

Peer-led Approaches to Gender-based Violence Prevention Education in Higher Education: Insights from the Rights, Relationships and Respect Program

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Abstract

As Australian universities prepare for the introduction of the National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence, there is a pressing need to move beyond compliance-driven approaches toward models that embed prevention in campus culture and practice. This article examines a peer-led, dialogic, and restorative model of gender-based violence (GBV) prevention education through a case study of the Rights, Relationships and Respect program. Piloted across three residential communities, the program combined an online module with a series of co-designed, peer-facilitated workshops focused on consent, respectful relationships, and bystander intervention. Drawing on a mixed-methods evaluation, the paper explores student engagement, learning outcomes, and implications for scaling and adaptation.

Findings highlight that participatory and relational approaches can foster critical consciousness, practical skill building, and trust in peer support, particularly when embedded within inclusive residential cultures. However, challenges emerged around sustaining engagement, navigating cultural and linguistic diversity, and balancing institutional mandates with the conditions necessary for transformative learning. The credibility of peer facilitators, adaptive design, and co-design processes were key enablers, while enforcement mechanisms and abstract theoretical frameworks limited student participation.

We argue that dialogic and restorative approaches must be relationally grounded, culturally responsive, and institutionally supported to achieve transformative impact. This case study offers valuable insights for universities in the context of current legislative reform. Effective prevention requires more than standardised programs; it demands reflexive, participatory, and values-based pedagogy embedded in community life.

Keywords

Peer-led approaches; Gender-based violence prevention; Restorative practices; Dialogic approaches; Respectful relationships education; Consent education.

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains pervasive within higher education institutions in Australia and internationally. Defined as “behaviour or attitudes underpinned by inequitable power relations that hurt, threaten, or undermine people because of their (perceived) gender or sexuality” (Anitha & Lewis, 2018, p. 1), GBV manifests in diverse, often overlapping behaviours. These include physical and sexual assault, coercive control, harassment and stalking, economic deprivation, cultural or spiritual abuse, and technology-facilitated intrusions such as image-based abuse, all rooted in gendered power imbalances (Our Watch, 2022). Power in this context refers to social power at both the relational and structural levels (see, for example, Vanstone & Grierson, 2021, for a discussion about social power). Our Watch (2022), the national peak body for the prevention of violence against women, has articulated these power imbalances as drivers of gendered violence, including the condoning of violence against women; men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s

independence in public and private life; rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity; and male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance, and control. These drivers are firmly embedded within our institutional, social, and economic structures; social and cultural norms; and organisational, community, family, and relationship practices (Our Watch, 2022).

University settings are characterised by hierarchical structures and distinct subcultures, particularly within residential and research communities, where structural power imbalances and elitism heighten the risk of violence (Armstrong et al., 2006). Intersecting systems of oppression further expose women, LGBTIQ+ students, and other marginalised groups to disproportionate harm (Cantor et al., 2015; Cantor et al., 2019; Valentine et al., 2009). Manifestations of GBV span peer-to-peer violence among students (Cantor et al., 2015; Fisher et al., 2010), harmful cultures in teaching environments (Page et al., 2019), and abuses of power in staff–student relationships (Bull & Page, 2021). These dynamics are often compounded by institutional tendencies toward reputational risk management and reluctance to confront the systemic drivers of harm (Iverson & Issadore, 2018). Addressing GBV therefore requires more than procedural compliance or isolated behaviour-change initiatives; it demands comprehensive, whole-of-community strategies that confront underlying social norms and power structures (Our Watch, 2021). Policies and institutional strategies deployed solely for accountability tend to foster a compliance mindset rather than genuine transformation, yet they hold untapped potential as instruments for social justice and prevention when embedded within broader cultural-change efforts (Iverson & Issadore, 2018).

Universities occupy a paradoxical position as both sites of harm and potential drivers of social change (Bull & Page, 2021). While they often reproduce hierarchical power structures that enable GBV, they also hold considerable capacity to foster critical consciousness and social transformation (Rosa & Clavero, 2022). Their influence in shaping values and future leaders uniquely positions them to challenge the gendered norms and power structures underpinning GBV (Humphreys & Towl, 2020). However, this potential diminishes when prevention efforts are reduced to compliance tasks (Humphreys & Towl, 2020). In response to this challenge, adopting a restorative justice lens offers a promising alternative to punitive and compliance-driven approaches to harm. Restorative justice reframes how communities understand and respond to wrongdoing by shifting the focus from rule violation and punishment toward identifying harms, addressing needs, and fostering accountability through relationship repair (Braithwaite, 2002; Zehr, 2015). Rather than asking, “what rule was broken and what punishment is deserved,” restorative approaches ask who has been harmed, what their needs are, and whose obligation it is to meet those needs (Zehr, 2015). This relational orientation is increasingly applied in educational settings. Morrison and Vaandering (2012) argue that restorative practices offer schools a framework for building community, addressing conflict, and creating cultures of care that prevent harm from occurring in the first place. In a university context, Karp (2024) positions restorative justice as encompassing a spectrum of practices, with some focused on building relationships and strengthening communities to prevent harm, and others designed to respond to harm through inclusive and collaborative decision-making. Restorative justice, then, offers a bridge between violence prevention and response, which is particularly valuable in university settings. Rather than treating prevention education and response protocols as separate institutional domains, the relational infrastructure built through prevention work such as trust between peers and shared understandings of consent and respect can become the foundation for healing-centred responses to harm.

