

What Were You Wearing Australia (WWYW)

Email: whatwereyouwearingaus@gmail.com

Website: www.whatwereyouwearingaus.org



WWYW Australia's Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

Executive Summary

- Agreement with the issues identified in **Section 3.2.3.2: Addressing harm**. We support the call for improved institutional governance to the extent it leads to better, enforceable policies against sexual assault and harassment, perpetrated and experienced by students and staff, as well as, occurring on university campuses.
 - We strongly recommend the integration of diverse victim-survivor perspectives in these processes.
- Agreement with the Report's emphasis on supporting minority groups, such as First Nations peoples, people from regional, rural and remote areas and low socio-economic backgrounds and students with disabilities.
- We recommend the implementation of a comprehensive, survivor-centered approach to address sexual assault and harassment on university campuses through uniform cross-institutional policies, preventative education, accessible reporting mechanisms, responsive investigative processes, and transparent accountability measures. We implore the Universities Accord to include a focus of these measures for gender and sexuality diverse students, who are disproportionately affected by sexual violence.
- 5 recommendations are presented to the Australian Universities Accord to improve upon prevention and incidents of sexual assault on campus'.

Submission

This submission contains *What Were You Wearing (WWYW) Australia's* response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. This submission focuses on the issues of sexual assault and harassment experienced by university students, particularly those occurring on

university campuses. *WWYW Australia* is a not-for-profit organisation aiming to end sexual violence in through advocacy, law reform and education.

WWYW Australia welcomes the release of the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report and commend its ambitious scope and foresight. We applaud the Panel on its proposal of five immediate actions to be taken, which will undoubtedly improve access to and promote student retention in higher education for women and minority groups including First Nations peoples, people from regional, rural, and remote areas, people from low socio-economic backgrounds and those with disabilities. In particular, we appreciate the recognition of concern for the safety of students and staff by the Panel in **Priority Action 5**. That said, we highlight the omission of any specific focus on sexual violence experienced by certain vulnerable groups, in particular women and gender diverse people.

We note the Panel's finding that enhanced university governance is needed as part of a new approach to the sector. We concur with the assessment that strengthening institutional governance is a pivotal foundation to developing a high functioning system in the higher education landscape. Strengthening governance should encompass direct measures against sexual assault and harassment, both perpetrated and experienced by university students and staff, as well as, incidents occurring on university campuses generally, we are in full support. To reiterate data referred to in the report, since starting university, 4.5% of students were sexually assaulted and 16.1% were sexually harassed, according to the 2021 National Student Safety Survey¹. The existing approach to reduce the incidence of sexual assault and harassment on university campuses is clearly inadequate. *WWYW Australia* advocates for increased transparency, monitoring, and accountability systems. Moreover, we strongly recommend the integration of diverse victim survivor perspectives in these processes.

We recommend establishing standardised and cohesivity across universities' policies against sexual assault and harassment. A concerted effort to establish a consistent high standard allows institutions to better safeguard students against sexual violence and ensure perpetrators are held accountable by a fair and transparent framework. Further, we promote the development of trauma-informed prevention education programs for incoming students on consent and

¹ W Heywood, P Myers, A Powell, G Meikle and D Nguyen, 2022, *National Student Safety Survey: Report on the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in 2021*, The Social Research Centre.

respectful relationships, as well as universities' reporting procedures and investigative processes. We also passionately encourage the engagement of voices from disproportionately affected and marginalised communities, to acknowledge their unique barriers to seeking help and reporting. In all, we recommend the implementation of a comprehensive, survivor centered approach to address sexual assault and harassment on campus through uniform policies, preventative education, accessible reporting systems, responsive investigative processes, and transparent accountability via publication of annual reports.

Consequent upon limited efforts across tertiary institutions, systemic issues persist across the higher education sector to disadvantage women and gender diverse people. Women currently make up close to 60% of domestic enrolments², however, their studies and future career prospects are hindered through both prior exposure and the threat of sexual assault and harassment. Such incidents profoundly impact student's mental health, and are associated with high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), clinical depression and anxiety and general feelings of unsafety. A systematic review has shown that the experience of sexual assault on university students can lead to higher rates of failure, nonattendance, dropping out and delayed academic progression³. Moreover, these incidents erode students' trust in tertiary education institutions' support systems, making it less likely for victim-survivors to seek help or report. The pervasive nature of sexual assault and harassment contributes to an unsafe campus environment, which may tarnish the reputation of Australian universities, leading to a decrease in participation by deterring prospective students.

Sexual assault and harassment is not just experienced by students at universities, but also among the workforce employed in the tertiary education sector. In order for Australian universities to be 'exemplary employers', a target outlined under **Priority Action 5**, a clear zero tolerance policy against sexual harassment must be promoted and enforced. In light of recent data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace is shocking. According to the ABS Personal Safety Survey 2021-2022, 330,000 women were sexually harassed by someone who they had a work or professional relationship in the one year period, and 320,000 experienced sexual harassment in person at their workplace⁴.

² Department of Education and Training. 2020, *Higher Education Statistics Data Cube (uCube)*, viewed 30 August 2023, <<http://highereducationstatistics.education.gov.au/>>.

³ Molstad, T. D., Weinhardt, J. M., & Jones, R. 2023, *Sexual Assault as a Contributor to Academic Outcomes in University: A Systematic Review*. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 24(1), 218–230.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021-22, *Personal Safety, Australia*, ABS, viewed 30 August 2023, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release>>.

