

## Moving Beyond Institutional Boundaries: A Collaborative Approach to Primary Prevention

Laura Burge  
Deakin University

Fiona Marshall  
Monash University

### Abstract

*Preventing and responding to incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment on university campuses remains an ongoing challenge for tertiary institutions across Australia and around the world. The growing recognition that universities have an obligation to address sexual harm has led to increased cooperation and collaboration among universities. This paper provides an overview of one such example of sector collaboration—the Victorian Tertiary Primary Prevention Network (TPPN). This community of practice brings together practitioners to share resources, ideas, successes, and challenges in relation to the promotion of safe and respectful university communities, and the prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment. The paper also highlights transferable elements of the Network, drawing attention to four principles that should be taken into consideration by those seeking to explore or develop similar cross-institutional programs of work.*

### Keywords

Primary prevention, Sexual assault, Sexual harassment, Collaboration

### Introduction

Sexual assault and sexual harassment have been issues of concern and focus within universities across Australia, and globally, for many years. National surveys collecting data on the scale and nature of students' experiences continue to highlight the prevalence of incidents, with calls on universities to do more to prevent, and respond to, sexual harm.

In 2017, the results of the first national independent survey into sexual assault and sexual harassment experienced by students at Australian universities, conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), was released via the *Change the Course* report (AHRC 2017). In the wake of the report's release, universities grappled with nine recommendations focusing on five areas of action, including:

1. leadership and governance,
2. changing attitudes and behaviours,
3. university responses to sexual assault and sexual harassment,
4. monitoring and evaluation, and
5. residential colleges and university residences.

As part of the response to the report, Monash University reached out to colleagues across the sector, proposing a meeting to further discuss the recommendations, challenges, and opportunities for sharing good practice and collaboration. This saw the establishment of the Victorian Tertiary Primary Prevention Network (henceforth, referred to as the Network). The Network's first meeting was held on 2 November 2017, involving staff from Monash University, Deakin University, La Trobe University, and Swinburne University.

The primary purpose of the Network was to bring together practitioners in the sector as part of a community of practice, providing a forum for exchange of information, knowledge, and expertise,

and a network of support for staff to share challenges and opportunities. In these early days, the Network was largely informal, with no official terms of reference, only verbal commitments regarding purpose and expectations. All meetings were held in person to build a sense of safety, confidentiality, and trust among those involved, allowing for open and honest conversations and reflections.

During 2018, the Network met eight times. Universities shared hosting responsibilities, discussing a wide range of topics related to prevention, as well as the implementation of recommendations from the *Change the Course* report. Strong working relationships developed between the small group of staff. Colleagues were able to share cross-institution opportunities for attendance at events and professional development, as well as the expansion of networking opportunities within and beyond higher education. Many meetings during this time involved academics and prevention experts from external organisations presenting their research or areas of practice. Membership grew beyond the original four universities throughout 2018, with most universities in Victoria represented by the end of the year.

In 2019, efforts were made to formalise the Network via Terms of Reference and the invitation of membership to universities beyond Victoria. Meetings were shifted to a hybrid model of online and face-to-face, for those who could not attend in person, to enable accessibility. The engagement of academic experts and community specialists continued where relevant. Unfortunately, the expansion of the Network and a required shift to predominantly online meetings resulted in a loss of some of the more open and honest sharing of challenges which had previously been of value. In 2020, with the onset and challenges of COVID-19, the Network lost further momentum due to competing priorities, limitations on staff time, and restructuring within most universities.

