

The Prevention Mandate: Aligning Compliance with Transformation to End Gender-based Violence in Higher Education

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Introduction

The anticipated implementation of the *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence* (the Code; Department of Education, 2024) marks a hard-won step forward in Australia's university sector, driven by years of advocacy, the persistence of survivor voices, and the sustained commitment of practitioners and national leaders working for systemic change. It will mark a landmark shift in response and survivor support in an Australian institutional context more broadly. But the more complex and long-term task of prevention remains largely unproven and far harder to regulate. The real challenge will be holding both the Code and universities accountable for driving the deep cultural and institutional change that prevention truly requires.

This article draws on the first-hand experience of colleagues in sector-wide institutional prevention work across Australia's university sector and a literature review to examine what gender-based violence (GBV) prevention currently looks like on the ground, and where it continues to fall short. While national policy momentum is building, many university-based prevention efforts remain fragmented, under-resourced, or symbolic. Through this combined lens, we explore both the promises and limitations of current prevention strategies. We argue that unless Australian universities commit to real accountability, sustained investment, and a genuine effort to interrogate and upend the gendered and institutional power structures that underpin operations, meaningful change may be out of reach.

From our perspectives as practitioners working on the ground, we explore how these power dynamics extend beyond policy and practice, and are deeply embedded in the histories, hierarchies, and values that shape the academic mission itself. We examine how prevention is being interpreted and enacted in practice, highlighting the challenges practitioners face and the examples of good practice they are facilitating. We argue that a truly effective, whole-of-institution approach must build on this work if we are to move beyond rhetoric and achieve meaningful, lasting change.

How did we get here?

The Code is the result of nearly a decade of mounting evidence, public scrutiny, and persistent calls for change. The 2017 *Change the Course* report by the Australian Human Rights Commission was a defining moment, exposing both the widespread nature of sexual violence in universities and a sustained failure on the part of universities to respond effectively (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). In the years that followed, the message to universities was clear: acknowledge the problem, support survivors, and take genuine steps to prevent harm.

But progress was uneven. Some institutions made genuine efforts to improve, while others did little beyond minor policy changes, limited awareness campaigns, and outsourced training modules (Henry, 2023;

Heywood et al., 2022). The follow-up *National Student Safety Survey* (Nisbet et al., 2022) reflected this reality. It showed little improvement in students' understanding of reporting options or their confidence in university responses. Among advocates, survivors, and government officials, frustration grew. The message coming from the federal Labor government in particular was resounding: too many universities had dragged their feet, and legally mandated oversight was seen as the only way forward.

In his first term, Minister Jason Clare introduced the Code as a firm response to this impasse, signalling a coordinated and authoritative effort to address longstanding gaps. Introduced to Parliament in early 2025, its progress was briefly halted by the calling of a federal election. But with Minister Clare returned to his portfolio and momentum restored, its passage was finalised in August 2025. For universities, this represents a compelling and unambiguous mandate to lift standards across the sector: survivor-led, trauma-informed responses; real accountability for those responsible for harm and the institutions that have too often shielded them; and, perhaps most interestingly, an unprecedented, legislated commitment to prevent harm before it occurs (Department of Education, 2024).

Significantly, a legislated mandate for the primary prevention of GBV will mark a first across any institutional sector in Australia. While some sectors have implemented national principles, policy frameworks, or funding incentives around GBV prevention, none have seen prevention duties enshrined in enforceable legislation at this scale (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020; Fergus, 2024; Our Watch, 2022). *Respect@Work* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020) led to important reforms in workplace sexual harassment law, introducing a positive duty under the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) that requires all employers to take reasonable steps to prevent harassment. However, this duty is broad and non-sector-specific, and compliance is largely measured in relation to legal risk management, not cultural transformation or whole-of-institution reform (Smith, 2023).

