

Editorial: Special Issue Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education

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The introduction of the Australian *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence* (Department of Education, 2025; the National Code) marks a significant milestone for the sector. It follows decades of victim-survivor advocacy and increasing public scrutiny of the lack of action in addressing the high prevalence of gender-based violence on university campuses.

In particular, the *Change the Course* report (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017) was a pivotal moment that prompted widespread action across the higher education sector. The report detailed the results of the first independent survey conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) into sexual assault and sexual harassment experienced by students at Australian universities. In the wake of the report, many providers implemented initiatives to strengthen prevention and response measures based on nine recommendations across five areas of action. However, these efforts were often inconsistent, fragmented, and varied in scope and effectiveness, resulting in uneven progress across institutions.

A second National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) conducted in 2021, with results released in 2022, saw little positive change. Institutional failure and inaction in preventing and responding to gender-based violence was further recognised in a Senate inquiry, conducted in the same year, into current and proposed sexual consent laws in Australia.

As a result, education ministers released the 2024 *Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2024). The *Universities Accord (National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence) Act 2025* (Cth) and the *Universities Accord (National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence) (Consequential Amendments) Act 2025* (Cth) were subsequently passed, leading to the establishment of the National Code.

The resulting formal regulatory requirements for higher education providers to proactively address and respond to gender-based violence are articulated across seven key standards. These relate to governance and leadership; safe environment and systems; knowledge and capability; safety and support; safe processes; data, evidence and impact; and student accommodation. Significantly, the National Code requires providers to adopt a whole-of-organisation approach across the prevention and response continuum (Department of Education, 2025).

Whilst the National Code is an Australian initiative, its development and implementation has the potential to have significant implications for New Zealand and the broader international education sector, reflecting a global shift toward strengthened regulatory compliance, accountability frameworks, and demonstrated evidence-based practice. As international attention turns to how the Australian higher education sector responds to emerging compliance requirements, we have an opportunity to lead by example, setting a new standard for whole-of-community approaches to the prevention of and response to gender-based violence.

With compliance required by 1 January 2026, this special issue could not be more timely. While the National Code sets a new national standard for demonstrating enduring change across the seven standards, many providers have dedicated prevention and response teams and have been developing, implementing, and evaluating programs of work for several years. Increasing efforts across the sector in recent months have refined, enhanced, and extended these approaches. This special issue showcases examples of such programs, surfaces key considerations and implications for future practice, and highlights lessons learned to date alongside emerging opportunities for growth and innovation. Each of the authors explore practices, policies, and programs that directly relate to key aspects of the National Code, including more broadly the challenges associated with compliance and implications of each of the standards.

The issue brings together a range of different academic, theoretical, and practical insights across 14 articles. These begin with an insightful opinion piece from Radcliffe et al., who speak from a practitioner perspective to the challenges of holding universities accountable for the significant cultural and institutional shift required to achieve meaningful change through prevention.

Five peer-reviewed papers collectively explore systematic and institutional responses to gender-based violence, examining how policy frameworks, regulatory mechanisms, prevention education initiatives, and frontline staff experiences influence the effectiveness of interventions across higher education. Antolak-Saper provides a comparative analysis between regulatory and policy frameworks across the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia (Standard 1), while Newport examines frontline staff perspectives on gender-based violence and the built environment in an international setting (Standard 2). Two papers turn to knowledge and capability building (Standard 3). Hock et al. outline key findings from a student-led sexual misconduct and bystander intervention training initiative within a law school. Gadow et al. present findings from a pilot evaluation of peer-led consent education at the Australian National University, arguing that dialogic and restorative approaches must be relationally grounded, culturally responsive, and institutionally supported to achieve transformative impact. Finally, Bertram and Pruscino identify systemic challenges impacting the effective evaluation of the National Code, highlighting policy implications and recommendations to support policymakers, leaders, and practitioners in translating its ambition into practice (Standard 6).

In our professional practice section, contributions underscore the need for coordinated institutional and sector-wide action, integrating student partnership, cohort-specific support, culture change, sustained awareness and training, and holistic case management. Three papers examine effective leadership and governance (Standard 1). Acosta et al. outline the progressive development and implementation of a whole-of-institution approach to gender-based violence prevention and response at Monash University, detailing key lessons, challenges, and recommendations for the sector. Griffin et al. consider the needs, experience, and agency of university community members, outlining the opportunities presented in supporting female international students experiencing gender-based violence in Australian higher education. McCartney et al. discuss the importance of drawing upon the expertise of those with lived experience to inform institutional strategies. Leveraging evidence-based family violence and trauma-informed frameworks, they outline a program in practice at the University of Newcastle and recommendations to ensure sustainable engagement.

Doulton et al. (on behalf of UniSport Australia) provide sector-wide insight into safe environments and systems (Standard 2), highlighting the opportunities in sport and recreation to drive positive cultural change.

The focus then shifts to knowledge and capability development (Standard 3). Arya reviews conventional single-session sexual consent and respectful relationships education in universities, recommending a shift towards refresher interventions to maintain students' understanding and practice. Muir et al. highlight the role of awareness-raising campaigns in addressing high rates of gender-based violence and low help-seeking behaviour among students, detailing a campaign which was co-designed with students and delivered across six La Trobe University campuses. Hoey similarly argues the need for an approach that shifts from consultation to authentic co-design, outlining initiatives that embed engagement into the curriculum at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Finally, the issue concludes with Huttley, who turns attention to safety and support (Standard 4), outlining the CARE (Coordination, Assessment, Referral, Evaluation) Service at Monash University, a model for delivering trauma-informed, person-centred case management to both student and staff respondents, as well as complainants.

We believe that this special issue offers an important contribution to the ongoing and evolving practice in this space. Collectively, the highlighted themes reflect the complexity of addressing gender-based violence in tertiary settings, calling attention to actions that range from institutional governance and cultural change initiatives to student-led co-design and tailored support. Across all contributions to this special issue, a consistent message emerges: early and ongoing meaningful engagement with stakeholders, within and beyond universities, is essential, as is a collaborative, partnership-based approach to meeting and exceeding the requirements of the National Code. Indeed, whilst universities are often defined by competition, the National Code presents a unique opportunity for enhancing co-design and collaboration across institutional and geographical boundaries, and connections across sectors.

Importantly, the breadth and depth of work showcased here also demonstrate the sector's genuine commitment to the broad vision of the National Code — to eliminate gender-based violence. Further, it indicates a level of maturity and progress already achieved prior to the National Code's formal commencement. As we continue to build on this foundation, we hope the emerging practice, research, and insights shared here will support efforts across the sector, building common ground around key challenges, identifying opportunities and lessons learned, encouraging collaborative practice and learning, and paving the way for progress and lasting change.

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Guest Editors

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