

# SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO FAMILY, DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

July 2020

Universities Australia (UA) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the House Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs' inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence.

UA is the peak body for Australia's 39 comprehensive universities. There is no higher priority for universities than the safety and wellbeing of their students and staff. With a community of more than 1.4 million students and 130,000 staff, universities play a vital leadership role in preventing and responding to violence and harassment, and combatting online abuse wherever it exists.

UA and our member universities work closely with the specialist family, domestic and sexual violence prevention and response sector, survivor and victim advocates and governments to address violence against women. The work we undertake is informed by experts and reflects best practice.

## ***RESPECT. NOW. ALWAYS.***

In February 2016, UA launched the *Respect. Now. Always.* initiative. A world first, this comprehensive initiative brings together the Australian university sector to collectively address sexual violence in our communities. Since 2016, UA has:

- commissioned the first-ever national survey of students on sexual assault and sexual harassment to help universities better understand the nature and scale of these behaviours;
- developed best practice guidelines for sexual assault and sexual harassment responses in collaboration with the sexual violence prevention and response sector, student victim and survivor advocates, university counsellors and senior leaders;
- published a set of principles for respectful supervisory relationships, in partnership with the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, the National Tertiary Education Union and the Australian Council of Graduate Research;
- in collaboration with the Australian Psychological Society, released an online training program for all university staff on the drivers of sexual violence and how to respond to disclosures, with more training programs for senior university leaders and mental health clinicians under development; and
- established a community of practice across the sector, with more than 200 university staff as members, sharing best practice and amplifying the reach of their efforts.

The work under *Respect. Now. Always.* complements and builds on the longstanding work of individual institutions over many years to promote the safety and wellbeing of students and staff. Every university provides counselling services to students, and has a dedicated, expert-informed committee to address sexual violence at their institution.

Universities have close partnerships with external specialist sexual violence support services to ensure that victims and survivors have access to expert care and support. Since August 2017, universities have implemented a further 800 major actions and initiatives in their institutions to prevent and respond to sexual violence. This includes first responder training for student leaders, consent and bystander training for staff and students, and working with students to co-design prevention programs.

Violence prevention requires continuous effort and long-term commitment. In keeping with the university sector's commitment to evidence-based decision-making, UA has commissioned and funded the Social Research Centre, in partnership with Associate Professor Anastasia Powell, to conduct the next national student survey in 2021. This will inform universities' next steps to achieve sustained change.

## PRIMARY PREVENTION

In February 2019, UA announced its partnership with Our Watch and the Victorian Government to develop an evidence-based, whole-of-institution model to address the gendered drivers of violence against women and LGBTIQ people in universities. Called *Respect and Equality in Universities*, this project is the first of its kind in the world.

Gender inequality sets the scene for gender-based violence against both women and LGBTIQ people. Over the last 18 months we have supported four pilot universities to examine how they promote gender equality across all domains of the institution, such as research, teaching, student life and community activities. The model will include a specific set of workplace principles (based on Our Watch's Workplace Equality and Respect Standards), training packages for students and staff, and resources and toolkits on how to promote gender equality and address the drivers of violence. The model will be released to the sector in early 2021.

## TACKLING ONLINE ABUSE

Online safety is a critical and growing part of UA's work to prevent and respond to gender-based harassment and assault in universities. UA is keenly aware of, and concerned by, the increase in online harassment, image-based abuse and sextortion as people spend more time online. Many of our students and staff are part of groups that are at particular risk of online abuse, including young women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from LGBTIQ communities and people with disability.

UA has recently partnered with the eSafety Commissioner to develop a Toolkit for Universities containing 14 resources offering targeted advice to universities, academics and teaching staff, and students. It includes guidance on how to prevent, prepare for and respond to online safety incidents and the safe and positive use of online classes and collaboration tools. UA continues to work with its partners to address technology-facilitated abuse, including as part of its primary prevention work.

## TEMPORARY VISA HOLDERS

UA and its members are extremely concerned for the safety and welfare of temporary visa holders, including students, in Australia. International students make a profound contribution to Australia's economic and cultural fabric, and we should make every effort to ensure they are safe and well during their stay.

Complex cultural, social and structural factors can increase international students' risk of sexual and intimate partner violence, both inside and outside of university settings. Preventing sexual violence begins with promoting bodily autonomy and healthy sexual relationships, but many international students arrive in Australia with limited understanding and knowledge of sexual and reproductive health including consent and contraception.

Students face extra barriers in engaging with prevention programs and health services, including social isolation, cultural stigma, concerns about visa status and residency, costs, and a lack of familiarity with the

Australian health system. These barriers have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with temporary visa holders excluded from almost all forms of government assistance. Many students have lost employment and have limited support networks and often finite resources available to them.

Universities have undertaken a range of projects under *Respect. Now. Always.* specifically targeted to international students, including sexual health workshops, peer educator programs, and providing information in-language. While we have a leadership role, we recognise that these activities need to be accompanied and reinforced by accessible and culturally safe prevention programs and support services outside university settings.

All international students are required to have Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) for the duration of their study in Australia. From 2011, insurers have not been required to provide cover or pay benefits for pregnancy-related services, including births and terminations, within the first 12 months of a person's arrival in Australia. This is a missed opportunity to promote healthy sexual relationships, encourage early help-seeking, support women's bodily autonomy and identify women experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, violence. It creates another barrier for women seeking to break the cycle and can perpetuate feelings of shame, fear, and embarrassment in reporting sexual violence. It is essential that all women are empowered to make decisions which promote their health, safety, and recovery regardless of their visa status.

#### **Recommendations:**

UA recommends that the next National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children:

- maintain a broad focus on all gender-based violence, including technology-facilitated abuse and sexual violence, both as forms of domestic and family violence and as standalone crimes;
- continue to invest in and grow Australia's global leadership in primary prevention including evidence-based whole-of-setting approaches to violence prevention; and
- improve primary prevention and service responses for communities who experience multiple forms of discrimination and inequity, including LGBTIQ people and temporary visa holders.