In 2021, Australian universities commissioned and funded a second survey collecting data on the scale and nature of university student experiences of safety, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. The National Student Safety Survey was conducted by the Social Research Centre, with results released in March 2022 (Social Research Centre, 2022). The results released showed little positive change in the prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment across the sector and subsequently fostered a renewed appetite for collaboration amongst universities. At the request of Deakin University's Vice-Chancellor, a paper outlining the opportunities for staff across the sector to work together was prepared by Deakin's Respectful Communities team and shared with the Victorian Vice-Chancellor's Committee for discussion. The general sentiment of collaboration was endorsed, providing a renewed mandate for further discussion of sector-wide projects. Deakin University subsequently coordinated a face-to-face workshop in June 2022, providing an open invitation to staff across the sector to gather as a group. Attended by 16 staff from six universities across the state (Deakin University, La Trobe University, Monash University, Australian Catholic University, Federation University, and Victoria University) the group concluded the productive day with an agreement to progress three key priority projects:

1. reinvigoration of the Network, including a commitment to an annual face-to-face professional practice forum and Network Coordinator,
2. exploration of opportunities to enhance communication of primary prevention and the program of work across the sector, and
3. a coordinated sector-wide "respect" campaign.

## **Reinvigorating the Network**

A year on, significant progress has been made by the Network. In post-workshop meetings, a new Terms of Reference and logo were created and endorsed by members. A range of administrative enhancements were also made, including the creation of an accessible OneDrive; a private members' LinkedIn page; templates for meeting agendas and minutes; and a commitment to the distribution of regular member updates outlining progress on projects and sharing resources, links, and relevant news. The position of a volunteer Network Coordinator (held by Deakin University) was created and implemented to lead the group and its strategic direction, also taking responsibility for providing biannual reports to the Victorian Vice Chancellor's Committee. The creation of the role further operates to ensure ongoing momentum of the Network and priority projects.

Network meetings are generally held online every second month, involving members from across the state, with member institutions rotating responsibility for coordination of meetings. Agendas and discussion topics are Network Coordinator- and member-led, with academic and external specialists invited to speak on occasion.

In addition to regular meetings, in February 2023, the first face-to-face Staff Professional Practice Forum was coordinated by Deakin University at its Melbourne Downtown campus, bringing together 19 staff from five universities (Monash University, La Trobe University, Deakin University, RMIT University, and Swinburne University). As part of the event, criminal lawyer, researcher, and author, Katrina Marson, shared insights into her role in advocating for universal access to comprehensive relationships and sexuality education. The forum also provided the opportunity for attendees to discuss challenges, examples of practice, and potential opportunities for future priority projects on topics including increasing engagement from under-represented cohorts; data collection, evidence, and evaluation; affirmative consent; bystander intervention; and cultural education. The in-person session re-instilled in the Network the original purpose and intention of the group—a safe and supportive forum for staff undertaking the challenging work that is the prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment.

## **Enhancing communication**

The second priority project for the Network focused on the exploration of opportunities to enhance communication of primary prevention and work across the sector. Areas of focus have included exploration of the development of guidelines and/or training for executive and communication leads within universities, noting the complexity of language and the burden on institutions without dedicated subject matter experts. As part of this initiative, the Network supported and promoted Our Watch's facilitation of training on "Guidelines for reporting violence against women" for relevant university communications staff in July and October 2022.

A second area of focus has involved the creation of a draft glossary on gendered violence. The glossary is intended to promote the use of consistent language across the sector and explain key theoretical terms, Victorian legislation, and Victorian Government policy frameworks. It also includes links to relevant Australian and international resources.

## **A coordinated respect campaign**

As part of the final and, arguably, more ambitious priority projects, members from Monash University, Deakin University, Torrens University, Swinburne University, Australian Catholic University, Victoria University, The University of Melbourne, La Trobe University, and RMIT University gathered throughout the latter half of 2022 and into early 2023 to design, plan, and deliver a coordinated and collaborative respect campaign. "Respect at Uni Week" was subsequently held in March 2023 at individual universities, subject to preferred timing, between weeks three and

five (13–31 March). An agreed logo and collective statement were shared by participating universities on their websites as follows:

*Victorian universities are joining forces to promote the importance of respect, equality and inclusion on our campuses and online spaces. Our communities should be safe and free from violence. The National Student Safety Survey has revealed universities must continue to improve their response to, and prevention of sexual harassment and sexual assault. We invite students and staff at all Victorian universities to participate in the upcoming Respect at Uni Week activities and to help create a safe and respectful community. Preventing gender-based violence starts with a culture of respect – now and always. Find out more about the inaugural Victorian Respect Week activities on your campus by visiting [individual university website hyperlink].*

As part of the campaign, universities facilitated a range of on-campus and online events and activities, with programs including guest speakers, online pledge walls, on-campus activations, webinars, and capacity building and awareness raising initiatives. A series of events were also open to all students and staff across the state. These included an online safety webinar facilitated by Deakin University in partnership with the eSafety Commissioner's Office (Deakin University), Monash's speaker series event discussing "Chivalry vs Equity", a virtual film screening of *The Bystander Moment* by Swinburne University, and an online privilege walk by Victoria University. Students were the primary audience for events and activities, but many universities promoted them to staff, members of the broader public, and alumni.

Overall, the Respect at Uni Campaign was considered a success for all universities involved, particularly noting the limited lead in and planning time in its inaugural year. In review and reflection, key learnings from the campaign have included the importance of central coordination (a nominated university lead for the project, shared theme, and agreed consistent messaging), the ability for institutions to determine and deliver individual programming subject to available resources, the offer of open and shared events and activities (available and promoted to all when deemed appropriate), the need for a longer lead in and planning to enable university-wide engagement, and the value of increased student engagement and voice in planning and delivery stages.

### **The challenges and benefits of collaboration**

Whilst the Network has certainly made progress in advancing various projects and bringing together staff across the sector once again post-COVID-19, challenges remain, including administration and logistics, the impact of the location of meetings and forums on staff engagement, staff turnover and burnout, and complexity of the topic.

Firstly, sharing of resources, information, and documents amongst staff from multiple universities can be challenging due to the use of varying platforms, levels of security, restrictions, and access. A shared link to a OneDrive folder owned by the Network Coordinator has offered a partial solution; however, the use of a OneDrive requires an individual owner which presents challenges in the event the staff member leaves their position or their university. Effective communication amongst members can also be difficult with attempts to avoid overuse of email through the creation of the member updates shared by the Network Coordinator.

Secondly, as is the case more broadly in education, whilst online and hybrid meetings have offered convenience and flexibility, interaction and authentic engagement can be stifled. Face-to-face gatherings, whilst more logistically challenging for staff spread across the state to attend, have undoubtedly enhanced Network outcomes, including greater engagement, honest and reflective discussion, and commitment to ongoing collaborative programs of work.

Third, the sector has experienced significant change in recent years, with restructures, changing priorities, and reallocation of workloads. Levels of resourcing vary throughout the sector, with some staff single-handedly tasked with primary prevention work limiting their ability to engage with the Network. Staff involvement and contribution remains voluntary, and above and beyond day-to-day tasks; thus, also limiting engagement and ability to undertake additional projects.

Finally, while high-risk and high-profile topics, sexual assault and sexual harassment are also highly complex and, at times, controversial. It can be challenging for staff to feel comfortable to share challenges openly and honestly or showcase examples of good practice for fear of “tall poppy syndrome” or criticism. Sharing of resources can also be challenging, with uncertainty around what can be freely distributed and discussed whilst ensuring maintenance of institutional intellectual property.

Notwithstanding such challenges, there are significant benefits and advantages of sector collaboration. Working in unity to address and prevent sexual harm within higher education provides the opportunity to share and pool resources, capitalise on expertise and specialist knowledge across institutions, and use effective partnerships to design innovative programs, campaigns, and initiatives. Access to a network of prevention colleagues with whom to share ideas, opportunities, and challenges also provides support and encouragement in a role which can be difficult and disheartening at times. Collaboration further promotes a strong statement of shared commitment to respect and sexual harm prevention to our students, staff, and broader community.

### **Principles of transferability**

The Network provides an example of emerging effective sector collaboration in practice, and there are four transferable principles which could be taken into consideration by those seeking to explore or develop similar cross-institutional programs of work.

