurance but as a relational, victim-survivor-informed practice that supports structural reform, cultural learning, and justice (Forss, 2018; Mertens, 2021; Patton, 2008).

A second challenge compounds this risk. While the Code signals victim-survivor-centred and trauma-informed intent, it does not explicitly require institutions to evidence outcomes that matter to victim-survivors. Sustained advocacy from victim-survivors and civil society has been pivotal in driving regulatory reform (Henry, 2024b), yet explicit victim-survivor-centred outcome requirements remain underdeveloped in the Code. This absence creates a missing centre in its evaluative logic. Extending Forss's (2018) critique that evaluation can entrench existing systems, higher education compliance obligations intersect with reputational pressures, amplifying the risk of ritualistic accountability while obscuring victim-survivor-centred reform.

The missing centre: Victim-survivor-centred outcomes

The Code references person-centred and trauma-informed approaches and emphasises collaboration with people with lived experience. These provisions are important, but they focus on the design and delivery of responses rather than on evaluating outcomes. The absence of explicit victim-survivor outcome measures leaves institutions without clear guidance on how victim-survivor voice should shape evaluative frameworks. In practice, this risks compliance being demonstrated through output-focused measures, such as counting disclosures or satisfaction surveys, that fail to capture whether responses reduce harm, restore trust, or advance justice.

While the Code commendably mandates trauma-informed and lived-experience input into institutional reform, it does not require that such input demonstrably improves outcomes for those affected by harm. In the absence of evaluative infrastructure to measure the impact of these contributions, there is a risk that victim-survivor engagement may be tokenistic, with consultation occurring but not meaningfully informing outcomes. Without mechanisms to assess how lived experience informs and shapes reform, institutions may inadvertently reproduce the very harms they seek to address. Effective reform demands evaluation strategies that both centre victim-survivor perspectives and rigorously assess the quality and effectiveness of resulting changes.

Contemporary evaluation theory offers pathways forward. Participatory, developmental, and equity-focused methodologies strengthen evaluation in complex, value-laden domains such as GBV (Mertens, 2021; Patton, 2011). Responsive and relational approaches to evaluation (Abma, 2006; Visse et al., 2012) highlight ways to balance victim-survivor engagement with safety and care. These approaches go beyond measuring outcomes to inform decision-making, enhance accountability, and ensure alignment with ethical and public interest considerations (Greene, 2006). Capturing outcomes that matter to victim-survivors—such as perceptions of safety, trust, and access to justice—demands iterative, mixed-methods approaches grounded in lived experience and healing rather than standardisation (Forss, 2018; Goodman & Epstein, 2008).

Embedding victim-survivor-centred outcome evaluation into the Code's operationalisation would close a critical gap and align with its ambition for cultural and systemic transformation. Yet even when institutions attempt to centre victim-survivor outcomes, fragmented organisational systems often undermine coherence. Dispersed responsibilities and fragmented systems across silos weaken capacity to act on victim-survivor insights. Without regulatory scaffolding, victim-survivor perspectives risk being relegated to consultation exercises rather than embedded as outcomes of accountability (Mertens, 2021; Patton, 2008).

Fragmented systems, fragmented accountability

The dispersion of evaluation responsibilities across all seven Standards, without a central organising logic, mirrors the fragmented evaluative capacity already evident within many universities. Student support services, faculties, residences, and executive offices often operate in silos, using inconsistent data definitions and evaluative logics (Our Watch, 2021). This fragmentation undermines coherence by inhibiting strategic oversight, duplicating effort, and constraining institutional learning. Without an integrated evaluative framework, responses risk remaining reactive and compliance-driven.

Meaningful contribution analysis depends on coherence in how change is theorised, measured, and attributed (Mayne, 2001). These are conditions that remain underdeveloped across most institutions. Whole-of-institution approaches therefore remain aspirational without deliberate systems change infrastructure. Previous prevention frameworks, such as *Change the Story* (Our Watch, 2019), advocated for such approaches but, in the absence of regulatory mandates, their uptake was inconsistent and largely voluntary. The Code marks a qualitatively different intervention by introducing binding compliance obligations. Yet regulatory authority alone is insufficient; without enabling infrastructure, clear evaluative alignment, and bold institutional leadership, institutions risk satisfying the letter of the Code while falling short of its spirit. In this sense, the Code demonstrates how fragmented systems can undermine victim-survivor-centred evaluation even under binding conditions, echoing Mayne's (2001) emphasis on coherent theories of change and extending Our Watch's (2019) insights on institutional prevention.