Recent Australian policy developments further demonstrate the need for transformative prevention efforts. The 2021 National Student Safety Survey revealed that one in six students experienced sexual harassment during their university tenure, coupled with low confidence in institutional responses (Heywood et al., 2021). Consequently, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards

Agency (TEQSA) has tightened expectations around student safety (Australian Government, 2023). Additionally, a *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence* (Department of Education, 2025; henceforth, the National Code), implemented 1 January 2026, will mandate baseline standards across prevention, response, and university governance. However, there remains a significant risk that implementation will default to compliance-oriented mechanisms instead of centring relational trust and cultural safety.

Effective GBV prevention involves sustained, values-driven work embedding equity, inclusion, and respect into everyday campus life (Bonar et al., 2022; Brush & Miller, 2023; Humphreys & Towl, 2020). This paper addresses this challenge by discussing the use of dialogic, participatory, and restorative approaches to GBV prevention in higher education. Dialogic methods, grounded in Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, emphasise reflective conversations that critically examine power, identity, and responsibility, fostering what Freire terms “critical consciousness”—the capacity to recognise and challenge oppressive structures. This is similar to Pointer et al.'s (2023) restorative pedagogy which prioritises relationships, self-reflection, and challenging systems of oppression through dialogue. Restorative frameworks also prioritise relational accountability, healing, and community repair rather than punitive responses (Gavrielides, 2021; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Participatory methods centre students' lived experiences, especially those from marginalised communities, in program design and delivery (Willmott et al., 2022). Together, these models represent a transformative, rather than transactional, vision of prevention.

One area where these approaches are particularly promising is peer-led education (Davidov et al., 2020; Hubach et al., 2019; McQueen et al., 2024). Peer-led initiatives leverage shared experiences and student facilitators' credibility to build trust, challenge harmful norms, and engage peers effectively (Coker et al., 2011). When well supported by training, supervision, and institutional backing, peer-led strategies can significantly enhance participation and impact, particularly among younger and diverse student cohorts (Coker et al., 2011; DeGue et al., 2014).

This article presents the Rights, Relationships and Respect (RRR) program at the Australian National University (ANU) as a case study illustrating this approach. Developed by ANU Inclusive and Respectful Communities (IARC) under the *ANU Sexual Violence Prevention Strategy 2019-2026* (Australian National University, 2019), the program comprises an online module and peer-led dialogic workshops addressing consent, respectful relationships, and bystander intervention. Its pilot phase (2022–2023) involved tailored delivery across three residential communities, supported by evaluation, facilitator development, and iterative feedback mechanisms (Radcliffe et al., 2024). While the online module reached a large student cohort and generated rich data on engagement and learning outcomes, detailed analysis of these findings is outside the scope of this article and is presented elsewhere (Robertson et al., 2024). Instead, this paper focuses on the face-to-face component of the program, the peer-led workshops, and draws on evaluation insights to explore three key questions:

1. What have we learned about student participation and engagement from the program?
2. What learning outcomes emerged from student participation?
3. How might these insights inform future design, scaling, and evaluation of GBV prevention programs in higher education?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to emerging practice-research on relational, student-centred prevention. It argues that peer-led and dialogic approaches are not peripheral but foundational to effective GBV prevention. Furthermore, it proposes that these practices are foundational to building restorative cultures in a university community that can offer a mechanism for both violence prevention and response.

Introduction to the program

Online module

The online module was developed to equip commencing students with foundational knowledge about consent, respectful relationships, and support pathways at ANU. Launched in January 2023, the module was co-developed by primary prevention practitioners and response specialists, with input from students and other key stakeholders. The module's design was informed by the multifaceted dimensions of consent education, contextualised for both the Australian Capital Territory legal framework and the ANU campus. Comprising six topics, the module provides an exploration of key themes related to respectful relationships and consent including values, norms, and expectations that shape healthy and respectful relationships within the university community; sexual violence; and power dynamics. The module also provides students with comprehensive information about the support services and resources available to survivors of sexual misconduct at ANU.

Pilot workshops

To complement the online module and promote community dialogue, a three-part in-person curriculum was piloted across three residential halls. These halls were chosen purposively to represent a diverse range of backgrounds and community dynamics, including university-owned halls and an independent affiliate residence. The workshops aimed to deliver comprehensive education on healthy sex and relationships, understanding sexual violence, bystander intervention, and practical skills for addressing GBV.

Workshop 1 focused on understanding identity in relation to oneself and others in the context of sex and relationships. It aimed to help new residents at ANU explore healthy sexuality and relationships on campus. To guide this exploration, the workshop introduced two key concepts. First, everyone has *sexual projects*—the goals, values, and choices that shape their sexual lives. Second, being part of a university community involves a form of *sexual citizenship*, which refers to how people exercise rights, responsibilities, and respect for others in sexual and relational contexts. These ideas were developed by scholars to better understand sexual life and violence prevention in higher education (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Hirsch et al., 2021).