By contrast, the Code will go much further. It will be the first time that preventing GBV becomes a legal requirement embedded across the operations of an entire institutional sector, specifically higher education. Unlike positive duty, the Code will impose detailed and prescriptive obligations, including the delivery of evidence-based GBV prevention education to all students and staff, establishment of institution-wide prevention strategies, ongoing cultural change programs, robust evaluation, and public reporting requirements (Department of Education, 2024). These obligations are designed not just to reduce risk, but to transform university environments from the top down.

Crucially, the Department of Education—not a human rights or equality agency—will be responsible for monitoring compliance. This reflects a policy shift that treats GBV prevention as a core function of educational governance, rather than a human resources or risk matter. The Department will oversee implementation, compliance monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms, including potential sanctions for non-compliant institutions (Department of Education, 2024).

In effect, the Code will establish a new national benchmark where universities will become the first institutional sector in Australia under a legally enforceable, government-administered regime focused on primary prevention of GBV. Currently, no such legal mechanism exists for schools, workplaces, or health institutions anywhere in the country (Department of Education, 2024; Our Watch, 2022).

Promises and gaps in prevention

This shift marks more than just regulatory reform. It's a powerful recognition that robust, effective prevention is the most credible and necessary solution to the crisis of GBV. For those of us who have worked in prevention without this kind of regulatory oversight, it's a long-overdue affirmation that our work matters. The hope is that it will finally inspire the clear, actionable governance and strategic university leadership we have long been hoping for.

But this shift also reminds us of the complexity and uncertainty that defines this work. Prevention is a slow, iterative, whole-of-population task, and while we have strong theories of change and good evidence for what drives GBV, the implementation of prevention at scale remains largely untested (McCall et al., 2023; Our Watch, 2022).

In Victoria, several world-leading initiatives have piloted and evaluated whole-of-setting prevention approaches, most notably through the Respectful Relationships program (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2017). Launched statewide following recommendations from the Royal Commission into Family Violence, Respectful Relationships aimed to embed gender equity and violence prevention into school culture, curriculum, leadership, and policy. Evaluation of early rollout schools found positive changes in student attitudes and improved teacher confidence, suggesting the approach holds promise (Joyce et al., 2019). However, even in these well-supported contexts, researchers noted considerable variability in implementation fidelity and impact, often shaped by leadership buy-in, staff capacity, and system readiness (Joyce et al., 2019). Translating this learning into the tertiary education sector presents a distinct set of challenges. Universities are inherently complex and heterogeneous, often characterised by siloed decision-making, bureaucratic inertia, and governance shortcomings (Maxwell & Hamilton, 2023). In Australian universities, increasing institutional scale and operational complexity further hinder coordinated, system-wide responses. These structural conditions make the implementation of unified initiatives, such as those needed to address GBV, especially difficult.

What is also missing is robust, longitudinal research that measures the preventive impact of such approaches in university contexts. While we know more about what constitutes “best practice” prevention, such as whole-of-institution strategies, intersectional approaches, and leadership accountability, there is limited empirical evidence showing that these strategies actually reduce rates of GBV over time (DeGue et al., 2014; Fergus, 2024). Most research to date has focused on measuring attitude change, awareness, or program satisfaction rather than behavioural outcomes or violence incidence (Flood, 2019; Kang et al., 2024). Research also cautions that shifts in attitudes do not always lead to corresponding behavioural change, particularly in the prevention of GBV (Flood, 2019; Fulu et al., 2014). As Australia continues to invest in prevention infrastructure, there is a pressing need for coordinated research efforts that move beyond proxies and begin to track real-world effectiveness over the long term.

These complexities have led some commentators to question whether current policy momentum risks overselling what prevention can deliver. In a recent essay, Hill and Salter (2024) raise concerns that prevention is being treated as a catch-all solution or moral certainty, warning that this framing risks masking the deeper institutional and political work still required. In response, sector leader Emily Maguire (2024) offers a strong defense of Australia’s current prevention architecture. She argues that primary prevention is already grounded in a solid, evolving evidence base, and that critiques should not undermine the hard-won infrastructure now beginning to gain traction. Rather than a binary of promise versus failure, her view reinforces that prevention must be continuously refined, strengthened, and funded, while resisting the temptation to abandon the approach because of its complexity or slow returns.