The types of sexual harassment experienced by women were, most commonly reported, inappropriate comments about body and sex life (800,000 women), followed by indecent texts, emails or posts (500,000 million women) and unwanted touching or grabbing (400,000 women)⁵. This research should be at the forefront of university leaders, policymakers and employers.

Finally, we deeply support the emphasis on marginalised groups, including First Nations peoples, people from low socio-economic backgrounds, those from regional, rural and remote areas, and students living with disability. However, sufficient acknowledgement has not been given to other minorities, namely, as aforementioned, the LGBTQIA+ community. Sexual assault and sexual harassment disproportionately affect gender diverse individuals⁶. They are more vulnerable due to cultural stigma, myths and deeply ingrained stereotypes that continue to marginalise and silence the LGBTQIA+ community. Research indicates that around half of transgender people and bisexual women will experience sexual violence at some point in their life⁷. In addition, the higher prevalence of hate-motivated violence experienced by the LGBTQIA+ community often takes the form of sexual assault and harassment⁸. As such, it is essential to implement targeted measures that address gender diverse people's different and unique safety concerns, alongside promoting a culture of respect and equality.

Proposals for Improvement in **Section 3.2.3.2: Addressing harm**

WWYW has been actively working against sexual assault and violence on campus for the past few years, implementing procedures and safeguards, specifically with the University of Newcastle (UON). WWYW proposes the following to prevent the alarming rates of sexual violence that occurs on campus.

1. Survivor Advocates Advisory Groups

Survivor Advocates Advisory Groups are groups we set up to ensure students with lived experience have a voice in any changes to University policies and decisions relating to sexual

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021-22, *Personal Safety, Australia*, ABS, viewed 30 August 2023, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release>>.

⁶ Messinger, A. M., & Koon-Magnin, S.. (2019). Sexual Violence in LGBTQ Communities (pp. 661–674). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-23645-8_39.

⁷ Callander D, Wiggins J, Rosenberg S, Cornelisse VJ, Duck-Chong E, Holt M, Pony M, Vlahakis E, MacGibbon J, Cook T. 2019. 2019, *The 2018 Australian Trans and Gender Diverse Sexual Health Survey: Report of Findings*, Sydney, NSW: The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney

⁸ Tillewein H, Shokeen N, Powers P, Rijo Sánchez AJ, Sandles-Palmer S, Desjarlais K. 2023, *Silencing the Rainbow: Prevalence of LGBTQ+ Students Who Do Not Report Sexual Violence*. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 20(3):2020.

assault and harrassment. We meet monthly and it is facilitated by our CEO, Sarah Williams, and UON's Respectful Communities Coordinator.

- Each student receives a \$50 gift card each month as payment for their time and valued lived experience.
- The group has introduced sexual health testing days, a refreshed look at security on campus training and much more.

2. Education for students

- Students should be educated in consent, respectful relationships, active bystander awareness, and victim-blaming prevention training.
- It is not enough to put students through a once a degree consent matters course.
- Education on the disproportionate rates of sexual assault for marginalised groups needs to be implemented

3. Advocacy groups

- Advocacy groups like WWYW need to be paid as a start. Paid to continue our services and help students.
- Payments for having safe spaces, providing resources and consultations to universities.

4. Trauma Informed Staff

- All staff need to be trauma informed, trained and educated in victim blaming prevention and educated on experiences of gender and sexuality diverse students.
- This is crucial, as staff may be the first and only people students disclose to.

5. Sexual Assault & Harrassment Advisory Board

- There needs to be an executive board at each institution that has advocates, staff, counselors, and University executives that meet at least once a semester to discuss what the University must do to prevent and end rape on campus. It is imperative that our institutions leaders are involved and committed to genuinely make change.

Stories that have been submitted to us from victim-survivors:

“I was on campus walking home from studying and someone followed me to my dorm room. I was raped and never have been okay since”

“I was in the library, studying for my bio med exam. I went to the bathroom as one does, and someone followed me in and locked the door and assaulted me. When I reported the university said they couldn’t do anything and he remained a student”.

“I was 17, a school student but I was getting tutoring from a staff member on campus. I was raped in his room. I didn’t know who to report to or who to tell. I looked online and it was confusing because I wasn’t a University student. I’m now a student and everything about uni is triggering”.

“I was raped on campus by a student in my class. They thought it was okay because I had a revealing dress on that they could touch me. I tried to report online but the process was way too long.”

In summation, Australian universities have an instrumental role in ensuring safety on campuses and must step up to protect students and staff from sexual violence. Ensuring this would not only prevent the devastating impact of sexual assault and harassment on students’ mental health and wellbeing, but would address the clear evidence based need for improving students’ academic performance and progression. Addressing sexual assault and harassment at universities is an ongoing process of shared responsibility between university governance, students and staff. In order to develop effective preventative and responsive policy in this area, university leadership must demonstrate commitment, inclusiveness, trauma informed practice and appropriate incorporation of student victim-survivor perspectives.

We hope that you consider our concerns and prioritise the protection and safety of students against sexual violence in Australian universities by implementing the 5 suggestions above.

Prepared by: **Scarlett Green, *Social Justice Researcher, WWYW Australia***

Contributors: **Maggie Fearon, Caitlin Rowling, Kurt Pardey, *Social Justice Team, WWYW Australia***

Signed off by: s.williams

Sarah Williams
CEO and Founder of WWYW Australia