Workshop 2 delved into the dynamics of sexual violence, examining factors like societal norms and media representations that contribute to its ubiquity. This included gendered drivers, the influence of pornography, bystander intervention strategies, and responding to sexual violence disclosures.

Workshop 3 aimed to empower participants to take action against GBV by providing practical skills for mapping culture within their hall, and prototyping initiatives to challenge drivers of sexual violence on campus. Projects and initiatives created during the workshops were shared across residential halls as templates for action and inspiration.

Each workshop incorporated tools such as a live digital engagement tool (e.g., Mentimeter-style platforms) to gain anonymous real-time feedback using group activities and scenario-based learning. Peer educators played an important role in facilitating workshops, co-leading sessions, and contributing to the development of content.

Method

Recognising the importance of building a stronger evidence base around GBV prevention in higher education settings, the program was developed with in-built scope for independent monitoring and evaluation. While common for practitioners to conduct (formal or informal) evaluation of programs they develop and implement, internal review is oftentimes limited—not only in terms of the

assessor's objectivity (Conley Tyler, 2004; Weiss, 1972) but their contribution to the broader evidence base. Indeed, Shaw (2005) explains that much practitioner-led evaluation has an explicit practice-advancement motive, rather than broader policy or academic research rationale (see also McIvor, 1995; McLeod, 1999). While not seeking to dismiss the significance of practice wisdom (Fook, 2019; Macdonald, 2000), it is important to note that practitioner-led evaluation seldom engages in processes required for broader research dissemination, including human research ethics review. With this in mind, researchers from the ANU Centre for Social Policy Research (POLIS) made in-kind contributions of time and expertise to design and conduct a robust, empirical evaluation of the program. This collaboration arose from a pre-existing relationship, underpinned by a shared commitment to embedding restorative practice across the university community. In addition to improving institutional primary prevention approaches, practitioners and researchers agreed that this evaluation provided a unique opportunity to contribute to academic understanding as prevention practitioners transitioned from evidence-based to evidence-building practice. Human Research Ethics Committee approval was secured to ensure that findings could be communicated more broadly in service of this aim (2022/835 and 2022/850).

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the content, several ethical safeguards were implemented. To ensure student data were handled in line with relevant policies, a privacy impact assessment was conducted, detailing the types of data to be collected and processes for de-identification. Furthermore, high engagement standards were set regarding consent, participant burden, and duty of care. Participation in data collection activities was voluntary. The research team worked closely with the ANU Student Safety and Wellbeing team to ensure a united approach to managing distress in workshop settings, which was communicated clearly to participants.

Data collection methods

A mixed-methods approach was applied to the evaluation, drawing on a variety of data sources including surveys, interviews, observations, learner responses to online module activities, and student responses to the live digital engagement tool used throughout the pilot workshops.

Online module

Take-up and engagement were assessed using data gathered by the online learning platform on aspects such as course enrolment, course completion, and time spent on the course. A 29-question post-implementation survey was also deployed via Qualtrics to collect demographic data, understand motivational drivers for completing the module, gain course feedback, and test knowledge about ANU support services. Students were invited to take the survey upon completion of the module. To encourage participation, students entered a draw to win a AU\$100 gift voucher.

Engagement with the online module was also assessed via machine learning-assisted qualitative analysis of learner responses to five module activities. Using an opt-out approach, 2,026 learners who completed the course during Semester 1, 2023 consented to the use of their responses to evaluate the module. Responses ranged from 1,820–2,026 across each activity analysed. While these datasets offer rich insights into learner engagement and perspectives, detailed findings from the online module analysis fall outside the scope of this paper but are included in the public evaluation report (Robertson et al., 2024).

Pilot workshops

This component of the evaluation drew on a range of methods and sources of data to explore the different facets of student engagement with the workshops. Researchers observed 12 out of 20 workshops, taking open-ended fieldnotes and, where possible, conducted observations in pairs to

cross-check notes. Interviews were conducted with student participants (n=4), peer educators (n=3), and a staff facilitator (n=1). Despite offering a AU\$50 gift voucher, student interview participation was limited, reflective of findings on broader engagement discussed below. A further limitation is that all student participants were domestic, although peer educators included both domestic and international students. All interviews were conducted before the completion of Workshop 3, limiting reflections to experiences from sessions one and two.