This exchange reflects a broader tension within the field between the cautious optimism of practitioners working within real constraints, and the strategic ambitions now being set through policy reform. It underscores the importance of holding space for disagreement and reflection, especially as prevention gains visibility and investment. Honest dialogue about what prevention is—and is not—is essential to ensuring that new mandates like the Code drive sustained, meaningful change rather than more surface-level performance.

That’s why the Code matters. It signals that universities must shift from reactive responses to proactive, systemic prevention. And for this shift to succeed, it must reflect the conditions that prevention teams are working within: under-resourced programs, fragmented leadership, and limited influence. The sector is not lacking in intent. What’s missing is alignment between policy ambition and operational reality. To assess the true potential of the Code, we need to examine what it mandates and be clear about its expectations, scope, and assumptions. This comparison reveals the distance between policy ambition and institutional reality and brings into focus the tensions that will shape how prevention is understood, resourced, and implemented in the years ahead.

Prevention in the Code

The Code establishes a clear obligation for universities to take reasonable steps to prevent GBV across all areas of their operations and environments (Department of Education, 2024). It signals that a culture of merely responding to incidents—or worse, inaction—is no longer acceptable. Institutions must now demonstrate that they are actively creating conditions that reduce the likelihood of harm occurring in the first

place. It's an ambitious directive, particularly within the sprawling, decentralised, and fast-moving ecosystem of higher education.

The Code also affirms what prevention practitioners and experts have long known: that organisational and cultural change is the real goal. Preventing violence means addressing the conditions that allow it to occur, including gender inequality, institutional hierarchies, disrespect, and the abuse of power. These hierarchies and systems aren't going anywhere anytime soon — they are embedded in how universities are structured, and meaningful attempts to reform them are often met with vigorous resistance (Bess et al., 2023). Perhaps the more immediate challenge, then, is to make them more accountable, transparent, and humane. This is no easy task. It requires education, reflection, dialogue, and sustained effort to shift both attitudes and institutional dynamics. Universities are being asked to invest in the slow, human work of transformation, work that doesn't produce immediate metrics or easy wins, but that, over time, may build better universities, in all aspects.

Framing this transformation as part of building a higher-performing university may feel like a concession, but it is often what compels university leaders to act. While the moral imperative to prevent GBV should be enough, the reality is that many leaders respond more readily to arguments framed around performance and reputation (Marginson, 2011). Thankfully, these aren't opposing agendas. A growing body of evidence shows that cultures marked by equity, safety, and inclusion are also more effective: they retain staff, engage students, improve collaboration, and enhance institutional credibility (Hunt et al., 2018; Workplace Gender Equality Agency [WGEA], 2018). The long-term returns of investing in prevention are both social and strategic, and in the deep neoliberal era we inhabit, it's often the strategic case that gains more traction, whether we like it or not. Done well, this work makes universities more just and more resilient. The challenge is to ensure this logic does not dilute the work's moral depth, but strengthens the case for sustained, impactful change.

Crucially, the Code recognises that this work requires specialist expertise. It acknowledges the role of trained prevention practitioners, like those who contributed to this article, and calls for their meaningful involvement in the design, implementation, and evaluation of institutional strategies. This is expressed by explicitly calling for the involvement of experts in the prevention of GBV, evidence-informed approaches, and trauma-informed practice, among other requirements that cement the expertise required to undertake prevention work (Department of Education, 2025). This is a vital inclusion, for both effectiveness and credibility. Too often, institutions have appointed high-profile public figures to advisory roles, committees, or working groups — individuals who may bring profile and leadership miles in other settings but have little connection to the day-to-day prevention efforts or campus realities. This risks establishing symbolic oversight without real traction. The Code marks a departure from these performative, compliance-driven approaches by insisting on engagement with the people who actually do the work.

