

## Universities Australia submission to Senate Committee inquiry into domestic violence and gender inequality

8 April 2016

Universities Australia welcomes the opportunity to lodge a submission to the Finance and Public Administration References Committee inquiry into domestic violence and gender inequality.

Universities Australia (UA) is the peak body representing Australia's 39 universities. Our mission is to influence the national policy framework in ways that affirm Australia's position as a highly innovative and educated nation.

### **Ensuring the safety of the university community**

Our universities recognise that domestic violence and gender inequality is a significant social issue and that all parts of the community need to take action to reduce and eliminate violence against women and gender inequality. Over many years—both individually and collectively—Australia's universities have implemented numerous policies, programs and processes to ensure the safety of the university community.

Earlier this year Universities Australia, in conjunction with former Sex Discrimination Commissioner Ms Elizabeth Broderick AO, launched a sector-wide campaign—*Respect. Now. Always.*—to prevent sexual assault and harassment. This campaign highlights the determination of Australia's universities to ensure students and staff are safe from sexual violence and clearly communicates the sector's zero tolerance approach to these unacceptable behaviours.

The first stage of the campaign aims to empower those who have experienced sexual assault and harassment to seek support. A suite of communication materials was provided to each university, outlining specific examples of unacceptable behaviour. These materials are being customised by universities to detail support services available at their institution, ensuring that *Respect. Now. Always.* is a national campaign with local leadership. This suite is appended to this submission for your information.

As part of the campaign, the sector has committed to participate in a national survey on the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment in the university community. The first of its kind in the sector, the survey will provide robust, reliable data upon which universities can draw to gain a better understanding of the issue. The data from the survey will be used to inform a set of best practice institutional protocols and policies on responding to sexual violence.

As the campaign progresses, UA will continue to collaborate with Our Watch and the National Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service (1800 RESPECT).

Building on UA's Ten Point Action Plan to Increase Student Safety (2009), our Good Practice Guidelines on Enhancing Student Safety (2011) look directly at the issue of student safety as a first and foundation component of the student experience. Both the Guidelines and the Action Plan are used continually by universities to inform and improve their policies and practices, and specify that support services be made available to students who report an experience of violence, assault, sexual harassment or relationship abuse. The Guidelines also state that institutional policies and plans need to encompass safety on campus; safety at home; safety on transport; safety on the street; safety at play; safety contacts; and incident reporting. This approach recognises that breaches of safety occur off campus and that the sector is committed to addressing these issues regardless of where such incidents take place.

All universities work closely with their local police service as well as specialised counselling agencies to provide support and assistance to victims of violence.

At an institutional level, there are policies and procedures in place to support those who report an experience of sexual assault or harassment. These policies range from codes of conduct to broader student and staff safety policies. Each university also offers free support and counselling services for students seeking assistance, with several universities, such as Victoria University, establishing dedicated 'safety units' within their institutions. University administrations are uniting with student groups on their grass-roots campaigns to address and prevent gendered violence in their institutions, such as 'The Pledge' campaign at Australian National University.

Universities are also harnessing mobile technologies to improve student safety. For example, the University of Queensland has recently implemented a smartphone safety app that directly connects students and staff with the institution's security team or emergency services. This app also enables the university to alert its community about safety issues on campuses through push notifications.

## **Addressing gender inequality**

The higher education sector is committed to improving gender equality more broadly.

UA is currently developing a Strategy for Women as part of the sector's commitment to equity and diversity. The strategy will focus on a broad range of gender equity issues within universities, including addressing the career pipeline for the advancement of academic and professional women staff, flexible and equitable work, gender pay equity, and supporting staff with families. The strategy will also encourage action plans in universities to tackle gender inequity. UA also supports UA Executive Women, a group that aims to increase participation of senior academic and professional women in Australian universities through mentoring programs, cross-sectoral professional development for women, and increasing awareness of the underrepresentation of women and unconscious bias in the human resources departments of universities.

UA is a proud supporter of the Science in Australia Gender Equity program—an initiative of the Australian Academy of Science in partnership with the Australian Academy of Technological

Sciences and Engineering—that addresses gender equity in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine. The program is governed by ten principles of equity and inclusion, and provides an evaluation and accreditation framework to identify and address gender inequity in science organisations.

As demonstrated by various policies, program and initiatives, Australia's universities are committed to our part in addressing and preventing violence against women and improving gender equality. UA welcomes further discussion on how the higher education sector can contribute to the Commonwealth Government's *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010–2022*.

Yours sincerely,



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