Data were also extracted from the live digital engagement tool used by facilitators throughout the workshops to promote real-time student participation. This tool allowed the facilitator to pose questions to the audience and present their responses in a range of visual formats including graphs, charts, and word clouds to prompt further discussion. Responses to prompts related to workshop experience and hall culture collected during the third workshop delivered to students in August of 2023 were included for analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed across interview and digital engagement tool data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive approach. The analysis adopted both inductive and deductive approaches, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data while remaining attentive to the clearly defined scope and context of the broader evaluation project. Quirkos (2013) qualitative software was used throughout all phases of the analysis. Quirkos's visual canvas interface allowed for the spatial organisation of codes, the creation of hierarchies between codes and themes, and the use of colour coding to identify relationships. During the initial coding phase, the software provided live updating visualisation of codes as data were analysed, facilitating an iterative process of code development and refinement. The memo function was used to annotate sources and document analytical decisions throughout the coding process. During theme development and review, Quirkos's query view functionality allowed for filtering and comparison of coded segments across different data sources and participant groups, while the overlap view visualised connections between codes, revealing how frequently themes co-occurred within the dataset. This visual representation of thematic relationships supported the identification and refinement of overarching themes and sub-themes. These data were triangulated with the observational data described above, enabling cross-validation of findings across multiple data sources and strengthening the credibility of the analysis.

Results

The evaluation of the workshop pilot program explores both the potential and challenges of dialogic, participatory approaches to GBV prevention in university residential settings. The following section examines four interconnected themes that shaped program implementation and student experience.

First, *engagement* patterns reveal the tensions between institutional mandates for participation and the relational trust essential to transformative prevention work. Second, the distinct *cultural* dynamics across residential halls emerged as a critical factor influencing student reception of prevention programming, with inclusive community cultures facilitating engagement while a dominant party culture created resistance that undermined program goals. Third, data on the *development and implementation* showcase the strengths of co-design approaches involving peer facilitators and the ongoing challenges of adapting content to diverse student populations. Finally, *student experience and learning outcomes* reflects on critical consciousness, practical skill building, and gaps in accessibility and relevance.

Engagement

Engaging students and maintaining that engagement throughout the workshop series proved to be one of the most consistent challenges of the program. Workshop attendance declined substantially

across the three sessions, from 394 students across the three halls in Workshop 1 to approximately 200 in Workshop 2 and 130 in Workshop 3. This pattern of declining participation reveals some of the challenges of student engagement and illustrates the tensions between dialogic approaches and institutional mandates.

Self-selection

Self-selection became evident as students chose whether to continue participating beyond the first workshop. As one student observed during a session, "I've noticed there's a gender imbalance with who decides to come to these sessions," while another noted, "when I look at who has shown up it seems like most of the people here need it least."

Mandatory attendance

The mandatory nature of attendance across the pilot halls created tensions between institutional requirements and the relational trust essential to dialogic approaches. Different halls employed varying enforcement strategies, with results that starkly illustrated the distinction between compliance-oriented and transformative prevention approaches. While the self-catered hall noted comparatively high attendance and retention, the privately-operated hall implemented strict attendance monitoring. As one peer educator reflected:

I mean, the biggest thing is that at [the privately catered hall] they were made to be there, right? Attendance was taken nine times or something ridiculous. It was very prison warden vibes. I think it was really harmful to the learning.

Another peer educator noted:

As soon as one of their staff members walks in the room it's kind of like everyone sits up straight and they put away their phones. I think it was probably quite harmful to the way that the content was absorbed.

Cultural and language barriers

Apparent differences in student comfort and familiarity with workshop content revealed additional challenges. Peer educators described their observation of lower levels of active participation among international student cohorts, with language barriers hindering comprehension of essential concepts. As one peer educator described:

For example, we were doing a session on consent, and there was a group, a table that had all Chinese students, and they called me over, and they're like, what is consent? We haven't heard that word. And then I had to write it down for them and they searched it in the Chinese language and translated it.

Here, the reliance on shared understanding of concepts like "consent" illustrates the difficulty of designing prevention programming that accommodates diverse cultural backgrounds. The intersecting barriers faced by international students, such as language, cultural unfamiliarity, and

newcomer status, created multiple layers of complexity that required ongoing attention. While the program aimed to be inclusive, these findings highlight the challenges of such an approach.

The program's reliance on reflective dialogue also seemed to create anxiety for students lacking confidence in their understanding. When students felt uncertain, peer educators observed they became reticent: "When we got more towards the consent side of things, people got a little more scared ... because they didn't have the same certainty, and they were petrified of saying something wrong and being cast in the wrong way."

The staff member echoed the observations made by peer educators regarding persistent challenges in accommodating diverse student populations with varying levels of prior knowledge and cultural familiarity. They acknowledged that "students would come from a range of different backgrounds, exposure to these ideas, levels of maturity, comfort with it." Cultural and language barriers proved particularly challenging in live delivery environments. The staff member reflected:

How can we facilitate [overcoming] a language barrier of a live conversational programme. And I don't have good answers for that yet ... it is very clearly an issue, and the flow-on effect as well, if you went to a first session and didn't understand a word of it, why would you sign up for volume two?

The use of the live digital engagement tool helped mitigate some of these participation barriers, with one student noting, "As soon as the [digital feedback responses] come out everyone is a bit more engaged." This technological solution partially addressed the challenge of creating safe spaces for reflective conversation, particularly for students navigating cultural and linguistic differences.

Culture

The analysis revealed distinct cultural dynamics across the three residential halls that appeared to, in turn, influence student engagement with the program, highlighting how existing community norms shape the effectiveness of dialogic and participatory prevention approaches.