Of course, there's also a risk here, which is evident when we look to the United States (US). In the wake of Title IX reforms, rather than building internal expertise and capacity, many universities turned to a burgeoning compliance industry (Linder et al., 2025). This shift created a landscape where institutions outsourced responsibility to external consultants and risk management firms and prioritised legal defensibility and institutional reputation over cultural transformation and justice (Linder et al., 2025). An industry-driven approach displaces the expertise of embedded staff, often those with deep relationships, lived experience, and longstanding equity knowledge, and replaces it with standardised, transactional solutions. The result has been symbolic action rather than substantive change, where resources are diverted to external compliance consultants and the everyday relational and pedagogical work of prevention is devalued and structurally sidelined within the institution (Linder et al., 2025). The lesson for Australia is clear: we already have a developing prevention workforce in universities, and the priority must be to invest in and grow this capability rather than sideline it in favour of tick-box solutions, as we have seen with our US counterparts.

Despite the challenges, the Code offers a practical sketch of what prevention might look like in a university setting. It's not a detailed playbook (yet), but it does provide the scaffolding: clear obligations, systemic scope, expert input, and accountability. For those of us working in prevention, it legitimises the work we've been doing for years, often on the margins, and offers the chance to do it more effectively, more collaboratively, and with the institutional mandate we've long needed. Some of the core questions it raises

about implementation, measurement, and cultural transformation are worth addressing. We now share vignettes, anecdotes, and insights from our own experience of working in this space to illustrate what prevention currently looks like on the ground and what it could become if fully embedded across institutions.

University prevention work in practice

As prevention practitioners from different institutions, we affirm that the Code is both overdue and essential. At the same time, the work of prevention in universities remains structurally and culturally constrained, and we remain skeptical about how a compliance-driven approach can help confront this. A major challenge is conceptual. While GBV is publicly condemned, many staff and students still misunderstand what prevention entails. Prevention is often mistaken for response or intervention—focused on removing perpetrators or excluding those perceived as threats—rather than understood as the long-term work of changing the structural and cultural conditions that enable violence in the first place. At best, it's often treated as an education or awareness-raising exercise, rather than a sustained strategy for institutional and cultural transformation.

At the same time, we feel confident that education initiatives, particularly those targeting undergraduate students in residential settings, have gained traction. These programs are now more visible, better resourced, and, in some cases, co-designed with students themselves. We have noted shifts in student engagement and awareness, especially in settings where education is embedded early and reinforced through peer-led models (e.g., Robertson et al., 2024). However, while these efforts are promising, the broader impact of this work—particularly in terms of victimisation prevalence or sustained bystander behaviour—remains difficult to measure (Heard et al., 2024; McCall et al., 2023). There is currently no shared, sector-wide understanding of what's working, where, and why, with available evidence mostly coming out of US contexts. Moreover, the Code signals that prevention must go well beyond student-focused, one-off education. It calls for structural and institutional change: coordinated leadership, embedded accountability, and the integration of prevention into the full range of university operations (Department of Education, 2024; Our Watch, 2022). In that context, even strong education programs, if left disconnected from wider strategies, risk student education efforts being treated as the maximum extent of institutional responsibility, rather than the minimum baseline from which broader, systemic change must grow.

Yet when education and awareness is treated as the limit of institutional effort, its scope becomes dangerously narrow. In our own experience we often see prevention treated as a response measure, activated after harm, not embedded to stop it beforehand. In one example, a team was brought in after serious misconduct by a senior academic. HR had intervened swiftly, the staff member removed with little transparency, and the community told not to discuss it. The broader conditions that enabled the abuse, including rigid hierarchies, seniority, entitlement, and lack of institutional response and accountability, went unexamined. The prevention team was tasked with supporting recovery, but without open acknowledgement of harm, the work became a form of reputational damage control rather than a process of recovery and repair. Prevention efforts in such contexts remain superficial. They can provide support and connection, but not the transformation needed to rebuild trust and shift power.