Systemic constraints and the risk of regressive compliance

A deeper structural risk emerges in the Code's framing. While intended as a baseline for building more mature prevention and response efforts, universities may treat the minimum standards as an endpoint. Evaluation scholarship has long described this tendency as *compliance drift* or *satisficing*, where organisations under resource pressure settle for 'good enough' responses (Dahler-Larsen, 2024; Picciotto, 2020; Power, 1997). In higher education specifically, Newton (2002) and Beerkens (2015) show how external accountability regimes often generate performative compliance cultures, privileging reputation management and easily auditable outputs over substantive quality improvement.

In the current fiscal environment, Australian universities are incentivised to demonstrate compliance in the most efficient ways, even when such activities provide little evaluative insight. This often produces reliance on easily counted indicators, such as policy presence or training numbers, rather than victim-survivor-centred outcomes like safety, trust, or justice (Forss, 2018; Guedes et al., 2013; Henry, 2024a; Kelly et al., 2021; Morrison et al., 2007). These patterns echo wider critiques that higher education has often leaned on policy rhetoric and reactive compliance at the expense of cultural transformation (Atkinson & Standing, 2019; Durbach & Grey, 2018). While structural logics of reputation and efficiency can reinforce these tendencies (Gardiner & Finn, 2023; O'Connor et al., 2021), it is important to acknowledge the difficulty of striking the right balance. The Department of Education faces the challenge of aligning policy and governance intent with calls for detailed, victim-survivor-centred standards, while also recognising the diversity of HEIs and the risks of mandating requirements that cannot be universally delivered.

Staff often conceive of quality in terms of enhancement and improvement rather than compliance (Kleijnen et al., 2013). This indicates that aspirations for more meaningful evaluation exist, but they remain misaligned with the external accountability logics shaping institutional practice. Without clearer guidance, support, and investment, this misalignment risks entrenching defensive, low-resolution compliance practices rather than enabling the systemic and cultural transformation the Code is designed to achieve.

The Code's evaluative ambitions cannot be realised through technical fixes alone. The challenges are not merely procedural but cultural and systemic, shaping how institutions interpret accountability, how victim-survivors are positioned in evaluation, and how resources are mobilised amid competing pressures. Recognising and navigating these tensions is essential if the Code is to drive victim-survivor-centred, institution-wide change. Its transformative potential depends not only on compliance but also on universities' capacity to engage with evaluation as a cultural and structural shift. It is against this backdrop that the implications for policy and practice must be considered.

Implications for policy and practice

These findings carry important implications. The Department of Education has framed the Code as a baseline, yet without clear implementation guidance, staged supports, and sustained investment, universities may treat minimum standards as an endpoint rather than a foundation. In a constrained fiscal environment, where institutions are balancing multiple accountability demands, the incentive is to satisfice—to meet the minimum requirement rather than to strive for excellence.

This creates a paradox. Institutions that seek to exceed the Code's requirements by embedding victim-survivor-informed practices, piloting advanced evaluations, or investing in strategic data integration may find such efforts interpreted internally as excess. In this context, excellence risks being reframed as a liability rather than a marker of leadership. Unless the sector is supported to treat the Code as a launchpad for adaptive, whole-of-institution transformation, defensive and low-resolution responses may become entrenched.

Responsibility therefore rests not only with institutions but also with policymakers and evaluation leaders to ensure the Code's intent is both clear and feasible to enact. Establishing consistent evaluative expectations, alongside capacity-building supports and sustained investment, will be essential to prevent compliance drift and realise the Code's transformative potential.

Recommendations

Clearer guidance is essential to avoid fragmented implementation of the Code, which undermines both accountability and victim-survivor outcomes. Without a unifying evaluative structure, institutions risk dispersing efforts, defaulting to procedural metrics, and missing opportunities to embed victim-survivor perspectives meaningfully. Past practice highlights four persistent risks: inconsistent operationalisation, victim-survivor consultation reduced to tokenism, under-resourced and siloed evaluation capacity, and a compliance culture that prioritises image over learning. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated strategies at both policy and institutional levels.

Our four recommendations (summarised in Table 2) therefore address two priorities. First, strengthening coherence and victim-survivor-centred outcomes: institutions need shared scaffolding to align actions, outputs, and outcomes, and evaluations must embed trauma-informed and participatory practices so that success is judged by outcomes that matter to victim-survivors—safety, trust, and justice. Second, building capability and reframing evaluation as reflexive learning: effective implementation requires resources, evaluation literacy, and cross-institutional collaboration, while shifting evaluation from retrospective audit toward a forward-looking practice that supports adaptation, legitimacy, and victim-survivor-centred cultural change.