Distinct cultural identities

Students in the self-catered and catered halls consistently described their residences as characterised by community, inclusivity, and respect, with predominant terms being "comfortable," "friendly," "diversity," and "participation." The self-catered hall was particularly noted for its inclusive atmosphere toward LGBTIQ+ students, with one student explaining that "the culture is very inclusive, open, but not tolerant to stuff that's out of line."

By contrast, the privately-operated hall exhibited a culture centred around social events and alcohol consumption. Student responses were dominated by terms such as "nights out" and "beer sinkage," while references to inclusivity and respect were largely absent. When terms like "feminism" appeared, the context suggested negative connotations rather than genuine endorsement of gender equality, with sarcastic variations like "feminism4lyf" appearing in responses.

These cultural patterns persisted across student cohorts. During a session with senior leaders at the privately-operated hall, terms such as "matriarchy," "sex," "misogyny," and "drinking" remained prevalent despite greater emphasis on sporting and academic achievement, indicating the strength and persistence of hall culture.

Culture-engagement dynamics

These cultural differences appeared to directly influence program participation. Peer educators noted that the "strong gay culture" of the self-catered hall contributed to positive engagement, with students' values aligned with creating inclusive communities. Workshop observations confirmed active and respectful participation from these students.

Conversely, the privately-operated hall presented significant engagement challenges. Researchers observed disrespectful behaviour including talking during presentations, interrupting discussions, and making inappropriate comments, indicating resistance to programming that challenged existing cultural norms.

Development and implementation

The program's development and implementation process revealed the strengths and challenges of co-design approaches that seek to embed dialogic and participatory principles in prevention programming. The collaboration between staff and peer educators emerged as a defining feature of the program, as was the staff facilitation and dynamic adaptation based on student feedback.

Co-design

The commitment to co-design was consistently identified as the program's greatest strength by both participants and facilitators. Engaging peer educators as co-facilitators created conditions that supported the relational trust essential to dialogic approaches. As one peer educator observed:

When they see us going and sitting with them as students, not as officers from the RRU, just looking at them they feel more comfortable to share and discuss openly on the table that they're sitting at. So, I think peer educators are really helpful in the sessions.

Students highlighted the value of peer facilitation, with one noting the importance of facilitators "who [we] could more relate to" and who understood "the nuances of not just university life but university life at ANU on campus."

The collaborative development process extended beyond delivery to program design itself. Peer educators praised the staff team for being "receptive to their feedback to make the workshops more digestible and relatable to student experience." One reflected that "we would share feedback after each session" and another noted how staff discussed content changes: "coming up to workshop two, they discussed a lot with us about 'are you comfortable with this PowerPoint,' is there anything you'd like changed?"

Facilitation

While peer educators played a key role, sessions were led by a staff member. This facilitation was identified as a particular strength, with students noting facilitators were "really good" and "very approachable." Feedback emphasised the importance of "facilitator understanding of safe queer spaces and inclusivity" and the "open" and "non-intimidating" environment that fostered "good conversation."

Adaptive design

The program's capacity for real-time adaptation demonstrated the flexibility that dialogic approaches require while revealing both opportunities and challenges in responsive design. Staff members emphasised their commitment to experimentation, with one noting: "It's a living

community of people from all over the world ... being bold and experimental I think is really important."

This adaptive approach was evident in the program's evolution between workshops. After Workshop 1 feedback indicated that content was "way too hard" and students requested "statistics" and "practical implications," the team redesigned Workshop 2 to focus specifically on drivers of GBV. As one peer educator explained, "One of the threads [from Workshop 1] was a feeling that we needed to address more directly who is responsible for perpetrating sexual violence, and how to change the behaviours of those people."

Peer educators further emphasised the importance of maintaining the dynamic and responsive approach while scaling delivery. As one noted, "I want to see this program really respond to the people it's teaching to ... I would hate to come back in five years and see identical PowerPoints."

Student experience and learning outcomes

Consciousness-raising and critical awareness

Students reflected on their growth in critical consciousness around consent complexities and structural drivers of GBV. As one student contemplated, "It was challenging to wrap my mind around the real statistics of sexual violence and its prevalence at uni because it's not really a topic of discussion." This consciousness-raising extended to understanding consent as contextual and complex: "I thought it was interesting about how complex consent can be and how many grey areas there are."

Particularly valuable was content addressing structural and cultural drivers of violence. One student noted, "What I really liked about the second session of the unit was that it was talking about the societal causes. And I think a lot of people ... particularly with harassment, don't necessarily see themselves as doing anything wrong." This recognition of systemic rather than individual factors represents the kind of critical consciousness that dialogic prevention aims to develop.

Practical application and skill development

Students reported increased confidence in bystander intervention and peer support. One student explained:

I do [feel confident to intervene]. I didn't before, but the fact that I hang out now with a lot of people who are very confident to do it makes it easier for me ... it's on your mind, and you know it's on everyone else's mind, you're all thinking about it, it adds confidence to the assertive motion.