The Code's proposed ban on non-disclosure agreements signals a potential shift (Department of Education, 2024). If implemented and enforced, it would remove one of the key tools that can suppress institutional transparency (Funnell et al., 2018). It offers a chance to centre truth-telling and repair, giving prevention teams the space to operate in environments where harm is genuinely acknowledged. Whether institutions will embrace this shift remains to be seen.

We share the key concern that, from our observations, legal risk remains an influential driver of institutional action. Decisions are too often shaped by liability and brand management, rather than a commitment to cultural accountability (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020). Prevention teams are routinely asked to operate downstream from these choices and manage fractured communities without the authority to address how they got there. At the same time, prevention work must often start from scratch. Many staff, including university executives, come to it with limited awareness of gender dynamics or their own role in maintaining power imbalances and inequality. We acknowledge that the starting point is often unfamiliarity, not resistance. It offers a way in but also raises tough questions about the preparedness of those in power.

When senior leaders, well-paid and highly credentialed, express confusion about basic prevention principles, it underscores just how far we still must go.

While the Code does require universities to take evidence-informed action and demonstrate progress in prevention (Department of Education, 2024), we remain skeptical about how effective this requirement will be, and what “evidence-informed” can realistically mean given the limitations of the evidence base. This absence of guidance on how to collect and share nationally comparable data on effectiveness is a concern. Evidence must be collected longitudinally, using research design that is methodologically sound, in order to demonstrate how prevention activities are making a difference. While the cumulative effect of relational, values-based work might feel tangible to those working on the ground, the challenge of capturing its impact in ways that align with institutional expectations or compliance frameworks remains. The Code gestures toward an evidence-informed approach, but its requirements remain broad. The opportunity now is to move beyond aspiration and to define prevention by both its intent and the demonstrated outcomes.

One group that requires much greater attention in prevention efforts is international students. They make up a substantial portion of the university population, yet are often isolated from programs that build awareness, access, and safety. As practitioners, we have observed cultural taboos around sex and violence, limited language support, and uncertainty about visa protections, which create barriers for many students to access help or engage with institutional messaging. For example, in one case, a university restricted the distribution of health promotion materials in students’ first languages, based on a misguided assumption that full English immersion was part of the educational contract for our international cohorts. However, we must recognise that safety and wellbeing rely on more than academic assimilation and depend on communication that is linguistically and culturally meaningful. Research has shown that international students face unique vulnerabilities due to social isolation, unfamiliarity with local norms, and reluctance to engage with formal systems (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016).

The elephant in the room remains resourcing. Universities are expected to meet the Code’s obligations without any significant new investment from the government, aside from limited funding to establish a departmental workforce. Most institutions are dramatically under-resourced for the scale of work required. While some universities have full teams dedicated to prevention alone, many operate with one or two staff members covering both prevention and response. This mismatch is critical, as the Code sets out serious and necessary obligations. Meeting them requires a corresponding shift in how universities fund, staff, and structure this work, and indeed, how the government meaningfully supports them to do so.

These pressures are compounded by the broader financial and operational challenges facing the Australian higher education sector. The effects of COVID-19, heavy reliance on international student revenue, and years of policy uncertainty have left many institutions in a fragile state (Department of Education, 2023). Budget tightening has often hit equity and prevention initiatives hardest, particularly when they are difficult to rationalise from a cost-benefit perspective. Yet these are precisely the kinds of initiatives the Code demands. Without dedicated investment and structural reform, prevention will continue to be ambitious on paper, but precarious in practice.

Promising practice and small wins

Amid these challenges, we reflect on what it looks like when prevention is working, even in constrained, under-resourced settings. A shared observation between us is that when people are supported to reflect and connect prevention to their own values and contexts, change begins to take root. The shift that takes place when prevention is no longer seen as someone else’s responsibility but recognised as part of one’s own role is subtle but profound. It is in these moments that real transformation becomes possible.

