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Universities have a problem with sexual assault and harassment: here's how to fix it

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University students need more, and better, education in sexual violence prevention strategies. Shutterstock

Universities in Australia have a serious problem with sexual assault and sexual harassment. The Australian Human Rights Commission's survey, to be released today, documents that large numbers of students have experienced sexual assault and harassment.

This is no surprise. National and international studies have already established that the risks of sexual and dating violence are highest among university-aged populations. And key risk factors for sexual violence, including sexist norms and gender inequalities, thrive in some campus contexts.

Universities are already adopting systems and policies for responding to victims and survivors. But they also must act to prevent sexual assault and harassment from happening in the first place.

Education is a key response

It may be tempting for universities to adopt tokenistic measures aimed largely at placating parents

Author



Michael Flood

Associate Professor in Sociology,
Queensland University of Technology

and reassuring international student markets. But a real effort demands more comprehensive strategies to prevent violence among students and staff.

A key element of campus prevention efforts should be violence prevention education. Teaching and learning strategies are the most widely used tools of violence prevention.

There is significant scholarship in this field, including more than 100 published evaluations of university-based prevention programs. These show that face-to-face education programs are effective in violence prevention and reduction.

If done well, they can reduce students' adherence to attitudes that support rape, decrease victim-blaming, increase students' willingness to intervene, and even lower rates of actual perpetration. However, if poorly designed and implemented, some programs produce no positive impact or even make things worse.

It will be useless, and indeed harmful, if universities adopt programs that fall short of standards for effective practice in violence prevention education.

Some Australian universities already host programs on sexual consent, healthy relationships, bystander intervention, and related topics. These programs are of varying quality. Few if any meet well-established criteria for effective practice.

Most are far too brief to make change, comprising only one or two hours of instruction. Most are not designed to be sustained or integrated into the institution. And none have been subjected to robust impact evaluation (although some are based on other, evaluated programs).

Importance of a holistic approach

Effective practice in violence prevention education on campus has five essential elements:

- a whole-of-institution approach
- a long-term vision and funding
- effective curriculum delivery
- relevant and tailored practice
- evaluation.

Whatever means a university adopts to educate its students about violence, these must be embedded in a whole-of-institution approach. This includes educating students and staff, changing organisational policies and practices, and building an equitable university culture.

Reviews of violence prevention and relationships education are unanimous in advocating a whole-of-

organisation or institution-wide approach. This includes in the university context, in particular.

This also requires systems of response to victims and perpetrators, stakeholder involvement (including from students and community violence-focused agencies), accountability systems, and reporting on outcomes.

Prevention requires a long-term approach, including resourcing, staffing, and senior-level leadership.

What is an effective program?

What does the effective delivery of violence prevention curriculums look like?

They must tackle the factors known to drive violence, including violence-supportive and sexist attitudes and gender inequalities.

They also must tackle both physical and sexual violence. In practice these often overlap and co-occur, as do their risk and protective factors.

Effective programs are interactive, participatory, and involve small-group learning. They include activities focused on skills development (seeking consent, resolving conflict, and so on). They have protocols in place for responding to disclosures of victimisation and perpetration.

To work well, programs must run for long enough and intensively enough to produce change. While brief, one-session programs among students are common, none have demonstrated lasting effects on risk factors or behaviour.

Lengthier programs have greater impacts, as a wide range of reviews and analyses have shown. At least five classroom sessions is a reasonable minimum.

Both mixed-sex and single-sex classes have advantages and disadvantages, and the optimum strategy may be a sequenced mix of both.

Finally, it should be university staff who teach violence prevention education on campus. This facilitates a whole-of-institution approach, enables more effective integration of curricula, and fosters student wellbeing.

While some recommend using peer educators (other students), a review and meta-analysis find that peer educators are no more effective or less effective than professional presenters.

The fourth essential element of effective violence prevention on campuses is relevant and tailored practice. Good-practice programs are informed by knowledge of their audiences and local contexts, and are tailored for particular campus populations.

Finally, universities must evaluate and improve their violence prevention efforts, gathering robust data on their impacts on violence-related attitudes and behaviours.

Australian universities have a critical opportunity to adopt world-leading initiatives in campus-based prevention. There are already strong prevention frameworks available such as Change the Story and national plans of action.

Overseas, university bodies such as the Universities UK Taskforce have shown national-level leadership. It is time for Australian universities to step up and adopt a comprehensive, long-term, and multi-pronged prevention strategy.


If you need support, help is available.

** National university support line: 1800 572 224 (From July 31 to November 30, 2017)*

** 1800 RESPECT: 1800 737 732*

** Lifeline: 13 11 14*

** Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636*

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