Students also reported implementing learning in everyday situations. Since completing the first two sessions, there had been a few instances in which they had observed peers "toeing the line towards assault." Another student commented, "the reaction has been very strongly with a lot of my friends, which I'm actually really proud about."

Knowledge of support systems and response pathways

Students reported a general improved knowledge of campus-specific support pathways, noting, "There are a good amount of support services available to us on campus" and "I just know there's more places than I thought to go for support."

However, students expressed desire for more detailed guidance on peer support strategies, particularly "how to support those who have experienced trauma," "strategies of asking if someone

is alright in a lowkey way," and "how to socially navigate grey areas, especially when perpetrators don't understand why they are in the wrong." This feedback suggests both successful awareness-raising and need for more detailed skill development in peer support practices.

Engagement with complex content

The students interviewed demonstrated thoughtful engagement with challenging content, particularly around pornography and its role in shaping sexual expectations. One student noted:

There was a small discussion on pornography in the second session, and I thought that was a really interesting thing to discuss, because I'd say the modern understanding of how pornography fits into people's lives is a bit confused ... the way they approached it, in talking about how usually it's accessed way too young, is damaging in a way, and sort of worth talking about, I think was really good.

This willingness to engage with complex, contested topics suggests the programme created conditions for critical dialogue around sensitive issues.

Despite overall positive engagement, students struggled with certain theoretical concepts, particularly "sexual citizenship" and "sexual projects." These concepts were perceived as academically abstract rather than practically relevant, with one student describing them as "things that, like, were produced by academics for, I don't know, journal articles." In contrast, accessible frameworks like FRIES (consent that is freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific) were consistently identified as valuable and memorable. This suggests that complex academic concepts need to be made more practical and accessible for students. This is particularly important when working with diverse student populations who have different levels of prior knowledge.

Requests for expanded content

Students expressed clear desire for program expansion addressing specific aspects of university life. Requests included "More on alcohol, parties, practicalities of consent etc" and deeper exploration of "how culture enables violence and the impact of language on creating culture." Students also wanted content on "changing toxic masculine culture and normalising these conversations without alienating those who need to listen."

Significantly, students requested content on resistance and self-protection, including "sexual violence resistance," "self-defense techniques," and "protecting oneself from sexual assault and harassment, especially off campus." This suggests students understand prevention as requiring both cultural change and individual safety strategies.

Discussion

This article has explored the RRR program as a case study of peer-led, dialogic, and restorative approaches to GBV prevention in higher education. We now return to the three guiding questions to reflect on the program's implications for practice and future research.

1. What have we learned about student participation and engagement from the RRR program?

The pilot program highlighted that participatory and relational approaches to GBV prevention hold potential, but also encounter barriers, especially within institutional environments shaped by compliance pressures, entrenched cultures, and uneven student readiness.

One key finding was the pattern of declining attendance across the workshop series, with ongoing engagement relying heavily on the halls' individual approaches to mandating attendance, student motivation, and perceived relevance. This echoes existing critiques of compliance-oriented prevention: although mandates may achieve reach, they can suppress the relational trust and intrinsic motivation that dialogic models require (Iverson & Issadore, 2018). Peer-led education relies on credibility and trust between facilitators and participants, which can be undermined by heavy-handed enforcement mechanisms (Coker et al., 2011). This display of institutional control appeared to undermine the conditions necessary for the reflective conversations that dialogic approaches require. The tension between mandated participation and engagement reveals a fundamental challenge in applying participatory and restorative principles within compliance-driven institutional structures. Such practices cannot be coerced; they emerge from relational trust and shared values (Braithwaite, 2002; Karp, 2024). This tension also illustrates what Ellsworth (1989) identified as a core limitation of critical pedagogy in institutional settings: the gap between its emancipatory rhetoric and the power dynamics that can constrain dialogue.

Self-selection presented another engagement challenge. Students most committed to respectful relationships were perceived to be those who remained engaged, while students perceived most likely to benefit from attitudinal change self-excluded after initial sessions. This pattern illustrates a challenge in participatory prevention methods (Willmott et al., 2022): those most invested in creating respectful communities may be overrepresented, while those whose attitudes and behaviours most need examination may self-select out of transformative conversations (see also Friere, 1970). In the context of GBV prevention, Rich et al. (2010) provide empirical evidence of this resistance among male university students, finding widespread disinterest in prevention programmes accompanied by beliefs that such initiatives were irrelevant to their lives or a waste of time. Their research revealed that many men rhetorically construct perpetrators as "the other," failing to recognise their own accountability within rape culture or responsibility for prevention, while expressing defensive anger toward prevention programming before it even began. The self-selection observed in the workshops thus represents more than a logistical challenge and may reflect deeper structural resistance to examining privilege and complicity in systems of GBV.