A starting point is the identification of areas of common ground, opportunities for collaboration, and key partners, with consideration of the benefits and costs or implications of involvement. As part of the process, a core group should seek to identify colleagues who can act as champions to be part of founding conversations, form additional connections, and ultimately drive early action. Starting with a small circle of committed and passionate allies can be helpful to progress activity in initial stages.

Setting a clear vision, with mutually agreed achievable goals and desired outcomes is also important. This may be as simple as agreeing to a regular meeting schedule, developing terms of reference, or facilitating a one-off face-to-face gathering to kickstart ongoing collaboration. As part of these early conversations, members should seek to clarify how collaboration will work in practice, frequency of engagement, minimum agreed levels of involvement or commitment, assignment of roles and responsibilities, and agreed touch points to report or provide updates.

Garnering institutional support—initially from direct management and from senior leaders or executive post-establishment—is also critical in helping to drive action and greater engagement. Such support is important when noting that members may potentially need to undertake additional duties or responsibilities beyond day-to-day tasks, including the role of the Network Coordinator or in leading priority projects. Maintaining executive support helps to ensure commitment from members who feel that their involvement and engagement in any collaborative projects is

recognised and acknowledged. Providing progress reports detailing initiatives and achievements and outlining the contribution of members and institutions provides a helpful forum for seeking ongoing endorsement.

Finally, it is important to ensure awareness and acknowledgement that individual and institutional contributions may vary subject to resourcing, staffing, and expertise. Whilst this may not feel like a level playing field, all should agree on the collective value of working together and understand the limitations imposed on some members to engage.

### **Looking ahead**

The Network continues to meet bimonthly throughout the year, with ongoing discussion and progress reporting on priority projects. For the year ahead, the Network has committed to five priority projects, three of which are continuing programs of work, whilst the remaining two are emerging areas of interest to be explored. Projects include a second Respect at Uni campaign, ongoing work in relation to communications, a follow-up professional practice forum, review of opportunities for public prevention and sexual harm data reporting, and collaborative training/module development.

#### ***A 2024 Respect at Uni Week***

Based on the success of the 2023 campaign, universities will once again seek to coordinate and deliver this shared campaign across the state. An opportunity presents to reuse the agreed logo and collective statement. The flexible nature of this campaign—with institutions able to use agreed messaging and collateral, but coordinate their own events based on resourcing—makes this a particularly viable option for sector collaboration.

### ***Communications***

Work will continue in this space, with additional exploration of a sustainable and cost-effective targeted communications education resource that is specific to the university context to support both communications and media teams.

#### ***A follow-up 2024 staff professional practice forum***

The Network is committed to the facilitation of an annual Staff Professional Practice Forum, with coordination rotated amongst institutional members and Monash University volunteering to host in 2024. A face-to-face gathering remains of incredible value to the Network and allows for the discussion and selection of agreed priority projects for the year ahead.

### ***Respect and sexual harm reporting***

A small number of universities across Australia (including Deakin University, The University of Melbourne, Monash University, and the University of New South Wales) have begun to publicly report annual respect and sexual harm prevention work and data. The Network is interested in continuing discussions and exploration of the standardisation and publication of both prevention work and sexual harm data reporting.

### ***Sector training/module development***

The Network is interested in further exploring whether there is an opportunity for universities to collectively produce one or more modules and/or training which could be applied across the sector; for example, a bystander intervention training program or one which outlines emerging legislation regarding affirmative consent.

## **Conclusion**

While there are certainly challenges and limitations, recent outcomes from the Network showcase the benefits of collaboration for students, staff, university communities, and the higher education sector more broadly. Whilst resources and level of commitment may vary and waver, it is clear from the Network's initial progress outcomes that the sector has much to gain from pooling resources, knowledge, and expertise, and providing support for staff undertaking this critical program of work.

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### The authors may be contacted via:

Laura Burge — [l.burge@deakin.edu.au](mailto:l.burge@deakin.edu.au)

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