Table 2

Strategic Recommendations to Strengthen Evaluation Practice Under the Code

Recommendation	Summary
1. Clarify and align evaluation frameworks across institutions	Policymakers and regulators should articulate shared outcome domains and provide illustrative indicators to strengthen coherence and comparability while allowing local flexibility. Clearer scaffolding will help ensure evaluation tracks not only activities and processes but also whether universities are improving student safety, trust, and access to justice.
2. Strengthen victim-survivor-centred evaluative practice and outcomes beyond compliance	Promote ethical, trauma-informed, and participatory evaluation that embeds victim-survivor perspectives throughout design, implementation, and interpretation, not as an afterthought. Victim-survivor expertise should shape both evaluative approaches and the standards by which institutional accountability is judged, ensuring outcomes that matter to victim-survivors (safety, trust, justice) take priority over procedural or output-focused metrics.
3. Invest in institutional capability to support whole-of-institution evaluation	Delivering on the Code's intent requires investment in leadership, governance, program design, and data systems. Institutions should resource dedicated evaluation roles, integrate data systems, and build evaluation literacy among senior decision-makers. Sector-wide initiatives, such as communities of practice, shared training, and cross-institutional collaboration, can amplify capacity and strengthen collective maturity.
4. Reframe evaluation as a reflexive learning tool, not just an assurance mechanism	Compliance-driven culture risks discouraging ambition and innovation. Evaluation should be positioned as a forward-looking practice that supports continuous improvement, legitimacy, and trust. When victim-survivors, students, and staff are engaged as partners, evaluation shifts from audit rituals toward genuine accountability, trust-building, and victim-survivor-centred cultural transformation.

The timing of these recommendations is significant. For Table A and B providers, compliance obligations under the Code commenced on 1 January 2026, after which they must report to their Governing Body at least every six months against the outcomes framework in their Prevention and Response Plan. Addressing evaluative challenges at this early stage is not only a matter of regulatory preparedness but of strategic design. Establishing coherent, victim-survivor-centred evaluation frameworks before implementation becomes embedded will help avoid the inefficiencies of retrospective adjustment and better position institutions to align with the Code's intent of driving meaningful cultural change.

Limitations

This document analysis, grounded in reflective practice, offers interpretive insights rather than generalisable claims. Our positionality as embedded practitioners and evaluators strengthens the sectoral relevance of the analysis but also shapes the lens through which the Code's evaluative framing was interpreted. The study did not employ itemised coding or inter-rater reliability processes, which may be viewed as a limitation from more positivist research traditions. In addition, the analysis focused solely on the Code and its supporting documentation, without triangulation through institutional case studies, implementation data, or stakeholder interviews. At the time of writing, the role and actions of the newly established National Student Ombudsman (NSO) could not be examined, as the scope of the NSO's powers is expected to expand following the commencement of the compliance timeframe for the Code. While these limitations restrict claims about how implementation will unfold in practice, the analysis nonetheless provides a practice-informed contribution to the emerging evidence base on institutional readiness, evaluative capability, and the risks of compliance drift in GBV prevention and response within Australian higher education.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how the Code positions evaluation as both a mechanism of institutional accountability and a potential driver of cultural change. Through qualitative document analysis, supported by a structured interpretive matrix, we identified systemic risks: dispersed evaluative requirements without a unifying framework, under-specified outcomes, fragmented data systems, and the danger of compliance drift. These tensions reveal a misalignment between the Code's transformative ambitions and the current evaluative capacity of many institutions.

The Code is a landmark in Australia's higher education regulatory landscape, yet its potential will not be realised through compliance alone. Progress requires shifting evaluation from a static reporting obligation to a cultural practice embedded in governance, prevention, and response, anchored in bold institutional leadership. The sector now faces a pivotal moment, with the chance to establish best practice in GBV prevention, support, and response.

As implementation unfolds, policymakers and institutional leaders must treat evaluation not as a technical exercise but as a strategic lever for safer and more just universities. The Code's bold ambition is to centre lived experience, enable continuous improvement, and elevate evaluation to strategic oversight. Policymakers and institutional leaders must provide the conditions for success: coherent evaluative scaffolding, investment in capability and infrastructure, and victim-survivor-informed approaches that embed ethical care in accountability processes, including outcome measures that prioritise the wellbeing of those who have experienced harm.

With these conditions in place, evaluation can drive cultural transformation, moving universities beyond reactive compliance toward victim-survivor-informed leadership in preventing and responding to GBV. Without them, the Code risks entrenching compliance drift rather than catalysing the change it promises.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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