Cultural and linguistic diversity added additional complexity. Some students, particularly those from international backgrounds, struggled to engage in reflective conversations due to unfamiliarity with terminology or fear of making mistakes. As Levand (2020) argues, navigating consent across cultural contexts requires not only shared language but a shared understanding of social norms, which are often shaped by differing assumptions about communication, power, and appropriate behaviour. Fear of judgement or social sanctions can inhibit participation, particularly in dialogic settings that rely on open conversation (Ryan & Viete, 2009). This is consistent with Ellsworth's (1989) critique of participatory and dialogic approaches. The assumption that all students enter dialogue from positions of equal knowledge and comfort can obscure how cultural, linguistic, and social differences shape who can participate meaningfully in classroom discourse. The experience of international students in the RRR programme illustrates this. Despite facilitators' intentions to create inclusive dialogue, language barriers and unfamiliarity with concepts limited participation. These findings highlight the importance of culturally responsive design and facilitation, as well as the need for layered forms of engagement, such as anonymous digital tools, to create low-risk pathways for participation.

Institutional culture also shaped participation. The evaluation suggested marked differences in engagement based on hall identity and values. It appeared that those pilot residences with more inclusive cultures enabled trust and dialogue, while the hall dominated by party culture resisted or undermined program goals. This supports Karp's (2024) assertion that "culture eats strategy for

breakfast” (p. 32). In the prevention context, this means that even well-designed prevention initiatives will falter if they are not attuned to the cultural conditions in which they operate.

These findings illustrate how existing community cultures can either facilitate or undermine the relational trust and cultural safety that transformative prevention requires. In halls where students highlighted inclusive values, the program built upon foundations that supported the critical reflection dialogic education and restorative pedagogy requires (Pointer et al., 2023). However, where the dominant culture actively resisted such conversations, the program faced collective opposition rather than just individual resistance. This highlights the role of universities as both sites of harm and potential drivers of social change. Where community values already align with respect, inclusion, and accountability, dialogic and restorative approaches can leverage existing strengths to support transformative learning. However, in resistant cultural contexts, prevention efforts risk becoming performative or counterproductive unless adapted to local realities. As Karp (2024) argues, restorative practices in higher education cannot be sustained through individual programs alone—they require an institutional ecosystem that values relational infrastructure over procedural control and is willing to confront uncomfortable cultural truths.

The cultural dynamics also reveal implications for scaling prevention programming across diverse university settings. As Pointer et al. (2023) argue, a key element of restorative pedagogy requires cultivating dialogue that unearths social systems of oppression. Yet this cultivation depends on the cultural soil in which it is planted. The RRR experience suggests that effective prevention programming may require adapting approaches based on existing community norms rather than assuming uniform delivery will succeed across contexts.

Despite these challenges, peer facilitation emerged as a key strength of the pilot program. The peer-to-peer dynamic is supported by research demonstrating that peer-led initiatives leverage shared experiences and credibility to build trust and challenge harmful norms more effectively than traditional top-down approaches (Coker et al., 2011). This aligns with restorative pedagogical principles that prioritise relationships and cultivate dialogue addressing systems of oppression (Pointer et al., 2023), highlighting responsiveness to changing learner needs and contexts through ongoing dialogue and iteration as a core principle of effective peer education (Davidov et al., 2020; McQueen et al., 2024). The value placed on adaptability is consistent with participatory design methodologies, which foreground students’ lived experiences and active involvement to ensure relevance and buy-in (Willmott et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the emphasis on relationship building and iterative refinement resonates with restorative practice frameworks, which centre relational trust, cultural responsiveness, and continuous feedback as essential components for fostering sustainable change (Karp, 2024; Pointer et al., 2023). However, such dialogic and participatory approaches demand considerable ongoing investment in relationship building, feedback collection, and programme refinement. This poses potential challenges to traditional models of programme scaling and standardisation, which often prioritise efficiency and uniformity over relational depth and adaptability (Coker et al., 2011; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

Together, these findings suggest that while dialogic and restorative models offer promising tools for cultural transformation, they are not a panacea. Their success hinges on enabling environments where community norms support accountability and dialogue, and where institutional implementation avoids performative compliance.

2. What learning outcomes emerged from student participation?

Despite engagement challenges, the workshops contributed to meaningful learning outcomes for some students, particularly in three key areas: critical consciousness, practical skill building, and awareness of support pathways.

First, students reflected on their increased critical awareness of structural drivers of GBV, recognising violence not only as interpersonal but embedded in cultural norms and social hierarchies. Reflections on media influence, consent complexity, and power dynamics signalled a move beyond individualised understandings of violence toward systemic thinking. This is a central aim of dialogic prevention models: to cultivate reflective, accountable, and socially conscious citizens capable of challenging harm-enabling structures (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Pointer et al., 2023).

Second, students developed practical skills in bystander intervention and peer support. Several noted greater confidence in recognising problematic behaviours, intervening in social situations, and responding to peers' disclosures. These behavioural shifts, while not measured at a larger scale, suggest that the program provided not just knowledge but the confidence to act on it, a crucial aim of prevention education (DeGue et al., 2014).

Third, students reported increased familiarity with campus support services and policies. While some requested deeper guidance on how to support peers or navigate complex scenarios, overall feedback suggests the workshops improved knowledge and confidence to access help. Importantly, students valued peer facilitators as credible sources of information, particularly around navigating university-specific pathways and cultural nuances of residential life.