Another key observation is that small but powerful shifts take place when prevention is given the time, trust, and relational grounding it needs. For example, a prevention team worked with a faculty’s teaching and learning division to integrate respectful relationships education into a core subject, supported by lecturers who were themselves engaged in the work. The result wasn’t just changed student awareness, but a visible shift in classroom dynamics. Another example highlights long-term, quiet engagement with professional staff, those often left out of prevention strategies, yet key to how campus culture is experienced. In this example, practitioners started by listening. It took months, but by the time they ran training, people were

ready. It wasn't compliance, it was curiosity. In this instance, prevention didn't arrive as a policy mandate. It grew through trusted relationships, co-design, and patience.

Prevention can also find footing in peer-led and cross-functional initiatives. One university had built a customised, scalable consent and healthy relationships education program that was reaching tens of thousands of staff and students and had been successfully adapted for both staff training and research settings. A collaboration with student leaders to co-develop messaging around consent and respect helped find language that reflected the lived experience and values of students, rather than the institutional voice. Yet another example relates to embedding prevention into staff induction processes, which began to shift how new employees understood their roles. In this context, staff don't just learn what to avoid, they learn what they could do to shape a safer environment.

This ethos of grounded, relational practice can extend beyond the formal university setting. In one institution, prevention staff were walking shoulder to shoulder with students, staff, and community members at a public event held after the death of an alumna due to intimate partner homicide. The invitation came from a student who had been volunteering in the space for years and brought along her entire soccer club to participate. These gestures are deliberate acts of alignment where prevention is not only communicated, but practiced in how people show up, walk together, and relate to one another in everyday institutional life.

What defines all these examples is not scale, funding, or even strategic positioning. It is continuity, relational practice, and a community-led mandate to stay with the work. As practitioners, we are clear-eyed about the limitations we face, but also hopeful about what's possible when we are trusted to lead prevention from a place of depth and care rather than metrics. These examples show that even under significant constraints, prevention can plant seeds for cultural change, especially when supported by people who understand both the system and the communities within it.

Yet the examples shared above can't be mistaken for evidence that the system is working. They are proof of what is possible despite the system. These local wins, powerful and important as they are, remain fragile. They rely on individuals who often work in isolation, with limited authority and insecure employment. Practitioners are building transformative practice under conditions that routinely undermine it. Without sustained investment, leadership, and structural alignment, even the most promising efforts risk being erased by turnover, budget cuts, or shifting political priorities. The Code offers a chance to embed these strengths more deeply if institutions recognise that meaningful prevention cannot be scaled through compliance alone. It must be nurtured, resourced, and led by those who know what the work truly requires.

Conclusion

The introduction of the Code marks a welcome and long-overdue shift in how universities are expected to address GBV. It signals formal recognition that quality prevention work is essential for a meaningful and sustained reduction in gender-based harm on university campuses. This article argues that while the Code is a critical starting point, it cannot achieve transformative change on its own. Prevention is long-term, relational work that must be woven into the fabric of institutional life.

The evidence and reflections shared here reveal a clear gap between policy intent and on-the-ground reality. We described how prevention is often misunderstood, under-resourced, and sidelined. Yet despite these challenges, meaningful progress is being made. Across the sector, prevention leaders are building trust, engaging communities, and embedding change in ways that reflect deep care and cultural insight. This work is promising but it remains precarious without the investment, authority, and leadership it deserves.

A stronger evidence base is also needed. The Code rightly calls for evidence-informed action, but current measures often miss cultural shifts, behavioural change, and long-term safety. Practitioners are ready to lead this learning but need systems that value and resource their insight.

For the Code to succeed, it must go beyond compliance. It must support those already doing the work, strengthen their capacity, and fund prevention as a long-term strategic commitment. With the right support, the Code can become a lever for real change and a catalyst for a safer, more accountable sector.

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Please cite this paper as:

Radcliffe, J., Gadow, F., Leary, H., & Pruscino, C. (2026). The prevention mandate: Aligning compliance with transformation to end gender-based violence in higher education. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 34(1), 5–14. <https://doi.org/10.30688/janzssa.2026-1-10>



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