Students also engaged thoughtfully with complex and contested content. Discussions around pornography and cultural norms revealed a willingness to grapple with difficult topics. However, students struggled with abstract academic concepts such as "sexual projects" and "sexual citizenship," favouring more concrete frameworks like FRIES. This points to the importance of ensuring that prevention content remains accessible and relevant, particularly when working with diverse student populations.

Taken together, these findings highlight the promise of the capacity of dialogic, peer-led approaches to foster both cognitive and affective engagement. However, they also highlight the need for scaffolded learning pathways; culturally inclusive content; and more applied, skills-based training.

3. How might these insights inform future design, scaling, and evaluation of GBV prevention programs in higher education?

The program offers several lessons for future prevention efforts in higher education, particularly as universities prepare for the implementation of the National Code.

First, participatory and peer-led approaches must be adequately resourced and institutionally supported. The pilot required significant investment in training, co-design, and facilitation. Scaling such initiatives without undermining their relational integrity will require universities to shift from short-term compliance strategies toward long-term cultural investment. This includes embedding prevention in staffing models, professional development, and governance structures. In the context of ANU, these steps are now reflected in the integration of the program into its *Student Safety and Wellbeing Plan 2024-2026* (Australian National University, 2024).

Second, flexibility and responsiveness are essential. The implementation team's readiness to adapt content based on feedback, such as pivoting toward more practical, culturally relevant material,

appeared to be key to maintaining student engagement. This kind of adaptive design is resource-intensive but crucial for programs operating in diverse and evolving campus environments.

Third, scaling should prioritise cultural contextualisation rather than standardisation. The variation in hall cultures underscores that prevention efforts cannot be one-size-fits-all. Programs must be tailored to local conditions, with facilitators trained to read and respond to community dynamics.

Fourth, evaluation is both a requirement and a resource. The collaborative, ethically approved evaluation model adopted by ANU offers a valuable precedent. As the National Code mandates evidence building, institutions must invest in evaluation as a practice of accountability, reflection, and improvement. Ethical considerations, especially around participant privacy, trauma, and power, must be central to such efforts. The growth of the program since its pilot, now delivered entirely by student peers to approximately 1,400 first-year residents in 2025, illustrates its scalability and confirms the value of peer-led approaches. Early evaluations indicate high acceptability, particularly around peer-facilitated delivery, and improved student confidence in recognising and practicing consent, further underscoring the effectiveness of relational and dialogic models.

Finally, the pilot experience reinforces that GBV prevention cannot be reduced to a binary of “before” or “after” harm. Restorative approaches position prevention as an ongoing practice of relationship building, cultural reflection, and shared responsibility. By building trust and fostering peer accountability, the programme creates relational infrastructure that prevents harm. Simultaneously, this infrastructure prepares the community to respond restoratively when harm does occur. We suggest, then, that such practices are restorative in that they offer a bridge between prevention and response. However, such approaches are not merely additional to compliance frameworks; they require a reorientation of institutional values toward relational accountability and collective care.

Limitations

This evaluation provides valuable insights into a peer-led, dialogic approach to GBV prevention, but several limitations should be acknowledged. The small number of interviews and the self-selecting nature of participants limit the generalisability of findings, particularly as later workshops attracted those already aligned with the program’s values. The evaluation was also confined to three residential halls within a single university, and findings may not be transferable to other institutional or cultural settings.

While the online module reached a wider cohort, its analysis was not integrated into this paper, reducing the ability to assess learning across the full program. Additionally, trauma-informed delivery principles meant some student disengagement was not systematically recorded. Despite these constraints, the findings offer valuable directions for adapting prevention efforts to diverse residential and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This case study represents a compelling example of what student-centred, restorative GBV prevention can look like in practice. It offers lessons for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers: peer-led approaches can foster critical consciousness and behavioural change; dialogic education requires cultural readiness and trust; and scaling prevention requires adaptation, reflection, and sustained relational investment, not merely replication. Furthermore, we suggest that programmes such as this help to embed restorative practices within a university and offer a bridge between violence prevention and response.

As Australian universities prepare to implement the National Code, there is a risk that prevention efforts will retreat into performative compliance. The findings presented here challenge this impulse and demonstrate that effective prevention is not merely a matter of policy, but of pedagogy; not governance, but culture. This case study provides a hopeful glimpse into the potential of universities being more than sites of harm; they can be communities of transformation, reflection, and care. The challenge now is to embed this potential across the sector, not as an exception but as a new standard of practice.

Acknowledgments

We thank the student participants for their valuable insights. Special thanks to Professors Nicholas Biddle and Miranda Forsyth for their methodological and observational contributions. We appreciate the support of the Inclusive and Respectful Communities team and Residential Experience Division, and Dr Bethany Muir for survey analysis. Grateful thanks to Patricia Teh, Senior Project Officer, University Experience, for her support throughout the evaluation.

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Please cite this paper as:

Gadow, F., Robertson, H., & Rossner, M. (2026). Peer-led approaches to gender-based violence prevention education in higher education: Insights from the Rights, Relationships and Respect program. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 34(1), 56–75. <https://doi.org/10.30688/janzssa.2026-1-13>



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